

## **An examination into Russia's use of Private Military Contractors as a tool to achieve their geopolitical goals in Africa**

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This paper examines Russia's use of Private Military Contractors (PMCs) in Africa, particularly its impact on diminishing Western influence. Existing research on PMCs often overlooks the specificities of Russia's approach and therefore this research addresses this gap; by employing a mixed methods approach, combining document analysis with quantitative data. It investigates the historical and legal context of Russian PMCs, their deployment strategies in Africa, and their impact on established Western interests. Case studies of Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) explore operational dynamics, geopolitical motivations, and the consequences for regional stability, human rights, and democratic governance.

The findings reveal a calculated Russian strategy leveraging PMCs to counter Western influence and establish spheres of power. While this approach weakens Western influence, it also exacerbates instability and undermines human rights. The blurring of lines between state and non-state actors further complicates accountability. The research highlights the need for a multifaceted international response, including condemning human rights abuses, strengthening sanctions, and reevaluating Western military aid models to emphasise adherence to international law. Acknowledging limitations due to the opacity of PMCs, the paper recommends future research on African perspectives, potential shifts in Russia's strategy, and robust regulatory frameworks to enhance accountability and transparency. By illuminating the destabilising effects of Russia's PMC strategy, this paper underscores the urgency of safeguarding international norms for peace, security, and human rights.

Private Military Contractors (PMCs) have emerged as a prominent instrument in the pursuit of geopolitical objectives, presenting a complex interplay of power dynamics and strategic manoeuvring in global affairs. This paper aims to delve into the specific case of Russia's utilisation of PMCs within the African continent and its consequential impact on undermining and reducing Western influence. The multifaceted nature of this shift in Russia's foreign policy warrants a comprehensive examination encompassing historical precedents, legal frameworks, operational dynamics, and geopolitical implications. Numerous studies and reports have identified the significance of the operational strategies of Russian PMCs and acknowledge the evolving nature of contemporary conflict landscapes.



However, the existing literature presents notable lacunae, notably in comprehensively understanding the origin and growth of PMCs in Russia, examining the broader ethical and geopolitical implications, and exploring the specific impacts within African contexts, such as Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR). Thus, this research endeavours to fill these gaps by investigating the historical use of PMCs by Russia, assessing the relevant legislation within Russia, and conducting an analysis of Russia's PMC deployments. The overarching goal is to elucidate the complex dimensions of Russia's PMC strategy in Africa and its implications for the geopolitical balance, regional stability, and diminishing Western influence on the continent.

## **Literature Review**

The collaborative work by the Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) and Johns Hopkins University (2020), titled "Russian Private Military Companies: Their Use and How to Consider Them in Operations, Competition, and Conflict" offers a comprehensive examination of the strategic utilisation of Russian PMCs.<sup>1</sup> The publication presents an overview of the evolving landscape of modern conflict, particularly in the context of Russia's strategic use of PMCs. The analysis delves into the operational dynamics, the evolving nature of warfare, and the intricate relationships between PMCs and state-sponsored military objectives. While providing valuable insights into the operational tactics and strategic implications of these entities, the report occasionally leans towards a descriptive narrative, lacking critical analysis of the broader geopolitical ramifications and ethical considerations surrounding their use of PMCs. Additionally, while the report acknowledges the evolving legal frameworks, it falls short in critically examining the ethical implications and global legal perspectives regarding the use of PMCs, warranting a deeper exploration. Yet, the work serves as a pertinent foundational resource, offering valuable insights into the operational and strategic considerations when assessing the role of Russian PMCs in contemporary conflict scenarios.

The report titled "Russia's Influence in Africa, A Security Perspective" by Sarah Daly (2023), provides a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of Russia's growing influence on the African continent.<sup>2</sup> The paper effectively highlights the historical context of Russia-Africa relations, the various instruments of Russian influence, and the implications for African security. Daly's work is particularly valuable for its attention to the role of Russian PMCs in pursuing hard power goals in the region via the provision of weapons systems, training and combat support, whilst also examining Russia's use of soft power via increased trade, investment and commercial activities. Daly argues that through these mechanisms Russia is seeking to reassert itself as a global power in direct challenge to Western hegemony and to solicit and exercise mutual diplomatic and political support from African nations in multilateral and international bodies, notably the UN General Assembly.

However, Daly's analysis could be strengthened by a more in-depth discussion of the varying responses of African countries to Russia's influence. While the research rightly acknowledges the diversity of African perspectives, it does not fully explore the factors that

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<sup>1</sup> The AWG was established in 2003 to provide global operational advisory support to enable U.S. Army against current and emerging asymmetric threats, and prepare for Large Scale Combat Operations. It was disbanded in 2021.

<sup>2</sup> This report was completed in conjunction with the Atlantic Council's Africa Centre and Policy Centre for the New South (PCNS).

shape these different perspectives. Additionally, the paper could benefit from a more explicit discussion of the potential benefits of Russia's involvement in Africa, alongside the risks. This would provide a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics of Russia-Africa relations.

The research report by Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyerthe (2023), titled "The Grey Zone Russia's military, mercenary and criminal engagement in Africa" provides a detailed analysis of Wagner Group's operations in Africa and offers a comprehensive understanding of its complex engagement, intertwining Russian state foreign policy, organised crime dynamics, and economic pursuits. The report delves into Wagner's emergence as a prominent PMC, highlighting its symbiotic relationship with the Russian state and the accusations of misconduct. The report's delineation of PMC activities across military, political, and economic spheres in African nations reflects the complexity of their engagements, varying in intensity and nature but shadowed by allegations of human rights abuses, resource exploitation, and election interference whilst simultaneously maintaining increasing support for the Russian state through a systematic disinformation campaign. Furthermore, the research demonstrates how private Russian commercial interests, and the state are intertwined, which is exacerbated by current Western sanctions resulting in the increased reliance on alternative strategies such as PMCs to exert influence and achieve geopolitical and economic goals. Whilst the report concludes with a set of comprehensive recommendations addressing the need for multi-dimensional approaches to counter Russian influence in the region it predominantly focuses on organised crime and fails to examine the current legal framework for PMCs in Russia and the evolution of PMCs other than the Wagner Group which warrant further study.

### **Research Lacunae**

Existing literature on PMCs often focuses on Western activities and Russia's use in Ukraine and Syria, leaving gaps in understanding Russia's specific motivations, strategies, and impacts of PMC deployment in African contexts like Mali and the CAR. While scholars have analysed the implications of PMCs on global security, discussions around Russia's use of these entities in Africa remain limited. This gap impedes a comprehensive understanding of the evolving geopolitical landscape in Africa, particularly concerning the interplay between Russian PMC activities and the reduction of Western influence.

One evident void in current research lies in the limited exploration of Russia's legal framework governing PMCs, their involvement and the increasing reliance on their use. While various countries and international bodies have established legal guidelines for these entities, comprehensive insights into Russia's specific regulations and policies are scarce. Understanding the legal dimensions within which PMCs operate is crucial to assessing the legitimacy, accountability, and adherence to international norms governing their actions. Bridging this gap requires a deeper investigation into Russian laws, policies, and practices concerning the formation, operation, and oversight of PMCs.

Furthermore, the geopolitical implications stemming from Russia's PMC engagements in Mali and CAR remain insufficiently examined. The impact of these deployments on local dynamics, power structures, and the broader African geopolitical landscape lacks comprehensive analysis. Evaluating the effects of Russia's actions on stability, conflicts, and

the balance of power in these regions is crucial for understanding the evolving geopolitical dynamics in Africa and its implications for global security.

The scarcity of research addressing these issues necessitates a more nuanced approach to studying Russia's use of PMCs in Africa. An in-depth exploration could shed light on the motivations driving Russia's engagement, the operational strategies employed by these PMCs, and their effects on regional stability and global power dynamics. Additionally, an examination of Russia's legal framework governing PMCs could offer insights into its compliance with international norms and potential areas for countering their influence. Addressing these research gaps would not only enhance our understanding of Russia's geopolitical strategies but also contribute significantly to discussions on international security, legal frameworks for PMCs, and the broader implications of private military use.

### **Research Questions**

This paper aims to investigate the utilisation of PMCs by Russia within the African continent to advance their geopolitical objectives, notably assessing the impact on diminishing Western influence. The primary focus entails scrutinising historical precedents of PMC by Russia in global contexts, elucidating the evolving reliance and motives behind such strategic choices. Fundamental inquiries pertain to the legality framework governing PMCs within Russia, delving into the regulatory measures, legal provisions, and state policies governing their formation, operation, and engagement abroad. Additionally, the research intends to conduct a detailed analysis of Russia's deployment of PMCs specifically within Mali and the CAR, aiming to uncover the operational dynamics, the geopolitical motivations behind their presence, and the consequential impact on diminishing Western influence in these regions as witnessed first-hand by the author. The research spans aspects such as the nature of PMC involvement, their interactions with local actors, and the resultant alterations in geopolitical power dynamics.

1. How have PMCs emerged and evolved in Russia, and what comparative legal frameworks exist internally regarding the regulation of PMCs, and how do these align or contrast in reality with Russia's approach to their usage?
2. What is Russia's current deployment strategy in Africa and does it threaten traditional influence in the region?
3. What specific geopolitical implications arise from Russia's reliance on PMCs in Mali and the CAR, and how do these resonate on the broader African geopolitical landscape?

### **Sources**

A comprehensive examination of Russia's use of PMCs in Africa requires a multi-layered approach, drawing on varied and credible sources. Primary sources such as official government documents, legislation, and policy frameworks from Russia and Western entities are vital for understanding the legal and regulatory aspects of PMC operations. Scholarly literature spanning international law, security studies, and geopolitics provides theoretical frameworks and analytical insights into the role and impact of PMCs in global conflicts and power dynamics. Analysis from reputable geopolitical think tanks and academic journals offers further understanding of Russia's geopolitical strategies and historical use of PMCs, as well as insights into evolving African geopolitics. Reports and case studies from respected NGOs detailing Russian PMC activities in Mali and the CAR offer valuable empirical evidence.

Additionally, scholarly works on African regional dynamics, conflict studies, and Western foreign policy contribute essential context for evaluating the implications of Russia's PMC involvement in countering Western influence in Africa.

## **Methodology**

A mixed methods methodology is adopted for this research. Qualitative research with a significant focus on document-based information collection and analysis is utilised to identify and qualify potential biases or matters of contextual relevance; since much of the literature emanates from countries and organisations with an overt and covert agenda against the expansion of Russian influence. The idea is to minimise the dangers of drawing inaccurate conclusions. Thus, a Systematic Literature Review is chosen as the tool for analysing all sources available. Such methodology is in theory a “replicable, scientific and transparent process” that explicitly aims to minimise bias (Tranfield et al., 2003, p.209) and generates a logical sequence of reasoning between the research questions and findings.

Secondly, a quantitative analysis involving the systematic collection and analysis of available data, including PMC activities, geopolitical shifts, conflict patterns, and Western influence metrics in African contexts is conducted to provide empirical insights into the extent and nature of Russia's PMC involvement and its correlation with the reduction of Western influence.

## **Outline of Paper**

Part One will analyse and provide an in-depth exploration of the historical emergence and evolution of PMCs in Russia. It will delve into the historical trajectories, factors contributing to their evolution, and comparative legal frameworks governing PMCs internally. This section of the paper will critically analyse Russia's approach to regulating PMCs and evaluate how these frameworks align or diverge from global legal standards, shedding light on the realities of their usage.

Part Two will examine Russia's deployment strategy of PMCs within the African continent. It shall scrutinise Russia's geopolitical motivations, and operational strategies while examining the extent to which Russia's actions challenge or threaten established Western interests within the African geopolitical landscape.

Part Three will consider the geopolitical implications of Russia's PMC reliance in Mali and the CAR and conduct a detailed investigation in the specific implications arising from Russia's PMC involvement in these regions and explore how these reverberate across the broader African geopolitical landscape.

Part Four synthesizes the findings from the preceding section, offering a comprehensive overview of Russia's utilisation of PMCs in Africa and its consequences for geopolitical power dynamics. Drawing on the research outcomes, this segment formulates conclusive insights regarding the emergent patterns, geopolitical ramifications, and implications for Western and UN influence in Africa. Additionally, it provides recommendations to address the evolving challenges posed by Russia's PMC in the African continent.

## **PART ONE.**

### **1.1 Introduction**

"Private Military Contractor" or "Private Military Company" (PMC) is currently the in-vogue term for one of the world's oldest professions and has previously been known under many titles: Stratiotai, condottieri, privateers, soldiers of fortune and mercenaries. As alluded to by Singer (2004, p.8-10), the concept of mercenaries or PMCs has a long and complex history that stretches back to ancient times. This section aims to delve into their origins, tracing their evolution to the modern era, the emergence and evolution of Russian PMCs and their legal standing in Russia. Understanding these groups' historical backgrounds is essential to comprehend their current usage by Russia as a tactic to achieve strategic goals and how they are deployed to advance geopolitical objectives.

### **1.2 The Origin and Evolution of Mercenaries and Private Military Contractors**

Numerous academics such as Luraghi (2006, p.229) and Singer (2004) state that the origins of mercenaries can be traced back to ancient civilisations, where they played a central role in shaping the conduct of warfare. In ancient Greece, city-states contracted Stratiotai, to augment their armies during times of conflict. These soldiers for hire offered proficiency, discipline, and flexibility, making them attractive assets in a period characterised by shifting alliances and continuous rivalry. The Roman Empire made extensive use of mercenaries, particularly during its expansive phase were "Foederati", or foreign troops hired as allies, and "auxilia" who were non-citizen soldiers, were instrumental in augmenting Roman legions. This use of mercenaries allowed the Romans to maintain a formidable military presence across vast territories without relying solely on mandatory conscription and allowed for rapid expansion and demobilisation as required (Bachrach, 2008, p.143).

According to Percy (2007, p68-93), the medieval period witnessed the continued prominence of mercenaries in European warfare. Feudalism led to a fragmented political landscape, with regional elites hiring mercenaries to protect their interests and engage in territorial conflicts. These mercenaries, referred to as "condottieri" in Italy and "free companies" in France, operated as self-styled military units, offering their services to the highest bidder. Their loyalty was often more aligned with their employers than with any overarching notion of a nation-state.

During the fourteenth century, there was a growing reliance on mercenary-styled groups. As the scale of warfare increased, privatised groups were permitted to take on responsibility for the administration and organisation of their forces (Peterson, 2016, p.7). These private groups continued to expand and develop over the following three centuries with minimal interference and by the seventeenth century, these groups were assessed as key components in several major battles many of which consisted predominantly of private military forces (McFate, 2019, p.11). During the Thirty Years War, Count Wallenstein was considered to have become the richest man in Europe by equipping entire armies and leasing his paramilitary-styled forces to the highest bidder, which highlighted their perceived necessity (Singer, 2003).<sup>3</sup> The introduction of large-scale rental armies allowed 'the elites' to

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<sup>3</sup> Count Wallenstein, also known as Albrecht von Wallenstein, was a prominent military leader and statesman in the Holy Roman Empire after converting to Catholicism. Count Wallenstein played a key role in the conflict between Catholic and Protestant states and was renowned for his troop's brutal tactics. Despite his military

wage war whilst avoiding the sustained costs of standing armies; such as military pensions or reduced agricultural productivity due to a reduction of working-aged men being available in their fiefdoms. As stated by McFate (2019, p.13), the use of mercenaries “lowered the barrier to entry into the war while encouraging ever larger battles. Mercenaries never had it so good, or civilians so bad”.

As explained by Conybeare and Sandler (1993), the age of exploration and European colonial expansion, saw a new dimension to the use of mercenaries. European powers such as France, Spain and Britain employed privateers to engage in naval warfare against rival nations. These privateers were fundamentally state-sanctioned pirates, contributing significantly to the competition for colonial dominance. This period also witnessed the outsourcing of security activities, with countries like Britain contracting private organisations in the Americas. Britain's hiring of approximately 30,000 German troops after the American Declaration of Independence exemplifies this practice, as they sought to quell the revolution (Baer, 2015, p.111).

According to Peterson (2016), the end of the French Revolution marked the decline of the use of mercenaries as states sought to control their militaries and security through nationalism which was awakened from growing levels of patriotism and volunteerism. Before this, it was believed that patriotism was unconnected to military service (McFate, 2019, p.2). This decline was somewhat short-lived and merely saw nations incorporate hired soldiers into their regular armies. During the Napoleonic wars, the French state bolstered its armies with Polish lancers to battle the British who in turn contracted the King's German Legion. Brazil's utilisation of German and Irish mercenaries in 1820s to battle Argentina (Mockler, 1987) further showed the continued reliance and advantages of PMCs-styled groups. According to Thomson (1994, p.38), during the Crimean War, the United Kingdom hired approximately 16,000 Swiss, Italian, and German mercenaries to battle Russia and is assessed as being one of the last evidenced use of large-scale foreign armies for the next 100 years although the theory of employing PMCs by nation-states did not cease and merely migrated into alternative forms.

As clarified by Thomson (1994) and Spicer (2000) the employment of mercenaries after the 1850s took on several forms each shaped by unique agreements and circumstances. Firstly, individuals could join the armed forces of another nation permanently, as exemplified by the French Foreign Legion. This model involves foreign nationals becoming an integral part of the host country's military structure. Secondly, nations may engage in formal agreements, such as the Kathmandu Agreement between Britain and Nepal, allowing the recruitment of foreign forces, such as the renowned Gurkhas. These agreements signify a mutual understanding and cooperation between two sovereign states.

Another approach involves the direct contracting of individual foreigners or PMCs by governments to participate in targeted operations. Noteworthy examples include Executive Outcomes, contracted by Sierra Leone and Angola to suppress uprisings.<sup>4</sup> This model allows

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successes, Wallenstein's ambitions and growing power led to suspicions from Emperor Ferdinand II, ultimately resulting in his assassination in 1634 (Singer, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> EO was a South African-based PMC founded in 1989 by Eeben Barlow, a former Lieutenant-Colonel in the South African Defence Force. The company gained notoriety for its involvement in conflicts throughout Africa.

nations to leverage external expertise for specific military objectives while maintaining control over the contracted entities. Lastly, states may compensate one another for the use of military personnel, as demonstrated by Saudi Arabia's exchange of a billion-dollar aid package to Pakistan in the 1980s. This transaction involved the deployment of approximately 15,000 Pakistani combat troops in support of Saudi Arabia's strategic interests (Weinbaum & Khurram, 2014, p.213).

As referred to by Singer (2001, p191) and Kinsey (2006, p.155), the modern concept of PMCs commenced in earnest with colonial powers such as Britain, Belgium and France hiring groups to protect their interests in newly independent nations. These early groups laid the groundwork for contemporary PMCs, from providing security for businesses operating in conflict zones to participating in armed conflicts alongside national forces.

### **1.3 The Emergence and Evolution of Russian PMCs**

Research by Baranec (2014) and Vukicevic & Coalson (2016) demonstrates that Russia, like the West has long utilised non-state groups as a tactic to achieve their geopolitical goals with communities such as the Cossack and volunteer forces been used to perform functions similar to PMCs for the past 300 years.

#### **1.3.1 The Cossacks**

The Cossacks first emerged in the 15th century, as groups of runaway serfs and freemen who settled in the vast, sparsely populated grasslands of Eastern Europe. These early Cossacks were fiercely independent, and they resisted the authority of both the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Russian Tzardom. Though, the Cossacks also recognised the need for protection from their neighbours, and often formed alliances in exchange for military service.

As discussed by Skinner (1994), the Cossack paramilitary formations played a vital role in Russia's expansion during the 18th and 19th centuries and were involved in every major battle during the Napoleonic Wars which earned them a fierce reputation. The Cossacks were used by Tsar Nicolas I to subdue the Poles in Russian Poland during the 19th century, and were dispatched to Hungary and Czechoslovakia to support the Austrians in their fight against ongoing uprisings. Nevertheless, many scholars believe that the 1905 workers' protest in St. Petersburg, where Cossacks and Hussars opened fire on the demonstrators, raised public mistrust of Tsar Nicolas II regime and was the catalyst that sparked the 1917 revolution.

Conversely, under Bolshevik rule, the Cossack community faced repression and their independence eroded as Lenin's Bolsheviks attempted to take control over uncommitted Cossack regions during the Civil War. It took decades for the Cossack communities that survived the Civil War to recover from its devastation and adjust to a society in which their customary privileges were no longer respected in Russia (now the Union Soviet Socialist Republics). Early in the 1930s, Cossack farms were collectivised, which further diminished their independence and any opposition to the changes was crushed ruthlessly by the Soviet authorities. Stalin's purges also affected the Cossacks, who were accused by their leaders of

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It was officially dissolved in 1998 due to increasing pressure and the South African government's legislation to prohibit mercenary activities. However, it was re-established in 2020 (Barbesino, 2023).



being responsible for the collapse of collective farms, in addition to the military and dissidents (Skinner, 1994).

In 1994 President Boris Yeltsin implemented a "State Policy Concept regarding the Cossacks," which aimed to restore full legal rights to the Cossacks. Due to their period of suppression spanning over the previous six decades, this re-emerging Cossack community became heavily influenced and controlled by the state compared to their historically independent predecessors. Since the introduction, of "On the State Service of Cossacks" reform (by President Putin) their key role has been focused on fostering values and Orthodox education among young people in Russia. Cossacks have also expanded their involvement as a domestic security force and have been engaged in activities ranging from the provision of additional security at borders to counterinsurgency operations in regions such as Chechnya (Darczewska, 2017). From the 2000s, Cossacks participated in select Russian military operations, including activities in Abkhazia and the Georgia-Russia conflict, (Van Herpen, 2014, p.147). The annexation of Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts spurred the creation of the 'Cossack National Guard of the Almighty Don Army', who supported the operation with other alleged separatist groups in the Donbas region (Darczewska 2017, p.21).

A reorganisation of the Cossacks took place in 2014 to simplify their organisation. This saw many Cossacks join Serbian nationalists in the Republic of Srpska, Bosnia Herzegovina and Montenegro for cultural and political events. Aside from their involvement in eastern Ukraine, the use of Cossacks is now primarily utilised beyond Russia's borders for exerting soft power influence on countries rather than operating as PMCs (Vukicevic & Coalson, 2016).

### **1.3.2 Russian Volunteers**

As clarified by the AWG & Johns Hopkins University (2020) there was a culture of Volunteerism by Russian citizens who were utilised as non-government auxiliary force providers in the "near abroad".<sup>5</sup> In the 1990s, following the breakup of the USSR, there were several civil and ethnic conflicts in newly created independent republics. During these conflicts, it is believed that various groups received support either directly or indirectly from the Russian military. This was evident during the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict when recently demobilised Russian troops were recruited by Armenia to operate tanks and participate in combat missions against Azerbaijan. Additionally, some volunteers had their own ideological or nationalist motivations and travelled to participate in internal conflicts in Transnistria (Moldova) in 1992 and Abkhazia (Georgia) in 1993 (Bernales, 1994).

Hundreds of Russian volunteers were identified to have played a role in supporting the Serbian government under Slobodan Milosevic during the Yugoslav conflict with evidence put forward by Valetskii (2010), showing their arrival as early as September 1992 when they joined various foreign volunteer units including the "White Wolves." As demonstrated by O'Kane and Kettle (1999), Russians voluntarily joined the Kosovo conflict fighting alongside the Milosevic government and participating in bloody battles before the official Russian military contingent arrived as part of the NATO-led force. Similarly in the Ukraine conflict, McDermott (2016, p.5) provided evidence that large numbers of Russian volunteers

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<sup>5</sup> The term near abroad is used by the Russian Federation to refer to the fourteen Soviet successor states other than Russia.

supported separatist forces in Eastern Ukraine and played a significant role during the early stages of the conflict.

It must be noted that the opinions of these volunteers vary. Some experts such as Petersen (2008) see them as part of Russia's objective to regain influence in the region by involving themselves in various conflicts utilising PMCs and proxy forces. On the other hand, it is challenging to differentiate those who genuinely participate due to their personal ideology and beliefs from those who have undisclosed orders from the Kremlin. As explained by Galeotti (2019), these individuals might not always possess suitable military skills but they bring enthusiasm and serve as political propaganda tools to showcase supposed popular support.

Examining the 1997 UN Report on Mercenaries, it gives the term "Volunteer" a more nuanced meaning. The report states that any selfless voluntary participation in conflict actions is not included in the definition of a crime. This exemption is based on the fundamental idea that these actions are not motivated by self-interest, which gives them instant credibility. This distinction highlights the intricate relationship that exists between purpose and behaviour when engaging in conflict. It also emphasises how important it is to take into account the intentions and altruistic efforts of those involved in such activities when evaluating the legal ramifications of their actions, and it permits them to operate under the current Russian legislation (UN, 1997).

#### **1.4 The Modern Era of Russian PMCs**

Detailed research by the AWG and Johns Hopkins University (2020) provided evidence that Russian PMCs emerged from a growing market for security services in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. With the downsizing of the Russian military after 1991, many former military personnel found employment opportunities with domestic and international firms. In 1992, Federal Law No 2487 I "On Private Detective and Security Activity in the Federation of Russia" was adopted under President Boris Yeltsin which legitimised these private security companies (PSCs) to operate within Russia. Specialised groups marketed themselves as 'readymade' PSCs such as the "Alfa Group".<sup>6</sup> Despite the legitimacy of PSC to operate within Russia, there was virtually no governance over the market throughout the 1990s (AWG & JHU, 2020, p.8). As observed by Alison (2015, p.87), the lack of regulation or state control shaped the market for security services in Russia with privatisation driven by short-term initiatives and ad hoc political considerations. The growing demand for specialised security services relied heavily on informal networks of military and intelligence connections predominantly focused within Russia but also serving as contractors abroad.

During the 1990s and 2000s, numerous ex-Soviet soldiers from Russia and Ukraine found employment overseas as contractors in various African countries. These countries included Angola, Chad, the DRC, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan. Most of these nations had ties to the Soviet Union or were facing international sanctions or had limited/strained relations, with Western countries (Alison, 2015, p.94). Throughout the 2000s and into the 2010s, as Russian political stability improved, the PSC industry became "less freewheeling and more

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<sup>6</sup> The Alfa Group were created following the disbandment of a Federal Security Service (FSB) antiterrorist unit and played a role in safeguarding private businesses and individuals during the period of lawlessness in the 1990s and early 2000s.

regulated" (Galeotti, 2013, p.54). PSCs were subsequently legalised for use abroad which saw their use to safeguard state-owned infrastructure, anti-piracy and demining operations, and began offering security services abroad.

During this period, as asserted by Galeotti (2020), a discernible shift occurred within the upper echelons of the Russian military hierarchy. There emerged a growing reluctance to cede control over the deployment of force, accompanied by heightened concerns regarding the expansion and emulation of PSCs, particularly those modelling themselves after American contractors. Concurrently, within Russian military analysis circles, pivotal themes dominated discussions on PMCs.

Firstly, the discourse centred on the perceived threat posed by American PMCs to Russia's strategic interests, with particular emphasis on their alleged involvement in "colour revolutions" across nations like Syria, Libya, and Ukraine. This apprehension underscored the geopolitical dimension of PMCs and their potential role in influencing the internal affairs of sovereign states. Secondly, the discussions revolved around the prospect of financial gains if Russia could establish itself as the preeminent provider of PMC services. This economic perspective highlighted the competition for dominance in the lucrative PMC market, prompting considerations of how such services could contribute to the country's fiscal prosperity.

Lastly, the analysis delved into the tactical use of PMCs to advance Russian strategic geopolitical objectives. This consideration extended beyond mere economic gains to encompass the broader spectrum of geopolitical influence, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the diverse role that PMCs could play in advancing national interests on the global stage. In essence, this period witnessed a complex interplay between concerns over relinquishing military control, competition for economic supremacy in the PMC industry, and the strategic deployment of these entities to achieve geopolitical goals. The discussions within Russian military circles underscored the intricate dynamics and considerations surrounding the utilisation of PMCs, shedding light on the kaleidoscopic nature of their impact on national security and international relations.

Indeed during his first presidential term, the Putin administration started viewing PMCs as a tactic to achieve strategic objectives and since 2008 Russia has employed PMCs as a means to pursue its political agenda in various regions, including Georgia, Ukraine, Syria, Libya, the Central African Republic, Venezuela Sudan and Mali (Weber, 2020).

### **1.5 International Law Concerning the use of PMCs**

The proliferation of PMCs in recent decades has blurred the lines of traditional warfare, presenting intricate legal and ethical challenges within the framework of international law. At the heart of this debate lies the question of whether certain PMCs qualify as "mercenaries", individuals expressly prohibited from participating in hostilities under Article 47 of Additional Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions (United Nations, 2006). Additionally, the Montreux Document, while non-binding, offers a framework for regulating PMCs but falls short in addressing the evolving and often opaque activities of entities like Russian PMCs. This section, therefore, delves into the definition of mercenaries, explores how PMCs operate under

international humanitarian law (IHL), and examines the limitations of the Montreux Document in light of Russian PMCs' activities.

Defining mercenaries presents a fundamental obstacle. The 1989 International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries defines a mercenary as someone driven primarily by private gain to directly participate in hostilities for a warring party while not being a member of any party's armed forces. However, its ambiguity creates loopholes. PMCs often provide indirect combat support, blurring the line between "direct" and "indirect" participation. Additionally, their compensation structures can be complex, making it difficult to assess their primary motive (United Nations, 1989).

Russian PMCs, e.g., The Wagner Group, operate within this grey area. While not officially part of the Russian military, they demonstrably engage in armed conflict alongside Russian forces, raising concerns about their legal status. Notably, in Ukraine and Syria, Wagner personnel have been documented participating in combat, potentially fulfilling the "direct participation" criterion. Questions also arise regarding their motivation. While financial gain undoubtedly plays a role, ideological factors and support from the Russian state complicate the picture further.

Even when PMCs do not meet the full definition of mercenaries, their activities can still violate IHL. IHL principles like proportionality and distinction between civilians and combatants apply to all parties involved in armed conflict, regardless of their formal status. But, holding PMCs accountable presents difficulties, jurisdictional issues arise due to their multinational operations, and opaque structures often shield them from scrutiny. Additionally, the lack of a comprehensive regulatory framework for PMCs weakens enforcement mechanisms.

As argued by Cockayne (2008, p.403), the Montreux Document, aimed to address these challenges by setting non-binding good practices for states regarding PMCs. It emphasises states' responsibility to ensure PMCs under their control and on their territory comply with IHL. However, the Montreux Document has limitations. Its non-binding nature weakens its effectiveness, and its focus on preventing the "mercenaryisation" of armed conflict excludes PMCs whose activities may fall short of the full mercenary definition.

In the context of Russian PMCs, the Montreux Document's shortcomings are particularly evident as outlined by the UK's Foreign Affairs Committee (2023). The document's good practices rely on states' good faith implementation, which cannot be guaranteed when one of the key actors, Russia, is not a signatory. Moreover, the Montreux Document focuses on transparent structures and accountability mechanisms, which are precisely the areas where Russian PMCs remain shrouded in secrecy.

Cockayne (2008, p.411) highlights the challenges in addressing PMCs and IHL, necessitating a multifaceted approach. While upgrading the Montreux Document to a binding treaty with clear accountability and transparency measures would enhance its effectiveness, achieving such reforms seems unlikely. Therefore, the international community must pursue alternative avenues. Firstly, states need to demonstrate stronger political will to enforce IHL rigorously and hold violators accountable regardless of affiliation. Secondly, PMCs themselves

should adopt greater transparency, disclosing their operations and structures to facilitate robust oversight. Navigating this complex landscape requires a nuanced understanding of armed conflict dynamics and limitations of existing frameworks like the Montreux Document. Only through collaborative efforts between states, international bodies, and PMCs can we uphold IHL. Despite its complexities, this endeavour is crucial to prevent conflict zones from becoming havens for impunity and eroding international legal norms.

### **1.6 The legality of PMCs under Russian Legislation**

At present few organisations are as opaque and contentious in the complex world of international security as Russian PMCs. Even though these organisations are officially forbidden by the Russian Constitution and Criminal Code, they have a substantial impact on global conflicts. They raise important concerns about state intervention, the breakdown of legal standards, and possible dangers to international stability while acting as instruments in the Kremlin's geopolitical game plan. A nuanced approach is necessary to examine the confusing and contradictory landscape surrounding the legality of PMCs in Russia. This involves a thorough analysis of the complex factors that enable these organisations to continue operating despite their ostensibly unlawful status. An initial examination of the legal framework in Russia presents a straightforward scenario: PMCs operate outside the boundaries of the law. Chapter 34, Article 359 of the Criminal Code expressly criminalises involvement in armed formations not authorised by federal legislation, while Article 13(5) of the Constitution reserves the use of force exclusively for the state. This legal stance sharply contrasts with the practical reality on the ground. PMCs like Wagner operate boldly, recruiting personnel openly, deploying them overseas, and actively engaging in conflicts such as the war in Ukraine, seemingly unaffected by legal restrictions (Bowen, 2020; Doxsee 2022).

This stark contradiction begs the question, how do PMCs thrive in a legal environment that appears to be hostile? The answer is a complex and dynamic interaction of influences rather than a single factor. First of all, it seems that the law is frequently applied selectively. Law enforcement agencies within Russia conveniently ignore PMC activities, implying that they are either purposefully using plausible deniability as a tactic or receiving tacit endorsement from high-ranking authorities. As outlined by Bowen (2020) and Doxsee (2022) there is evidence of significant support from state intelligence and security services to erect a barrier around PMCs, protecting them from prosecution. Because of this mutually beneficial relationship, PMCs can function as the state's auxiliary agents, carrying out its orders with a convenient degree of detachment. However, the Kremlin's approach goes beyond mere tolerance; it involves a subtle process of legitimisation. By the Ministry of Defence and the Russian government branding PMCs as "volunteer detachments," the government minimises their private character and potentially legitimises their activities as extensions of the state apparatus (The Moscow Times, 2023). This linguistic manoeuvre serves a dual purpose: deflecting international scrutiny and framing PMC operations within a broader national security framework. By framing their activities in terms of patriotism and voluntary service, the state seeks to obscure its involvement and shift responsibility for its actions.

This strategic manoeuvring with legality carries significant risks. The absence of accountability that results from PMCs operating outside of the law makes it easier for violations of IHL and violations of human rights. Tales of extrajudicial executions, torture, and random assaults carried out by PMCs in Ukraine and Mali are sobering reminders of this

dangerous situation. PMCs operate with impunity, causing destruction and suffering in their wake, because there is no legal oversight and a convenient ambiguity surrounding their status. Furthermore, the employment of 'shadow forces' in international relations, such as PMCs, creates a risky precedent. The Russian state discredits the international system and violates accepted standards of interstate behaviour by pursuing goals through dubious entities. The global security framework may become unstable as a result of this blurring of the lines between state and private actors, which could lead to an era of 'shadow wars' fought by proxy forces acting outside of established lines of engagement (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018).

It's still unclear what the legal future holds for Russian PMCs. Although there has been a recent push for legislation to control their operations following the apparent Wagner mutiny in 2023, a change in direction is far from certain. The complex interaction between state interests and private actors complicates the situation with Potočník & Mareš, (2022, p.184) demonstrating that although a legal framework was drafted three times to regulate PMCs in 2014, 2016, 2018 it appeared to be obstructed by members of the MoD and FSB. International pressure and sanctions reduce their effectiveness with the US Treasury Department stipulating that several PMCs are deemed to be "designated Russian Ministry of Defence proxy forces" and therefore subject to state restrictions; with the Biden Administration designating the Wagner Group a Transnational Criminal Organisation (CRS, 2023).

As outlined by Perovic (2021), the global community now confronts a myriad of challenges, including navigating the complex legal landscape surrounding PMCs and IHL, while also holding individuals accountable and upholding the core tenets of a rules-based global order amidst evolving warfare strategies.

## **1.7 Conclusion**

The historical evolution of mercenaries and PMCs, from ancient empires to contemporary conflicts, reveals a recurring theme: states frequently harness private military forces as convenient tools to pursue geopolitical objectives under a veil of plausible deniability. The complexities surrounding their utilisation raise significant ethical and legal concerns about accountability, international law, and the potential erosion of state sovereignty.

Russia's embrace of PMCs exemplifies this trend. Despite operating in a grey legal zone within Russia, PMCs offer the Kremlin a range of strategic advantages. Primarily, they afford the state a degree of deniability when conducting politically sensitive operations abroad. As evidenced by Wagner's alleged involvement in conflicts from Ukraine to the Central African Republic, employing PMCs distances the Russian government from direct responsibility. Furthermore, these private forces bolster Russia's presence and influence in strategic regions, allowing the state to project power without committing regular troops.

This tactic becomes particularly relevant within the African context. As Part Two will explore, Russia seeks to enhance its geopolitical influence across Africa, often at the expense of established Western powers and UN interests. PMCs enable the Kremlin to subtly counterbalance competitors by providing resources and support to sympathetic regimes. It serves as a cost-effective strategy to expand Russian influence on the continent while furthering a political agenda often at odds with Western values.

However, this reliance on PMCs has considerable drawbacks. Their operation outside formal legal frameworks increases the risk of human rights abuses and undermines IHL. Moreover, the lack of transparency in their activities obscures the Kremlin's actual motives and undermines diplomatic efforts toward stabilisation. The long-term ramifications of employing these shadow forces for political gain deserve thorough consideration.

Understanding the historical lineage of PMCs, their complex evolution, and Russia's strategic motivations offers a vital foundation upon which to investigate the challenges Russia's deployment of PMCs in Africa poses to African governance, security, economic development, and established international norms. Part Two promises a comprehensive analysis of this complex and increasingly relevant issue within the contemporary geopolitical arena.

## **PART TWO**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Part One examined the historical origins of mercenary forces and PMCs, tracing their development globally and analysing Russia's distinctive legal/legislative environment surrounding these entities. The lack of regulation, combined with their proven ability to advance state interests, has had a significant impact on Moscow's perception of PMCs (Rampe, 2023). Beyond economic considerations, Russia views PMCs as versatile, multifaceted foreign policy instruments. Accordingly, this section will dissect the use of Russian PMCs on the African continent. These actors often operate within a grey area and excel at exploiting politically fragile scenarios, giving Russia potent means to counterbalance Western influence (Østensen & Bukkvoll, 2018).

As discussed by Siegle (2021) and Rampe (2023), the calculated use of PMCs in Africa highlights Russia's desire to amend the continent's historical geopolitical order. While access to valuable resources is undeniably beneficial, Moscow seeks to expand its influence by forging bonds with governments sympathetic to Russia's agenda. Doxsee, (2022) and Weber (2020) have demonstrated that PMCs bolster these allies by fulfilling vital security roles and training the forces of Russia-aligned nations. Russia systematically builds zones of influence within Africa, subtly dismantling established power structures previously dominated by Western countries and international bodies. These carefully calculated PMC deployments reflect Russia's long-term strategy of extending its power within Africa, driven by a desire to rival traditional Western centres of influence.

Part Two thus underscores that Moscow's motivation runs deeper than merely profiting from PMC use in Africa. This fundamental shift is vital to understand: Russia has weaponised PMCs into highly effective geopolitical tools. Analysing this dynamic provides profound insights into Russia's broader strategic objectives; it uses PMCs to strengthen its global position, weaken adversaries on the continent, and shift the balance of power to its favour. Russia recognises Africa as a key region to expand its sphere of influence and reposition itself as a force rivalling the West's traditional dominance (Siegle, 2021; 2022).

## **2.2 Legacy and Ambition: Russia's Strategic Pivot to Africa**

A comprehensive analysis of Russia's contemporary engagement in Africa necessitates an examination of its historical context, domestic power dynamics, and strategic parallels to actions beyond the continent. Russia's present ambitions in Africa reflect both continuities with its past and distinct adaptations in approach, revealing a calculated strategy guided by the intertwined goals of restoring great power status and challenging Western influence.

As maintained by Webber (1992), the Soviet Union's legacy of strong political and ideological bonds with many African states, forged during the Cold War era as it supported anti-colonial movements, likely provides a foundation for Russia's re-engagement. But now, studies suggests that Russia frames its efforts as a continuation of anti-imperialist and anti-neo-colonialist principles, positioning itself as an alternative to the influence of the United States, and former colonial powers. This strategic messaging grants Russia access to regimes facing international isolation, underscoring its opportunistic approach driven primarily by self-interest (Duursma & Masuhr, 2022, p.408-410).

In contrast to the overtly ideological stance of the USSR, Russia's contemporary actions in Africa are motivated by pragmatic concerns as President Putin's centralised power structure fuels both domestic control and foreign policy. Figures such as the now-deceased Yevgeniy Prigozhin, notorious for his network of mercenaries and resource extraction operations including the Wagner Group, exemplify the interweaving of personal gain and geopolitical objectives. Africa offers a conducive environment for this model, characterised by the deployment of semi-official paramilitary forces alongside efforts to secure economic control of strategic resource sectors (Sukhankin, 2020, cited in Duursma & Masuhr, 2022, p.411).

As explained by Stronski (2019, p.6-7), unlike its involvement in theatres such as Ukraine and Syria, where immediate security concerns predominate; Russia's actions in Africa represent a strategic focus on projecting its ambition to re-emerge as a major global power. It regularly employs a familiar hybrid toolkit: limited overt military force, reliance on mercenary and proxy groups, and extensive disinformation campaigns designed to amplify Russia's narratives while discrediting Western positions. While direct economic gains in Africa may be less significant than elsewhere, the political influence secured through alliances with resource-rich states provides crucial leverage for Moscow.

According to Duursma & Masuhr, (2022, p.412) and Reynolds, (2019, p.4) Russia's quest for renewed prestige plays a central role in its African strategy and come under the basic architecture that serves as the centre of power in Moscow which has been referred to as the "Kremlin Towers" or a "solar system." These terms refer to a highly personalised, networked conglomerate of various constituencies and personalities. However, the degree of power vested in a given office stems from the individual occupying it and their connections to other powerful individual nodes or oligarchs.

Ultimately, much power lies with President Putin who seeks to restore Russia's status as a global power reminiscent of the Soviet era. Africa offers a stage to demonstrate its capabilities beyond its immediate sphere of influence, directly challenging traditional Western dominance. This is achieved by expanding Russia's diplomatic presence, military



reach, and economic partnerships across the continent. In an age of intensified competition for resources, markets, and influence, Africa also becomes a key arena for geopolitical rivalry with Russia disrupting the established order and strategically cultivating its own support networks (Reynolds, 2019; Duursma & Masuhr, 2022; Rumer, 2022)

The use of PMC has thus become a crucial element in Russia's strategic approach as shown in Figure. 1. Organisations such as the Wagner Group offer deniable assets for operations in support of autocratic regimes or conflict-ridden states. PMCs engage in training, security provision, and the protection of Russian interests. Their deployment allows Russia to distance itself from potential political repercussions while maintaining significant influence. This underscores the complex and adaptable nature of Moscow's African strategy (Marten, 2019).

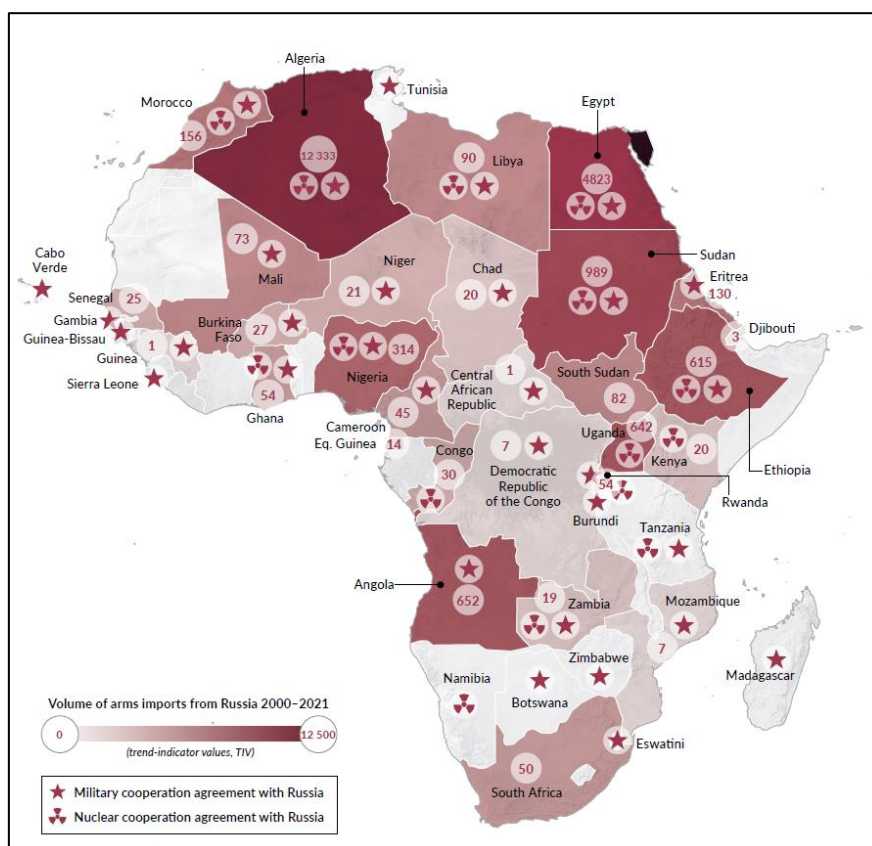


*Figure 1. Deployment of Russian PMCs 2016-2021  
(Doxsee, 2022)*

Duursma & Masuhr (2022, p.417) and the African Centre of Strategic Studies (2022; 2023) assess that Russia's engagement in Africa involves a calculated manipulation of historical grievances and present-day frustrations and its lack of a direct colonial legacy allows Russia to present itself as a benevolent alternative to Western powers, whose actions are often framed as neo-colonialist. By tapping into existing dissatisfaction with international aid structures and perceived Western condescension, Russia constructs a narrative of solidarity and partnership that appeals to nations (particularly those with limited Western support) seeking greater autonomy within the global system.

As examined by Reynolds (2019, p.8-9), Moscow's African strategy extends beyond economic gain or a return to Soviet-era relationships. Its interventions reveal a multi-pronged approach designed to achieve several goals. While the acquisition of critical minerals, oil, and natural gas serves to diversify Russia's exports and reduce reliance on domestic markets, Africa also represents a growing market for Russia's arms industry as can be seen in Figure 2. This economic pillar allows Russia to bolster its own position while strategically positioning itself as an alternative supplier of arms and military resources to African states.

*Figure 2. Key indicators of Russian diplomatic engagement in Africa  
(Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer, 2023, p.28)*



Following the invasion of Ukraine, heightened tensions due to Western sanctions underscore Russia's need to diversify its international relationships. By cultivating ties in Africa, Russia seeks to mitigate the impact of these restrictions. African markets provide potential avenues for essential trade, while strong diplomatic relationships translate into crucial support on the international stage. Africa's significance within the United Nations emphasises Russia's strategic interest in courting support from the continent. African nations comprise roughly one-quarter of UN member states, making their votes crucial to Russia's agenda. This influence was evident in both the 2014 General Assembly resolution condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea and the more recent vote on its invasion of Ukraine. In both instances, a significant number of African countries abstained, voted against the resolutions, or were absent (White and Holtz, 2022).<sup>7</sup> Securing voting blocs within the UN

<sup>7</sup> Thirty-five African countries did not support the General Assembly resolution critical of Russia's annexation of Crimea. And twenty-six African countries did not support a resolution to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

General Assembly affords Russia a degree of protection against widespread condemnation, allowing it to deflect criticism and pursue its agendas despite a largely unified Western response (Stronski, 2019, p4-5). These voting patterns highlight Russia's success in cultivating relationships with African nations, positioning them as potential allies.

In conclusion. Moscow's involvement in Africa goes beyond simply seeking profits or reviving old relationships. It's part of a deliberate strategy to regain Russia's global influence, establish footholds in Africa, and challenge the West's position on the continent. A key part of this strategy is the utilisation of PMCs. How Russia chooses which PMC to deploy (like the Wagner Group) in different African situations, and whether they follow the same playbook each time, is worth investigating. It's also important to understand what these PMCs do – from fighting alongside local forces, to training them, guarding resources, or spreading propaganda.

### **2.3 PMC Deployment Strategies and Operational Characteristics**

As previously discussed Russia's strategic engagement in Africa extends beyond traditional diplomatic and economic means, often incorporating the calculated deployment of PMCs. Understanding the usage patterns and operational modes of these groups is essential for a comprehensive analysis of Russia's goals and methods on the continent.

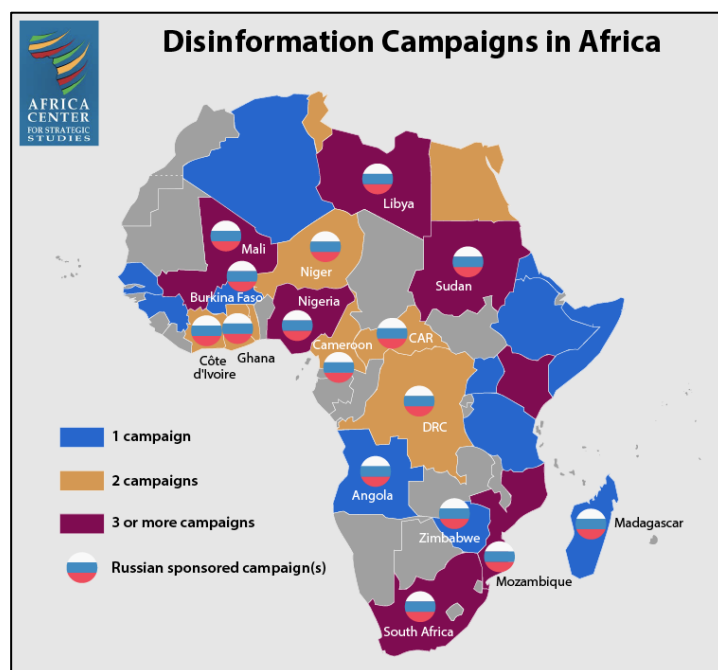
Russia's strategic deployment of PMCs within Africa underscores a flexible, adaptive approach tailored to specific contexts. Rather than following a single playbook, the choice of PMC and its scope of operations appear heavily influenced by the level of pre-existing alignment between the Kremlin and the African nation in question. This complicated model allows Russia to pursue an array of interconnected strategic goals on the continent, blending overt actions with potentially deniable proxy operations (Bowen, 2020; Daly, 2023, p.15).

In nations with strong historical or ideological ties to Russia, state-affiliated PMCs like the infamous Wagner Group enjoy considerable operational freedom. Sudan and the Central African Republic (CAR) offer striking examples. There, PMCs engage in resource protection, aligning with Russia's economic ambitions, and directly support allied militaries through training, equipment provision, and even active combat participation. This willingness to engage in frontline combat, a rarity among Western security contractors, provides the Kremlin with a cost-effective way to project power while minimising official Russian losses and the potential for domestic backlash (Sukhankin, 2019, p.7-9).

When overt Russian influence carries greater risk, PMCs with less obvious state affiliations are assessed to be preferred. These groups operate under the guise of commercial activity or even peacekeeping as argued by Daly (2023, p.12), allowing Russia to fully distance itself if needed. This tactic mirrors Russia's broader reliance on "hybrid warfare," a blend of traditional and unconventional methods. The true extent of Kremlin control over these seemingly independent PMCs remains difficult to ascertain, adding another layer to Russia's strategy of strategic ambiguity.

Daly (2023), Bowen (2023) and Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer (2023) demonstrate that across the spectrum of PMC deployments, a core set of operational modes emerge. Training and advising state security forces forms the foundation of many PMC activities, building relationships that translate into expanded Russian political influence and often pave the way for lucrative arms deals. Although less common than in Soviet-backed proxy wars, the readiness of Russian PMCs to engage in direct combat remains a potent tool in the Kremlin's arsenal. Additionally, securing control over strategic resources, notably energy reserves and mineral deposits, intertwines Russia's economic and geopolitical aims, allowing it to exert significant leverage over host nations.

Increasingly, Russian PMCs play a significant role in the realm of (dis)information operations and influence campaigns as is shown in Figure 3. The Wagner Group are said to be key to this and are allegedly seeking to destabilise African governments, expand its influence, and undermine Western powers. Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer (2023) demonstrate that the Wagner Group's presence in nations like Sudan, Mali and CAR extends beyond direct military support, encompassing political manipulation where Russian-backed actors utilise coordinated disinformation campaigns, often distributed through social media, to shape public opinion and sow discord. These campaigns frequently aim to discredit Western powers while bolstering narratives that favour the Kremlin, ultimately justifying Russia's interventionist role.



*Figure 3. Disinformation campaigns that have been detected (African Centre of Strategic Studies, 2022).*

Russia's PMCs destabilising techniques encompass a range of tactics, including the use of biased election monitoring initiatives (e.g. AFRIC) to legitimise preferred political outcomes.<sup>8</sup> They also deploy think tanks to amplify anti-Western sentiment within civil society. The case of Maxim Shugalei in Mali highlights the Kremlin's use of disinformation to

<sup>8</sup> Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) a Russian based organisation was sanctioned by the US in 2021 due to its links with Prigozhin (Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer, 2023).

discredit former colonial powers like France and portray Russia in a positive light. Shugalei's links to Yevgeny Prigozhin, expose the Kremlin's direct involvement in these manipulative operations (Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer, 2023, p.65). These actions raise the spectre of long-term destabilisation efforts, aimed at creating networks potentially sympathetic to Russian goals. The full extent and intent of these programs warrant further investigation and will be examined in the context of PMCs' influence in Mali and CAR within Part Three.

The adaptability of the Russian PMC model poses a unique challenge for analysts. As seen in Sudan, an initial training contract devolved into the brutal suppression of dissent and the violent securing of natural resource sites on behalf of the regime, where Russia was able to maintain a layer of plausible deniability. While the deployment of the Wagner Group in Mozambique resulted in several operational failures, yet the appeal of this model for both Russia and African nations seeking to evade international scrutiny remains substantial and with continued expansion forecasted (Daly, 2023).

The Kremlin's embrace of PMCs as proxies for direct military intervention marks a strategic shift away from traditional state force projection. Lacking a single, easily predictable playbook, Russian PMCs offer operational flexibility and a blurring of the line between state and commercial interests. Their focus extends beyond traditional security provision into resource exploitation and the murky realm of information operations. This methodology makes continuous analysis of PMC structures, activities, and their links to the Kremlin paramount.

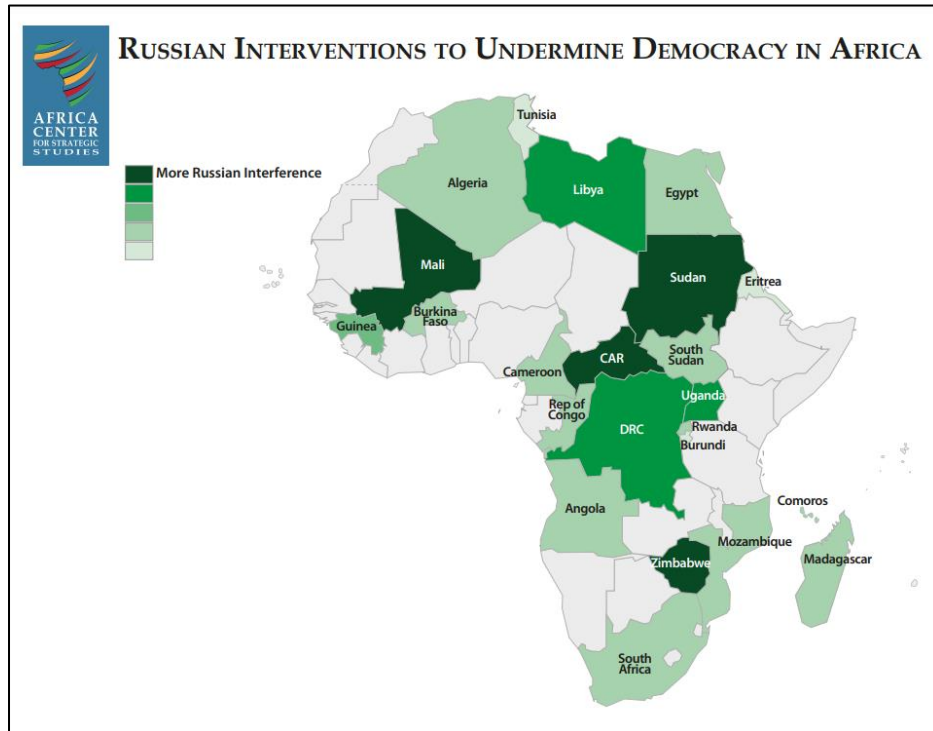
## **2.4 Impacts of PMC Deployment on the African Geopolitical Landscape**

The presence of Russian PMCs in Africa contributes to a dramatic shift in regional power dynamics. Historically, Western powers, notably France and the United States, maintained significant geopolitical and economic influence over many African nations. However, Russia's strategic use of PMCs is systematically undermining this dominance and was/is almost encouraged and facilitated by the Trump Administration's decision to reduce the US's footprint in the region (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023). By offering security expertise, military training, and alternative economic agreements, Russia presents African states with options that challenge traditional diminishing ties with the West. This creates new support networks in which African leadership can align themselves with Moscow in exchange for political support and economic benefits, reducing their reliance on Western partnerships and the conditions often attached to such agreements such as adhering to IHL and seeking democratic governance (Fasanotti, 2022).

The Wagner Group, infamous for its connections to the Kremlin, has played a central role in this shift. In nations like Mali, Burkina Faso and the CAR, where French influence has all but vanished, Russia has seized openings to infiltrate power structures. The Wagner Group has not only filled the void left by departing French troops and advisors but also established lucrative footholds in resource-rich regions, cementing Russia's position as an increasingly viable patron even amid controversy over the PMC's tactics (Fasanotti, 2022; Burke 2023; Kayali & Caulcutt, 2023).

Far from promoting stability, the deployment of Russian PMCs often contributes to a volatile landscape. These groups are frequently utilised to bolster regimes facing internal

strife or lacking popular support and their methods and locations are presented below. In Mali, Sudan and CAR, PMCs have ruthlessly suppressed opposition groups and protests, protected authoritarian leaders while undermining prospects for democratic transitions. This pattern destabilises entire regions, increasing the potential for protracted civil conflict and hindering peace-building processes.



*Figure 4. Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa  
(African Centre of Strategic Studies, 2023)*

Russia's Toolbox for Obstructing Democracy in Africa					
	(1) Election/ Political Interference	(2) Illicit Arms/ Wagner	(3) Undermining the UN	(4) Disinformation	(5) Political Support for Extraconstitutional Seizures/Term Limit Evasions
Algeria				X	X
Angola	X			X	
Burkina Faso				X	X
Burundi					X
Cameroon	X			X	
CAR	X	X	X	X	X
Comoros	X				X
Congo-B				X	X
DRC	X		X	X	X
Egypt				X	X
Eritrea			X		
Guinea	X				X
Libya	X	X	X	X	
Madagascar	X			X	
Mali	X	X	X	X	X
Mozambique	X			X	
Rwanda	X				X
South Africa	X			X	
South Sudan		X	X		
Sudan	X	X	X	X	X
Tunisia				X	
Uganda	X	X		X	X
Zimbabwe	X	X	X	X	X

Figure 5. Russia's Toolbox for Obstructing Democracy in Africa  
(African Centre of Strategic Studies, 2023)

The intertwining of PMCs with resource extraction further exacerbates instability and fuels violence. In their pursuit of minerals, oil, and other valuable resources, PMCs frequently become enmeshed in local power struggles, exacerbating tensions between rival factions. The involvement of Russian PMCs in Libya and their link to Russia's goals exemplifies this dynamic. Rumer's (2022) research demonstrates that Russian foreign policy has consistently aimed to undermine Western influence and policies and Russia's abstention on the vote to impose a no-fly zone over Libya in 2011 was the exception that proved the rule, as it quickly reversed course and criticised the Western "crusade" against the country. Since then, the Kremlin has pointed to the West's intervention in Libya as an example of reckless interventionism. The subsequent deployment of the Wagner Group to support Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army, contributed directly to the intensification of the Libyan civil war but also cemented Russia's willingness to disrupt the West (Fasanotti, 2022). These actions often lead to significant humanitarian crises as civilians are caught in the crossfire, displaced, and deprived of crucial humanitarian aid and access to essential services.

As demonstrated PMCs appear to be permitted and indeed encouraged to disrupt western missions, and discredit the efforts of multinational institutions as Russia likely perceives these entities as roadblocks to its objectives. This is vividly illustrated in CAR and Mali, where the Wagner Group has been widely accused of committing serious human rights violations and of harassing peacekeepers, journalists, aid workers, and minorities. Wagner's



presence has placed CAR's government at odds with the United Nations and the West, who have increasingly demanding that the country end its relationship with the Russian company or risk losing their assistance as occurred with the EU deciding in December 2021 to suspend its military training mission in the country (Fasanotti, 2022; Kayali & Caulcutt, 2023). This methodology and outcome was repeated in Mali with the withdrawal of the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation in Mali (MINUSMA) on 31 December 2023 and the significant reduction in scale and involvement of the EU's Training Mission in 2022 (EEAS, 2022; UNSC, 2023).

Furthermore, serious human rights violations attributed to PMCs seriously damage the credibility of international institutions and create openings for Russia to defend its actions under the pretext of intervention (Droin & Dolbaia, 2023). PMC-linked disinformation networks play a crucial part in undermining trust, spreading narratives that vilify the West while portraying Russia as a benevolent and desirable partner. This strategic use of disinformation, coupled with Russia's growing foothold within African power structures, poses a significant challenge to the ability of the West and the UN to maintain stability, project influence, and pursue development initiatives in the region.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

Russia's contemporary engagement with Africa represents a calculated expansion of influence. Its reliance on PMCs epitomises this approach as these groups offer Moscow deniable assets while serving multiple operational objectives – from directly bolstering allied regimes to spreading disinformation that strategically weakens Western powers. This multidimensional strategy aims to establish Russia as a major player on the continent, disrupting established Western dominance and advancing its quest for global power status.

The tactical deployment of Russian PMCs in Africa reflects a willingness to exploit fragile states. They have been used to shore up authoritarian regimes, train local security forces (often with questionable human rights records), and protect valuable resource extraction sites. Russia's reliance on these proxy forces fundamentally alters regional power dynamics and directly challenges Western interests and international initiatives. This is starkly visible as PMCs are increasingly employed in place of, or even against, UN peacekeeping efforts, exacerbating instability and undermining efforts toward peace and conflict resolution as witnessed in CAR and Mali.

The consequences of Russia's expanding PMC network in Africa are profound and a thorough investigation is warranted. As international influence shifts, the presence of these forces raises crucial questions about regional stability and long-term geopolitical ramifications. Intra-African conflicts may worsen as PMCs are harnessed to prop up failing regimes or pursue economic agendas at the expense of the population. This dynamic fuels internal strife, making peaceful resolutions increasingly complex and undermining international peacekeeping efforts.

Simultaneously, Russia's use of PMCs poses a direct challenge to Western influence and the credibility of international institutions designed to promote peace, human rights, and stability. Allegations of human rights abuses connected to PMC operations erode trust and further destabilise fragile states. The use of these forces to spread disinformation and



undermine international diplomatic efforts represents a strategic effort to rewrite geopolitical narratives and solidify Russia's position in Africa at the expense of traditional powers.

Part Three will therefore delve into the specific cases of Mali and the CAR to illuminate the geopolitical implications of Russia's reliance on PMCs within Africa. These two case studies will provide a microcosm through which to examine Russia's broader, calculated use of mercenary forces to extend its influence on the continent. A detailed analysis will examine how PMCs prop up unstable governments, entrench Russia's position of power, fuel conflicts, and undermine not only Western interests but also the goals of international institutions dedicated to maintaining stability in Africa and fostering development.

## **PART THREE**

### **3.1 Introduction**

Part Two explored the use of Russian PMCs across Africa as a tool to counter Western influence and strengthen Moscow's geopolitical position. This section narrows the focus to the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, where chronic instability has created fertile ground for Russia's strategic manoeuvring. Both nations grapple with legacies of internal conflict – in CAR, along sectarian lines; in Mali, fuelled by separatist rebellions and jihadist insurgency. France and other nations had maintained an extended presence in these countries, providing aid and deploying peacekeeping forces. Yet, the effectiveness of these interventions has been challenged by continued violence and weak governance (King, 2023; UNSC, 2023a).

Russia adeptly exploited the disillusionment with Western efforts and its waning commitment to protracted engagements. It painted itself as an alternative – more decisive and less encumbered by concerns over International Humanitarian Law (IHL). This section examines how PMCs strategically gained access to Mali and CAR, offering services the West was either unwilling or unable to provide. It will scrutinise the impact of PMC involvement on the internal dynamics of each nation and Russia's broader goals, from securing lucrative resource contracts to establishing a geopolitical counterweight to Western influence (Kayali & Caulcutt, 2023).

The section will further analyse whether the balance of power has irrevocably shifted. While the West retains some influence, Russia has made significant inroads, particularly as Western military interventions have scaled down. The consequences for Mali, the CAR, and broader regional stability are profound as Russia's success here could signal a new power projection model for the Kremlin, making these case studies crucial for understanding the future of geopolitics in Africa and how Russia's strategic approach could be replicated elsewhere.

### **3.2 The Central African Republic**

#### **3.2.1 Historical and Political Context**

As discussed by Gathmann (2022) and Petrini (2022) CAR's descent into continuous crisis is rooted in its turbulent history, marred by recurring civil wars, coups, and a perpetual power struggle. This legacy of conflict has profoundly weakened the foundations of the state,

fostering a landscape of chronic instability and profound insecurity. External interventions, such as those undertaken by France, the UN's Multidimensional Integrated Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), and the EU Training and Advising Missions, have aimed to stabilise the region but have achieved limited success. These efforts have often been hampered by inadequate resources, complex political dynamics, the volatile nature of the conflict and the inability (or unwillingness) of the West to engage in more robust combat operations.

Meanwhile, a complex tapestry of armed groups with diverse motivations, ranging from sectarian agendas to control of lucrative resources, have proliferated across the country. These groups prey on civilian populations, spreading violence and defying state control. The CAR's fragile institutions are ill-equipped to address the entrenched violence, leaving entire regions of the country effectively ungoverned. The complex interplay between historical instability, failed external interventions, and the rise of armed actors has created a seemingly intractable crisis in the CAR which has remained under UN sanctions since 2013, albeit these are somewhat reducing (UNSC, 2023b).

### **3.2.2 Russia's Entry and PMC Tactics**

The CAR's protracted struggle with chronic instability, coupled with a waning Western presence in the region, created a unique opportunity for Russia to expand its influence. France, the former colonial power, had reduced its military footprint, while the UN peacekeeping mission faced considerable challenges in enforcing stability. This disengagement left a power vacuum that Russia, eager to reclaim its role as a global player, was quick to exploit. The CAR government, desperate for any assistance in combating relentless rebel insurgencies, proved receptive to Russia's overtures as evidenced by President Touadéra's travel to Russia in 2017 which resulted in several security agreements (Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer, 2023, p.49).

As analysed by Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer (2023) and AWG & John Hopkins University (2020), Russia's strategic messaging played a critical role in its successful entry into the CAR. Portraying itself as a steadfast ally against instability, Moscow offered swift and decisive action in a context where Western powers were perceived as hesitant or ineffective. This message resonated strongly with President Touadéra, who sought to diversify CAR's alliances and reduce reliance on traditional partners that were increasingly reluctant to provide unconditional support. By emphasising its post-colonial stance and highlighting the benefits of cooperation without burdensome conditionalities, Russia effectively positioned itself as both a powerful and desirable alternative to Western actors.

As discussed by Serwat et al., (2023), the Wagner Group, under the guise of Sewa Security Forces, spearheaded Russia's ambitions in the CAR. Originally denied by the Russian government, Wagner's presence in the country became quickly irrefutable. Although Russia had been authorised by the UNSC in early 2018 to deploy 175 trainers and advisors (UNSC, 2018), Wagner operatives swiftly escalated to direct combat roles, often in violation of the UN arms embargo, fighting alongside CAR forces and demonstrating ruthless efficiency and violence against rebels and civilians (AWG & John Hopkins University, 2020, p.85). Evidence authenticated via the 'WagnerLeaks' showed that Wagner's expanded from 210 personnel across seven bases in July 2018 to 1478 personnel operating from 47 locations across the

country utilising armoured cars and heavy weapons by September 2021 (McCausland et al., 2023).<sup>9</sup> This provided crucial military support to the embattled government, strengthening Russia's influence and creating a dependence on its security expertise following its successful intervention against an attempted offensive by a coalition of militias known as the Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC) led by former President François Bozizé in 2020.<sup>10</sup>

Beyond battlefield operations, Wagner extended its reach into CAR's lucrative natural resource sector. Securing mining concessions in exchange for protection services underscores Russia's willingness to exploit the country's resources to cement its position. The group's involvement in illicit economic activities, such as smuggling and illegal gold mining, further highlights its opportunistic approach to pursuing financial and strategic gains (Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer, 2023, p.52).

Moscow has also deployed a range of soft-power tactics to influence public opinion in the country. These include establishing a pro-Russian radio station, Lengo Songo, and sponsoring sports and cultural events through Wagner-affiliated mining companies. An illustrative example is the distribution of a cartoon depicting Russia as a friendly bear helping CAR, represented as a lion, fight rebels portrayed as hyenas. Further, the 2021 action movie "Tourist" filmed in CAR, portrays Wagner fighters as the nation's saviours. Some Wagner mercenaries even act in the film, blurring the lines between reality and propaganda. The movie's release in Bangui's stadium, translated into the local language Sango, was accompanied by the distribution of "Je suis Wagner" merchandise (ANCIR iLAB, 2021; Moloma, 2021). This messaging was further amplified online through pro-Russian social media networks across central and West Africa. The CAR government's reliance on Wagner for military support, combined with the popular appeal generated by these soft-power tactics, has resulted in significant political influence for the organisation.

### **3.2.3 Russian (PMCs) and CAR's Relationship**

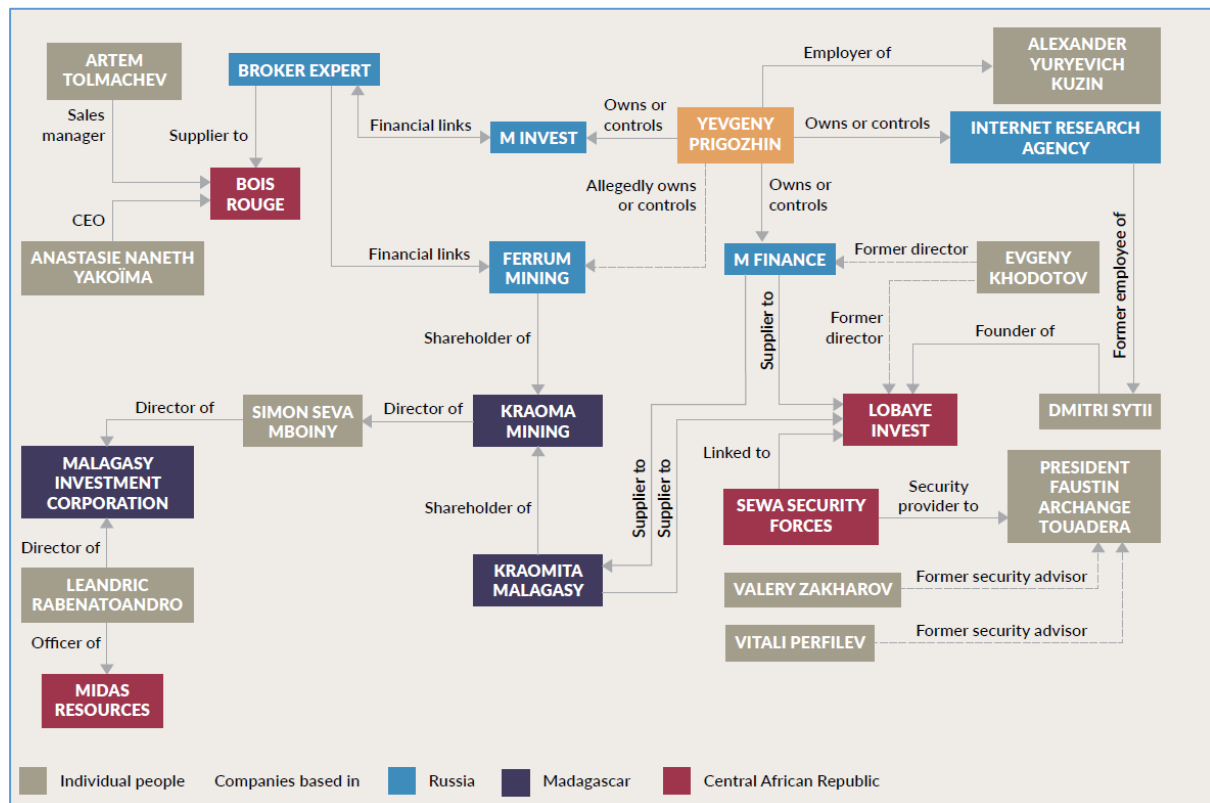
The intertwined roles of the Russian state and the Wagner Group in the CAR blur the lines between official state policy and the actions of a PMC. Figures like Valery Zakharov, a 'former' Russian intelligence officer linked to the Wagner network, served as national security advisor to President Touadéra for several years and has allegedly returned there in December 2023, raising concerns about the extent of Kremlin influence in CAR's decision-making processes (Olivier, 2021; Robert Lansing Institute, 2023). Moreover, Russia's ability to bypass UN arms embargoes under the cover of providing security assistance to the CAR, combined with alleged discrepancies in weapons accounting, suggests a degree of state sanctioning for Wagner's activities. This lack of transparency allows Russia to maintain plausible deniability while expanding its sphere of influence (McCausland et al., 2023).

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<sup>9</sup> In March 2023, a leak of over one million documents, part of which became known as the WagnerLeaks, exposed the inner workings of the Wagner Group and Yevgeny Prigozhin. These documents provided evidence of a direct connection between the group and the Russian government (Grynszpan, 2023).

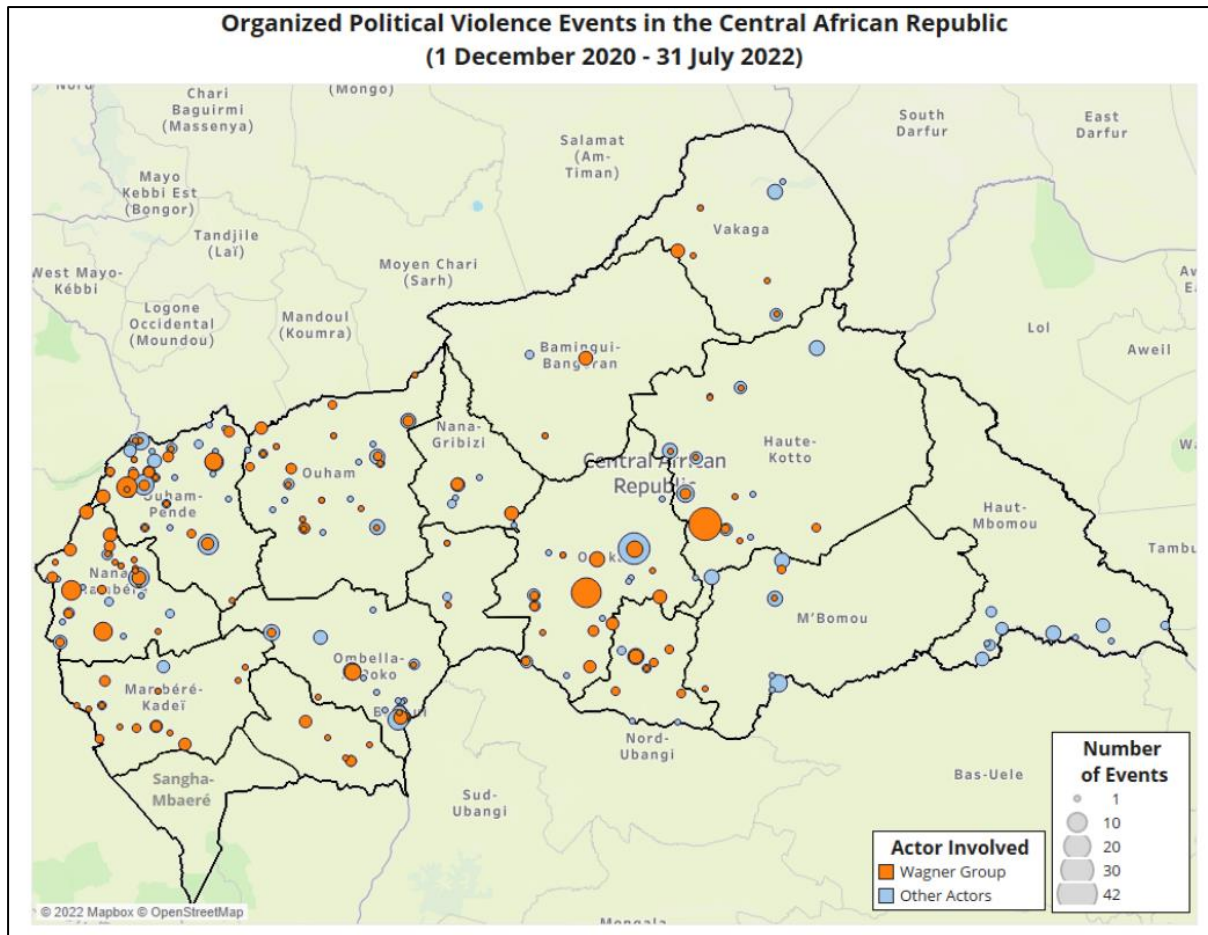
<sup>10</sup> Between December 2020 and January 2021, CPC-aligned militias gained control of roughly two-thirds of the country. In response to the CPC's early advance, Wagner mercenaries were deployed to directly participate in operations alongside FACA, MINUSCA, and Rwandan special forces (Serwat et al., 2023).

The CAR government's relationship with PMCs, particularly the Wagner Group, rests on a mutually beneficial exchange. As exposed by Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer (2023, p.12) and AWG & John Hopkins University (2020, p.82), the CAR government grants PMCs lucrative economic concessions focused on resource extraction in return for their military expertise and support against rebel insurgencies. Deals struck with companies such as Lobaye Invest and Midas Ressources open avenues for PMCs to profit from the CAR's gold, diamond, and other mineral resources (see Figure 6). Russian PMCs also help suppress dissent and opposition, directly bolstering the Touadéra regime's stability.



*Figure 6. Network of Wagner-linked companies & individuals in the CAR & overseas (Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer, 2023)*

However, evidence presented by Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2022a), provides credible allegations of human rights abuses which mar the PMC presence in CAR. Reports detail extrajudicial killings, violence, and intimidation targeting civilian populations and rebels, raising concerns about brutality employed in contested regions (see Figure 7). While the partnership with Russian PMCs may offer some stability for the embattled government, the CAR's growing reliance fosters long-term dependence and undermines its sovereignty. PMCs solidify their influence through economic concessions and security provisions, limiting the CAR government's ability to chart an independent course and potentially empowering Russia to exert undue influence. The presence of Wagner Group with links to abusive practices creates a complex environment where accountability may be elusive, posing further risks to long-term stability. The CAR's fragile government faces the daunting challenge of balancing the immediate benefits of PMC support against the dire consequences of compromised sovereignty and unchecked abuses of power.



*Figure 7. Organised Political Events in the CAR  
December 2020 – August 2022 (Serwat et Al., 2023)*

### 3.2.3 CARs Outlook

Russia's success in the CAR carries broader implications for Africa's geopolitical landscape. The CAR has become a blueprint for Russia to replicate its model in other fragile states seeking swift security solutions. This presents a challenge for Western powers who often apply caveats and bureaucratic processes when offering assistance. The EU and the West therefore need to explore alternative approaches to counteract Russia's strategic use of PMCs. This could include strengthening alliances with African nations, offering more flexible security support, and investing in development initiatives that address the root causes of instability.

The ongoing conflict in the CAR has had devastating humanitarian fallout. And in reality PMC operations have increased the levels of civilian casualties, displaced thousands, and disrupted vital aid delivery. Furthermore, the presence of Russian PMCs is likely fuelling tensions in neighbouring countries, hindering regional peacebuilding efforts and destabilising the region as a whole. And although the West have responded to Russia's influence in the CAR with diplomatic and economic sanctions, including the suspension of the EU's training mission (EUTM) in 2021, the effectiveness of these actions remains a crucial question and highlights the complex challenges in countering Russia's expanding influence in Africa.

### **3.3 Mali**

#### **3.3.1 Mali's Path to Instability**

As discussed by Dieng (2021) and Gowan & Forti (2023), Mali's path to instability stems from a complex web of historical grievances, jihadist insurgency, political fragility, and endemic state weakness. In the north, recurring Tuareg rebellions, fuelled by long-standing marginalisation and underdevelopment, persistently challenge the state's authority. Jihadist groups have opportunistically capitalised on this volatility, at times forging alliances with separatist movements or engaging in direct conflict, further destabilising the region. This volatile landscape, exacerbated by the Sahel region's porous borders, facilitates the spread of extremism, undermining the government's ability to maintain control over significant portions of its territory.

Successive military coups, including those in 2012, 2020, and 2021, expose the deep fragility of Mali's democratic institutions as these coups not only hinder progress towards democratic consolidation but also foster a cycle of mistrust between the military and the civilian population. Chronic political instability highlights the Malian government's ongoing failure to address fundamental issues like poverty, corruption, and escalating security threats. This has deeply eroded its legitimacy among citizens, with the UNSC (2022; 2023) noting that endemic corruption and the state's inability to provide basic services have resulted in profound disillusionment.

Non-state actors, particularly jihadist groups, exploit this vacuum by offering alternative forms of governance and social services, however twisted and brutal their methods might be. This strengthens their recruitment, control over populations, and ability to directly challenge the Malian state. These interconnected factors form a self-perpetuating cycle, driving Mali further down the path of instability and making it a mecca for violent extremism. This poses a continuous and complex challenge for regional and international actors seeking lasting peace and security.

#### **3.3.2 Western Interventions and their Limits**

A long-simmering rebellion by the Tuareg people, who have historically felt marginalised by the central government, culminated in the overthrow of the state in 2012. This power vacuum allowed for the creation of two self-declared autonomous regions in the north. In an attempt to regain control, the Malian government sought external military assistance from France, who, responded with military intervention through Operations Serval (2013) and Barkhane (2014). These operations, initially successful, managed to dislodge rebel groups from key urban centres, offering a semblance of temporary stability (King, 2023; Gowan & Forti, 2023). Concurrently the European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM-M) was established as the military pillar of the EU strategy in the country and was tasked to contribute to the improvement of the capabilities of the Malian Armed Force (FAMa), as well as training them on IHL, protection of civilians and human rights; but were not permitted to conduct or coordinate military operations (European Council, 2013).

But, this reprieve proved short-lived. The root causes of the conflict, including grievances over political and economic marginalisation, remained unaddressed. This allowed armed groups, to re-emerge and capitalise on the state's continuing fragility. Their actions further destabilised the region, posing a threat to Mali's long-term stability and in response,

the UNSC authorised the establishment of MINUSMA under Resolution 1200 (2013) in April 2013 (UN, 2013).

MINUSMA's mandate was broad, encompassing civilian protection, supporting the political process, and strengthening Mali's security institutions. At its height, it was one of the UN's largest and most complex peacekeeping missions (UNSC, 2023a). While achieving some early successes, MINUSMA faced a formidable array of challenges. The conflict's complexity and protracted nature, coupled with the involvement of external actors with competing agendas, Mali's internal political instability, and unrealistic expectations hampered its effectiveness.

The expansive conflict zone and the rise of groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb posed constant threats, directly challenging MINUSMA's ability to protect civilians and support peacebuilding efforts. Attacks on the mission, civilians, and infrastructure intensified, further destabilising the region. Moreover, MINUSMA's perceived cooperation with French and European forces blurred the lines between peacekeeping and counterterrorism. This tactical necessity in such a complex conflict eroded perceptions of neutrality and fuelled rising anti-French sentiment amplified by a Russian-sponsored disinformation campaign, significantly undermining MINUSMA's credibility (Le Cam, 2023; Gowan & Forti, 2023).

Mali's internal political instability, characterised by a lack of cooperation with MINUSMA and concerns over sovereignty, significantly hindered the mission's success. As argued by Gowan & Forti (2023), the 2020 and 2021 coups exacerbated this situation, with the junta's authoritarianism and disregard for IHL straining relations further and was the driving force behind France's withdrawal in 2022. MINUSMA's inability to meet the junta's demands for a more aggressive mandate, coupled with its condemnation of alleged abuses by FAMA and Russian PMCs, ultimately led to Mali's request for MINUSMA's withdrawal, paving the way for increased Russian influence in the region (UNSC, 2023a; UN, 2023).

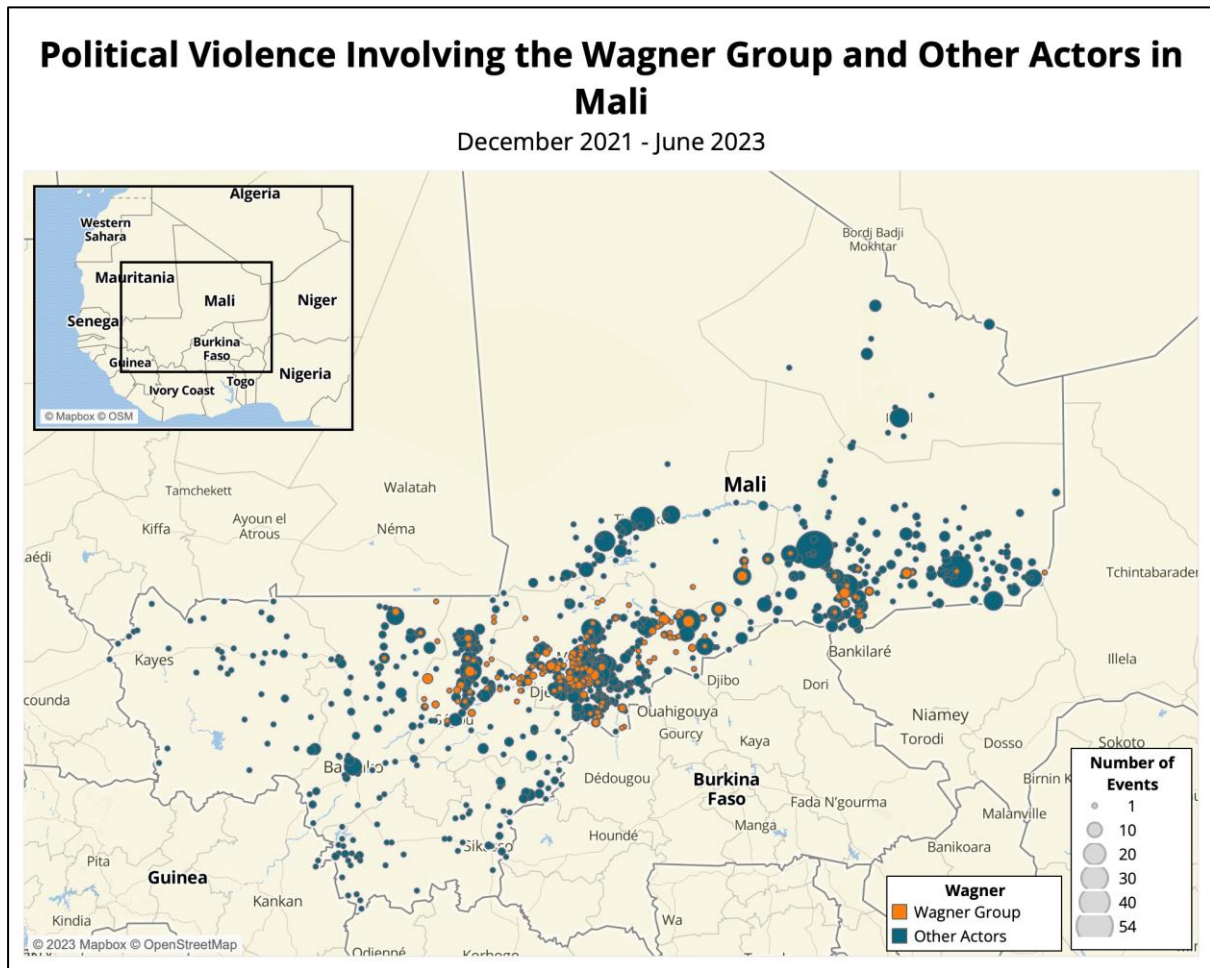
### **3.3.3 Russia's Strategic Inroads**

The Malian government's decision to embrace Russia as a security partner in 2019 marked a significant strategic realignment with geopolitical implications and saw the delivery of attack aircraft, weapons and ammunition as donations (Parens, 2022, p.9). This shift is rooted in multiple factors, including the junta's disillusionment with Western partners due to a perceived lack of progress in combating the protracted jihadist insurgency. Russia's more assertive and arguably less conditional approach, coupled with its cultivation of anti-French sentiment through disinformation campaigns, further pushed Mali toward the Kremlin's sphere of influence (Le Monde, 2023; King, 2023).

The arrival of the Wagner Group in 2021 represented a tangible manifestation of this newfound military cooperation. Wagner operatives were contracted to conduct training, close-protection, and counterterrorism operations for a reported fee of US\$10 million per month (Paquette, 2022). However, this partnership has been marred by credible allegations of human rights violations including massacres committed by both Wagner forces and FAMA



with whom they operate (see Figure 8 and 9) (HRW, 2022b).<sup>11</sup> Such actions undermine the rule of law and raise concerns about the long-term consequences of this security arrangement.



*Figure 8. Political Violence Involving Wagner Group and Other Actors in Mali  
December 2021 – June 2023 (Gurcov, Serwat & Nsaibia, 2023)*

<sup>11</sup> Significant evidence has been put forward that in March 2022 Wagner and FAMA took control of Moura, a village in the Mopti region of Mali, where between 350 and 380 Malians were killed over four days; the majority of whom were tortured and summarily executed (HRW, 2022b).



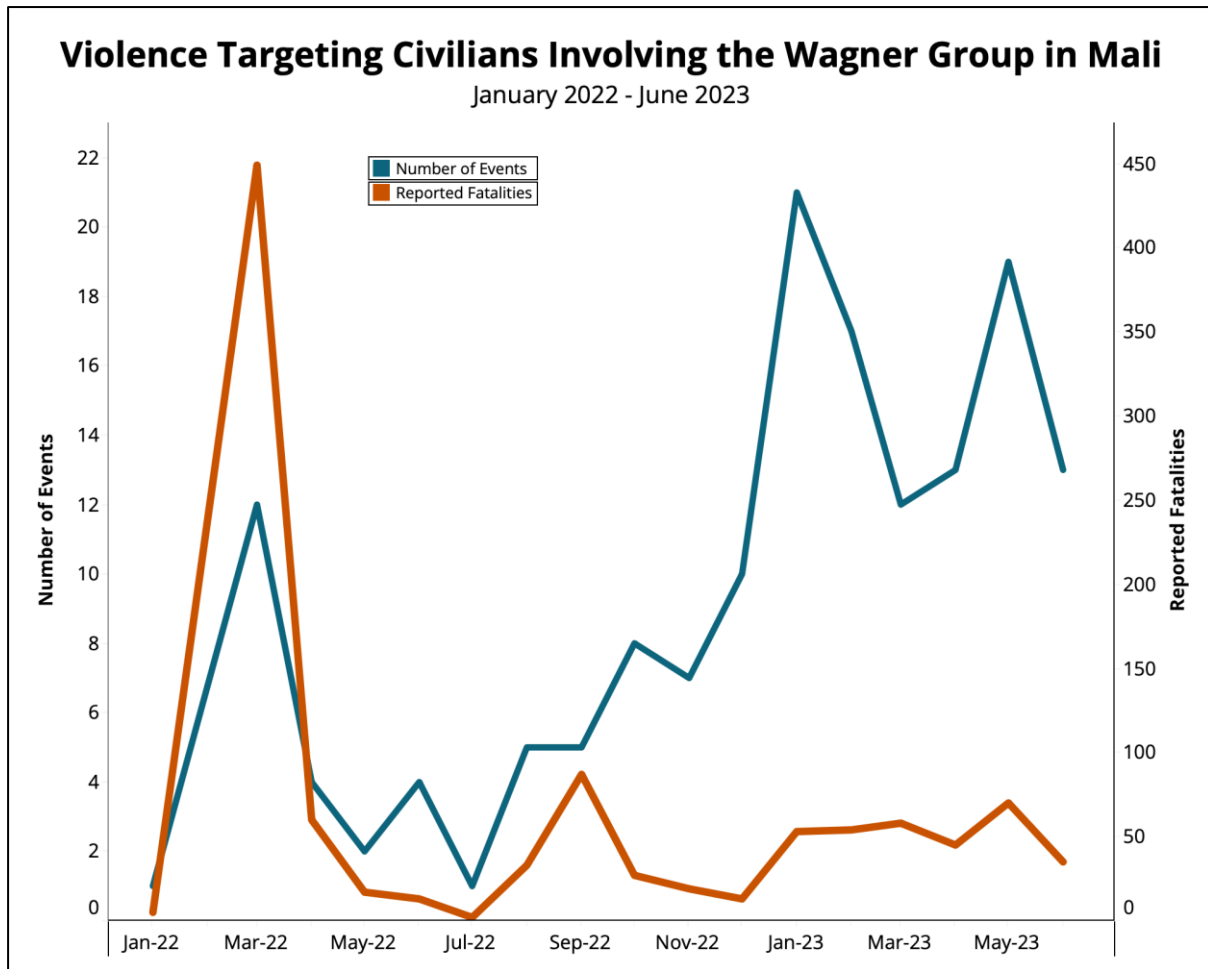


Figure 9. Violence Targeting Civilians Involving the Wagner Group in Mali  
December 2021 – June 2023 (Gurcov, Serwat & Nsaibia, 2023)

As explained by Kayali and Caulcutt (2023) and Parens (2022), the Malian context is characterised by a complex information environment where Russian-linked actors play a significant role in perpetuating disinformation and anti-French narratives which was evidenced by Wagner's attempt to stage a mass grave near the town of Gossi to discredit French forces in 2022 as witnessed by the author.<sup>12</sup> They utilise social media platforms and other channels to discredit Western powers and amplify pro-Russian sentiments as these influence operations exploit pre-existing grievances against France, positioning Russia as a more supportive and reliable ally. This highlights the power of disinformation to shape public opinion and political discourse, especially in states facing instability.

Although at a strategic level, economic motivations are unlikely to factor into Russia's involvement in Mali; access to their substantial natural resources, including gold and other valuable minerals, does serve as an alternative form of compensation for the Wagner Group (Stanyard, Vircoulon & Rademeyer, 2023, p.61-62). Furthermore, Mali's pivot is likely to

<sup>12</sup> Following the withdrawal of French Forces from Gossi in April 2022, allegations surfaced of an alleged mass grave in the former French base. However French intelligence released drone footage of likely Wagner and Malian personnel depositing and covering bodies. The Malian junta immediately accused France of flying the drone illegally and spying (Gramer & Robbie 2022).

embolden other regional actors to explore similar arrangements with Russia, likely further destabilising the Sahel and West Africa.

### **3.3.4 The Fallout**

The Wagner Group's presence in Mali has had a complex and largely negative impact on the security situation. While the group has contributed to some operational successes against jihadist militants, its involvement is also deeply intertwined with credible allegations of human rights abuses and even an increased number of atrocities targeting civilians as investigated by Gurcov, Serwat & Nsaibia, (2023) who demonstrate that the majority of Wagner's engagement in political violence in Mali has taken the form of violence targeting civilians. These actions risk further alienating local populations, potentially fuelling existing inter-tribal tensions and hindering long-term stability. The potential for impunity enjoyed by these actors will likely worsen the situation by eroding trust in state institutions and fostering cycles of violence.

Mali's embrace of Russia as a security partner has significantly strained its relations with the West. The resulting diplomatic fallout is exemplified by the withdrawal of French forces and MINUSMA (King, 2023; UN, 2023). Additionally, Mali's actions have prompted the consideration of sanctions and restrictions from the EU and other international actors. This strained relationship limits Mali's access to development aid and potentially hinders long-term cooperation in counterterrorism efforts, possibly weakening the collective response to instability in the Sahel (Leon Cobo, 2022).

Thompson (2022) posits that the presence of Russian PMCs undoubtedly strengthens the position of Mali's ruling military junta, but poses a significant obstacle to a potential return to democratic governance and in reality benefits from the security services provided by Wagner forces, potentially reducing its reliance on popular support and diminishing pressure for a transition to civilian rule. Moreover, Russia's backing, both militarily and through disinformation campaigns, provides the junta with a degree of legitimacy internationally and emboldens its resistance to calls for democratisation. These developments suggest a prolonged continuation of authoritarian rule and the further erosion of democratic norms within Mali, posing challenges for the country's future.

### **3.3.5 Mali's Uncertain Future**

Recent developments suggest that Russia and the Wagner Group are likely to remain entrenched in Mali for the foreseeable future. Satellite imagery from July 2023 reveals an expansion of Wagner's base in Bamako, including the construction of storage facilities for high-value military equipment. This contradicts earlier speculation about a potential Wagner withdrawal and underscores Russia's broader strategic ambitions in Africa (Doxsee, Bermudez & Jun, 2023). This demonstrates that both Russia and Wagner share a desire to solidify their influence on the continent and weaken Western dominance.

These actions threaten to escalate Mali's internal security crisis further, as Wagner's documented human rights abuses risk alienating local communities and fuelling instability. Geopolitically, Russia's foothold in Mali seeks to expand its influence across West Africa while exploiting anti-Western sentiments, encouraging neighbouring nations like Burkina Faso and

Niger towards similar Russian partnerships.<sup>13</sup> This destabilising trend reshapes regional dynamics, weakens Western counterterrorism efforts, and strengthens authoritarian regimes. With Western forces withdrawing and Russia's presence solidifying, Mali's prospects for resolving its security crisis and re-establishing democratic governance appear increasingly bleak.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

Russia's strategic interventions in the CAR and Mali reveal its adeptness at exploiting instability to establish footholds across Africa. By strategically capitalising on power vacuums created by reduced Western engagement and disillusionment with Western interventionist models, Russia has cast itself as a decisive, less conditional alternative (King, 2023). The CAR and Mali case studies illuminate the multifaceted tactics Russia employs to solidify its influence through the strategic leverage of PMCs.

PMCs such as the Wagner Group now serve as one of the Kremlin's primary tactical tools for achieving its strategic goals. Initially operating under the guise of trainers and advisors, Wagner operatives swiftly transitioned into direct combat roles, bolstering fragile regimes and securing military successes (Serwat et al., 2023). This operational prowess is rewarded through lucrative economic concessions, establishing exploitative resource extraction activities that further entrench Russian power (Stanyard, Vircoulon, & Rademeyer, 2023). Concurrently, Moscow utilises soft-power tactics, influencing public perception through pro-Kremlin media and disinformation campaigns designed to discredit Western actors (Kayali & Caulcutt, 2023).

The ramifications of this expanding influence are profound and multidimensional. While Wagner's presence might offer a degree of short-term stability, its long-term consequences raise considerable concerns. Credible allegations of human rights abuses carried out by Russian PMCs undermine the rule of law and risk perpetuating cycles of violence (HRW, 2022a). Compounded by the lack of accountability inherent to PMC structures, this erodes trust in institutions and jeopardises future peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, the growing dependence on PMCs hampers a nation's capacity to independently chart its own course. Governments like those in CAR and Mali become increasingly beholden to Russian interests, creating new power imbalances and hindering the trajectory toward genuine sovereignty.

Russia's success in the CAR and Mali, achieved without adhering to Western democratic standards, presents a potentially replicable model for expanding influence across Africa. These cases expose an evolving geopolitical landscape, prompting the West to critically reassess its strategies. Effective responses should prioritise adaptable security support, sustainable development, and fostering genuine partnerships built on shared values. The full consequences in the CAR and Mali are yet to unfold, but they offer valuable insights into Russia's evolving playbook and the complex challenges Africa faces amidst competing external powers. This underscores the urgent need for continued critical analysis of Russia's activities across the continent.

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<sup>13</sup> Burkina Faso demanded the withdrawal of French troops in 2023 and evidence suggests that Russian PMCs under a new organisation known as the African Corp have begun training and operating as of January 2024 (Yarga, 2024). Niger has similarly made moves towards Russian partnership following their 2023 Coup (Millon, 2024).

## CONCLUSION

### Summary of Key Findings

This paper has illuminated Russia's strategic transformation of PMCs into a multipurpose instrument of foreign policy within Africa. Historical legacies of Soviet engagement and the Kremlin's contemporary domestic power structures provide context for the motivations behind this resurgence. Russia's calculated deployment of PMCs aims to counter Western efforts and establish new spheres of power across the continent. The Wagner Group exemplifies this model, offering diverse services ranging from combat support and training to resource exploitation and the dissemination of pro-Russian disinformation. This adaptability underscores the value of PMCs to Russian strategic interests.

The case studies of the CAR and Mali tragically illustrate the consequences of this strategy. In both nations, the presence of Russian PMCs has exacerbated instability, led to credible allegations of serious human rights violations, and undermined the rule of law. By bolstering authoritarian regimes, often in return for lucrative resource concessions, Russia's approach weakens democratic governance and erodes Western diplomatic engagement. Beyond these case studies, the Kremlin's success with PMCs in Africa presents a replicable model, potentially fostering further destabilisation in vulnerable regions and posing a significant challenge to both the established international norm and the long-term prospects for peace and development.

Furthermore, the blurring of lines between state and non-state actors employed by PMCs complicates traditional diplomatic channels and accountability mechanisms. This lack of transparency raises concerns about potential war crimes and the erosion of adherence to IHL. The international community must therefore find new strategies to address the rise of PMCs and their potential to disrupt established security frameworks.

### Global Extrapolation & Irish Defence Force Considerations

The strategic success of Russia's PMC model in Africa prompts concern about its potential replication in other vulnerable regions across the globe. States characterised by weak governance, internal conflicts, and latent anti-Western sentiment present fertile ground for Russia's opportunistic expansion. Potential candidates include nations in the Sahel, such as Burkina Faso and now in Niger, where instability is on the rise and Western operations have diminished.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Russia could extend its reach into resource-rich states in Latin America or unstable regions along the periphery of Eastern Europe, wherever a potential exists to displace Western interests.

The escalating use of disinformation and hybrid warfare tactics by Russian PMCs poses a direct threat to Irish Defence Forces personnel deployed in regions where these actors operate. As evidenced in Mali, deliberate misinformation and coordination challenges created operational risks for Irish personnel and undermined the legitimacy of stabilisation

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<sup>14</sup> On 11 April, 2024, Russian 'trainers' and equipment of the rebranded African Corp arrived into Niger as relations with the west have rapidly deteriorated following disinformation campaigns (Chason, 2024). On 19 April the US Deputy Secretary of State announced the US would begin to withdraw their military personnel from the region (Hudson, 2024)

efforts (Gallagher, 2023). This tactical manipulation fuels instability, hindering conflict resolution, eroding trust in Western-led missions. To counter these threats, the Irish Defence Forces in coordination with their partners should adapt their training and doctrine. This requires bolstering intelligence capabilities to proactively identify and dismantle false narratives, alongside the development of countermeasures specifically tailored to the unconventional tactics of Russian PMCs. The evolving nature of conflict demands this preparedness, as non-state actors now wield sophisticated tools that jeopardise the safety and effectiveness of Irish deployments within peacekeeping or humanitarian operations. Ireland's future contributions to international missions may hinge upon the careful assessment of these risks and a decisive commitment to confront disinformation as a core component of modern conflict in regions where Russian PMCs seek to displace the West.

### **Broader Impacts of Russian PMC Strategy**

The Kremlin's success in utilising PMCs as proxies is a dangerous precedent: the normalisation and potential proliferation of such entities across the international arena. Emboldened by Russia's example, other authoritarian regimes or even non-state actors may become more inclined to employ PMCs as tools of coercion and influence. This trend could severely destabilise regional security dynamics, exacerbate existing conflicts, and introduce unpredictable actors less bound by international norms. These forces could act with impunity, further eroding respect for human rights and the rule of law.

Western powers, including Ireland, urgently need to formulate effective countermeasures to address the strategic shift posed by Russia's PMC expansion. Diplomatic channels should be further leveraged to expose and call out abuses committed by these groups, and stronger sanctions imposed against both state and private actors that utilise PMCs. Simultaneously, Western nations need to critically reassess their own models of military aid and training. A greater focus on strengthening governance, bolstering civil society, and promoting adherence to IHL may prove key to fostering stability in vulnerable nations, making them less susceptible to Russian influence campaigns.

Ultimately, the unhindered rise of Russian PMCs threatens to fracture the existing international order. An erosion of commitment to IHL, coupled with a shift towards multipolar competition based on raw power and spheres of influence, presents a grave danger. While counterbalancing Russian expansionism is essential, the West must also advocate forcefully for a system where sovereignty and international law remain paramount, mitigating the long-term threats posed by the unchecked normalisation of PMCs.

### **Limitations of Current Research & Recommendations for the Future**

This paper has sought to illuminate Russia's strategic use of PMCs in Africa, yet several limitations must be acknowledged. The opaque nature of these entities and the restricted information environment in conflict zones present inherent challenges to comprehensive research. Limited verifiable data on PMC operations, their corporate structures, and sources of funding hinder deeper analysis of their true motivations and decision-making processes. Furthermore, while this paper examined the consequences of PMC involvement for regional stability and geopolitics, it primarily reflects perspectives external to Africa. Future research should prioritise investigating how African nations and local populations themselves perceive

Russian PMCs in comparison to Western actors, including the potential benefits, trade-offs, and long-term risks they represent. This will contribute to a more nuanced and balanced understanding of a complex dynamic.

Additionally, as PMCs are inherently adaptable, continued monitoring of the Wagner Group, as well as other emerging entities, remains crucial. Analysing potential shifts in Russia's strategic calculus and identifying how their approach may evolve is essential. Future research should also explore the regulatory challenges posed by PMCs whilst strengthening international mechanisms for tracking and documenting PMC activities would bolster accountability and promote transparency. Ultimately, a deeper understanding of these organisations will be critical for developing effective policy responses that safeguard stability, peace, and human rights.

### **Closing Statement**

This analysis has demonstrated the profound consequences of Russia's weaponisation of PMCs in Africa. Far more than a tactical shift or pursuit of economic gain, Russia's approach undermines the hard-won international norms upon which peace and security depend. The disregard for human rights, calculated erosion of democratic institutions, and manipulation of information threaten more than just Western influence on the continent. This deliberate model of PMC deployment challenges the fundamental principles of sovereignty, non-intervention, and respect for international law enshrined in the UN Charter – the very framework that Ireland and other small nations rely upon for their security. By destabilising fragile states and empowering proxy actors, Russia's PMC strategy fuels cycles of violence that have ripple effects far beyond the immediate conflict zones. As the world grapples with issues of accountability, the evolution of warfare, and an increasingly multipolar geopolitical landscape, this paper serves as a reminder for renewed commitment by Western powers that only by protecting these fundamental standards can we create the conditions for sustainable peace and development for nations across the globe.

*Please note that the views expressed above are those of the author alone and should not be taken to represent the views of the Irish Defence Forces or of any other group or organisation.*

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