

# The Russians are coming! The Russians are coming?

Russia's growing presence in Africa  
and its implication for European policy

CRU Report

Guido Lanfranchi  
Kars de Bruijne



RUSSIA-AFRICA SOCHI 2019



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

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# Executive Summary

The growth of Russia's presence across Africa over the last decade has generated significant international concern, further exacerbated after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. Russia's engagement can affect the interests and policies of the European Union (EU) and its member states (MS) in Africa. How should European policymakers understand these developments and respond to them? To answer this question, this report looks at Russia's engagement in Africa, reaching three main conclusions.

First, Moscow's engagement with Africa has so far remained limited as compared to that of other global players, particularly in the economic domain. The current level of (media) attention devoted to Russia's role in Africa is thus not supported by sufficient evidence of its actual engagement in the continent. At the same time, however, the growth of Russia's presence is a real trend.

Second, Russian actors are guided by a rather loose strategy when it comes to Africa. The Russian state has some interests that act as a broad framework. However, the actual engagement is carried out not only by state actors, but also by state-backed conglomerates and politically connected private businesses. These latter actors have their own specific interests, which are not always fully aligned with those of the Russian state. While state actors are often driven by geopolitical considerations, Russian companies are more interested in economic opportunities.

Third, Russia's engagement in African countries is significantly shaped by the different national contexts and by the interests of African governments. For instance, in a strong state like Ethiopia, Russia's engagement takes place exclusively at the governmental level. By contrast, in Sudan and Mali (contexts with weaker state structures), other Russian actors like PMCs and private businesses are involved. Yet, in all three cases, Moscow's presence tends to grow when relations between African governments and their international partners (especially in the West) deteriorate, often in the wake of authoritarian turns. This shows the opportunistic nature of Russia's engagement, as well as the complex trade-offs faced by EU/MS governments when engaging with African governments.

These findings have significant consequences for the policy response of the EU and its member states. This report suggests that:

- (i) Rather than trying to respond reactively to Russia's presence, EU/MS should focus on strengthening their own relations with relevant African partners. Addressing some of the political and economic imbalances in the Europe-Africa partnership may be an effective way to strengthen such relations, and by doing so to reduce the chances of an increase in Russia's influence.



- (ii) In countries where this preventive strategy is difficult to implement (e.g. when facing authoritarian governments), decisions on whether/how to engage should go beyond debates about Russia's (potential) presence, and be based instead on a comprehensive understanding of EU/MS interests and norms. Partnerships with non-governmental actors (e.g. the private sector, traditional authorities) may allow EU/MS governments to remain engaged despite souring ties with the government.
- (iii) In countries where Russia's presence is already established, evidence-based and context-specific assessments of this presence should inform the EU/MS policy response. This can allow EU/MS governments to avoid overreacting to Russia's influence, while also not underestimating its dangers.
- (iv) To pursue their interests in an increasingly multipolar world, EU/MS governments should try to strengthen their leverage vis-à-vis Russia (as well as other actors). To do so, EU/MS policymakers should leverage more strategically the engagement of European businesses across Africa.

# 1 Introduction

“*The Russian Bear is back*”, or so it seems when one looks at the headlines of international media outlets.<sup>1</sup> Russia has sought to reinforce and restructure its ties with a wide array of different countries across the African continent over the last ten years, after two decades of relative disengagement following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Currently, more attention is being devoted to this trend, particularly in the context of the growing tensions between Moscow and Western governments in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

For policymakers in the European Union (EU) and its member states (MS), Russia’s growing footprint in Africa can create challenges. In countries where Moscow’s presence is on the rise, such as for instance in Mali, EU/MS governments are struggling to decide whether and how to continue their engagement with their African counterparts.<sup>2</sup> These struggles come at a time when policymakers in various European capitals are drafting, updating or refining their Africa strategies, as the continent’s relevance continues to grow (in terms of, for instance, economic opportunities, security challenges, migratory flows).

In this context, it is important for policymakers to thoroughly assess Russia’s presence in Africa, how this presence has come about, and what the response should be. A thorough analysis can allow policymakers to avoid following dominant narratives that are too often deficient and partial.<sup>3</sup>

This report seeks to contribute to these debates in three ways. First, it provides an assessment of the scale of Moscow’s presence in Africa, showing that although Russia’s footprint is rapidly growing, it still remains considerably limited when compared to that of other global players. Second, it outlines the drivers and strategies underpinning Moscow’s growing presence, showing how such a presence hinges on the interests and activities of various Russian actors (including both state actors and private ones),

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1 Clifford, C. 2021. *The bear is back: Russian re-engagement with Africa is picking up with Putin in the driving seat*. Johannesburg; South African Institute of International Affairs.

2 France24. 2022. ‘France reviews Mali military presence after junta expels top envoy’, *France24*, 1 February, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220201-france-reviews-response-to-mali-junta-s-expulsion-of-its-top-envoy> (accessed 18 May 2022).

3 For a critique of this kind of analysis, see: Thurston, A. 2022. ‘Four Recent Pieces on Russia in Africa/ The Sahel’, *Sahel Blog*, 3 May, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2022/05/03/four-recent-pieces-on-russia-in-africa-the-sahel/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

who rely on a broad set of recurrent tools. Third, by exploring more in detail the cases of Ethiopia, Sudan and Mali, the report highlights how each country's specific context heavily shapes the engagement of Russian actors, who often make significant inroads into African countries by profiting from the international isolation of local governments. On the basis of this analysis, the report provides recommendations for EU/MS policymakers on how to respond to Russia's growing presence in Africa.

# 2 Assessing Russia's engagement in Africa

## 2.1 Historical background

While Russia's engagement in Africa has sharply increased over the past decade, such engagement is not a completely new phenomenon – rather, it is largely rooted in the legacy of the Soviet Union's ties with Africa in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the decades following the end of World War II, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) provided considerable support to African independence movements first and post-colonial states later – partly as a means to advance its ideological agenda, and partly as a tool in its global confrontation with the Western bloc, to which former colonial powers like the United Kingdom and France belonged.<sup>4</sup> Throughout those decades, Soviet support materialized in different forms. These included economic assistance (in terms of both economic cooperation packages and technical assistance in developing policies), security cooperation (most notably in terms of weapons sales and military training), as well as extensive scholarships and training for African students and party cadres (a policy that created longstanding ties between African political elites and Moscow – ties that outlasted the fall of the USSR).

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in a marked decline in Moscow's engagement in Africa. The prominence of domestic troubles and the lack of financial resources prompted policymakers in the new-born Russian Federation to refocus its foreign policy on its immediate neighbourhood, leading to a massive withdrawal of its African presence.<sup>5</sup> In the early 2000s, however, as the domestic political situation stabilised and as higher oil prices boosted Russia's economic standing, Moscow again started to consider some form of increased engagement in Africa.<sup>6</sup> After a slow start, this re-engagement witnessed a significant boost as a result of the increasing tensions with the West, particularly in the wake of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. As Western countries imposed sanctions on Russia's economy, Russian companies (and particularly those linked to sanctioned individuals) started to look for new markets

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4 Matusevich, M. 2019. 'Russia in Africa: A search for continuity in a post-Cold War era', *Insight Turkey* 21(1), 26.

5 Matusevich, M. 2019. 'Russia in Africa', op. cit., 33-35.

6 Stronski, P. 2019. *Late to the party: Russia's return to Africa*. Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

in other regions, including in Africa.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the Russian government sought to shore up its position at the international level by looking for new diplomatic allies. Overall, this resulted in a rapidly growing Russian engagement in Africa over the past decade.

## 2.2 A rapidly-growing engagement

Russia's growing engagement in Africa over the past decade can be seen across different domains. Diplomatically, over the last few years the number of high-level engagements between the Russian government and African countries has increased sharply. For instance, during the last 5 years of unfettered travel before the pandemic's outbreak in 2020, African heads of state and government visited Moscow on more than 20 occasions – a major increase, considering that only 17 such visits had occurred over the previous 15 years (see Figure 1).<sup>8</sup> This intensification was compounded by the establishment of the Russia-Africa Summit, whose first meeting (hosted in Sochi in October 2019) brought to Russia 43 heads of state and government.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, high-level Russian diplomats (most notably Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Deputy Minister Mikhail Bogdanov) have made increasingly frequent visits to African countries.<sup>10</sup>

In parallel with this diplomatic re-engagement, economic ties between Russia and Africa have grown significantly over the past decade. In 2010-19, the value of Russia's trade with sub-Saharan countries reached an average of USD 2.8 billion per year – a 156% increase as compared to the figure for the previous ten years (see Figure 2).<sup>11</sup> These figures have been accompanied by a growing presence of Russian businesses across the continent. Although comprehensive data in this regard is scarce, 2019 was reported to be a record year in terms of new greenfield investment projects by Russian companies in Africa, with

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7 Abramova, I.O. and Fituni, L.L. 2020. 'Russia's new strategy on Africa', *Herald of the Russian Academy of Sciences* 90(6), 691; Stronski, P. 2019. *Late to the Party*, op. cit.; Kortunov, A., Zeiser, N., Kharitonova, E., Chkoniya, L., Kotchofa, G., and Ezhov, D. 2020. *Africa-Russia+: Achievements, Problems, Prospects*. Moscow: Joint Report of the Russian Council on International Affairs (RCIA) and the UNION "African Business Initiative" (ABI), 35; Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), 6-7, 20-21.

8 Data from the Kremlin website ('President of Russia', <http://en.kremlin.ru/>, accessed 18 May 2022) and various media sources; Stronski, P. 2019. *Late to the Party*, op. cit.

9 Gershkovich, E. 2019. 'At Russia's Inaugural Africa Summit, Moscow Sells Sovereignty', *The Moscow Times*, 26 October, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/26/russias-inaugural-africa-summit-moscow-sells-sovereignty-a67916> (accessed 18 May 2022); A second Summit meeting is planned for late 2022 in St. Petersburg, but at the time of writing some doubts have been cast as to whether or not it will be organized in the wake of the developments related to the conflict in Ukraine (conversation with a Russian diplomat in West Africa, March 2022).

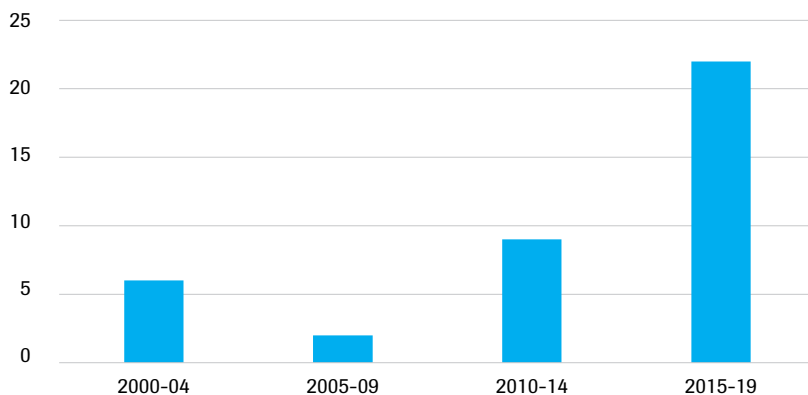
10 Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 10.

11 Data from: World Integrated Trade Solutions, <https://wits.worldbank.org/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

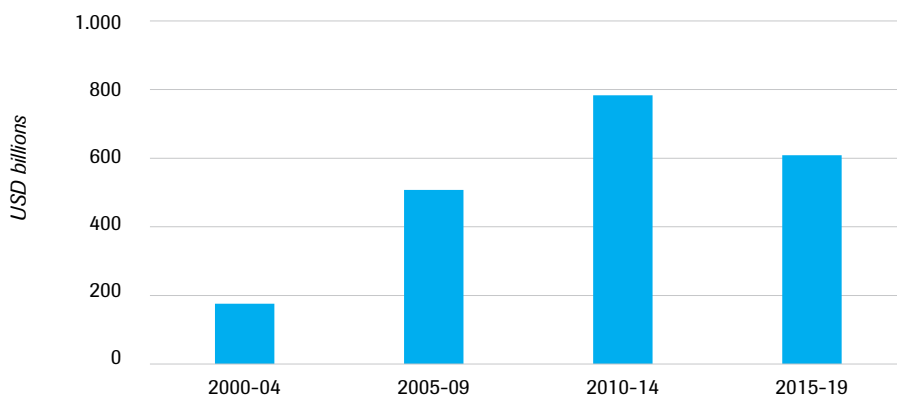
Elaboration by the authors.

19 such deals recorded.<sup>12</sup> The Sochi summit of October 2019 gave a significant boost in this regard, paving the way for the signature of 92 economic deals worth an estimated total of USD 14 billion.<sup>13</sup> Air links between Russia and Africa have also increased over the past years, with prominent African companies like Ethiopian Airlines launching new connections between Moscow and the continent.<sup>14</sup>

**Figure 1 Visits to Moscow by African heads of state and government<sup>15</sup>**



**Figure 2 Average annual trade flows between Russia and Sub-Saharan Africa<sup>16</sup>**



12 Irwin-Hunt, A. 2020. 'Russia's ongoing charm offensive in Africa', *FDI Intelligence*, 15 September, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/feature/russias-ongoing-charm-offensive-in-africa-78348> (accessed 18 May 2022).

13 Irwin-Hunt, A. 2020. 'Russia's ongoing charm offensive in Africa', op. cit.

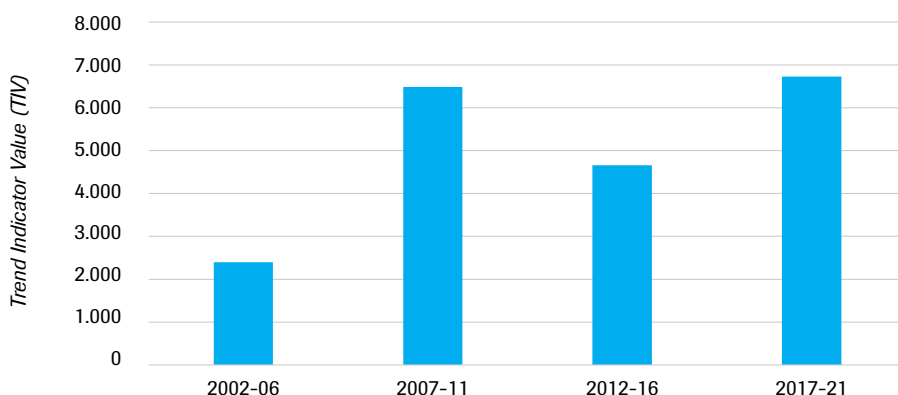
14 Noëth, B. 2018. 'Ethiopian airlines to connect Africa with Russia', *Aviation24.be*, 29 October, <https://www.aviation24.be/airlines/ethiopian-airlines/connect-africa-russia-1-december/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

15 Kremlin. 'Events – President', *Kremlin*, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news> (accessed 18 May 2022).

16 Data from: World Integrated Trade Solutions, <https://wits.worldbank.org/> (accessed 18 May 2022). Elaboration by the authors.

Russia’s increasing attention towards Africa has also been reflected in the intensification of military cooperation, a domain in which Russia already enjoyed a prominent position. Russian arms exports to African countries increased by 28% in 2012-21 as compared to the (already significant) figures for the previous decade (see Figure 3).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, between 2015 and 2018 alone, Russia signed over 20 bilateral military cooperation agreements with African governments (for an overview of these agreements, see Figure 7).<sup>18</sup> Although the extent to which this cooperation has materialised remains unclear, the signing of such agreements has continued in recent years, as testified by the deals inked with African heavyweights like Ethiopia and Nigeria during the summer of 2021.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 3 Russia’s arms exports towards Africa, 2002-2021<sup>20</sup>**



17 Data from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. ‘SIPRI Arms Transfers Database’, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 18 May 2022); elaboration by the authors. These figures refer to all African countries, including those in North Africa.

18 Hedenskog, J. 2018. *Russia is stepping up its military cooperation in Africa*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency; Vigne, E. 2019. *Le retour militaire de la Russie en Afrique subsaharienne : quels fondements ?*, Brussels: Groupe de recherche et d’information sur la paix et la sécurité (GRIP).

19 Kenyette, P. 2021. ‘Ethiopia, Russia sign military cooperation agreement’, *Military Africa*, 14 July, <https://www.military.africa/2021/07/ethiopia-russia-signs-military-cooperation-agreement> (accessed 18 May 2022); VOA News. 2021. ‘Nigeria, Russia sign military agreement’, *Voice of America*, 27 August, [https://www.voanews.com/a/africa\\_nigeria-russia-sign-military-agreement/6210035.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/africa_nigeria-russia-sign-military-agreement/6210035.html) (accessed 18 May 2022).

20 Data from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. ‘SIPRI Arms Transfers Database’, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 18 May 2022); elaboration by the authors. TIV is the unit developed by SIPRI to measure arms transfers.

## 2.3 A relatively marginal position

Despite this sharp increase in diplomatic, economic and security cooperation, however, it is crucial to note that Russia's ties with African countries still lag considerably behind those of other players that are active on the continent, such as China, the United States (US), as well as the EU and some of its member states.

The domain in which this gap is most pronounced is that of economic cooperation. In 2019, for instance, Russian imports accounted for only about 1% of sub-Saharan Africa's overall imports – a figure much lower than that of China (18%), the US (6%), as well as the Netherlands (3%) (see Figure 4).<sup>21</sup> Russia's relevance as a market for African exports was even more limited, with Moscow accounting for a mere 0.3% of sub-Saharan Africa's exports (as compared to 11% for China and 5% for the US and the Netherlands).<sup>22</sup> Russia's relevance is similarly limited in terms of foreign direct investment (FDI). As for 2017, less than 1% of Africa's FDI stock originated from Russia, and the number of greenfield projects announced by Russia-based companies between 2003 and 2020 has been only a fraction of the equivalent numbers for their Chinese and US counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

**Figure 4 Trade flows of Sub-Saharan Africa, 2019<sup>24</sup>**

Partner country	Imports		Exports	
	Value [USD bn]	Share [%]	Value [USD bn]	Share [%]
World	235.4	100.0	241.4	100.0
Russia	3.3	1.3	0.7	0.3
China	45.5	18.0	26.0	10.8
India	17.1	6.7	18.5	7.7
United States	16.4	6.5	12.5	5.2
United Kingdom	6.6	2.6	7.7	3.2
Germany	12.4	4.9	9.7	4.0
Netherlands	6.9	2.7	11.3	4.7

21 World Integrated Trade Solutions. 'Sub-Saharan Africa Imports, Tariffs by country and region', <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SSF/Year/2019/TradeFlow/Import> (accessed 18 May 2022).

22 World Integrated Trade Solutions. 'Sub-Saharan Africa Exports, Tariffs by country and region', <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SSF/Year/2019/TradeFlow/Export> (accessed 18 May 2022).

23 Irwin-Hunt, A. 2020. 'Russia's ongoing charm offensive in Africa', op. cit.

24 World Integrated Trade Solutions. 'Sub-Saharan Africa Imports, Tariffs by country and region', <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SSF/Year/2019/TradeFlow/Import> (accessed 18 May 2022); World Integrated Trade Solutions. 'Sub-Saharan Africa Exports, Tariffs by country and region', <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/SSF/Year/2019/TradeFlow/Export> (accessed 18 May 2022).



A domain where Russia has arguably managed to make more progress is that of diplomatic contacts. The 2019 Sochi Summit was a major success in this regard, attracting 43 African heads of state and government – a participation comparable to that of EU-African Union (AU) summits (about 40 leaders in 2022), and second only to China's Forum on China–Africa Cooperation (FOCAC, with 51 African leaders attending in 2018).<sup>25</sup> Still, looking at other indicators, Russia's diplomatic engagement still seems to lag behind that of other global players. For instance, the number of Russian diplomatic missions across the continent (40 embassies and 6 consulates) is lower than the equivalent number for China (52 and 9), the US (50 and 7) and the EU (48 delegations), while being comparable to that of individual EU countries like Germany (43 and 2) (see Figure 5).<sup>26</sup>

Even in terms of security cooperation – Russia's traditional strength – Russia's footprint in Africa is in some respects lighter than that of other countries. To be sure, Russia remains the largest weapons supplier for African states (44% of recorded arms imports in 2017-21), followed at some distance behind by the US (17%), China (10%) and France (6%) (see Figure 6).<sup>27</sup> In terms of military presence, however, Russia lags well behind these actors. The US maintains by far the largest presence (with 15 fixed military outposts and 12 temporary locations), followed by France (6 permanent bases and several smaller temporary ones). Other countries whose engagement on the African continent is more recent have also established a military presence: in 2017, for instance, China opened a naval base in Djibouti, while Turkey opened a military base in Somalia to train Somali

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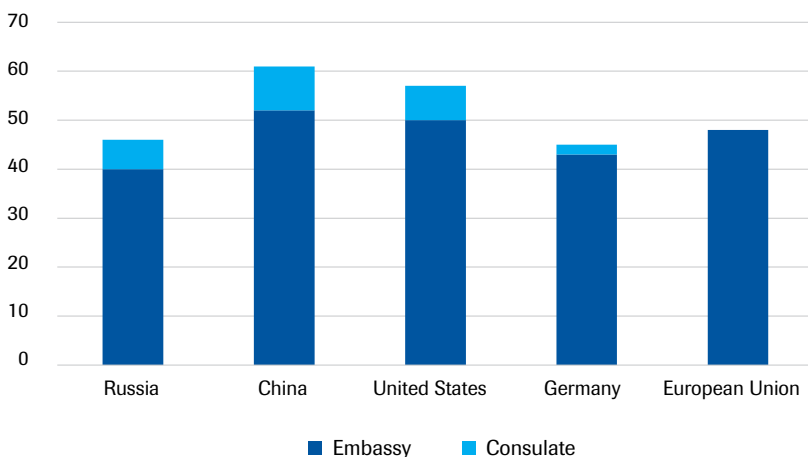
25 Gershkovich, E. 2019. 'At Russia's Inaugural Africa Summit', op. cit.; Szucs, A. 2022. 'EU-Africa summit: New words same game', *AA*, 17 February, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/eu-africa-summit-new-words-same-game/2505004> (accessed 18 May 2022); Nantulya, P. 2021. 'The forum on China-Africa cooperation at 21: Where to next?', 3 September, *Africa Centre for Strategic Studies*, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/focac-forum-china-africa-cooperation-21-where-to-next/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

26 For Russia, see: The Russian Federation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 'Russia in International Relations', <https://mid.ru/en/> (accessed 18 May 2022); For China, see: People's Republic of China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 'Chinese Embassies', [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjb\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/2490\\_665344/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/2490_665344/) (accessed 18 May 2022); Lowy Institute. 2019. 'Global diplomacy index – 2019', <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/> (accessed 18 May 2022). For the US, see: US Embassy. 'Websites of U.S. Embassies, Consulates, and Diplomatic Missions', <https://www.usembassy.gov/> (accessed 18 May 2022). For the EU, see: European External Action Service. 'EU Diplomatic Representations', [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-world-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-world-0_en) (accessed 18 May 2022). For Germany, see: Federal Foreign Office. 'German Missions Abroad', <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/about-us/auslandsvertretungen> (accessed 18 May 2022).

27 SIPRI. 2022. *Trends in international arms transfers, 2021*, 7. The figures are slightly different for sub-Saharan Africa, with Russia accounting for 30% of imports, followed by China (20%), France (10%) and the US (5%) in 2016-2020 (SIPRI. 2021. *Trends in international arms transfers, 2020*, 8).

forces.<sup>28</sup> By contrast, at this moment in time, the Russian armed forces do not have any permanent military presence in Africa. Previous attempts to establish an outpost in Djibouti were reportedly thwarted by US pressure, while a deal for the establishment of a naval facility on Sudan’s coast is currently under discussion with the Sudanese government.<sup>29</sup>

**Figure 5 Diplomatic presence of Russia and other countries in Africa<sup>30</sup>**

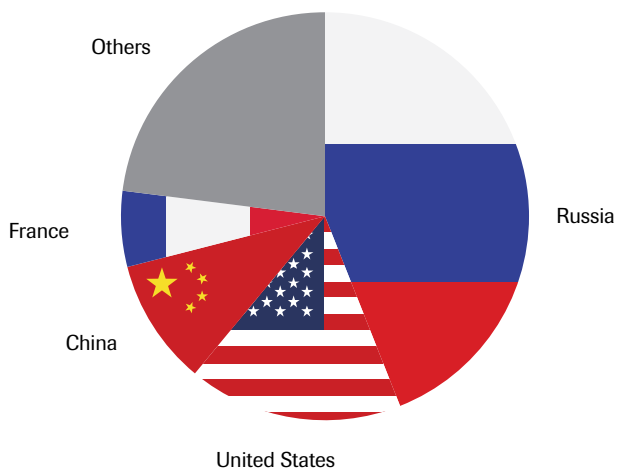


28 Turse, N. 2020. 'Pentagon’s own map of U.S bases in Africa contradicts its claim of “light” footprint', *The Intercept*, 27 February, <https://theintercept.com/2020/02/27/africa-us-military-bases-africom/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Sundberg, A. 2019. *France – A continuing military presence in Francophone Africa*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency; Reuters. 2017. 'China formally opens first overseas military base in Djibouti', *Reuters*, 1 August, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-djibouti-idUSKBN1AH3E3> (accessed 18 May 2022); Al Jazeera. 2017. 'Turkey sets up largest overseas army base in Somalia', *Al Jazeera*, 1 October, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/1/turkey-sets-up-largest-overseas-army-base-in-somalia> (accessed 18 May 2022).

29 Ramani, S. 2020. *Russia’s post Sudan naval base: A power play on the red sea*, RUSI.

30 For Russia, see: The Russian Federation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 'Russia in International Relations', <https://mid.ru/en/> (accessed 18 May 2022); For China, see: People’s Republic of China. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 'Chinese Embassies', [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/wjw\\_663304/zwjg\\_665342/2490\\_665344/](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjw_663304/zwjg_665342/2490_665344/) (accessed 18 May 2022); Lowy Institute. 2019. 'Global diplomacy index – 2019', <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/> (accessed 18 May 2022). For the US, see: US Embassy. 'Websites of U.S. Embassies, Consulates, and Diplomatic Missions', <https://www.usembassy.gov/> (accessed 18 May 2022). For the EU, see: European External Action Service. 'EU Diplomatic Representations', [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-world-0\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-world-0_en) (accessed 18 May 2022). For Germany, see: Federal Foreign Office. 'German Missions Abroad', <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/about-us/auslandsvertretungen> (accessed 18 May 2022).

**Figure 6 Sources of African arms imports<sup>31</sup>**



Overall, a careful look at Russia’s engagement in Africa thus suggests that although Moscow’s presence is sharply rising, it starts from a relatively low baseline. This leaves Moscow lagging well behind other global players that are active on the African continent, and suggests that the commotion resulting from Russia’s return to Africa does not correspond to Russia’s actual engagement in the continent. These observations thus call for a balanced assessment of Russia’s presence in Africa – an assessment that should not overestimate such a presence, while also not underestimating its rapid growth over the past few years.

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31 SIPRI. 2022. *Trends in international arms transfers, 2021*, 7.

# 3 The view from Russia: A loose strategy

## 3.1 Multiple actors in a loose strategy

Although the engagement of Russian actors across Africa has been growing over the past decade, the continent can hardly be described as a priority for policymakers in Moscow so far. Africa is barely mentioned in all major strategic documents guiding Russia's foreign and security policy, including foreign policy concepts, military doctrines and national security strategies.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, while several world regions are assigned a Deputy Foreign Minister, responsibility for Africa is included within the broader portfolio of Mikhail Bogdanov, the Deputy Foreign Minister covering the Middle East and North Africa – a region that enjoys a considerably higher priority for Moscow.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps reflecting this relative lack of prioritization, the Russian government has so far not published an Africa strategy comparable to those outlined by other global players such as China and the US, limiting itself to relying on a (classified) policy document first drafted in the 1990s and regularly updated since then.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, despite the lack of a formal public strategy, a close look at the engagement of Russian actors throughout the continent makes it possible to define the contours of a *de facto* Africa strategy. This strategy hinges on the interests and activities of a wide range of players, including – but not limited to – the Russian state. Within the government, Russia's Africa policy is managed by the President and by relevant

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32 Dreyfus, E. 2020. *Moscow's limited prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Kennan Cable, Washington: Wilson Centre.

33 Dreyfus, E. 2020. *Moscow's limited prospects*, op. cit. While Russia has traditionally devoted more attention to North Africa, this region falls under the purview of the Middle East and North Africa Department (MENAD), rather than the Africa Department (DAF). Russian Federation. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs. 2022. 'Structural diagram of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia', [https://mid.ru/en/about/structure/central\\_office/](https://mid.ru/en/about/structure/central_office/) (accessed 18 May 2022).

34 Even during the Trump administration, widely regarded as lacking attention towards Africa, the US issued an Africa strategy (White House Archive. Foreign Policy. 2018. *President Donald J. Trump's Africa Strategy Advances Prosperity, Security, and Stability*). China also has well-defined policy documents on Africa (People's Republic of China. The State Council Information Office. 2021. *China and Africa in the New Era: A Partnership of Equals*). No such document exists for Russia (Dreyfus, E. 2020. *Moscow's limited prospects*, op. cit.). Yet, Russian policymakers have reportedly relied on a classified policy document, first drafted in the 1990s and regularly updated since then (Karaganov, S. 2021. *Africa: Development prospects and recommendations for Russian policy*, Moscow: Situation Analysis, 130).

sectoral ministries, most notably those of foreign affairs and defence.<sup>35</sup> Alongside the government, a number of state-owned or state-backed conglomerates – particularly in the extractive and energy sectors (e.g. Alrosa, Rusal, Rosatom, Gazprom, etc.) – are active across the African continent.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the last few years have witnessed the increasing involvement of private companies owned by businesspeople with strong links to political elites in Moscow – the most notable case being that of Yevgeny Prigozhin, reportedly a close associate of President Vladimir Putin.<sup>37</sup>

The degree to which the interests and activities of these various actors are coordinated into a coherent strategy is subject to debate and seems to vary across cases. In the case of state-owned conglomerates, for instance, the government has reportedly retained its ability to influence the strategy of these companies, while at the same time leaving them the necessary space to make decisions based on economic opportunities.<sup>38</sup> In the case of private companies, however, coordination with the government has reportedly been more confused. While it is widely believed that these private companies operate with the consent (if not the encouragement) of the state, Russian officials have noted that these private ventures are too often not harmonized with the state's goals, and at times even contradict them.<sup>39</sup>

These observations suggest that Russia's strategy in Africa is rather a loose one, whereby the government provides a broad framework based on state interests, allowing (semi-)private actors to support its objectives by pursuing their own interests within that given framework. It is in this complex context that the next section seeks to outline some of the major drivers and recurrent tools that underpin the engagement of these Russian actors across Africa.

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35 Other ministries regularly involved in implementing the government's Africa policies are those of economic development, industry and trade, education and science. Karaganov, S. 2021. *Africa*, op. cit., 131; Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit.

36 Irwin-Hunt, A. 2020. 'Russia's ongoing charm offensive in Africa', op. cit.; Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 22-24.

37 Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 20-22; Olivier, M. 2021. 'Russia/Africa: Wagner, an investigation into Putin's mercenaries', *The Africa Report*, 28 July, <https://www.theafricareport.com/112649/russia-africa-wagner-an-investigation-into-putins-mercenaries/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Marten, K. 2019. *Into Africa: Prigozhin, Wagner, and the Russian military*, PONARS Eurasia.

38 Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 22-24.

39 Rác, A. 2020. *Band of brothers: The Wagner group and the Russian state*, Washington: CSIS; Karaganov, S. 2021. *Africa*, op. cit., 132. Remarkably, voices within the Russian foreign policy establishment have expressed the desire "to eliminate or minimize the activity of political entrepreneurs operating in Africa under the Russian flag and seeking to acquire state support in order to rapidly monetize it thereafter" (Karaganov, S. 2021. *Africa*, op. cit., 136).

### 3.2 Drivers of Russian engagement

The engagement of Russian actors across Africa is determined by a combination of different driving forces, including geopolitical considerations, economic interests, as well as domestic political concerns.

From a geopolitical standpoint, according to many observers, Moscow's Africa push is tightly related to the Russian government's long-standing quest for a more multipolar world, as well as to the growing competition between Moscow and the West at the global level.<sup>40</sup> After Russia's recovery from the difficult decades that followed the USSR's fall, policymakers in Moscow reportedly sought to re-establish the country's erstwhile global reach, including across the African continent. Seeking to avoid the large-scale commitments typical of the Cold War times, in the last couple of decades Russia has reportedly adopted a more opportunistic strategy, seeking to score points against its global competitors at a low cost.<sup>41</sup> Examples of such dynamics can be seen in diverse cases such as those of Ethiopia, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, where Moscow has exploited the dissatisfaction of African political and security elites with their Western partners to gain new allies on the continent, while weakening the alliances of its Western competitors.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to this geopolitical competition, Russia's push into Africa has also been driven by a quest for economic opportunities. Currently, official trade with sub-Saharan Africa is of little relevance to Russia and its companies, accounting for less than 1% of Moscow's total trade turnover.<sup>43</sup> However, much like most other countries in the world, Russia sees Africa as a continent with a vast economic potential, due to its large and growing market and its abundance of natural resources.<sup>44</sup> Over the past decades, African countries have come to play a relevant role in some strategic sectors of Russia's economy. For instance, as much as 25% of Russian aluminium is made from bauxite coming from Guinea, where Russian aluminium producer Rusal owns a large

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40 Stronski, P. 2019. *Late to the Party*, op. cit.; Conversation with European diplomat with diplomatic experience in Russia, March 2022.

41 Ramani, S. 2020. "Engaged opportunism" *Russia's role in the Horn of Africa*, Foreign Policy Research Institute.

42 Siegle, J. 2022. 'How Russia is pursuing state capture in Africa', *London School of Economics Blog*. For more details on the cases of Ethiopia and Mali, see the case studies below.

43 Data from: World Integrated Trade Solutions, <https://wits.worldbank.org/> (accessed 18 May 2022). Elaboration by the authors. It should be noted, however, that most of these purchases have been made by Algeria and Egypt, with sub-Saharan Africa accounting for around 3% of Moscow's sales over the past twenty years.

44 Abramova, I.O. and Fituni, L.L. 2020. 'Russia's new strategy on Africa', op. cit.; Kortunov, A. et al. 2020. *Africa-Russia+*, op. cit.; Balytnikov, V., Barabanov, O., Yemelyanov, A., Poletaev, D., Sir, I. and Zaiser, N. 2019. *Russia's return to Africa: Strategy and prospects*, Moscow: Valdai Discussion Club.

mining concession.<sup>45</sup> Other large Russian state-backed conglomerates, mostly in the extractive industry sector, also have active operations across Africa.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, over the last decades Africa has also grown into an increasingly important market for Russian weapons. Between 2017 and 2021, African countries accounted for 27% of Moscow's overall arms sales (up from 9% in 2002-06), while Russian companies also continued to provide maintenance services for Soviet-era equipment.<sup>47</sup>

Over the last ten years, these geopolitical and economic drivers have also tended to reinforce each other, as the increasing confrontation between Russia and the West – particularly after the crises in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014) – has provided a further impetus for Russian actors to engage with African countries.<sup>48</sup> On the diplomatic level, facing increasing isolation from the West, the Russian government has been eager to gain new allies across the continent in order to shore up its position in international forums such as the United Nations (UN). Some of Moscow's African allies, for instance, have lent their support to Russia on key UN votes in relation to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the recent invasion of Ukraine.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, on the economic level, the sanctions imposed by Western countries on Russia's economy (compounded by the counter-sanctions imposed by the Kremlin) have cut a number of Russian companies out of Western markets. In response, some of these companies (particularly those under

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45 Balytninkov et al. 2019, 23.

46 For instance, Alrosa (diamonds) is engaged in Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Nordgold (gold) is active in Burkina Faso and Guinea, while Rosneft, Gazprom, Lukoil and Tatneft (oil and gas) have interests in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, the Republic of the Congo, Nigeria and Mozambique. Irwin-Hunt, A. 2020. 'Russia's ongoing charm offensive in Africa', op. cit.; S&P Global. 2019. 'Analysis: Russia looks to Africa to broaden its global energy influence', *S&P Global*, 22 October <https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/oil/102219-analysis-russia-looks-to-africa-to-broaden-its-global-energy-influence> (accessed 18 May 2022); Norgold. 2021. 'Nordgold has mines and development projects, as well as investment projects in 6 countries – Burkina Faso, Guinea, Russia, Kazakhstan, French Guiana and Canada', <https://www.nordgold.com/about/geography/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

47 Data from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 'SIPRI Arms Transfers Database', <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 18 May 2022); elaboration by the authors. Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 8. It should be noted, however, that the bulk of the growth in Russian arms exports to Africa is related to purchases by Algeria and Egypt.

48 Abramova, I.O. and Fituni, L.L. 2020. 'Russia's new strategy on Africa', op. cit., 691; Stronski, P. 2019. *Late to the Party*, op. cit.

49 In 2014, Sudan and Zimbabwe voted against the UNGA resolution declaring Crimea's independence referendum illegitimate (France 24. 2014. 'UN votes to reject Russian annexation of Crimea', *France 24*, 27 March <https://www.france24.com/en/20140327-un-general-assembly-votes-reject-russian-annexation-crimea> (accessed 18 May 2022)). In 2022, a large number of African countries (e.g. Algeria, Burundi, CAR, Congo, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Mali, Zimbabwe) have opposed Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council (UN News. 2022. 'UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council', *UN News*, 7 April <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/04/1115782> (accessed 18 May 2022)).

sanctions) have tried to shift their operations to Africa, partly in order to compensate for the decrease in operations in other markets, and partly as an opportunity to (re)inject sanctioned or illegally-obtained capital into international markets.<sup>50</sup> This has also led to an increased engagement by Russian actors in illicit economic activities, such as for instance gold smuggling from Sudan, which has reportedly been used to sanction-proof the Russian economy by boosting its gold reserves.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, according to some observers, Russia's growing engagement in Africa may also be partly traced back to domestic political concerns. In a political system grounded in patronage, providing lucrative economic opportunities abroad for businesspeople (particularly those squeezed by Western sanctions) can be a good tool for political elites in Moscow to build loyalty among selected business elites.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, economic opportunities overseas may provide returns for state-owned companies, with a positive impact on the state's coffers. Overall, therefore, a push into Africa by Russian companies may provide economic benefits for a wide range of Russian actors, while also expanding Moscow's footprint overseas without straining the state's budget – surely a welcome combination from the perspective of the Russian government.

### 3.3 Moscow's recurrent tools

Besides the broad drivers outlined above, it is also possible to identify a set of tools that are recurrently employed by Russian actors in support of Moscow's loose Africa strategy. In particular, this toolbox includes security, economic, political and soft power tools.

Security tools are arguably the most relevant instruments of Russian influence in Africa. Three quarters of the continent's states are estimated to rely on Soviet-made military equipment, for which, to date, Russian companies continue to provide maintenance and upgrading.<sup>53</sup> This legacy, together with the good reputation of Russian weapons in terms of value for money and the absence of political conditions attached to arms

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50 Kortunov, A. et al. 2020. *Africa-Russia+*, op. cit., 35; Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 6-7, 20-21; conversation with a researcher on Russia's role in Central Africa and with a former Dutch diplomat with experience in Russia, March 2022. For more details, see below on the involvement of companies related to Russian businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin.

51 Collins, T. 2022. 'How Putin prepared for sanctions with tonnes of African gold', *The Telegraph*, 3 March, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/putin-prepared-sanctions-tonnes-african-gold/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

52 For some reflections on the interlinkages between domestic and foreign policy dynamics in relation to Russia's engagement in Africa, see: Marten, K. 2019. *Into Africa*, op. cit.; Lechner, J. 2021. 'To counter Russia in Africa, America should rethink its own role', *War on the Rocks*, 20 May, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/05/to-counter-russia-in-africa-america-should-rethink-its-own-role/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

53 Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 8.



sales, has contributed to consolidating Russia's position as Africa's top seller of weapons (especially transport and combat helicopters, anti-tank and surface-to-air missiles, as well as fighter aircraft).<sup>54</sup> Besides these sales, Russia also leverages broader security cooperation deals to strengthen cooperation with African countries in various fields, including counterterrorism, anti-piracy, as well as peacekeeping.<sup>55</sup> These deals often include provisions for the training of African military personnel (including to-be-deployed UN peacekeepers), as well as support for the development of military national capabilities more broadly.<sup>56</sup> In a number of cases (e.g. Sudan), such training has also supported African governments in bolstering their internal security forces.<sup>57</sup> In addition to these traditional security cooperation tools, over the last few years Russia has also increasingly relied on the deployment of private military companies (PMCs), most notably the now notorious Wagner Group. Russian PMC operatives have sprung up across the continent (see Figure 7), often in relation to bilateral deals signed at the governmental level, as well as to concessions made to Russian companies in the extractive industries sector (for more details, see Box 1).

### Box 1 Russian PMCs in Africa

Over past decades, the involvement of PMCs – not only from Russia, but also from other countries such as the US, the UK and France – has become an increasingly frequent feature of foreign engagement in Africa.<sup>58</sup> Among the Russian PMCs active in Africa, the Wagner Group has become by far the most well known, with reported operations across the whole continent (e.g. in Libya,

- 54 Russia accounts for 44% of all African imports (30% if only sub-Saharan Africa is considered). SIPRI. 2022. *Trends in international arms transfers, 2021*, 7; SIPRI. 2021. *Trends in international arms transfers, 2020*, 8; Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 8; Connolly, R., and Sendstad, C. 2017. *Russia's role as an arms exporter: The strategic and economic importance of arms exports for Russia*, London: Chatham House; Kondratenko, T. 2020. 'Russian arms exports to Africa: Moscow's long-term strategy', *DW*, 29 May, <https://www.dw.com/en/russian-arms-exports-to-africa-moscows-long-term-strategy/a-53596471> (accessed 18 May 2022). These figures exclude maintenance contracts.
- 55 Hedenskog, J. 2018. *Russia is stepping up its military cooperation in Africa*, op. cit.
- 56 Hedenskog, J. 2018. *Russia is stepping up its military cooperation in Africa*, op. cit.; Addis Standard. 2022. '#ASDailyScoop: Russian Navy delegation witness Ethiopia's effort to build modern navy', *Addis Standard*, 18 February, <https://addisstandard.com/asdailyscoop-russian-navy-delegation-witness-ethiopias-effort-to-build-modern-navy/> (accessed 18 May 2022).
- 57 Caniglia, M., and Murphy, T. 2021. 'Khartoum's autocratic enabler: Russia in Sudan', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 15 December, <https://ecfr.eu/article/khartoums-autocratic-enabler-russia-in-sudan/> (accessed 18 May 2022).
- 58 Durmaz, M., and Abdullahi, M. 2022. 'White hands': The rise of private armies in African conflicts', *Al Jazeera*, 28 April, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/4/28/white-hands-the-rise-of-private-militaries-in-african-conflict> (accessed 18 May 2022); Rühl, B. 2021. 'Why private foreign security companies are booming in Africa', *DW*, 2 July, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-private-foreign-security-companies-are-booming-in-africa/a-58134009> (accessed 18 May 2022).

Mali, Sudan, the CAR, Madagascar, Mozambique).<sup>59</sup> However, other Russian PMCs have also been active – most notably the Patriot Group (e.g. in the CAR, Burundi) and Sewa Security Services (e.g. the CAR).<sup>60</sup> These groups perform a wide variety of functions. Officially, their tasks include the training of African security forces, the personal protection of senior officials (up to the president, as in the case of the CAR), as well as the protection of key sites (including energy infrastructure and mining sites).<sup>61</sup> In reality, however, in some cases Russian PMC operatives have also reportedly engaged in intelligence gathering and in direct combat operations.<sup>62</sup> When various groups are deployed in the same country (e.g. the CAR), there seems to be a division of labour among them, with Wagner more engaged in military operations, while Patriot and Sewa take the lead in the protection of officials and assets.<sup>63</sup>

In the case of the Wagner Group, the presence of PMC operatives has also been tied to the economic interests of private companies with links to the business empire of Yevgeny Prigozhin, who is widely believed to be the ultimate financier of Wagner.<sup>64</sup> In the case of Sudan and the CAR, for instance, the ownership structure of local mining companies (e.g. Meroe Gold and Lobaye Invest) has been traced back to companies tied to Prigozhin's business empire (e.g. M-Invest and M-Finance, which in turn have reported ties to Prigozhin's Concord Group).<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in-depth analyses of customs data have shown that both Meroe Gold and Lobaye Invest have over the years received shipments of items such as armoured vehicles (later spotted in military training camps in the CAR and close to protest sites in Khartoum), as well as a transport helicopter (later portrayed, manned by Russian personnel, while delivering humanitarian aid in the CAR).<sup>66</sup> This shows the extent to which the presence of PMCs relates not only to security cooperation deals (often involving the Russian government), but also to an

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- 59 Katz, B., Jones, S. G., Doxsee, C. and Harrington, N. 2020. 'Moscow's mercenary wars', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, <https://russianpmcs.csis.org/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Askar, A. 2020. *The increasing presence and role of private security firms in Africa: The Russian company "Wagner" as a model*, Abu Dhabi: Emirati Policy Centre.
- 60 Sukhankin, S. 2018. *Russia's New PMC Patriot: The Kremlin's Bid for a Greater Role in Africa?*, Washington: The Jamestown Foundation; Narayanan, S. 2019. *The mercenaries behind Russian operations in Africa*, Washington: The Jamestown Foundation.
- 61 Katz, B. et al. 2020. 'Moscow's mercenary wars', op. cit.
- 62 Katz, B. et al. 2020. 'Moscow's mercenary wars', op. cit.
- 63 Olivier, M. 2021. 'Russia/Africa', op. cit.; Sukhanin, S. 2018. 'Russia's New PMC Patriot: The Kremlin's Bid for a Greater Role in Africa?', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 15(115).
- 64 Marten, K. 2019. 'Russia's use of semi-state security forces', op. cit. Prigozhin has repeatedly denied any affiliation with the Wagner Group.
- 65 Olivier, M. 2021. 'Russia/Africa', op. cit.
- 66 Margolin, J. 2019. 'Paper Trails: How a Russia-based logistics network ties together Russian mining companies and military contractors in Africa', *C4ADS*, <https://c4ads.org/blogposts/2019/6/13/paper-trails> (accessed 18 May 2022).

intricate network of economic interests of powerful, well-connected Russian businesspeople.

This observation sheds light on an important question, that is: to what extent do these complex networks of companies respond to the Russian state? In-depth investigations into Wagner – the Russian PMC on which most information is available – suggest that the relationship between this PMC and the Russian state is a complex one. Although Prigozhin reportedly enjoys close ties with Russian President Vladimir Putin, his relations with other major actors within the Russian state (most notably the Defence Ministry) have at times been troubled, potentially leading to serious internecine conflicts (such as the Deir ez-Zour accident in Syria, when the Russian military gave the green light to a US strike that killed scores of Wagner fighters).<sup>67</sup> Moreover, the alignment between the Russian government's directives and the Wagner Group's operations seems to vary according to the context of deployment. In Ukraine, for instance, the Russian government has seemingly used Wagner fighters as a direct proxy, with the aim of saving costs, avoiding official casualties and especially denying its involvement.<sup>68</sup> In African countries, by contrast, the available evidence seems to suggest that private interests play a relatively more prominent role in shaping Wagner's operations, although within a framework that respects – or at least does not excessively deviate from – the interests of the Russian state.<sup>69</sup> Remarkably, voices within the Russian establishment have issued calls to increase state supervision over Russian private contractors and political entrepreneurs active in Africa.<sup>70</sup>

In terms of political tools, the most relevant instrument leveraged by the Russian government is arguably diplomatic protection in the international arena. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia can leverage its veto power in the United Nations (UN) Security Council to shield allied governments from international condemnation and – most importantly – from the imposition of sanctions.<sup>71</sup> The use of this power has been a recurrent feature of Russia's interaction with African countries – from the late 2000s, when Russia defended allied governments in Sudan

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67 Marten, K. 2019. 'Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 35(3), 181-204; Marten, K. 2019. *Into Africa*, op. cit.

68 Marten, K. 2019. 'Russia's use of semi-state security forces', op. cit.

69 Marten, K. 2019. 'Russia's use of semi-state security forces', op. cit.; Marten, K. 2019. *Into Africa*, op. cit.

70 Karaganov, S. 2021. *Africa*, op. cit., 135-136.

71 Like in the case of the use of PMCs, the leveraging of the veto in the UNSC is not a phenomenon that is specific to Russia. Other permanent members, and in particular the US, have often used their veto power to shield allied governments. Brotman, A. 2015. 'The nuances behind Russia's use of the veto on the UN Security Council', *PassBlue*, 6 September, <https://www.passblue.com/2015/09/06/the-nuances-behind-russias-use-of-the-veto-on-the-un-security-council/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

and Zimbabwe from UN sanctions, to early 2022, when Moscow prevented the UN from endorsing the sanctions imposed by the West African regional bloc ECOWAS on Mali's post-coup government.<sup>72</sup> In addition to this diplomatic support, in more recent years Russian political advisers have been deployed to around a dozen African countries (including Madagascar, the CAR, the DRC and Sudan), where they have supported local ruling elites facing (the risk of) popular protests.<sup>73</sup>

In terms of economic tools, Russia's instruments are significantly more limited than those of its competitors. Russia does not meaningfully engage in development cooperation, and its capacity to provide financing and support to major infrastructure programmes is much more limited than that of other major actors like China.<sup>74</sup> However, the Russian government is able to leverage its control over large state-backed conglomerates to promote economic cooperation in specific sectors – most notably energy (including nuclear) and extractive industries – where Russian companies can offer capital and expertise to African countries.<sup>75</sup> For instance, a vast array of Russian oil and gas companies are active across Africa, while Rosatom (already involved in Egypt) is planning to specifically target a number of African countries with *ad hoc* packages.<sup>76</sup> Russian companies have also signed deals to support African countries in other high-tech domains (e.g. space), and some observers have pointed at the potential for successful cooperation in other sectors such as finance, pharmaceutical and digital.<sup>77</sup> In addition, the Russian government has at times leveraged the tool of debt forgiveness, both bilaterally and as part of broader international initiatives. For instance, Moscow has reportedly written off over USD 20 billion of African debt, at times in exchange for certain economic concessions (e.g. increased opportunities for Russian companies, access to natural resources, weapons purchases).<sup>78</sup>

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72 Sudan Tribune. 2007. 'Russia, China and S. Africa object US, UK sanctions against Sudan', *Sudan Tribune*, 19 April, <https://sudantribune.com/article21768/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Worsnip, P. 2008. 'Russia and China veto U.N. Zimbabwe sanctions', *Reuters*, 12 July, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-zimbabwe-crisis-un-idUSN0917887320080712> (accessed 18 May 2022); Al Jazeera. 2022. 'Russia, China block UN support for ECOWAS sanctions on Mali', *Al Jazeera*, 12 January, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/12/russia-and-china-block-un-support-for-ecowas-sanctions-on-mali> (accessed 18 May 2022).

73 Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 20.

74 Procopio, M. 2019. *Why Russia is not like China in Africa*. Milan: Institute for International Political Studies.

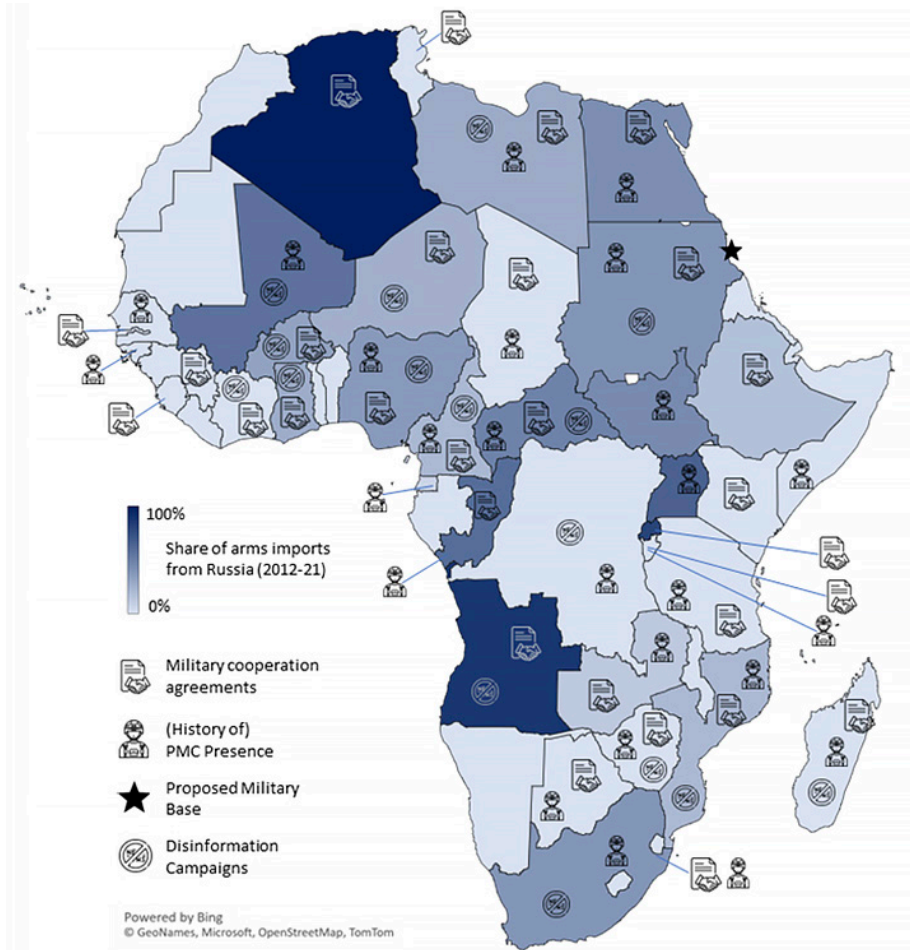
75 Kortunov, A. et al. 2020. *Africa-Russia+*, op. cit.; Balytnikov, V. et al. 2019. *Russia's return to Africa*, op. cit.

76 Kalika, A. 2019. *Russia's "great return" to Africa?*, op. cit., 22-23. See also Balytnikov, V. et al. 2019. *Russia's return to Africa*, op. cit., 22-26.

77 Balytnikov, V. et al. 2019. *Russia's return to Africa*, op. cit.; Kortunov, A. et al. 2020. *Africa-Russia+*, op. cit.. A deal with Angola was signed on the launch of satellites, and another with Nigeria on space exploration.

78 Balytnikov, V. et al. 2019. *Russia's return to Africa*, op. cit.. *Russia's return to Africa*, op. cit., 25; The Moscow Times. 2019. 'Russia vows to forgive Ethiopia's debts amid growing push for influence in Africa', *The Moscow Times*, 22 October, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/10/22/the-arctic-shelf-is-ours-russian-defense-ministry-says-a67843> (accessed 18 May 2022); Blank, S. J. 2007. *Rosoboronekspert: Arms sales and the structure of Russian defence industry*, Strategic Studies Institute., 70-71.

**Figure 7** Russia in Africa: Security cooperation, PMC presence and disinformation campaigns<sup>79</sup>



Finally, Moscow’s engagement in Africa also relies on a number of soft power tools. To begin with, Russia has taken advantage of old political ties with African elites dating back to Soviet Union times. During the Cold War, more than 50,000 African

79 Katz, B. et al. 2020. ‘Moscow’s mercenary wars’, op. cit.; Askar, A. 2020. *The increasing presence and role of private security firms in Africa*, op. cit.; Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. 2022. *Mapping disinformation in Africa*. Map powered by Bing © GeoNames, Microsoft, TomTom.

students studied in the USSR with the help of Soviet scholarships.<sup>80</sup> When returning to their countries, many of these individuals took up leadership positions, thus creating high-level individual ties between their countries and Moscow (see, among others, the cases of South African and Angola).<sup>81</sup> Besides leveraging these old ties, Russia has also sought to promote its image across Africa by intervening in the continent's information space. Russian media outlets – most notably RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik – have significantly increased their presence in Africa over the past decade.<sup>82</sup> Although the impact of this presence is still unclear, anecdotal evidence and preliminary analysis suggest that these outlets have become very popular in a number of African countries.<sup>83</sup> In addition to this increased media presence, Russian actors – including the Internet Research Agency, reportedly tied to both Prigozhin and Russia's military intelligence services – have conducted a number of disinformation campaigns across Africa (see Figure 7). The aim of these campaigns has often been to denigrate the policies of Western countries and their local allies in African countries, while also promoting Russia's own image.<sup>84</sup> In their soft power efforts, Russian actors have often leveraged the lack of Russian colonial heritage in Africa, the Soviet Union's support for decolonization, as well as the Russian government's promotion of political values such as multipolarity, anti-imperialism and national sovereignty, which have proved appealing in a number of African countries, both among political elites and at the popular level.<sup>85</sup>

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80 Katsakioris, C. 2021. 'Return from the USSR: Soviet-educated Africans, politics and work, 1960s–2000s', *Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue Canadienne des Études Africaines*, 55(2), 267-286.

81 Ambrosetti, E. T. 2022. *Russia's soft-power sources in Africa*, Johannesburg: SAIIA, 6-7. The same applies to politicians in other countries – for instance, the CAR's former transitional President Michel Djotodia (2013-14) had spent a decade studying in the Soviet Union and is fluent in Russian (Matusevich, M. 2019. 'Russia in Africa', op. cit., 36). Although the Russian state still offers a number of scholarships to African countries, these are now less focused on forming these countries' elites than they were in the past, thus making individual political ties more dependent on the older generation of leaders (Ambrosetti, E. T. 2022. *Russia's soft-power sources in Africa*, op. cit., 7-8).

82 Audinet, M. 2021. *Le Lion, L'ours Et Les Hyènes : Acteurs, Pratiques Et Récits De L'influence Informationnelle Russe En Afrique Subsaharienne Francophone*, IRSEM.; Ambrosetti, E. T. 2022. *Russia's soft-power sources in Africa*, op. cit., 8-9.

83 For instance, RT Arabic has become the second most watched international Arabic language media outlet in Sudan (after Al Jazeera), and its extensive use of social media has broadened its outreach to Sudanese people under the age of 30 (Ramani, S. 2019. *Resilience amid turmoil: Russia and Sudan maintain strong ties despite political upheaval*, Washington: Middle East Institute.). In francophone sub-Saharan Africa, the antenna time of RT has been comparable to that of BBC News, although it has remained significantly lower than that of Al Jazeera and Deutsche Welle (Audinet, M. 2021. *Le Lion, L'ours Et Les Hyènes*, op. cit. 34).

84 Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. 2022. *Mapping disinformation in Africa*, op. cit.; Audinet, M. 2021. *Le Lion, L'ours Et Les Hyènes*, op. cit., 43-54.

85 Ambrosetti, E. T. 2022. *Russia's soft-power sources in Africa*, op. cit.

# 4 The view from Africa: Drawing Russia in

## 4.1 Introduction

In order to fully grasp the dynamics of Russia's growing engagement in Africa, understanding the forces driving Moscow's push is surely necessary, but it is far from being sufficient. Much like for any external power becoming involved in a foreign region, Russia's engagement is shaped not only by Moscow's own interests and strategies, but also by the specific context of the country where this engagement takes place, as well as by the interests and strategies of African political elites who often welcome – and at times actively seek – Russia's support.<sup>86</sup>

By looking more in detail at the cases of Ethiopia, Sudan and Mali, this section sheds light on the differences and similarities that characterize Russia's engagement across Africa. On the one hand, these cases show how differences in the country context influence Russia's engagement, shaping which actors are more likely to be active and which tools are more likely to be deployed. On the other hand, however, these three cases also present a notable similarity: the presence of Russian actors tends to increase more significantly when relations between African governments and their Western counterparts deteriorate, highlighting the largely opportunistic nature of Russia's engagement.

## 4.2 Ethiopia

The way in which Russia has engaged in Ethiopia over the past decades has been significantly influenced by Ethiopia's specific characteristics, both at the national level and in the broader regional context. Traditionally, the country's large size, its relative degree of internal stability (especially until the eruption of the Tigray War in November 2020), as well as its influential international role (both in the Horn of Africa and in Africa at large) have allowed Addis Ababa to interact with external players from a position of relative strength. Leveraging these advantages, the federal government has been able to deftly balance its foreign relations, maintaining fruitful ties with all actors, while not

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86 Lanfranchi, G. 2021. *Geopolitics meets local politics in the Horn of Africa*, The Hague: Clingendael Spectator.

becoming fully dependent on any of them.<sup>87</sup> For instance, Ethiopia has been able to benefit from Western assistance on both the security and the development fronts, while at the same time heavily relying on Chinese financing for its state-led development plans and on Russian weapons for equipping its armed forces.

## **Box 2 Historical background of the relations between the Soviet Union/ Russia and Ethiopia**

Ethiopia has a long history of engagement with Russia. Diplomatic relations between the two sides were established as early as the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, reflecting a mix of both pragmatic considerations (e.g. shared enmity towards European colonial powers) and ideological ones (e.g. shared Christian Orthodox religious traditions).<sup>88</sup>

Despite the momentous political changes taking place both in Addis Ababa and in Moscow since then, relations between the two countries remained cordial across the decades.<sup>89</sup> A major upgrade of these relations took place in the late 1970s, when the Soviet Union suddenly replaced the US as Ethiopia's main international backer, supporting the Marxist *Derg* regime during the war against Somalia. Over the coming decade, increasing numbers of Ethiopian students, party cadres and military officers received education or training in the USSR, thus cementing bilateral ties in a more long-lasting fashion.<sup>90</sup>

In 1991, the advent of the EPRDF in Ethiopia and the collapse of the Soviet Union strongly reshaped Ethiopian-Russian relations, as Moscow reduced its engagement in Africa and Addis grew closer to the West as compared to the Cold War times. Even during this period, however, Russia remained an important

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87 Brown, S. and Fisher, J., 2020. 'Aid donors, democracy and the developmental state in Ethiopia', *Democratization*, 27(2), 185-203.

88 Rupprecht, T. 2018. 'Orthodox Internationalism: State and Church in Modern Russia and Ethiopia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 60(1), 212-235.

89 Demissie, A.A. 2021. 'Global Perspectives – Ethiopia-Russia Relations', *Wilson Center Kennan Institute and Africa Program*, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/global-perspectives-ethiopia-russia-relations> (accessed 18 May 2022).

90 For instance, Marxist/Leninist concepts and practices continued to be prominent in Ethiopia even after they had been abandoned in the Soviet Union/Russia itself. Most notably, the EPRDF – Ethiopia's ruling coalition from 1991 to 2019 – heavily relied on concepts such as democratic centralism in their decision-making procedures.



security partner for Ethiopia, accounting for 51% of its weapons purchases in 1991-2020.<sup>91</sup>

Ethiopian-Russian relations have recently warmed up once again in the wake of the eruption of the Tigray conflict, which has severely damaged Addis Ababa's relations with its Western partners (see below).

In this context, Russia has been a viable alternative partner for Ethiopia in times of souring relations between Addis and its Western partners, as shown by the increasingly close ties between Moscow and Addis since the eruption of the conflict in Tigray in November 2020. While the ascent to power of Abiy Ahmed in 2018 had seemingly brought the Ethiopian government closer than ever to its Western partners, the war in Tigray has severely damaged these ties. Criticizing the government's approach to the conflict, most of Ethiopia's Western backers have dramatically reduced their support for Addis, both diplomatically and in terms of material assistance. For instance, the EU has suspended around EU 90 million of budgetary support destined to the federal government, while the US has removed Ethiopia from the list of African countries benefiting from preferential access to the US market under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA).<sup>92</sup> This withdrawal of Western support has come at a time of increasing needs for the Ethiopian government, faced with multiple domestic conflicts and worsening economic conditions.

This combination of increasing needs within Ethiopia and decreasing support from Western countries has set the stage for increased Russian engagement in the country. Moscow's interests have surely contributed to the growth of such engagement, which has allowed the Russian government to make further inroads into one of the largest and most influential African countries, at the expense of some of its international competitors (chiefly the US).

Yet, the Ethiopian federal government has been arguably the main beneficiary of this partnership, which has earned Addis Ababa the support of a powerful international actor. For instance, in March 2021, Russia leveraged its diplomatic power within the

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91 Data from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 'SIPRI Arms Transfers Database', <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 18 May 2022); elaboration by the authors. This figure increases to 74% when imports from Belarus and Ukraine are added to the calculation.

92 Marks, S. 2020. 'EU suspends nearly €90M in aid to Ethiopia over internal conflict', *Politico*, 16 December, <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-commission-suspends-nearly-90-million-euros-in-aid-to-ethiopia-over-internal-conflict/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Reuters. 2022. 'U.S. cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa duty-free trade program', *Reuters*, 02 January, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/us-cuts-off-ethiopia-mali-guinea-africa-duty-free-trade-program-2022-01-01/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

UN Security Council to block a statement calling for the end of hostilities in Tigray, supporting the federal government in its position that the dispute should be settled without foreign interference.<sup>93</sup> Moscow has also adopted a position on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) that, while maintaining a degree of balance in order not to damage ties with Egypt, has ensured a relative alignment with the Ethiopian government's stance.<sup>94</sup> The signing of a military cooperation deal between Ethiopia and Russia in July 2021 has further cemented bilateral ties, providing Addis with an alternative to the declining security partnerships with Western countries.<sup>95</sup> For instance, after the suspension of military cooperation between Ethiopia and France, Russia has been seen as a potential partner supporting Addis' efforts to set up a national navy.<sup>96</sup>

Besides these international dynamics, Ethiopia's domestic specificities have also shaped the nature of Russia's engagement in the country. The presence of a relatively strong state, with an effective bureaucratic apparatus and a significant degree of control over territory and population, has meant that Moscow's engagement – much like that of Ethiopia's other international partners – has been mostly channelled through the state. Accordingly, the bulk of Russian-Ethiopian relations has been conducted at the government-to-government level, mostly in the form of weapons sales (half of Ethiopia's purchases over the last 20 years have come from Russia), military cooperation (the July 2021 deal was preceded by an April 2018 agreement including provisions for training and cooperation in the domains of peacekeeping, counterterrorism and anti-piracy), as well as diplomatic support (particularly in the context of the GERD and the Tigray conflict – see above).<sup>97</sup> These government-led ties have been also compounded by the connections between the two countries' Orthodox Churches, with religious officials repeatedly exchanging visits, at times in parallel with diplomatic and economic

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- 93 The Independent. 2021. 'Diplomats: UN fails to approve call to end Tigray violence', *The Independent*, 06 March, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/diplomats-un-fails-to-approve-call-to-end-tigray-violence-ethiopia-india-russia-ireland-china-b1813330.html> (accessed 18 May 2022); Russian News Agency. 2021. 'Ethiopia grateful to Russia for its position on Tigray crisis, Ambassador to Moscow says', Russian News Agency, 23 August, <https://tass.com/world/1329199> (accessed 18 May 2022).
- 94 Ramani, S. 2021. *Russia and the GERD: An uneasy balancing act*, Washington: Middle East Institute.
- 95 Kenyette, P. 2021. 'Ethiopia, Russia sign military cooperation agreement', op. cit.
- 96 Africa Intelligence. 2022. 'Moscow makes moves to replace France for navy training', *Africa Intelligence*, 25 March, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-and-southern-africa\\_diplomacy/2022/03/25/moscow-makes-moves-to-replace-france-for-navy-training.109763308-art](https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-and-southern-africa_diplomacy/2022/03/25/moscow-makes-moves-to-replace-france-for-navy-training.109763308-art) (accessed 18 May 2022).
- 97 Data from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 'SIPRI Arms Transfers Database', <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 18 May 2022); elaboration by the authors; Kenyette, P. 2021. 'Ethiopia, Russia sign military cooperation agreement', op. cit.; Hedenskog, J. 2018. *Russia is stepping up its military cooperation in Africa*, op. cit.

exchanges.<sup>98</sup> By contrast, non-state actors like PMCs – which in other African countries are a significant feature of Russian engagement (see below the cases of Sudan and Mali) – have been absent from the Ethiopian scene.

### 4.3 Sudan

Much like in the case of Ethiopia, Russia's engagement in Sudan has been to a large extent shaped by the specificities of Sudan's domestic context and its government's relations with other international partners. The actual dynamics of these interactions, however, have been significantly different. While Ethiopia has long managed to maintain constructive relations with its Western partners (at least until recently), Sudan's relations with the West have traditionally been fraught. During the thirty years of Omar al-Bashir's rule, for instance, Sudan was for a long time under Western sanctions – a situation that pushed the government to reach out to alternative partners (including Russia, but also China) to gain international support. Similar dynamics have taken place after Bashir's fall in 2019, as Sudanese (para)military leaders have increasingly relied on their ties with Moscow to strengthen their domestic position vis-à-vis civilian political forces, who have instead enjoyed warmer ties with Western governments.<sup>99</sup>

#### **Box 3 Historical background of the relations between the Soviet Union/ Russia and Sudan**

Diplomatic relations between Khartoum and the USSR were established immediately after Sudan's independence in 1956. Through the 1960s, bilateral relations witnessed a relatively good period, with active cooperation in the military sphere (via the provision of Soviet military equipment and training for Sudanese officers), as well as (to a somewhat lesser extent) in the fields of economic planning (e.g. technical assistance in the drafting of the 1970-74 Five Year Plan) and political relations (e.g. Soviet training for Sudanese Communist Party cadres).<sup>100</sup> The attempted coup against Jafaar Nimeiri in 1971, blamed by

98 Serbian Orthodox Heritage. 2018. 'Delegation of the Russian Orthodox Church visits Ethiopia', *Serbian Orthodox Church*, 13 March, [http://www.spc.rs/eng/delegation\\_russian\\_orthodox\\_church\\_visits\\_ethiopia](http://www.spc.rs/eng/delegation_russian_orthodox_church_visits_ethiopia) (accessed 18 May 2022); New Business Ethiopia. 2022. 'Russia opens Africa-Russia economic cooperation office in Ethiopia', *New Business Ethiopia*, 24 February, <https://newbusinessethiopia.com/economy/russia-opens-africa-russia-economic-cooperation-office-in-ethiopia/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

99 Demissie, A.A. 2021. 'Global Perspectives – Ethiopia-Russia Relations', *Wilson Center Kennan Institute and Africa Program*, available at <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/global-perspectives-ethiopia-russia-relations> (accessed 18 May 2022).

100 Global Security. 2019. 'Soviet Union and Sudan', <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/sudan/forrel-su.htm> (accessed 18 May 2022).

Nimeiri on communist-leaning officers, led to a serious deterioration in bilateral relations.<sup>101</sup>

After Moscow's disengagement from Africa in the wake of the USSR's fall, relations between Russia and Sudan picked up again in the 2000s, when Moscow shielded Bashir's government from international sanctions, and provided it with military equipment despite its increasing international isolation.<sup>102</sup> In the following years, Sudan reciprocated this diplomatic support by recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and by opening its lucrative natural resources sector to a number of Russian companies.<sup>103</sup>

Ties between Khartoum and Moscow further improved in 2017, when an embattled Bashir asked for Russia's support, while underscoring Sudan's potential to become "Russia's key to Africa".<sup>104</sup>

The support provided by Russia to Sudanese military leaders has taken several different forms. Diplomatically, Russia has shielded its partners in Khartoum from international condemnation on several occasions, including during the conflict in Darfur in the 2000s, but also more recently after the bloody repression of protests against the military in 2018-19.<sup>105</sup> Throughout the years, Russia has also continued to supply Sudan with weapons (despite the reluctance of other international actors to do so), as well as to provide Sudanese military and police officers with training.<sup>106</sup> In recent years, military

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101 Wai, D.M. 1979. 'The Sudan: domestic politics and foreign relations under Nimeiri', *African Affairs*, 78(312), 297-317.

102 Sudan Tribune. 2007. 'Russia, China and S. Africa object US, UK sanctions against Sudan', op. cit.; Boustany, N. 2007. 'New photos indicate arms flow to Darfur', *The Washington Post*, 24 August, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/08/23/AR2007082302088.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

103 Charbonneau, L., and Donath, M. 2014. 'U.N. General Assembly declares Crimea secession vote invalid', *Reuters*, 27 March, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-un-idUSBREA2Q1GA20140327> (accessed 18 May 2022).

104 Klomegah, K.K. 2018. 'Russia's key to Africa', *Modern Diplomacy*, 17 July, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2018/07/17/russias-key-to-africa> (accessed 18 May 2022); Kostelyanets, S.V., 2019. 'Russia-Sudan relations in the early 21st century', op. cit.

105 Sudan Tribune. 2007. 'Russia, China and S. Africa object US, UK sanctions against Sudan', op. cit.; Landry, C. 2019. 'China, Russia block UN sanctions on Sudan', *Yahoo News*, 5 June, <https://news.yahoo.com/un-security-council-meets-sudan-crisis-215258682.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

106 Kostelyanets, S.V., 2019. 'Russia-Sudan relations in the early 21st century', op. cit. Between 2001 and 2020, Russian weapons accounted for 47% of Sudan's arms imports (Data from: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 'SIPRI Arms Transfers Database', <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers> (accessed 18 May 2022); elaboration by the authors.

elites in Khartoum have also reportedly relied on Russian political advisors and private security personnel to repress domestic protests, as well as to discredit leaders of the civilian component of the government through disinformation campaigns.<sup>107</sup>

This support has resulted in a number of benefits for Moscow. Through its partnership with Sudan, for instance, the Russian government has managed to expand its footprint in the geostrategic Horn of Africa region (kick-starting discussions, still ongoing at the time of writing, on the opening of a naval base on the Red Sea coast), as well as to strengthen its involvement in the neighbouring CAR (for instance through Russia-brokered, Khartoum-based peace talks among CAR armed groups in 2018).<sup>108</sup> Sudan also reciprocated Russia's diplomatic support by recognizing Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>109</sup> In addition to these benefits for the government, Russian companies – including firms linked to powerful Russian businesspeople under Western sanctions – have benefited from increased access to Sudan's economy, particularly in the lucrative natural resources and energy sectors (for instance, Kush E&P and M Invest/Meroe Gold have obtained several mining concessions in Sudan, while Stroytransgaz has participated in the construction of the Port Sudan oil pipeline).<sup>110</sup>

Despite the presence of Russian interests, however, the most significant push towards the deepening of Russo-Sudanese ties has arguably come from Khartoum, as shown by the fact that some of the most notable instances of Russian support have materialized at times when Sudanese leaders faced domestic troubles and/or international isolation.

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107 Harding, L., and Burke, J. 2019. 'Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa', *The Guardian*, 11 June, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa> (accessed 18 May 2022); Leviev, R. 2019. *From Russia with Wagner: Are Russian mercenaries suppressing the Sudan protests?*, Conflict Intelligence Team; Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. 2022. *Mapping disinformation in Africa*, op. cit.

108 Al-Monitor Staff. 2022. 'Sudan remains open to naval base deal with Russia', *Al-Monitor*, 4 March, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/03/sudan-remains-open-naval-base-deal-russia> (accessed 18 May 2022); Relief Web. 2018. 'CAR armed groups conclude Russian-brokered peace meeting in Sudan', *Relief Web*, 30 August, <https://reliefweb.int/report/central-african-republic/car-armed-groups-conclude-russian-brokered-peace-meeting-sudan> (accessed 18 May 2022).

109 Charbonneau, L., and Donath, M. 2014. 'U.N. General Assembly declares Crimea secession vote invalid', *Reuters*, 27 March, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-un-idUSBREA2Q1GA20140327> (accessed 18 May 2022).

110 The engagement of M Invest has taken place through its Sudanese subsidiary Meroe (Miro) Gold. Other examples include Russian geological holding ROSGEO's elaboration of a metallogenic map of Sudan, as well as Rosatom's proposed cooperation deal on the peaceful use of atomic energy. See: Kostelyanets, S.V., 2019. 'Russia-Sudan relations in the early 21st century', op. cit.; Johnston, W. 2019. 'More than just oil and gold informing Russia decision to back Bashir', *The East African*, 12 March, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/oped/comment/Why-Russia-is-backing-Sudan-Omar-Bashir/434750-5021178-ga4fsxz/index.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

For instance, Russia's diplomatic support to Bashir at the UN first materialized at the height of the Darfur crisis, when the Sudanese government faced increased condemnation for the atrocities committed in the region.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, the more recent deepening of bilateral ties has its roots in a 2017 trip to Moscow by an embattled Bashir, who explicitly asked Russia for support against US interference.<sup>112</sup> Russia's recent engagement with Sudanese (para)military actors – including in the wake of the October 2021 coup, which has seriously strained these actors' ties with Western governments – looks like a continuation of this trend.<sup>113</sup>

In addition to these observations regarding the drivers of Russo-Sudanese ties, an analysis of Sudan's case also helps to understand how the engagement of Russian actors in Africa is shaped by the specific contexts of the countries in question. Unlike Ethiopia's strong state, the Sudanese state has traditionally struggled to exert control over the country, particularly in the resource-rich peripheries. Moreover, as a legacy of the Bashir era, security forces – not only the various branches of the official armed forces and intelligence agencies, but also paramilitary groups like the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) – have enjoyed a prominent role in the country's economy, including in the extractive industries.<sup>114</sup>

In this context, Russia's involvement has not been limited to government-to-government cooperation, but it has rather also included the involvement of para-statal and non-state actors from both countries – a feature not present in Ethiopia's case. On the Russian side, non-state, profit-seeking actors with ties to Russian political elites (e.g. the Wagner Group and mining companies like Meroe Gold) have gained an increasingly prominent role in shaping Moscow's presence in Sudan.<sup>115</sup> On the Sudanese side, the RSF – a former peripheral militia turned into a powerful paramilitary armed group – has placed itself as a key counterpart for Russia.<sup>116</sup> This trend has been particularly pronounced since the Sudanese Revolution of 2018-19: as Bashir's fall deprived

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111 Sudan Tribune. 2007. 'Russia, China and S. Africa object US, UK sanctions against Sudan', op. cit.; Boustany, N. 2007. 'New photos indicate arms flow to Darfur', op. cit.; Kostelyanets, S.V., 2019. 'Russia-Sudan relations in the early 21st century', op. cit.

112 Kostelyanets, S.V., 2019. 'Russia-Sudan relations in the early 21st century', op. cit.; Caniglia, M., and Murphy, T. 2021. 'Khartoum's autocratic enabler', op. cit.; France 24. 2017. 'Sudan's Bashir plans maiden Russia trip', *France 24*, 3 July, <https://www.france24.com/en/20170703-sudans-bashir-plans-maiden-russia-trip> (accessed 18 May 2022).

113 Reuters. 2022. 'Sudan's Hemedti seeks deeper Russia ties on Moscow visit', *Reuters*, 23 February, <https://www.reuters.com/article/sudan-russia-idAFL1N2UY0K8> (accessed 18 May 2022).

114 Gallopin, J.B., Thomas, E., Detzner, S. and De Waal, A., 2021. *Sudan's political marketplace in 2021: Public and political finance, the Juba agreement and contests*, London School of Economics.

115 Olivier, M. 2021. 'Russia/Africa', op. cit.; Marten, K. 2019. *Into Africa*, op. cit.

116 Espanol, M. 2022. 'Russia, Wagner Group expand ties with Sudan', *Al-Monitor*, 13 April, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/04/russia-wagner-group-expand-ties-sudan> (accessed 18 May 2022).

Russian actors of their main governmental counterpart, Russia's engagement has been refocused around a partnership with the RSF, as shown by the visit of the group's leader (Mohammed Hamdan Daglo, aka Hemedti) to Moscow in late February.<sup>117</sup>

#### 4.4 Mali

Mali has been a theatre of international engagement since the early 2010s. Moreover, the past 10 years have resulted in a very unstable political situation with three military coups and regime changes and a multi-level civil conflict that developed from a somewhat confined north-south problem to an extremely localized insurgency that proliferates across Malian territory.

Since the end of 2021, 'Russia's' engagement with the Malian authorities in Bamako has made headlines in the press (even though such rumours have been floating around in Bamako since the first coup in August 2020).<sup>118</sup> After an announced withdrawal of the French-led military operation 'Barkhane' in February 2021, rumours started to emerge about increased military cooperation between the Russian state and the Malian government, and the deployment of the infamous Wagner Group. In reality, Russia already enjoyed a good relationship with the Malian authorities, in part derived from the Cold War legacy and in part from overlapping interests (see Box 4).

Wagner's presence in Mali has now been firmly established, as has official military collaboration between Russia and Mali. Disagreement exists over the degree of strategic collaboration between the Wagner Group and Russia.<sup>119</sup> This section does not distinguish between both actors, but recognizes that diverse interests may be at play.

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117 Reuters. 2022. 'Sudan's Hemedti seeks deeper Russia ties on Moscow visit', op. cit.

118 Al-Jazeera. 2022. 'Russian troops deploy to Mali's Timbuktu after French exit', *Al-Jazeera*, 07 January, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/7/russian-troops-deploy-to-malis-timbuktu-after-french-exit> (accessed 18 May 2022); Risemberg, A. 2021. 'Mali's military government: Russia sends trainers, not mercenaries', *VOA News*, 28 December, <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-s-military-government-russia-sends-trainers-not-mercenaries/6372764.html> (accessed 18 May 2022); France 24. 2021. 'Russian military advisors arrive in Mali after French troop reduction', *France 24*, 07 January, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220107-russian-military-advisors-arrive-in-mali-after-french-troop-reduction> (accessed 18 May 2022).

119 Petesch, C. and Imray, G. 2022. 'Russian mercenaries are Putin's 'coercive tool' in Africa', *Associated Press*, 23 April, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-putin-technology-business-mali-d0d2c96e01d299a68e00d3a0828ba895> (accessed 18 May 2022); U.S. Department of State. 2022. 'Wagner Group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Russia's Disinformation in Africa', *U.S. Department of State*, 24 May, <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/wagner-group-yevgeniy-prigozhin-and-russias-disinformation-in-africa/> (accessed 7 June 2022).

Like the other two case studies, Russia's involvement in Mali is first and foremost driven by domestic political developments in Bamako. In August 2020, the Malian armed forces took over power from a recently elected government through a coup that followed months of mass protests triggered by an electoral crisis. In May 2021 a faction of the same military conducted a 'coup within a coup'.<sup>120</sup>

In the wake of the second coup, the West African regional bloc ECOWAS first suspended Mali, and then punished it with sanctions. The effect was that the country's economy was crippled and resentment grew among the population – a process that is still continuing.<sup>121</sup> Mali's ties with its Western partners also quickly deteriorated after the coup.<sup>122</sup> Western partners had already been increasingly disillusioned by the meagre success of counter-terrorism operations since 2012. But the situation further escalated after the coup, for reasons related to a reluctance to hand over power, increased violence against civilians and changing geopolitical alliances: Mali expelled France's ambassador; Paris announced the withdrawal of its troops from the country; the EU reduced its military cooperation with the government; and the US stripped the country of the benefits enjoyed under the AGOA.<sup>123</sup>

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120 Haidara, B. 2021. 'Inside Mali's coup within a coup', *The Conversation*, 26 May, <https://theconversation.com/inside-malis-coup-within-a-coup-161621> (accessed 18 May 2022).

121 The sanctions have had a serious effect on Mali's economy, leading not only to the worsening fiscal position of the government, but also to increased food security problems. *African Markets*. 2022. 'Moody's downgrades Mali to Caa2 from Caa1; ratings on review for further downgrade', *African Markets*, 04 February, <https://www.african-markets.com/en/news/west-africa/mali/moody-s-downgrades-mali-to-cao2-from-cao1-ratings-on-review-for-further-downgrade> (accessed 18 May 2022); Kleinfeld, P. 2022. 'Sieges, sanctions, and soaring hunger: Mali's humanitarian crisis deepens as foreign forces withdraw', *The New Humanitarian*, 21 March, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2022/03/21/Mali-crisis-Barkhane-Sieges-sanctions-hunger-Wagner> (accessed 18 May 2022); Lorgerie, P., And Diallo, T. 2022. 'Mali's workers feel the squeeze as sanctions take hold', *Reuters*, 21 February, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/malis-workers-feel-squeeze-sanctions-take-hold-2022-02-21/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Le Point. 2022. 'Les sanctions ont suscité la colère de nombreux Maliens', *Le Point*, 11 March, [https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/les-sanctions-ont-suscite-la-colere-de-nombreux-maliens-10-03-2022-2467676\\_3826.php](https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/les-sanctions-ont-suscite-la-colere-de-nombreux-maliens-10-03-2022-2467676_3826.php) (accessed 18 May 2022).

122 Bagayoko, N. 2022. 'What Went Wrong in Mali? The Future of France's Presence in the Sahel', *Institute for International Political Studies*, 7 April, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/what-went-wrong-mali-future-frances-presence-sahel-34515> (accessed 18 May 2022).

123 BBC. 2022. 'French ambassador expelled from Mali', *BBC*, 31 January, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60202343> (accessed 18 May 2022); BBC. 2022. 'Why are French troops leaving Mali, and what will it mean for the region?', *BBC*, 26 April, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-60419799> (accessed 18 May 2022); Al Jazeera. 2022. 'EU winds down military training operations in Mali', *Al Jazeera*, 12 April, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/12/eu-winds-down-military-training-operations-in-mali> (accessed 18 May 2022); Reuters. 2022. 'U.S. cuts off Ethiopia, Mali, Guinea from Africa duty-free trade program' op. cit.; Claes, J. and Schmauder, A. 2021. 'Mali: Two Coups and Two Shortcomings for a Successful Transition', *Institute for International Political Studies*, 17 December, <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/mali-two-coups-and-two-shortcomings-successful-transition-32670> (accessed 18 May 2022).



It is the deterioration of Bamako's ties with its Western partners that has created an opening for a strengthening of ties with Moscow. As relationships deteriorated, Russian actors were quick to seize the opportunity. This offered benefits to both the Russian and the Malian authorities. For Russia, there were various benefits. Diplomatically, the Russian government found in its Malian counterpart a real geopolitical ally. Mali, for example, changed its voting pattern in recent UN voting on the conflict in Ukraine (e.g. Mali voted against Russia's expulsion from the UN Human Rights Council).<sup>124</sup> Moreover, although this is still debated, the reported presence of Wagner-linked geologists might pave the way for an increased presence of Russian mining companies, with potential economic benefits for Russian actors.<sup>125</sup>

For the Malian authorities, however, Russian engagement has helped them to address their key concern: how to survive. Russia has offered partial international protection: the Russian government has been seeking to limit the pressure on Mali, for instance by blocking UN support for the sanctions imposed by ECOWAS.<sup>126</sup> Yet the key factor for the Malian regime has been to use Russian engagement to support its domestic survival in two main ways: ramping up popular support and having a loyal military unit not only to fight but also to protect the regime from inside threats.

#### **Box 4 Historical background of the relations between the Soviet Union/ Russia and Mali**

Bilateral relations between Mali and the USSR started in the 1960s, in the wake of Mali's independence from France, with the development of ties at various levels (including military, economic, technical, as well as academic).

Over the following decades, the Soviet Union provided not only training and technical assistance to rulers in Bamako, but it also supported the construction of large-scale public projects (e.g. stadiums, hospitals, higher education buildings), which today still positively shape the perceptions that Malians have about Moscow – particularly in contrast to the more negative perceptions of former colonial powers.<sup>127</sup>

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124 UN News. 2022. 'UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia from the Human Rights Council', op. cit.

125 Thompson, J., Doxsee, C., and Bermudez Jr, J.S. 2022. *Tracking the arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali*. Washington: CSIS.

126 Al Jazeera. 2022. 'Russia, China block UN support for ECOWAS sanctions on Mali', op. cit.

127 Sangaré, B. 2021. 'Mali : « La Russie inspire plus confiance que les anciennes puissances coloniales »', *Jeune Afrique*, 22 September, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1238040/politique/mali-la-russie-inspire-plus-confiance-que-les-anciennes-puissances-coloniales/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

Since the fall of the USSR in 1991, the cooperation between Moscow and Bamako has changed, with Russia's more recent engagement based less on the legacies of the past than on pragmatic choices, most notably in terms of economic opportunities and geopolitical rationales.<sup>128</sup>

Over the last ten years in particular, the two sides have strengthened their bilateral ties, most notably through an intensification of diplomatic exchanges and military cooperation agreements (in terms of both arms purchases and training).<sup>129</sup> Moreover, as compared to the Soviet period, Moscow's recent engagement in Mali has featured increasingly significant involvement by Russian companies, particularly large conglomerates with varying levels of ties to the Russian state (e.g. Gazprom, Rosneft, Rosatom, Rusal, Severstal).<sup>130</sup>

Both the Malian regime and the Russians have pushed a narrative that has framed Russian engagement as a form of liberation of the local government and population from France's neo-colonialist engagement. It is a strategy that has gone down well and paid off and it has increased the junta's popularity (and indeed popular legitimacy). One reason as to why this narrative has gone down well is that, over the years, Russia has sought to promote a pro-Russian sentiment among the Malian population.<sup>131</sup> This often builds on existing societal ties from the cold war era (see Box 4).<sup>132</sup> The consequence is that open altercations with France (but also other Western partners)

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128 Smirnova, T. 2021. 'La Russie et le coup d'État au Mali : héritage historique et logiques géopolitiques', *Bulletin Francopaix* 6(1-2), 12.

129 Global Security. 2022. 'Mali-Russia Relations', <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/africa/ml-forrel-ru.htm> (accessed 18 May 2022); Rane. 2019. *Russia, Mali: Moscow inks defence agreement with Sahel nation*, Rand Corporation; Demidova, O. 2021. 'Four military helicopters and weapons from Russia delivered to Mali', *DW*, 10 January, <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-mali-dostavleny-chetyre-voennyh-vertoletov-i-oruzhie-iz-rossii/a-59380193> (accessed 18 May 2022); Rosoboronexport. 2021. *Cooperation with Mali*.

130 Sangaré, B. 2021. 'Mali : « La Russie inspire plus confiance que les anciennes puissances coloniales »', op. cit.; Regnum. 2019. 'Malian authorities invited Russian investors to the country', *Regnum*, 22 October, <https://regnum.ru/news/economy/2755323.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

131 Le Roux, J. 2022. 'Pro-Russian Facebook assets in Mali coordinated support for Wagner Group, anti-democracy protests', *Digital Forensic Research Lab*, 17 February, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-russian-facebook-assets-in-mali-coordinated-support-for-wagner-group-anti-democracy-protests-2abaac4d87c4> (accessed 18 May 2022); Sangaré, B. and Diallo, F. 2021. 'Russia-Mali: Who is spreading Moscow's soft power in Bamako?', *The Africa Report*, 25 November, <https://www.theafricareport.com/150126/russia-mali-who-is-spreading-moscows-soft-power-in-bamako/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Svoboda, C., Matlach, P.C. and Baddorf, Z. 2021. *Russia's Activities in Africa's Information Environment (Case Studies: Mali, Central African Republic)*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence.

132 Armstrong, A.R. 2022. 'Mali's Violent, Authoritarian Turn', *The Nation*, 13 April, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/mali-massacre-russia-france/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

are beneficial to the Malian regime. Geopolitically, the importance of Russia as a partner for the junta has steadily grown and domestically it has proven to be a strategy that – so far – seems to work.

Another benefit for the Malian authorities is that the ‘withdrawal’ of Western security partners like France and the EU has allowed Russian actors to step up their cooperation with the Malian armed forces. For instance, Russian companies have continued to deliver weapons to Mali and personnel from the Wagner Group have been deployed in the country.<sup>133</sup> But while this might partly replace Western state military support in the civil war, it has effectively provided the Malian authorities with a military unit that is (for now) dependent on the Malian junta’s survival. For example, when in May 2022 another internal coup was prevented some Malian politicians stated that this “may explain why Colonel Assimi Goïta [the leader of the junta] preferred to entrust his security to Wagner [...] even within their [the junta’s] ranks, there are people who do not share their way of leading”<sup>134</sup> Russia’s military engagement therefore seems to be a lifeline for the Malian junta. In short, the case of Mali highlights how domestic circumstances are key in shaping the nature of Russia’s engagement.

What is finally striking about the case of Mali is how Russia leverages a diversity of ‘entry points’; alongside the increasing formal cooperation between Moscow and Bamako, Russia’s engagement in the country has also involved the deployment of a PMC.<sup>135</sup> This trend – which makes Mali’s case similar to that of Sudan, while different from that of Ethiopia – can once again be traced back to Mali’s domestic context. In a country characterized by weaker state capacity, Russia’s presence goes beyond government-to-government cooperation: rather, it also includes the activities of private, profit-oriented actors (like the Wagner Group) who, while working within a broad framework defined by Russia’s state interests, also have room to pursue their own private gains.

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133 Faulkner, C. M. 2022. ‘Rising instability in Mali raises fears about role of private Russian military group’, *The Conversation*, 10 January, <https://theconversation.com/rising-instability-in-mali-raises-fears-about-role-of-private-russian-military-group-174634> (accessed 18 May 2022); Hanspal, J. 2022. ‘Mali: More military equipment from Russia after backlash’, *The Africa Report*, 19 April, <https://www.theafricareport.com/195666/mali-more-military-equipment-from-russia-after-backlash/> (accessed 18 May 2022); Africa Intelligence. 2022. ‘Junta has IBK to thank for latest Russian arms shipment’, *Africa Intelligence*, 11 April, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa\\_diplomacy/2022/04/11/junta-has-ibk-to-thank-for-latest-russian-arms-shipment,109766865-art](https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_diplomacy/2022/04/11/junta-has-ibk-to-thank-for-latest-russian-arms-shipment,109766865-art) (accessed 18 May 2022).

134 Baché, D. 2022. ‘Mali: sept personnes inculpées pour atteinte à la sûreté intérieure de l’État’, *Radio France Internationale*, 17 May, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20220517-mali-sept-personnes-incipul%C3%A9es-pour-atteinte-%C3%A0-la-s%C3%BBret%C3%A9-int%C3%A9rieure-de-l-%C3%A9tat> (accessed 18 May 2022).

135 Thompson, J. et al. 2022. *Tracking the arrival of Russia’s Wagner Group in Mali*, op. cit.

## 5 After Ukraine's invasion: Rolling back or doubling down?

Less than three months after the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, it remains unclear how the current developments may impact Moscow's engagement in Africa. On the one hand, the war effort in Ukraine and the economic hardship deriving from Western sanctions have the potential to reduce Russia's capacity to project its power in distant regions such as Africa. Faced with a need for experienced combatants on the Ukrainian front and with increasingly scarce economic resources, Russian actors may opt to cut back on their military and economic footprint overseas. In the past months, for instance, there have been reports (though not always corroborated) about the redeployment of Wagner personnel from African countries (most notably the CAR and Libya) to Ukraine.<sup>136</sup> At the same time, on the economic front, Russian companies subjected to Western sanctions have reportedly found it increasingly difficult to operate across the continent.<sup>137</sup>

On the other hand, however, the war may also prompt Russia to double down on its engagement in Africa. As noted earlier, Moscow's push into Africa over the last decade has been driven, to a significant extent, by the need to find new diplomatic partners and

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136 Obaji Jr, P. 2022. 'Notorious Russian mercenaries pulled out of Africa ready for Ukraine', *The Daily Beast*, 31 January, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/wagner-group-mercenaries-pull-out-of-africa-ready-for-ukraine?ref=home?ref=home> (accessed 18 May 2022); Euronews and AP. 2022. 'Russia planning to deploy 1,000 Wagner mercenaries to eastern Ukraine, says UK's defence ministry', *Euronews*, 29 March, <https://www.euronews.com/2022/03/29/russia-planning-to-deploy-1-000-wagner-mercenaries-to-eastern-ukraine-says-uk-s-defence-mi> (accessed 18 May 2022); Al-Atrush, S., and Pitel, L. 2022. 'Russia reduces number of Syrian and Wagner troops in Libya', *Financial Times*, 28 April, <https://www.ft.com/content/88ab3d20-8a10-4ae2-a4c5-122acd6a8067> (accessed 18 May 2022); Harchaoui, J., and Lechner, J. 2022. 'How Russia's war in Ukraine affects its meddling in Africa', *Lawfare*, 1 May, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-russias-war-ukraine-affects-its-meddling-africa> (accessed 18 May 2022).

137 Africa Intelligence. 2022. 'PhosAgro, Uralchem, Eurochem: How Russian fertiliser giants cope with sanctions', *Africa Intelligence*, 21 March, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/the-continent/2022/03/21/phosagro-uralchem-eurochem-how-russian-fertiliser-giants-cope-with-sanctions,109761834-gra> (accessed 18 May 2022); Africa Intelligence. 2022. 'Bekker, Penny, Dos Santos... Russia's African partners kept at bay by war in Ukraine', *Africa Intelligence*, 25 April, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-and-southern-africa\\_business/2022/04/25/bekker-penny-dos-santos-russia-s-african-partners-kept-at-bay-by-war-in-ukraine,109780029-ge0](https://www.africaintelligence.com/eastern-and-southern-africa_business/2022/04/25/bekker-penny-dos-santos-russia-s-african-partners-kept-at-bay-by-war-in-ukraine,109780029-ge0) (accessed 18 May 2022).

economic opportunities in response to increasing tensions with Western governments. As these tensions soar in the wake of Ukraine's invasion, therefore, Russian actors may be prompted to further strengthen their relations with African countries – much like they did in the wake of previous crises in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014). Recent declarations by prominent figures from the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Russian Ministry of Economic Development and the Russian business group AfroCom (Coordinating Committee on Economic Cooperation with Africa) seem to point in this direction, signalling a shared interest by the Russian government and Russian companies in stepping up economic cooperation with African countries.<sup>138</sup>

In this context, it is important to stress that Russia's current engagement – unlike that of the Soviet Union during the Cold War – does not entail major public expenditures. On the contrary, as seen earlier, the current approach is often a source of profits for Russian companies (be they weapons exporters, state-owned conglomerates, mining companies or PMCs), as well as a useful tool for political elites to sustain their patronage networks, while also expanding Moscow's footprint abroad.

Moreover, owing to years of engagement, Russian actors operating in Africa have by now come to control a vast infrastructure complex – including mining sites, airfields, naval bases and military camps – that enables them to circumvent (some of) the sanctions imposed on them.<sup>139</sup> Over the last few years, for instance, Russia's involvement in Sudan's gold mining sector has been reportedly leveraged to shore up Moscow's gold reserves, a move aimed at sanction-proofing Russia's economy.<sup>140</sup> Given such circumstances, the imposition of new sanctions over the last months may further increase the incentives for Russian actors to double down on their engagement in Africa, so as to bolster their capacity to circumvent restrictive measures.

Overall, therefore, an analysis of recent patterns in and drivers of Russian involvement in Africa suggests that the invasion of Ukraine and related developments are unlikely to lead to a reduction of Moscow's engagement in the continent – on the contrary, they may well give it a further boost.

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138 Klomegah, K. K. 2022. 'Russia turns to Africa for trade amid US, EU Sanctions', *Modern Diplomacy*, 24 March, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2022/03/24/russia-turns-to-africa-for-trade-amid-us-eu-sanctions/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

139 Harchaoui, J., and Lechner, J. 2022. 'How Russia's war in Ukraine affects its meddling in Africa', op. cit.

140 Collins, T. 2022. 'How Putin prepared for sanctions with tonnes of African gold', op. cit.; Marks, S. and Alamin, M. 2022. 'How a sanctioned Russian company gained access to Sudan's gold', *Bloomberg*, 30 April, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-04-30/how-a-sanctioned-russian-company-gained-access-to-sudan-s-gold> (accessed 18 May 2022); Sudan Tribune. 2022. 'Sudan denies reports about alleged role in Russian gold reserves', *Sudan Tribune*, 11 March, <https://sudantribune.com/article256257/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

# 6 Conclusion and recommendations

## 6.1 Findings

Russia is strengthening its engagement across the African continent, and this trend can create a number of challenges for policymakers in the EU and its member states. In countries where the footprint of Russian actors is on the rise, which are the EU/MS interests that are threatened? Should EU/MS governments seek to counter Russian influence? If so, by which means? To answer these questions, this report looks at Russia's engagement in Africa, reaching three main conclusions.

First, Moscow's engagement with Africa has so far remained limited as compared to that of other global players, particularly in the economic domain. The current level of (media) attention devoted to Russia's role in Africa is thus not supported by sufficient evidence of its actual engagement in the continent. At the same time, however, the growth of Russia's presence is a real trend.

Second, Russian actors are guided by a rather loose strategy when it comes to Africa. The Russian state has some interests that act as a broad framework. However, the actual engagement is carried out not only by state actors, but also by state-backed conglomerates and politically connected private businesses. These latter actors have their own specific interests, which are not always fully aligned with those of the Russian state. While state actors are often driven by geopolitical considerations, Russian companies are more interested in economic opportunities.

Third, Russia's engagement in African countries is significantly shaped by the different national contexts and by the interests of African governments. For instance, in a strong state like Ethiopia, Russia's engagement takes place exclusively at the governmental level. By contrast, in Sudan and Mali (contexts with weaker state structures), other Russian actors like PMCs and private businesses are involved. Yet, in all three cases, Moscow's presence tends to grow when relations between African governments and their international partners (especially in the West) deteriorate, often in the wake of authoritarian takeovers. This shows the opportunistic nature of Russia's engagement, as well as the complex trade-offs faced by EU/MS governments when engaging with African governments.

## 6.2 Policy recommendations

The EU and several of its member states are currently struggling to rethink their engagement with Africa, including how to respond to Russia's growing presence on the continent. This presence is currently a much-debated concern, particularly given the growing tensions between Russia and the West after Moscow's invasion of Ukraine. This report's analysis can form the basis on which European policymakers can (re)think their response to Russia's growing Africa footprint. In particular, the report offers four main recommendations.

### 1 Prevention is better than cure: Strengthen the EU/MS' own relations with African partners

Strategies focused on countering Russia's presence when it arises are unlikely to be effective. So far, it is clear that EU/MS attempts to counter such a presence have not led to any Russian disengagement. By contrast, they have sometimes entrenched it – for instance in Mali, where the military authorities have grown increasingly dependent on Russia after the detachment from France and the EU.

Instead, EU/MS governments should seek to prevent Russia's influence from arising in the first place. This can be best achieved by strengthening the EU/MS' own engagement with African countries, particularly in cases where the interests and norms of EU/MS governments overlap with those of their African counterparts.

Currently, the Europe-Africa partnership faces many hurdles. For example, despite a joint push to move towards a 'partnership of equals', unequal power dynamics still give the European side an edge on defining the agenda for the Europe-Africa partnership.<sup>141</sup> In addition, significant imbalances in trade and investment patterns persist: the bulk of European investments in Africa focus on low value-adding industries, raw materials dominate Africa's exports to Europe, and EU subsidies and non-tariff barriers create disadvantages for African companies, particularly in critical sectors such as agriculture.<sup>142</sup>

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141 Kaba, M. 2022. 'What a True Partnership of Equals Would Mean for the European Union and African Union', *Center for Global Development*, 15 February, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/what-true-partnership-equals-would-mean-european-union-and-african-union> (accessed 18 May 2022).

142 Moore, W.G. and Eguegu, O. 2022. 'EU-Africa Relations: Delivering on Promises Past', *Center for Global Development*, 14 February, <https://cgdev.org/blog/eu-africa-relations-delivering-promises-past> (accessed 18 May 2022); Kappel, R. 2020. *Africa-Europe Economic Cooperation: Using the Opportunity for Reorientation*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Brussels/Berlin.

Addressing some of these imbalances may go a long way to strengthening the partnership between EU/MS governments and their African counterparts, offering them a fair and attractive model for engagement. This, in turn, could be the best bulwark against the growing influence of Russian actors, denying them cheap entry points on the continent.

## **2 When prevention is hard: Look beyond Russia's presence**

Adopting a preventive strategy may be difficult at times, most notably when EU/MS governments have to deal with uncomfortable partners, such as authoritarian governments or questionable security partners. In these cases, European policymakers may face tensions between not wanting to support these governments, but being enticed to do so to safeguard certain interests (e.g. addressing migration, ensuring market access, countering terrorism) and to avoid pushing these countries towards geopolitical competitors such as Russia.

When facing such trade-offs, it is important to recognize that Russia's presence is often more of a symptom than a cause of these tensions. In various cases, tensions surrounding Russia's presence have just laid bare structural tensions in the EU/MS' relations with African partners.

In Mali, for instance, Moscow's footprint has grown in a context of souring relations with Western partners in the wake of years of unsuccessful stabilization efforts. The case of Burkina Faso may also soon become a relevant one in this regard. In January 2022, the military seized power in a coup that has been openly condemned by European governments. Recently, there have been reports of a potential deepening of ties between Burkina Faso and Russia, spurring debates among European policymakers on how to react. Yet, like in Mali, the key challenges faced by EU/MS governments in their interaction with the new Burkinabe authorities go well beyond Russia. Rather, they concern, for instance, how to pursue effective stabilization efforts in the broader Sahel region amidst a democratic backsliding.

It is thus important that decisions on engagement with uncomfortable partners are based on a comprehensive understanding of EU/MS interests and norms, rather than on Russia's (potential) presence. The outcome of these decisions may then be varied. At times, European states may decide to uphold their engagement with the government (e.g. as done in Egypt, despite Cairo's security and energy cooperation with Russia).

At other times, they may reduce or halt cooperation with the government (e.g. as in Mali). In such cases, the EU might opt to support non-governmental actors more in line with EU/MS interests and norms (e.g. civil society, private sector actors, traditional authorities, etc. – to be determined according to the specific context). This could help



EU/MS governments to maintain a presence in the country and sow the seeds for future cooperation once the circumstances improve.

### **3 When prevention fails: Ground responses in realistic assessments of Russia's presence**

At times, when preventive strategies are not successful, EU/MS governments have to face Russia's increased presence in some countries. In these cases, it is important that policymakers ground their policy response in a thorough assessment of Russia's engagement.

Policymakers should rely on realistic, evidence-based, context-specific assessments of Russia's presence and its impact on EU/MS interests. As polarization grows in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this may not be easy. Dominant media narratives are often based on sensationalistic analyses that overplay the extent of Moscow's engagement and oversimplify its nature.<sup>143</sup> Yet, countering Russian presence without soundly understanding its driving forces might in fact harm European interests.

In some cases, Russia's presence hardly threatens European interests, or it is partly a symptom of broader tensions between EU/MS governments and their African partners. An excessive focus on countering Russia may in these circumstances be counterproductive. In Mali, for instance, Russian influence has been for a large part determined by a regime under threat, which has used Russian engagement to prop up popular support. In this context, the EU/MS' focus on Moscow's presence has allowed the Malian regime to pick a fight with the West and increase its domestic backing by riding on anti-Western and anti-colonial sentiment. Moreover, the EU/MS' attempts to counter Russia have pushed the Malian government into a corner, further increasing its dependency on Russia.<sup>144</sup> An over-reaction to the Russian presence has thus harmed European interests.

In other cases, underestimating the dangers of Russia's presence can be dangerous, as Moscow's presence does have the potential to threaten European interests in Africa. In Sudan, for instance, Russian actors have supported a kleptocratic governance

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143 For a critique of this kind of analyses, see: Thurston, A. 2022. 'Four Recent Pieces on Russia in Africa/ The Sahel', *Sahel Blog*, 3 May, <https://sahelblog.wordpress.com/2022/05/03/four-recent-pieces-on-russia-in-africa-the-sahel/> (accessed 18 May 2022).

144 On Mali, for instance, see: Lebovich, A. 2021. 'Russia, Wagner Group, and Mali: How European fears weaken European policy', *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 2 December, <https://ecfr.eu/article/russia-wagner-group-and-mali-how-european-fears-weaken-european-policy/> (accessed 18 May 2022). Similar dynamics apply to the CAR – see Lechner, J. 2021. 'To counter Russia in Africa, America should rethink its own role', op. cit.

structure and the proliferation of illicit economic activities (e.g. gold smuggling), thus undermining the long-term stability of the country.<sup>145</sup> In this context, EU/MS governments may work with relevant Sudanese stakeholders to counterbalance this negative influence, for instance by collecting information to expose illicit activities. Crucially, any response should be tailored to the specific context and the nature of Russia's engagement.

#### **4 Leverage amid multipolarity: Improve coordination with European businesses in Africa**

Russia's growing influence is symptomatic of the increasingly multipolar nature of the international system. Recent years have witnessed a stark rise in the involvement of various external actors across the African continent.<sup>146</sup> This has increased the availability of external support for African political elites, thus strengthening their bargaining power. In this context, African governments can now push more strongly for policies that do not necessarily align with those of their EU/MS partners, and resist those that they do not like, as they know that there are other alternatives. EU/MS governments thus face increased competition from other foreign governments.

This competition often plays out in (geo)economic terms, as external actors seek to gain favour with African governments by providing them with economic opportunities. Many of these actors (including Russia) routinely leverage the presence of their country's businesses (often state-owned or state-backed enterprises) as part of their involvement in Africa. EU/MS policymakers may obtain some inspiration from this strategy.

To strengthen their leverage, EU/MS governments should improve their coordination with European private sector actors engaged in Africa. For instance, EU/MS governments could seek to sponsor favourable market conditions for European businesses active on the continent and incentivize particular market behaviour (e.g. sponsoring responsible and sustainable entrepreneurship or seeking access to critical resources). Businesses, in turn, could commit to upholding European norms and values or seek to invest in critical infrastructures.

This strategy will require a number of thorny issues concerning state-market relations to be dealt with. European businesses active in Africa generally do not have such close ties to their home governments; rather, they follow their own business interests and

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145 Caniglia, M., and Murphy, T. 2021. 'Khartoum's autocratic enabler', op. cit.

146 Ursu, A.E., and van den Berg, W. *China and the EU in the Horn of Africa: Competition and Cooperation?*, CRU Policy Brief, The Hague: Clingendael; Lacher, W. 2022. *African Conflicts amid multipolarity: Implications of a changing actor landscape*, Megatrends Africa.

seek profits in return. However, as more state-linked businesses from other countries become involved in Africa, European companies may also be increasingly drawn into the challenges of a more multipolar world order. Increasing coordination with their home governments may help businesses to navigate through these challenges, while also resulting in a more strategic engagement by EU/MS actors in the continent.

Overall, intelligent and thoughtful engagement based on EU/MS interests and norms may well be the best antidote against the influence of Russia, as well as that of any other geopolitical actor.