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### **Russian para-military operations in Africa: The Wagner group as a de facto foreign policy instrument**

#### **Introduction**

In recent years, Russian President Vladimir Putin increasingly placed a high premium on rebuilding and strengthening Russian ties with the African continent as a Russian foreign policy priority. Putin's interest in Africa could become of even greater political importance against the background of sanctions from several Western countries in response to the Russian attack on Ukraine.

Three areas of Russian-African relations have become of special importance in the past decade. Firstly, the Russian focus on the African continent centres on [energy diplomacy](#). Secondly, Russia is the second largest exporter of arms globally – after the United States – and a major [supplier of weapons and military aid](#) to Africa. Thirdly, the continent is rich in mineral wealth, and Moscow has an economic [interest in mineral riches](#) in Africa.

#### **Resources and resource concessions**

What makes Russian foreign policy and activities in Africa particularly controversial is that these are associated with [Africa's extractive mining industry](#). In this regard, the Wagner group, a Russian private military group, is regularly appearing as a de facto non-official foreign policy instrument that basically facilitates access to resources in African states.

Of course, Africa is not the only theatre of operations where Wagner has been active in recent years. [Wagner's international footprint](#) is well documented in international conflicts, specifically Syria and Yemen, and most recently also Ukraine. In recent times, Wagner's footprint in Africa literally touched countries across the African continent, most notably Libya, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, and Madagascar.

Wagner has been instrumental in the negotiation of [resource concessions](#), and such offering of mineral resources in African states often takes place in exchange for military training or support offered to the security forces of a particular country. In 2017, for instance, Wagner

was present at [demonstrations in Sudan](#) against former president Omar al-Bashir. Wagner denied allegations that they were working as proxies or acting on behalf of the Russian government, but it transpired that they had agreed to train and equip the Sudanese military and to assist them in suppressing the political protesters, if needed. This was in exchange for ) [exclusive rights to gold mining](#) in Sudan.

Not all cases of Wagner's involvement in African states however seem to be linked to resources or mining concessions. In Mali, where a Wagner force of about 1 000 paramilitary functionaries is deployed, the goal is mainly concerned with the protection of the ruling or emerging governing elites and critical infrastructures. Of course, in Mali, the major political challenge relates to potent Islamist militants, poor governance, and state fragility. In this case, the goal is most probably the [filling of the political vacuum](#) left by the withdrawal of thousands of French troops from the country in 2022. In this regard, Wagner seems to act as a de facto foreign policy instrument and fulfilling a role that the Russian state cannot dare to play.

### **Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Central African Republic, and Madagascar**

The Wagner group has [no official status in Moscow or internationally](#). In fact, it does not even exist officially and has no company registration. Yet, its African footprint is undeniable, and many of Wagner's controversies are linked to the name and media profile of (11) [Yevgeny Prigozhin](#), a close associate of Russian President Vladimir Putin. The reason is that Prigozhin and his political operatives appear to be offering security, arms training, and electioneering services in exchange for mining rights and other opportunities in African states.

A most controversial project associated with Prigozhin and what looks like a Kremlin play for resources and political influence in Africa is Wagner's activities in the CAR, specifically involving [diamonds and gold](#). Controversy was sparked when three Russian journalists were murdered when they investigated Prigozhin's activities in the CAR. In the CAR, Wagner has [trained the CAR military](#) since 2017, and is receiving a [percentage of profits](#) from the guarding of gold and diamond mines. [Diamonds in the CAR](#) are mostly gem quality and, like Syrian oil, no ordinary business firm can lay its hands on these diamonds, as the diamond industry is mired in civil strife and government greed. Discussions were conducted in recent years between the CAR and Russia to explore the country's natural resources, especially diamonds and gold, on a concession basis, and Russia – with Prigozhin playing a key role – has successfully managed to offer weapons and security services in exchange for [access to markets and mineral extraction rights](#).

To put matters in perspective, it should be noted that Prigozhin was linked to a sophisticated [disinformation campaign](#) during the 2016 US presidential elections and thereafter with the sending of Russian operatives to Madagascar in an effort to manipulate the 2018 election. According to reports, some candidates in the last presidential election in Madagascar received funding from businessmen linked to Prigozhin to [influence the election results](#). In Madagascar, Russia most probably has an interest in the fact that the country is the world's biggest producer of [vanilla and it also has mineral riches](#), such as nickel, cobalt and uranium.

### **Libya and Mozambique**

Another controversial Wagner project relates to [Russian involvement in Libya](#) where Moscow and Wagner have been supporting militia efforts to topple the internationally recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli. The reason seems to be the establishment of a long-term [presence in the Mediterranean Sea](#). Again, Wagner seems to act as a de facto foreign policy instrument, fulfilling a role that the Russian state cannot dare to play. This undoubtedly shuffled the deck of the conflict dynamics in the ongoing [intra-state war in Libya](#). More recently, Wagner was also linked by Human Rights Watch to the use of [banned landmines and booby traps](#) in the Libyan conflict between 2019 and 2020.

Towards the end of 2019, Russian presence was also extended to the Mozambican [northern province of Cabo Delgado](#) against the backdrop of insurgent movements of ISIS-aligned jihadist groups in the area. The operation was relatively short-lived after Wagner failed to curb the insurgents and suffered casualties. The question is: why Mozambique? The answer can be found in the foreign interest in Mozambican unexploited resources, especially [natural gas](#). As far as liquefied natural gas is concerned, the Russian energy company, [Rosneft](#), is competing with other international energy companies for a portion of what now appears to be one of the world's largest sources of natural gas.

### **Evaluation and conclusion**

[Critical observers](#) of Russia's contemporary Africa policy have for some time contended that Moscow's relations with African states are strongly motivated by the need to counter international isolation. Russia is furthermore criticised for a foreign policy in Africa that mostly deals with instruments of conflict rather than development and peace. It is further argued that Moscow is indirectly – through the Wagner group as a proxy actor – propping up authoritarian rulers against domestic democratic resistance, often through so-called 'electioneering services' and in other instances through security services rendered to elites. It should also be noted that most of Russia's African trade comes from arms sales. Furthermore, an important issue in Russia's foreign policy is that – in addition to the conventional tools of trade and diplomacy – Moscow tends to rely heavily on covert instruments, especially intelligence and security capabilities.

Wagner can be described as a foreign policy instrument of [shadow soldiers](#) in a versatile, cheap, and deniable package; the perfect instrument for a former superpower that is keen to re-establish itself as a superpower without being too assertive in the public eye and avoiding too many foreign policy risks.

Moscow's de facto association with the Wagner group – even though official links are [denied by Moscow](#) – obviously does not help to link Russian foreign policy in Africa to sound democratic practices and good governance – rather sheer national interest, spookery and dogs of war. Moreover, very recent evidence [implicating Wagner in massacres](#) in Mali, once again does not leave the critical observer of Russian ties with the African continent with the impression of accountability and transparency. It rather associates Russia's foreign policy actions in Africa with high risk and dubious foreign policy practices.

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