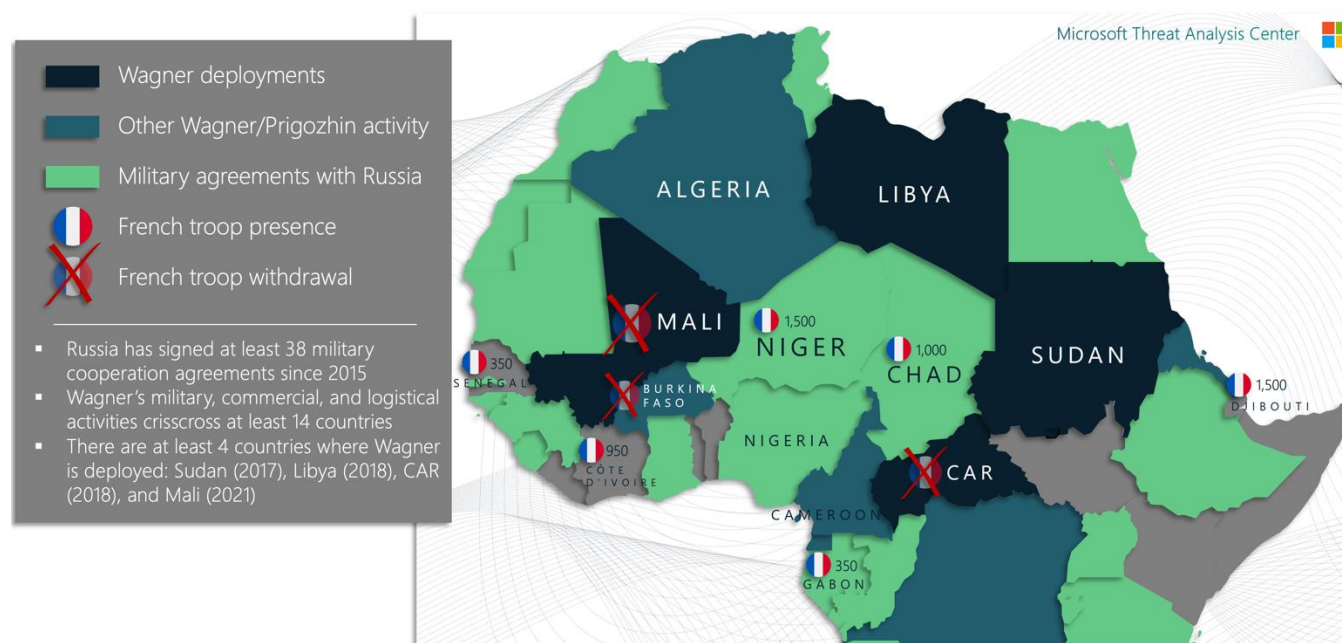


Date: September 1, 2023

Coups in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon have all brought instability to a continent that for the last two decades has seemingly made strides in democratic governance. While coups are not unknown to the countries of the Sahel, there has been something unusual about the July toppling of the Niger government – the spawning of multiple pro-coup protests featuring Russian flags.

The appearance of Russian flags is symbolic of a multi-pronged media strategy Russia has developed to capitalize on coups. Although the power grabs in the Sahel and now Gabon were motivated by political dynamics specific to each country, Russia's online and offline influence campaigns have acted as an accelerant, driving polarization and cementing the authority of often outwardly pro-Russian coup leaders.<sup>1</sup> Overt Russian diplomacy and military agreements have been coupled with the shadowy mercenary work and media outreach of recently killed Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, who helped spread the Kremlin's tentacles across the continent over the last few years. Amid this recent string of coups across Africa and with Russia's leading emissary Prigozhin possibly killed by his own country, where will the Kremlin's influence operations transition to next and who will write the next chapter in the Russian playbook for Africa?



<sup>1</sup> The Sahel is a transitional climatic zone between the Sahara to the north and the Sudanian savanna to the south and includes parts of 14 African countries.

## Coup contagion in context

The wave of coups that has swept Francophone West and Central Africa has left international observers concerned about a spiraling crisis of governance in the region. Nine coups have befallen seven countries—Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Chad, Niger, and now Gabon.

In the Sahel, coup leaders have had similar motivations: Assimi Goïta in Mali, Ibrahim Traoré in Burkina Faso, and Abdourahmane Tchiani in Niger all cited a flagging fight against jihadists as an impetus for their rebellion. These military juntas have all seized upon anti-French sentiment, scapegoating the former colonial power for failing to resolve the region's security crisis and even accusing the French of supporting terrorists.

The spate of coups precipitated the withdrawal of French troops from Mali in August 2022 after nine years of deployment, then from Burkina Faso [after 14 years](#) in February 2023. In June 2023, Mali went a step further, requesting the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping presence in the country, MINUSMA. Most curiously, while the French were facing pressure to leave, Malian and Burkinabe officials began entertaining a new security partner: Russia.

## Russia's coup playbook in Africa

Russia's strategy for influence in Africa, like its strategies for election interference in Europe and North America, is one of hybrid warfare. The launch of sympathetic media outlets, cultivation of social media influencers and so-called activists, creation of fake civil society organizations, artificial manipulation of political discourse—these techniques complement military and economic levers of influence. These assets are deployed in an increasingly familiar pattern which might be called Russia's coup playbook.

1. **Long-term influence campaigns** – Russia and its messengers in Africa produce a constant drip of pro-Russia content concentrating on polarizing issues. In Francophone Africa, longstanding Prigozhin-linked propaganda outlets like [Afrique Média](#) and influencers like Kémi Séba and Nathalie Yamb have enflamed anti-French sentiment driven by colonial-era grievances. This comes either from Russia directly—via RT and Sputnik—or from Russian affiliates and officials from reliably friendly states like Mali and the Central African Republic.
2. **Align with the coup leaders** – When a coup occurs, Russia's messengers quickly declare their support. This is typically a low-cost decision: if the coup fails, Russia has snubbed a government already unfriendly to their interests; if the coup succeeds, Russia has signaled early their willingness to work with the undemocratic junta. Support can be communicated by proxy: in Niger, for example, the Russian government has not declared official support for the coup, but Prigozhin [did](#), before his death. This public alignment gives the appearance that the Wagner Group may have had a role in orchestrating the coup, adding to the mystique of the mercenary organization.

3. **Seize control of the narrative** – Russia capitalizes on the information void that follows a coup with pro-Russian narratives that have already been seeded throughout Francophone Africa by established messengers. Post-coup messaging typically [glorifies](#) military and coup leaders. Russia will champion national sovereignty while denigrating France, enflaming tensions with specific provocations to withdraw troops or diplomats. Being first matters because audiences are generally biased towards the first narrative they encounter, especially in a moment of political indeterminacy.
4. **Amplify with affiliates** – Given their long-term investments in Africa-based, pro-Russian propagandists and influence operations (IO) networks, Russia can call upon a range of figures, both overt and covert, to amplify their messaging. Known Prigozhin affiliates broadcast pro-coup messaging to large audiences, while covert agents, typically operating in concert with local groups, amplify pro-Russian messaging in more targeted channels, such as Facebook [groups](#). Such messaging is especially effective when it comes from trusted sources and personal contacts. This messaging can crowd out competing narratives and create the impression of popular agreement.
5. **Mobilize supporters** – Pro-coup demonstrations featuring Russian flags give the impression of widespread support for both the junta and partnership with Russia while opposition to the coup is violently repressed, chilling dissent. Protests create their own powerful media effects. Demonstrators bearing Russian flags are highly visible and capture the attention of the international media, raising the geopolitical profile of the putschists. Pro-Russian protests also signal to the incoming regime that their support base embraces Russia, which can bias the decision-making of the incoming authorities.
6. **Ban dissenting media** – In Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, coup leaders have quickly identified Radio France International and France 24 as [adversaries](#). Their suspension silences the largest French-language sources of credible news from the West, enabling other narratives to thrive relatively unchallenged.

### *Wagner's role*

Previously, the Wagner Group has offered 'coup-proofing' services that included both physical security and influence operations, ideal for military regimes in embattled countries with a new or tenuous hold on power. For example, Wagner first deployed to Mali in December 2021, ostensibly to train the Malian armed forces (FAMA). In reality, Wagner engaged in combat operations and ran influence campaigns that glorified Assimi Goïta and FAMA. The culmination of these efforts was the Malian constitutional [referendum](#), which formalized Goïta's de facto control over the legislature. The similarly insecure junta in Burkina Faso has also embraced Russia as a "strategic ally," though formal contracts with Wagner have not been publicly reported.

### Pro-Russian protest movements in Niger

Russia's playbook proved particularly effective in Niger's recent coup. After military leaders announced the formation of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP)

on state television, protests erupted in the capital, Niamey. An initial wave of anti-coup [protests](#) was violently suppressed by the junta, which imposed a curfew and closed Niger's borders. Thousands of coup supporters soon [rallied](#) in front of the national legislature. One group of protesters attacked the French Embassy, claiming that France sought to restore the ousted president to power. Meanwhile, protesters at multiple demonstrations brandished Russian flags and signs demanding the departure of France from the Sahel.

Two civil society groups in Niger—**PARADE Niger** and the **Union of Pan-African Patriots**—stand out for their unusually strong pro-Russian stance. PARADE Niger appears to be a construct of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), with little organic buy-in, whereas UNPP is ostensibly a political party, though organized around a single figurehead. Following the coup, these groups celebrated the junta, were among the loudest voices calling for greater cooperation with Russia, and helped coordinate and amplify offline protest. They also appear to have engaged in inauthentic online behavior, including the creation of multiple Facebook pages, to artificially promote content.

Similar protests in support of Russia have followed the coups d'état across the Sahel, highlighting four factors that make Russian IO successful in the region.

- **Agility.** Russia's messengers are capable of producing content quickly in response to sudden changes in the political winds. Local actors can take signals from known pro-Russian sources with continent-wide reach such as Afrique Média, Kémi Séba, and Nathalie Yamb.
- **Intensity.** Russia's messengers are often vitriolic and inflammatory, casting political decisions in stark, polarizing terms. This is often channeled through a central protest group or political figurehead.
- **Hydra-headed.** Russia's messaging is diffused through multiple conduits, creating the impression of diverse but converging opinion. Facebook pages are relatively cheap and easy to produce but difficult to track and eliminate.
- **Cooptation of grievance.** Pro-Russian messaging is grafted on top of civilians' legitimate fears about physical and economic insecurity. France's historical baggage is exploited to cast Russia in a favorable light.

### *PARADE Niger*

The Russia-Africa Alternative Partnership for Economic Development (Partenariat alternatif Russie-Afrique pour le développement économique, or PARADE) is a Russian affinity [group](#) with chapters in multiple African countries. The Senegalese chapter, headed by [Samba Mbenda Diaw](#), is called PARADE International and doubles as the network's umbrella organization.

In December 2022, the Nigerien chapter received a [visit](#) from the Russian Ambassador, Igor Gramyko, who promised "to magnify their work within Nigerien civil society." The chapter's leader, [Amadou Kindo Abdourahamane](#), has shared [conspiracy theories](#) about Russia's war in Ukraine and [content](#) from Afrique Média, a Cameroon-based propaganda outlet linked to Prigozhin. Following the coup, the group appeared at pro-coup protests, [declaring](#) their support for the junta and their hope for partnership with Russia. Subsequently, Kindo made an official [announcement](#) of support for the CNSP on Facebook, sharing it to multiple Nigerien Facebook groups.

Representatives of Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs have visited PARADE's many chapters, indicating a possible connection. Diaw advocated for closer Russian-African partnership in a [video](#) conference at the Russian university MGIMO, which was subsequently featured on the Facebook page of the Russian Embassy in Senegal. According to Diaw, the presentation was [attended](#) by both Séba and Prigozhin. Similarly, Diaw's comments on the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg were [amplified](#) by Sputnik, suggesting further ties to Russia's propaganda apparatus.



**Figure 1:** Logo of PARADE



**Figure 2:** Leader of PARADE Niger, Amadou Kindo Abdourahamane, posts a declaration of support for the CNSP to his Facebook page

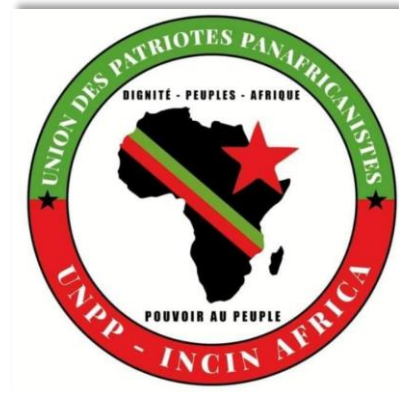


### *L'Union des patriotes panafricanistes*

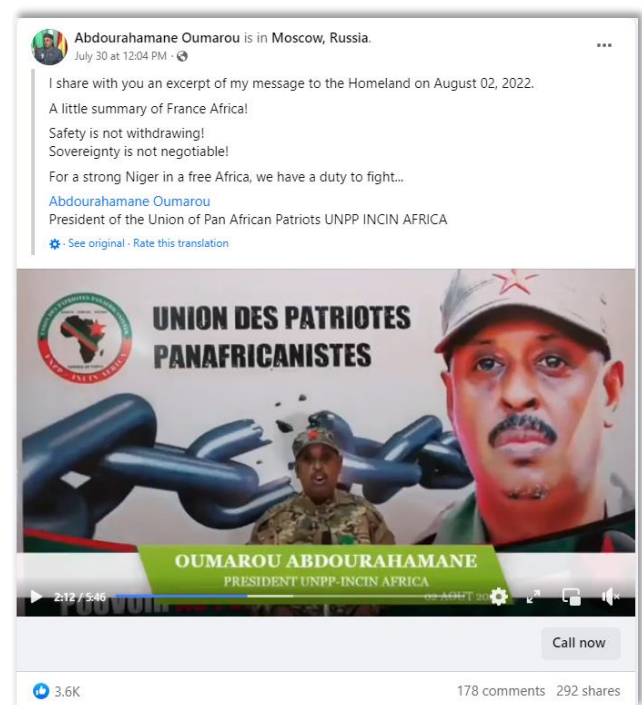
Created in 2020, l'Union des patriotes panafricanistes (The Union of Pan-African Patriots, UNPP) is political party whose founder and leader, **Abdourahamane Oumarou**, has been [described](#) as the “Che” of Niamey. The party appears to serve exclusively as a vehicle for promoting Oumarou, whose personal [website](#) describes his politics, in part, as “revolutionary from head to toe.” Born in Sudan and educated in Morocco, [Oumarou](#) was a member of Niger’s legislature from 2016-2021 and stood as a candidate in its 2020 presidential elections.

Oumarou did not personally attend any of the pro-coup protests as he was in St. Petersburg for the Russia-Africa Summit. There, he [met with](#) other pro-Russian media figures like Séba and Yamb as well as Mali’s recently sanctioned Minister of Defense Sadio [Camara](#) and Burkina Faso’s interim President Ibrahim [Traoré](#).

With a following of 179K on Facebook, Oumarou [signaled](#) his support for the coup from Russia, [encouraging](#) his followers to attend protests (Figure 4). Oumarou also [appeared](#) on Afrique Média to voice his support for the CNSP.



**Figure 3:** Logo of the Union des patriotes panafricanistes

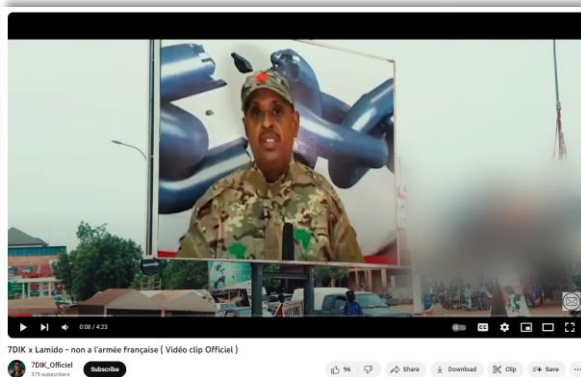


**Figure 4:** Oumarou explains the UNPP's support for the coup from Moscow

In his role as director general of the music television channel Liptako TV, Oumarou appears to have earned the loyalty of several Nigerien musicians. As the coup unfolded, Facebook pages linked to Oumarou that typically ran publicity for musicians began championing the CNSP. One, originally called PROMO, [changed](#) its name to Espoir 227, imitating a news page, and began sharing content celebrating the junta. Additionally, two musicians in this network—Lamido Music and 7Dik—released a [music video](#) called “Non à la armée française” (“No to the French army”) which opens with an extended clip of Oumarou’s remarks on the coup (Figures 5 and 6). It is unclear if Oumarou directs these artists or coordinates these promotional Facebook pages, but he is a central node in the network connecting them.

### What does this mean for Gabon?

The August 30 coup in Gabon does not neatly fit the profile of pro-Russian coups in the Sahel. On the one hand, Gabon maintains good relations with France, having received a state visit from French President Emmanuel Macron in March. There is also a French military presence in Gabon engaged in a regional military training operation. On the other hand, the



**Figure 5:** Oumarou’s remarks on the coup appear in the opening shot of Lamido and 7Dik’s music video, “Non à l’armée française.”



**Figure 6:** The musicians Lamido and 7Dik released a song called “Non à la armée française.” The song has been promoted on a series of Nigerien music promotional channels connected to Oumarou. Note the #espoir227.

grievances leveled against the Bongo regime differ from those of the putschists in the Sahel. Gabon’s government has been in the hands of the Bongo family for more than 50 years, with the Bongos enriching themselves on the state’s oil wealth. The governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Sudan, and Niger, by contrast, were fledgling democracies.

Another crucial difference is the **absence of Russian flags at pro-coup protests in Gabon**, at least so far. Russian flags have appeared at pro-coup protests in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, but they remain an ambiguous if alarming metric of popular support for Russia. Some protesters may legitimately endorse partnering with Russia, some may be signaling alignment to protect themselves amid political upheaval, and others may have been paid by Russian affinity groups to participate. The Russian flag has perhaps ironically become a symbol of African sovereignty, channeling anti-French grievances into nationalism and harkening back to Soviet-era liberation struggles.

However, **pro-Russian messengers are attempting to influence the junta in Gabon**. In the hours after the coup Kémi Séba [called on](#) Gabon to “follow the path of Goïta and IB [Ibrahim Traoré], not Damiba.” Lt. Col. Paul Henri Sandaogo Damiba was the head of the first coup government in Burkina Faso who was ousted in a second coup by Traoré following accusations that he was too close to France. It's too soon to say how General Brice Oligui Nguema will respond, but the fear of coup contagion has prompted the governments of Rwanda and Cameroon to [reshuffle](#) their military leadership.

### What's next

Yevgeny Prigozhin's reported death, and that of his deputy Dmitry Utkin has left the Wagner Group headless. Coup plotters and client states alike are eager to know what will become of the organization that directly or indirectly helped champion their rebellions. While the fate of Wagner operatives on the continent remains unknown, the organization was only ever one actor among many in Russia's influence apparatus. The Russian MFA as well as individual agents on the ground and online continue to offer avenues for influencing popular protest in Africa.