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Russia's return to Africa in a historical and global context: Anti-imperialism, patronage, and opportunism

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ABSTRACT

This article contextualises Russia's involvement in Africa through the lenses of the Soviet past, current rulership architecture in Russia, and its recent operations abroad. Russia deploys normative justifications like anti-colonialism to justify its involvement in Africa. Russian agents in Africa are drawn from vast political-oligarchic patronage networks, making these agents perfectly suited to operate in patronage-political contexts that are widely observed across Africa. The diffusion of Russian power projection is therefore likely a strength and not a weakness. The article further shows that Russian activities during the 2010s have predominantly been driven by opportunism as opposed to an attempt to turn Africa into a theatre of competition with the US and NATO, yet it seems that more strategic guidance is likely in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the resultant increase in tensions with the West.

KEYWORDS

Russia; Africa; geopolitics; anti-imperialism; patronage

Introduction

The Soviet Union was widely seen as one of the most influential external actors in Africa during the Cold War.¹ Yet, following the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation closed nine embassies and three consulates across Africa and subsequently showed little interest in Africa during the 1990s and 2000s.² This lack of interest proved to be only temporary, as Russia returned to Africa in the 2010s. Moscow began to re-build relations with many African rulers from 2014 onwards.³ Reflective of Russia's greater involvement on the continent is the fact that, by June 2019, Moscow had signed military cooperation deals with at least 20 African states.⁴ Moreover, on 24 October 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin together with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi co-chaired a Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi. This was the first event of this level in the history of Russian-African relations, with all African heads of state invited to attend. The stated goal of the summit was the further expansion of political, economic, military, technical and cultural cooperation between Russia and African states.⁵

This article analyses the nature of Russia's renewed involvement in African affairs. It looks to contextualise Russia's return through the lenses of the Soviet past, current

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rulership architecture in Russia, and its recent operations abroad. Instead of zooming in on one particular case, the article aims to provide a broad overview of Russia's involvement in Africa and reflect on the nature of this involvement. Looking at the nature of Russia's involvement is important because there is currently a debate ongoing regarding the extent of Russia's influence in Africa and its implications for international affairs.

On the one side of the debate, Russia's return to Africa is seen as a grave security threat. For instance, Russia's return to Africa is closely monitored by other states, including Russia's Cold War adversary, the United States. In February 2019, then-commander of US Africa Command (AFRICOM), General Thomas Waldhauser, referred to Russia as a growing challenge in the Central African Republic because of its arms sales and the actions of the private security firm referred to as the Wagner Group. He further stated that Russia tried to 'import harsh security practices, in a region already marred by threats to security' and that Russia 'potentially looks to export their security model regionally.'⁶ Another former AFRICOM commander, General Stephen Townsend, referred to 'Russia's malign influence in Africa' as the second biggest threat to US security interests in Africa after terrorism.⁷ Since the invasion of Ukraine, the angle of 'great power competition' has, if anything, become more pronounced. In August 2022, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin specifically linked Russian inroads into Africa with Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine earlier that year.⁸ Moreover, the tone of remarks on Russian involvement in Africa by US defence officials has become more military in nature, with AFRICOM for instance asserting that the deployment of Russian air defence systems to Mali, in the wake of its military junta inviting Russian mercenaries, has added to instability in the region.⁹

On the other side of the debate, observers point out that Russia's involvement in Africa should not be overstated.¹⁰ Russian involvement in most African states in which it is involved is still of little consequence in comparison to other foreign states. For instance, most experts on Sudan agree that the Gulf states have been far more influential in Sudan than Russia, both during the rule of President Omar al-Bashir and following his fall from power.¹¹ Similarly, Kimberly Marten notes how Russian activities in Africa remain limited in comparison to the longstanding presence of the United States and the European Union, as well as the huge new commercial and financial inroads made by China, though Marten also highlights that 'Moscow is engaged in an astonishing variety of well-publicised political, economic, and military pursuits.'¹²

Instead of picking a side in the debate on the level of influence Russia wields in Africa,¹³ this article focuses more on the nature of Russia's involvement on the continent. The authors deem it crucial to first examine what Russia does and how its African activities fit into a Russian context before the extent of Moscow's influence in Africa can be examined. While Russia's invasion of Ukraine has made its future within the international system even harder to predict, its policies in Africa will necessarily build on its recent actions. As a result, this article aims at providing a snapshot, conscious of future uncertainties.

The article puts Africa-Russia relations in context in three distinct ways. First, Russia's current involvement in Africa cannot be meaningfully understood without putting it in historical and normative contexts. The Soviet Union's involvement in Africa has been hotly debated.¹⁴ Yet, as soon as Russia scaled back its activities on the continent with the waning of the Cold War, the scholarly interest in Russia's role in Africa correspondingly

waned. Nevertheless, studying Soviet-Africa relations sheds light on some of the current contradictions of Russia's involvement – such as a clear normative emphasis on anti-imperialism to justify its involvement while simultaneously operating in Africa with an agenda to increase its geopolitical influence and principally cater to authoritarian leaders.

Second, the article puts Russia's involvement in Africa in the context of Putin's broader patronage¹⁵ networks. While Moscow is often viewed as a monolithic, holistically thinking and executive actor, the reality is much more ambiguous. This is related to what has been described as a 'solar system' in which elites' power is defined by their proximity to President Putin.¹⁶ In this view, the Russian ruling circle is a highly complex network of oligarchic and administrative actors, which also includes those in charge of the military-security complex (*siloviki*). While the power of the president and the executive have been strengthened under Putin, this does not mean every Russian or Russia-attributed activity outside its borders is conducted at Putin's behest, or even that of its nominally legitimate institutions. This also goes a long way in explaining areas in which Moscow's agents prefer to operate and who they cooperate with. As such, it is necessary to sketch actors and dynamics that serve as elements of official and semi-official tools of power projection.

Third, and lastly, the revival of Russian involvement in Africa cannot be understood without putting it in a wider, more global context than just the African context. Russia's actions in Africa bear certain commonalities with Russian actions in non-African settings, such as Syria. Discussion will accordingly aim to showcase where Russian power projection into Africa echoes previous operations. The article principally examines the fused nature of military and non-military measures by Russia, and the re-appearance of certain actors.

Russia's increased involvement in Africa in historical and normative contexts

The Soviet Union did not have contact with Africa during the colonial period, with the exception of an embassy in Addis Ababa that dated from the late 19th century during tsarist times. However, the Soviet Union started to support many of the newly independent African states from the late 1950s onwards, portraying itself as an ally to African leaders. Moscow hoped to gain strategic influence by offering to help local state leaders to reorient the continent away from Western, post-colonial countries.¹⁷

However, from the African perspective, close cooperation with the Soviet Union was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, a strong norm emerged in the early post-colonial period to maintain the autonomy of the African system of states and keep external actors out of Africa. African leaders subsequently witnessed how easily they could be caught up in superpower competition. The first of these instances was the US and Belgian intervention in the Congo in 1964, but the point was especially driven home by foreign involvement in the civil war that broke out in Angola in 1975. This further coalesced African leaders around the desire to shield themselves from external involvement and to avoid being caught up in the Cold War.¹⁸

On the other hand, the non-alignment norm was not strong enough to dissuade African leaders from accepting non-African support to help fight the Portuguese in the remaining African colonies and fight the white minority regimes in South Africa,

Namibia, and Rhodesia.¹⁹ For example, from early on in the liberation war in Mozambique that started in 1964, the Soviet Union provided military equipment and training to help FRELIMO fight the Portuguese.²⁰ In short, liberating all African countries from colonialism, as well as from post-colonial influences, was deemed so important that these goals overrode the norm of non-interference. Soviet support was thus happily received.²¹ Accordingly, an African norm emerged that equated neo-colonial and imperialist influence with the West, while other actors such as Russia could stay below the threshold of being perceived as imperialist.

Crucially, Russia has been able to re-attach itself to the Soviet Union's legacy of supporting liberation struggles. Moscow holds a comparative advantage when it comes to building ties in Africa, as it can draw on its reputation to consistently oppose colonialism in Africa.²² Indeed, a striking similarity between Russia's Africa policy and its communist predecessor's Africa policy during the Cold War is that both heavily emphasise the sovereignty of African countries and the mutually voluntary nature of Russia's involvement. Soviet representatives emphasised during the Cold War that the start of Soviet support to Somalia in the 1960s and Ethiopia in 1974 was the result of an invitation from these African states rather than an imposition.²³ Similarly, Valery Zakharov, a former St Petersburg police officer with links to Russian domestic intelligence (FSB) – who assumed the role of the main security advisor of the president of the Central African Republic (CAR) in 2017 – stated in response to a question on Russia's activities in the country that it was 'the will of the president of the Central African Republic' that Russia came to CAR:

I must emphasize this again. We, all of us, are here at his invitation. It is his vision to improve ties with Russia. And why is this? Let's remember our history. Russia first came here in 1964. Today, Russia is simply coming back. That's all. Everything you see here that's of any value was created under president Bokassa with the support of the Soviet Union.²⁴

Russia thus pushes a narrative of respecting the sovereignty of African countries while being an effective ally, grafting its present activities directly onto perceived Soviet successes.

Another example of how Russia cashes in on the fact that the Soviet Union provided extensive support to the African anti-apartheid movement during the Cold War is the nuclear deal between Moscow and the governing African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa in 2014. While many Western states labelled Nelson Mandela and the ANC as terrorists, the Soviet Union provided strong support to the ANC. As a result, the ANC has longstanding ties to Moscow; former South African President Jacob Zuma had received his military training in the Soviet Union.²⁵ Building on this relationship, once he was elected to office Moscow concluded a nuclear power deal with Zuma.²⁶ This deal eventually backfired, with Zuma being accused of corruption, but the agreement does show how Moscow's reputation during the Cold War as a champion of the liberation movement is still of relevance today.²⁷

In addition, the Africa policies of both the Soviet Union and Russia could be described as pan-African in nature. A series of internal documents that were leaked in June 2019 describe Russia's current African priorities. These included a paper titled 'African World' and dated March 2018, which calls for Russian support to develop an 'African self-identity' based on anti-imperialism, an integral part of the pan-African school of thought.²⁸ In other words, it is in Moscow's interest to promote this ideology, as anti-Western sentiments are virtually baked into it by way of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. The 'African World'

paper suggests that Russia should actively work towards a 'loyal chain of representatives across Africa.'²⁹ To this purpose, it is suggested that Russia identify 'agents of influence' to groom as future African leaders, not only in Africa, but also in the US and Europe.³⁰ The assumption accordingly seems to be that pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiment go hand in hand.

An example of how Russia puts on a liberator's cloak while supporting autocrats was Moscow's support for Sudan's Omar al-Bashir during his final years in power. For example, Russian mercenaries supported the Sudanese security forces' crackdown (ultimately only partially successful) in early 2019.³¹ The Sudanese-Russian links, however, appear to have survived the autocrat's fall, as the long-awaited announcement of a Russian naval logistics base on Sudan's Red Sea coast was announced in November 2020.³²

Two differences

There are, however, two differences between the Soviet Union and Russia in terms of their Africa policies. A first difference is that during the Cold War, the Soviet Union directly intervened in African states in which the US and its allies had strong interests. By contrast, Russia up until 2022 focused on countries in Africa ignored by the West rather than focusing on priority countries of the West. Russian assets' intervention in Mali which coincided with and partially forced the French drawdown, however, might indicate a change in behaviour³³ but so far constitutes an outlier. Some of the African states in which Russia has been most active since 2014 – including Libya, Sudan, and Zimbabwe – are all under UN and/or EU multilateral sanctions for war crimes and other bad behaviour.³⁴ For this reason, Marten concludes that rather than making headway in an international competition with the West, Russia is building relations with these countries because it has few alternatives.³⁵ In short, Russia's current Africa policy is more opportunistic than the Soviet strategy during the Cold War. Of course, this does not preclude a more direct approach at undermining Western influence on the continent, once Moscow feels it has secured a sufficiently large support base. In addition, Russia's significant involvement in CAR appears to be a direct result of the vacuum left by the US and France, allowing a rival security provider to step in.³⁶

A second difference between the Soviet involvement in Africa during the Cold War and Russia's current activities in Africa is that Russia is currently pursuing a much less state-centric approach. Russia's activities in Africa from the mid-2010s onwards have been led by a businessman from St Petersburg and close associate of Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, who implements Russia's interests through a network which his employees refer to as the 'Company'.³⁷ One of the groups belonging to the 'Company' is the private military company (PMC) referred to as the Wagner Group. The paramilitary and political operations of the Wagner Group in Sudan, Mozambique, the CAR, Libya, and Mali are telling examples of how Russia's involvement in African affairs is different from the involvement of other foreign states, in the sense that Russia's Africa policy is in large part implemented by a network of groups that are not legally recognised as part of the Russian state, but are nevertheless closely connected to the Kremlin.³⁸ As such, it would be misleading to label these efforts as 'covert' or 'autonomous', as Moscow's veneer of deniability is very thin.

In short, Russia is heavily emphasising an anti-imperialist narrative, latching onto the Soviet commitment to supporting liberation struggles in order to gain influence in Africa. A notable difference between the Soviet and the Russian Africa policy is that Russia's activities are more pragmatic and less driven by state instruments. The next section delves into the diffused nature of Russian power as it is wielded on the continent.

Russia's increased involvement in Africa in the context of Putin's 'Solar System'

A lot of research has focused on what drives Russia as an international actor, and, to some extent, who does so. The basic architecture that constitutes the locus of power in Moscow has been termed 'Kremlin Towers' or a 'solar system'. These terms describe a highly personalised, networked conglomerate of different constituencies and personalities. The degree of power vested in a given office, however, stems from the individual occupying it and their links to other powerful individual nodes.³⁹ Henry Hale describes this more concisely as 'patronalism',⁴⁰ defined as 'a social equilibrium in which individuals organise their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalised exchange of concrete rewards and punishments, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorisations that include many people one has not actually met in person.'⁴¹ In effect, this means that Russia is ruled and administered in a dual architecture, one characterised by official, hierarchical bureaucracy and the other by informal networks constituted by patron-client relationships.⁴² Vladimir Putin and his circle sit at the top of the former, and in the centre of the latter element of this dual architecture, not simply by power of office but also by occupying the central nodes that enable a controlling position – hence the term 'solar system'.

While the basic principles of the system remain in place, especially after Vladimir Putin resumed the role of President in 2012, he has centralised the system to a higher degree than before, concentrating more power within his inner circle. State and patronage assets overlap, for example, where Chechen viceroy Ramzan Kadyrov's network is deeply integrated within the recently created National Guard (*Rosgvardia*).⁴³ Another telling example of how Putin's solar system works is how Yevgeniy Prigozhin has curried favour with the Kremlin in a variety of ways. He is the central figure behind the now infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA), a St Petersburg-based 'troll factory' that has been indicted in the US for election interference.⁴⁴

As an outgrowth of Russia's informal solar system at home, Marten notes how Russia's foreign policy operates 'under an individualistic, patronage-based model of politics and business, where corrupt favours are exchanged under the table by particular bosses and kingpins on the basis of longstanding personal loyalties, but no lasting institutional relationships are built.'⁴⁵ Prigozhin has emerged as a central actor linking Russia's domestic power architecture to activities abroad that further the Kremlin's causes. Familiar patterns have emerged in these activities: Wagner and other elements under the oligarch's control act as (semi-)deniable actors, executing missions for the Kremlin or at least within Kremlin-defined parameters. In exchange, the 'Company' gets rewarded by access to resources in the target country. The Russian government helps by facilitating these transfers between local regimes and Prigozhin.⁴⁶

According to Marten, Russia's individualistic, patronage-based model of politics and business is a major weakness of Russia's involvement in Africa.⁴⁷ However, this claim ignores the fact that there is a large Africanist literature that suggests that politics – defined as who gets what, when, and how – is often not determined through state institutions according to the rule of law in many African countries, but rather through a logic of patronage politics.⁴⁸ Indeed, Russia is predominantly involved in unstable countries in Africa in which patronage politics thrive. The leaked documents on Russia's Africa strategy include a map from December 2018 that shows and ranks the level of cooperation between Russia and African governments, indicating political, military, and economic relationships with Sudan, Madagascar and the Central African Republic being at the top.⁴⁹ With regard to Sudan, Alex de Waal has noted how the country is best characterised as a 'political marketplace' in which local elites seek to obtain the highest reward for their loyalty within patrimonial systems.⁵⁰ Dalby notes with regard to the Central African Republic that 'Since independence, the political elite have sought to benefit from their privileged position and have therefore concentrated power and resources in Bangui while largely neglecting and excluding those in the hinterland.'⁵¹ Similarly, Marie-Joëlle Zahar and Delphine Mechoulan reflect how elites in the Central African Republic have consistently 'used all the means at their disposal — including legal and illegal financial rewards and political appointments — to buy the loyalty of potential rivals.'⁵² Russia's use of a patronage-based strategy is therefore a natural fit in Africa.⁵³ For example, Russians in the Central African Republic have tried to entrench President Touadéra's rule through bribing militia leaders and providing political advisors ('political technologists,' in the Russian nomenclature) to support combat operations against insurgents.⁵⁴ The Russian involvement in the Central African Republic not only includes arms sales, military training, and diamond and gold mining deals, but also the provision of personal security to President Touadéra and his inner circle.⁵⁵ Marten concludes that 'Touadéra is effectively surrounded by Russian security representatives 24 hours a day — a strong incentive for him not to stray far from Moscow's wishes'.⁵⁶

In Madagascar, Prigozhin helped fund at least six candidates for the presidential elections, but requested all these candidates support Andry Rajoelina when it became clear that Rajoelina was in the lead to win the elections.⁵⁷ Similarly, Moscow provided strong electoral campaign support to help Emmerson Mnangagwa win the presidency in Zimbabwe's elections in 2018.⁵⁸ Within a year, the Zimbabwean government and the Alrosa diamond company announced a joint venture to exploit both platinum and diamonds. Alrosa is led by Sergei S Ivanov, who as the son of Putin's KGB training school classmate and former defence minister is well integrated into Putin's core network.⁵⁹ President Mnangagwa witnessed the signing of the joint venture and stated that the deal had come to fruition owing to his country's excellent relations with Russia.⁶⁰

Yet another example of how Russia is replicating its patronage-based strategy in Africa is the Russian involvement in Libya. With military support from Russia, Libyan rebel leader Khalifa Haftar has managed to take control of most of the oil fields in Libya. This military support took the form of Russian military advisors and several private military companies, including the Wagner Group and the RSB Group.⁶¹ Haftar promised Moscow lucrative oil deals in return for Russia's military support.⁶² These deals are concluded at the highest level as became apparent in November 2018, when Haftar travelled to Moscow for a meeting with Russian Defence Minister Sergey Shoigu. Yevgeny Prigozhin also attended this meeting.⁶³

Russia's increased involvement in Africa in a global context

As opposed to operations in Ukraine or even Syria, Russia's sub-Saharan endeavours have not been driven by traditional concerns of national security and regional strategic posture but rather overarching ambitions of placing Russia on the highest tier of the international hierarchy.⁶⁴ While this does mean that African operations, even if militarised, should not be equated with previous instances from Soviet history, we attempt to draw comparisons where applicable. In particular, Russia's use of non-military measures and of criminal patronage networks can be observed in both its military and semi-state endeavours.

The revival of Russia's involvement in Africa was preceded by the start of heightened tensions between Russia and the US with its allies, perhaps most clearly reflected in the Western sanctions imposed against Russia over the annexation of Crimea.⁶⁵ It would be tempting to equate operations on African soil with those that were conducted in Ukraine and Syria and to assume that methods and priorities are made from the same cloth. However, the authors attempt here to not only disentangle where the differences between 'Russia the state' and 'Russia the collective actor' lie, but also to identify parallels in its approaches on the ground. Indeed, it is a worthy question whether Russia's recent activities on the African continent up until 2022 have been directly linked to the new round of competition with NATO – with the jury being out on whether Mali constitutes a major strategic shift. For the present purposes, however, the article will give context to previous military actions abroad, starting in Ukraine in early 2014 and specifically Russia's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent escalation in the country's east.

In operational terms, Russian special operations and high-readiness intervention forces seized the Crimean Peninsula in a *coup-de-main*. Among other factors, they capitalised on international and Ukrainian confusion in the aftermath of pro-Russian Ukrainian President Yanukovich's ouster, the Crimea's proximity to Russia's two highest readiness military districts, a friendly civilian population, and pre-existing military contingents.⁶⁶ In eastern Ukraine, Moscow initially hoped to achieve its ends by funnelling in volunteers, mercenaries (including operatives of the Wagner Group), and raising local militia through its agents.⁶⁷ However, Ukrainian successes necessitated a fully mechanised ground intervention, executed by less-than-deniable means such as armoured formations and artillery batteries.⁶⁸ After its intervention in the Syrian Civil War in 2015, Russia (except in Ukraine in 2022) has largely stuck to an approach that minimises its military footprint, with the air force, military advisors and special operations forces being its most notable contribution to Bashar al-Assad's regime. Besides this type of Russian support, the Kremlin has seemed happy to let local militia and proxy forces do the majority of the fighting and dying.⁶⁹

This type of minimal Russian involvement can also be observed in Africa. For instance, in Libya, Russian support in favour of General Haftar, who opposes the internationally-recognised government coalition, is based on a minimal footprint of mercenaries and, one assumes, special forces and intelligence assets.⁷⁰ However, with Turkey stepping up its military involvement on the other side of the proxy war equation in early 2020, Russia was forced to deploy fighter-bomber aircraft in autumn of the same year, supposedly flown by private contractors.⁷¹ In addition, forces tied to the Wagner Group have constructed large-scale fortifications along a 280-kilometre line reaching into the Libyan desert, fortifications which serve to entrench the military status quo. Russian

semi-state forces thus appear by no means limited to light infantry and advisory duties in Libya, but also include combat aviation and engineering capabilities, if the situation (or Moscow) demands it.⁷²

The level of Russian effort in non-African countries – such as Ukraine and Syria – has corresponded to the relevance each theatre holds for the Kremlin. Ukraine touches Russia's security interests most directly. In addition, Ukraine is not viewed as an independent cultural or political entity in Moscow, as it represents two distinct threat vectors. Firstly, due to its cultural proximity, the Kremlin perceives revolutions in Kyiv especially threatening as they might 'infect' Russia itself. Secondly, Ukraine's territory makes for a perfect corridor into Russia and, indeed, represents a historic invasion route. The tools of modern warfare – in this case long-range sensors and missiles – exacerbate the old fear of NATO gaining a foothold in the former Soviet republic even more.⁷³ Syria, meanwhile, has been Russia's most reliable ally in West Asia, enabling power projection into the wider region and serving as a local ally, hostile to NATO and the US. Russia's air war in favour of the Damascus regime was thus not very surprising.⁷⁴

In these theatres of war, as in Africa, the use of PMCs has played a crucial role in the hard power component of Russia's military strategy. For instance, the Wagner Group has been active in eastern Ukraine and Syria.⁷⁵ These contractors are not only semi-deniable but also offer convenient off-ramps – Moscow can deny, and has done so in the past, ownership of operations if they result in military failure. An incident in February 2018 in north-eastern Syria illustrates this dynamic: A force of Russian mercenaries and local allies had attempted an attack on a US/Kurdish-guarded oilfield. When the Russian military denied its involvement, US air and artillery strikes destroyed the attacking columns – potentially killing large numbers of Russian mercenaries. However, these mercenaries still make it possible to use a minimum level of necessary state force, by supplementing or replacing the deployment of regular troops.⁷⁶

The soft power component of operations in Ukraine and Syria has been completely tied to their hard power components. The ratio of non-military and military measures is nominally prescribed as 4 to 1, but with the non-military strategic efforts still falling under the aegis of the military.⁷⁷ A telling example of this blurring of the lines between instruments of soft and hard power is that Russia has a 'Reconciliation Centre' in Syria, which provides humanitarian aid and promotes dialogue between the different sides within the conflict – while also reportedly being integrated into the targeting complex of Russia's air campaign.⁷⁸ These activities would be kept completely separate, both institutionally and functionally, by Western states, but not by Russia. Rather than seeing development and diplomacy on the one hand and military action on the other hand as contradicting activities, Russian policymakers see this as all falling under 'holistic' or 'fused' security policy.⁷⁹

This approach, or, in more minimalistic terms, this strategic priority has been visible in Russian agents' activities in Africa. The operations of the Wagner Group in Sudan, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, and Mozambique have received a lot of attention,⁸⁰ but how Russia is involved in soft power or political activities in these countries has garnered much less attention. Russia, for instance, played a crucial role in the mediation of a peace agreement between the government of CAR and various armed groups in August 2018.⁸¹ Russia has used its contacts with the armed groups to influence them to refrain from fighting. Marten observes how in the Central African Republic, Moscow is 'using financial and security inducements to buy a tenuous peace between an individual

leader in the capital and local warlords in the resource-rich periphery, serving as the sole linchpin for stability.⁸² In operational terms, heavily armed mercenaries are but a small element in a wide-ranging campaign to secure President Touadéra's power base next to bribing both officials and militia and aiding in the political consolidation of the ruling party.⁸³ CAR appears to provide an environment in which Russia's semi-state actors thrive: a splintered country in which various militia vie for access to and ownership of natural resources. Here, Moscow appears to have simply capitalised on the drawdown of French and US assets by stepping into the breach and throwing its weight behind Touadéra and his (then) tenuous government.⁸⁴ As a result, Russian actors have become embroiled in what amounts to proxy warfare with French-aligned networks and military actors. Touadéra's apparent preference for hiring the expertise of international businesspeople with connections to criminal networks and furnishing them with CAR passports suits groups such as Wagner perfectly.⁸⁵ It is no surprise that Prigozhin's network is reportedly engaged along every chain link between Moscow and Bangui as it is engaged in funnelling personnel and weapons into the theatre.⁸⁶

Similarly, while Russia is supporting rebel commander Khalifa Haftar in his fight against the internationally recognised Libyan government, it has played a crucial role in the various Libyan peace initiatives. Moscow hopes to strengthen Haftar's bargaining position in Libya through its military support, but at the same time tries to bolster his influence over a future UN-brokered diplomatic settlement on Libya through being directly involved in this mediation process. In addition, Russia uses the mediation process to keep a channel open with the Libyan government. To this end, Russia established an intra-Libyan contact group in 2018, aimed at facilitating dialogue between various political factions.⁸⁷ In illustration of Russia employing its dual soft power/hard power approach abroad, this contact group was headed by a businessman with ties to Chechnya's leader Kadyrov.⁸⁸

Another crucial aspect of Russian soft power activities in Africa, similar to previous operations outside of Africa, is a focus on information flows. The information dimension is a pillar of Russia's thinking on war and competition.⁸⁹ In the Russian security canon 'information security/warfare' refers to the substantive content – the ideas and arguments – conveyed as information, whereas in the West one tends to focus on the infrastructure for the conveyance of that information – for example cyber defence and network security.⁹⁰ A telling example of how Russia has unfurled this strategy in Africa is the support to former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir before he was ousted from power. Russian specialists helped the regime to develop a campaign to smear anti-government protestors, depicting these protestors as anti-Islam, pro-Israel, and pro-LGBT.⁹¹

Yet another example of Russia's emphasis on information flows is the fact that Yevgeny Prigozhin's 'Company' has helped set up newspapers and a radio station in the Central African Republic.⁹² The Russian capacity to mobilise political actors, media, and social networks has subsequently greatly increased.⁹³ One paper in the leaked documents on Russia's Africa policy comments on how the activities of the 'Company' have included spreading false information in order to get rid of politicians in the Central African Republic, including national assembly representatives and the foreign minister (Charles Armel Doubane), who are 'orientated towards France.'⁹⁴ Accordingly, these political operations inside and outside the CAR are employed in concert with the above mentioned paramilitary-political entrenchment of Touadéra.

More generally, Russia is investing in drawing attention to the French and English versions of its two big international media platforms, RT and Sputnik. The editorial line of these two platforms is depicting Western involvement in Africa as neo-imperialism. According to a former Google employee, Russia has been investing in an *Addwords* campaign that makes Russian media content more likely to be privileged in Google searches in Africa.⁹⁵

In short, the information domain is a very important aspect of Russia's fused efforts to garner influence and to discredit Western activities and initiatives. In addition to more direct military involvement, Russians deployed in Africa have reportedly acted as repression consultants, advising their African clients on how to polarise or control society through engaging in propaganda or spreading disinformation.⁹⁶

The economic relations Russia is developing with African states through the exploitation of natural resources should also be seen from this perspective. However, it should also be noted that the revenues generated through mining in Africa pale in comparison to mining projects in Russia itself. Marten even casts doubt on whether Moscow is making a profit in the Central African Republic, given that the diamond and gold mines are artisanal operations spread out over a large territory.⁹⁷ Indeed, economic interest cannot fully explain Russia's increased involvement in Africa, because one would expect Russia to also have been more involved in Africa during the 1990s and 2000s if economic interests were key. However, the political influence Russia wields through these economic partnerships is significant.⁹⁸ Stephen Blank explains how Russia's economic activities in Africa have 'strategic-political importance' since they allow 'Russia to gain a local foothold upon which it can then expand its influence in multiple directions.'⁹⁹ Paul Goble asserts in this regard that the economic partnerships Russia is developing might even allow it to 'restore many of the political positions it enjoyed in Soviet times.'¹⁰⁰ The leaked document on Russia's Africa policy mentions in this regard that the Central African Republic is strategically important because it allows Russian companies to not only set up profitable mining deals in CAR, but also to expand across the African continent and conclude mining deals and build influence in other African countries.¹⁰¹ That being said, while the Russian state is not motivated primarily by economic reasons, its semi-state agents might very well be. In addition, by controlling both mining companies and mercenary outfits, Prigozhin, for example, appears to be able to self-finance elements of his influence and combat operations – without doubt another bonus with the Kremlin.¹⁰²

Conclusion and outlook

In this article, the authors have tried to contextualise Russia's return to Africa in three distinct ways. First, Russia's current involvement in Africa cannot be meaningfully understood without putting it in historical and normative context. The Soviet Union portrayed its support to African states or African armed opposition groups as part of an effort to promote pan-Africanism and fight imperialism and neo-colonialism. Russia capitalises on this historical support, contrasting its involvement in Africa with that of former colonial powers like France. Moscow's clear normative emphasis on anti-imperialism makes Russian involvement in African affairs more acceptable to African leaders, even though Russia arguably also operates in Africa with an agenda to increase its geopolitical influence and principally cater to authoritarian leaders.

Second, Russia's return to Africa should be understood in the context of Putin's broader patronage networks, which have been active as an element in power projection gaining political influence abroad. Hence, not every Russian or Russia-attributed activity abroad is carried out on the order of and executed by state institutions. Since Russia is predominantly involved in unstable countries in Africa where patronage politics thrive, Russian actors have been able to establish loyalty from politicians, businessmen and armed groups by integrating them into their patronage-based networks. As a result, beyond the often-assumed motive of 'denying' Russia's involvement, this external deployment of patronage networks has very pragmatic benefits: it not only cuts Moscow's foreign operations bill, but these semi-state operatives experienced in the Russian context might just be more suited to these environments than government bureaucrats or intelligence agents. The approach also fits what the leaked 'African World' paper called for: building a 'loyal chain of representatives across Africa.'

Third, and lastly, Russia's return to Africa needs to be understood in its global context, looking beyond the African context. Russia's actions in Africa bear certain commonalities with Russian actions in non-African settings. For instance, in Libya, Russian support in favour of General Haftar, who opposes the internationally-recognised government coalition, is based on a minimised footprint of mercenaries – a strategic priority observed even in the Ukrainian and Syrian theatres that touch Russia's national security more acutely. Of particular relevance in this regard is the fused nature of (para-)military and non-military measures in Africa. Russia has projected power into Africa through soft power tools, including diplomacy, informational warfare, and concluding commercial contracts. This again is an echo of operations in Syria that also featured tight integration of military and non-military means at a local level.

The invasion of Ukraine, may, however change these dynamics. While speculative, it appears reasonable to assume that Moscow may take a more hands-on, more 'robust' (read: militarised) approach to the African continent from 2022, echoing Cold War-era dynamics. This, however, may be constrained both by capability and pragmatism. On the one hand, Western sanctions and financial-military overstretch in Ukraine will impose hard ceilings on what the Russian state can invest in power projection further afield. Oligarch networks may also increasingly be regarded as malign actors and their activities hampered by western regulators, intelligence services, and law enforcement. There have already been indications of Russia being forced to reduce mercenary contingents in Libya to sustain combat operations in Ukraine, indicating that the separation of oligarchs and the state does not imply infinite resources.¹⁰³ Secondly, however, there may be little incentive for Moscow to change gears in the first place. Its current diffused, opportunistic approach can claim a range of successes, especially as far as Moscow's global standing is concerned. Hence, it can be expected that Moscow will rather stick to the principle of 'reasonable sufficiency' (strategic minimalism) on display in Syria¹⁰⁴ when it comes to African operations, even if a higher degree of strategic guidance is imposed. The contours of future power competition on the African continent may already be visible, but this is not guaranteed.

This article has intentionally not focused on the extent of Russia's influence in Africa. However, future research can draw on this article to study the impact of Russian power projection into Africa. The authors would argue, however, that Russian influence is most likely going to be visible in very different ways and depths, depending on local

contexts and the relevance ascribed – either in terms of strategic (read government) or profit-oriented (read patronage networks') priorities. While Russia is by no means the only relevant external actor in Africa, its historical reputation in Africa and its use of semi-state assets might allow it to punch above its weight, co-opting local and regional actors by integrating them into networks and drawing on expertise. The Russian state will also be able to provide expertise in paramilitary operations, should the local situation demand it (as in CAR), drawing on experience in primarily Syria. Meanwhile, Wagner's heavy footprint in Libya and Mali showcase that Russia is willing and able to, at first glance, 'outsource' a major campaign of power projection to private contractors if it serves more narrow national security interests.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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