



# GLOBAL INITIATIVE

AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL  
ORGANIZED CRIME



# THE GREY ZONE

Russia's military, mercenary  
and criminal engagement in Africa

JULIA STANYARD | THIERRY VIRCOULON | JULIAN RADEMEYER

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February 2023

The opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the Hanns Seidel Foundation.



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# ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AFRIC</b>	Association for Free Research and International Cooperation
<b>ANC</b>	African National Congress
<b>BEAC</b>	Bank of Central African States
<b>CAR</b>	Central African Republic
<b>COSI</b>	Officers Union for International Security
<b>CPC</b>	Coalition of Patriots for Change (Central African Republic)
<b>DNGM</b>	National Directorate of Mines (Mali)
<b>FACA</b>	Central African Armed Forces
<b>FAMa</b>	Malian Armed Forces
<b>FARC</b>	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
<b>FZNC</b>	Foundation for National Values Protection
<b>GNA</b>	Government of National Accord (Libya)
<b>GU</b>	Russia's Main Intelligence Directorate (formerly GRU)
<b>IASD</b>	International Agency of Sovereign Development
<b>IMF</b>	International Monetary Fund
<b>LAAF</b>	Libyan Arab Armed Forces
<b>LDPR</b>	Liberal Democratic Party of Russia
<b>MINUSCA</b>	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic
<b>MINUSMA</b>	UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
<b>NAMI</b>	New African Manganese Investments
<b>NOC</b>	National Oil Corporation (Libya)
<b>PMC</b>	Private military company
<b>RSF</b>	Rapid Support Forces (Sudan)
<b>SAPS</b>	South African Police Service
<b>SIPRI</b>	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
<b>UMK</b>	United Manganese of Kalahari
<b>UPC</b>	Union for Peace in the Central African Republic




A Russian-made MI-17 helicopter flies over a ministerial convoy on the road between Boali and Bangui, CAR, January 2021.  
© Florent Vergnes/AFP via Getty Images



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sudanese government Russian-built attack helicopter seen at the airport in al-Fashir, the capital of North Darfur state, in July 2006. © Karl Maier/Bloomberg via Getty Images





**T**he Wagner Group has rapidly become the most influential form of Russian engagement in Africa today. Principally a private military company – the group is a supplier of mercenary troops – it also comprises a network of political influence operations and economic entities such as mining companies. Controlled by a historically close ally of Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner has a seemingly mutually beneficial relationship with the Russian state.

The group has been accused of using whatever means necessary, including criminal activity, to achieve its aims: from indiscriminate use of violence against civilians in its military engagements, to disinformation campaigns and election-rigging to industrial-scale smuggling of natural resources, like gold and diamonds. The group operates in the grey zone, spanning both legal and illegal economies. In late January 2023, the US government designated Wagner as a ‘transnational criminal organization’, allowing for wider sanctions against Wagner and its enablers.

The Wagner Group is unique as an organization in the breadth, scale and boldness of its activities. However, as this report aims to show, Wagner did not emerge in a vacuum. The group’s activities and characteristics reflect broader trends in the evolution of Russia’s oligarchs and organized crime groups, their respective relationships with the Russian state and their activities in Africa.

Organized crime groups have long played a powerful role in Russia’s political landscape. Over decades, the characteristics of Russian organized crime have evolved from its violent origins into a more sophisticated form of criminality that is embedded within the legal economy. Wagner (with its opaque network of companies and organizations that constitute the group, and its blend of legal and illegal activities) employs strategies that reflect the latter in its operations.

Many Russian oligarchs and businesspeople with close ties to the Kremlin have been accused by Western countries of acting in the interests of the Russian state overseas, beyond merely pursuing their own interests, in a close relationship between business and politics. The Wagner Group exemplifies this, as many Wagner activities align with the aims of Russian foreign policy, in promoting Russian influence abroad and displacing Western political interests.

Following the invasion of Ukraine, Africa is becoming more strategically important to Russia, both economically and politically, as Russia is isolated by Western sanctions. These sanctions are also having a disruptive effect on Russian business interests in Africa. The political influence that Wagner wields – through the package

of services it offers to autocratic leaders – is therefore an important tool for Russia in promoting its economic and political interests in Africa.

This report draws on research focused on the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Cameroon, Mali, Madagascar and Libya conducted since July 2022, as well as other sources from across the continent. It is also based on a range of open-source material and literature on Wagner and the evolution of Russian criminal and business interests in Africa. This forms the basis of the case studies and overarching analysis. Please refer to the body of the report for all sources of information that underly the claims made here.

## Wagner's strategy in Africa

Since its first documented military engagement in Africa, in late 2017, Wagner has expanded aggressively. It has deployed troops to five African countries (to date), while groups linked to Prigozhin have been present in some capacity (either military, economic or political) in over a dozen African countries.

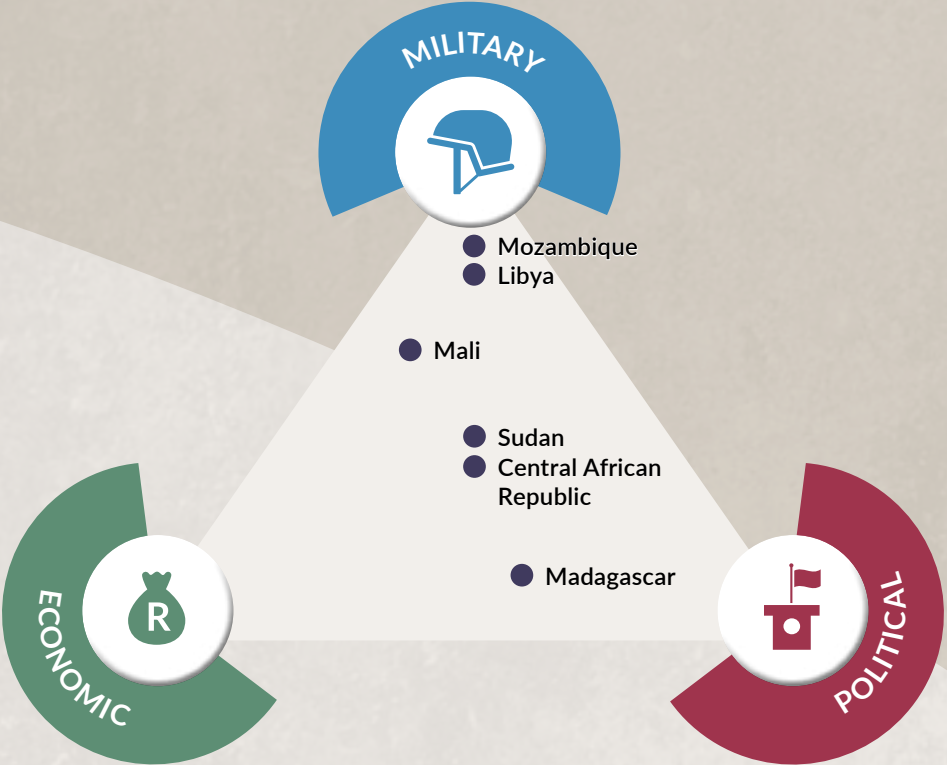
While some Wagner troops – in CAR and, reportedly, Libya – have been drawn away from deployment in Africa to shore up Russia's faltering efforts in Ukraine, this seemingly has not stopped Wagner from maintaining its military deployment in Mali (its newest theatre of military operations), CAR, Sudan and Libya, and making overtures to other African nations, such as Burkina Faso.

Wagner's public profile changed dramatically in 2022. Until recently, Russian leadership had denied Wagner's very existence, and Wagner's African partners have likewise kept the group's operations secretive, often denying the presence of Wagner troops in their countries. However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine thrust Wagner into the spotlight. Prigozhin – who until mid-2022 had denied any link to Wagner – publicly acknowledged founding the group, which is now a registered legal entity headquartered in St Petersburg. Wagner's transition from a shadowy, deniable organization to being a central public presence in Russia's military engagements overseas seems now to be complete.

Wagner operates in Africa in three main strategic areas through the interlinked military, economic and political entities that form the group:

- **Mercenary activities:** Presence of Wagner troops has been documented in Mali, Sudan, CAR, Libya and (formerly) Mozambique. These military interventions have largely been in the service of weakened autocratic governments seeking support in fighting insurgencies, rebel groups or civil wars, and have (in the case of Mali and CAR in particular) displaced former colonial powers, such as France, as these countries' primary military partners.
- **Political strategy, advice and influence:** Wagner has engaged politically in a greater number of countries in Africa than it has militarily. It has offered political strategy and advice for leaders engaging with Wagner; conducted politically biased election monitoring missions; run political influence and disinformation campaigns via social media; and interfered in elections.
- **Commercial, grey market and illicit activities:** A network of companies – primarily mining entities – linked to Wagner have also pursued commercial interests in countries where Wagner has provided military or political support. In some instances, access to extractive resources has been a quid pro quo arrangement with African governments in return for Wagner's provision of mercenary support.

The degree to which Wagner engages in each of these areas varies from country to country (as visualized in Figure 1): whereas some are more purely military engagements, others are limited to political and commercial roles.



**FIGURE 1** Spectrum of Wagner’s intervention in African countries.

Common across Wagner’s engagements in Africa, however, is the fact that to achieve its ultimate aims of profit and expanding Russian influence overseas, the organization has been accused of using any means necessary, including the exploitation of legal grey areas and engaging in criminal activity. In its operations in Africa, the group stands accused of the following abuses:

- Wagner mercenaries have allegedly perpetrated grave human rights abuses and violations of humanitarian law, including torture and execution of civilians.
  - Wagner-linked companies have been accused of illegally exploiting mineral resources and of gold smuggling.
  - Military operations and arms imports from Wagner to Africa have been conducted in violation of UN sanctions regimes.
  - Political organizations linked to Wagner have been accused of illegally interfering in overseas elections and spreading disinformation.
  - As a mercenary organization, the group operates in a legal grey zone.
- Despite Wagner’s prominent profile, private military companies are not legal under Russian law.

## Wagner and Russian organized crime in Africa

The Wagner Group – as it is today – can be compared to the characteristics of Russian organized crime and its activities overseas.

The literature documenting Russian organized crime has described how it has evolved significantly over the past three decades, amid changing economic and political conditions within Russia and a changing relationship between organized crime and the state. This evolution has influenced how Russian organized crime has developed a footprint overseas, including in Africa.

Organized crime expanded aggressively in Russia following the fall of the Soviet Union. As state assets were privatized and the weakened Russian state lacked the resources to effectively enforce order, criminality and violence exploded. Many of today's oligarchs made their fortunes in this violent period.

However, under the administration of Putin, the relationship between organized crime, oligarchs and the state shifted. Organized crime groups became more subordinate and controlled by the state. At the same time, the prevailing model of Russian organized crime shifted, from one characterized by violent enforcers of criminal control to a model of 'criminal businessmen' – one that is much more embedded in the legal economy.

Russian criminal networks have a global footprint. Their major role internationally is as 'service providers' to the world's criminal economy – providing illicit goods such as firearms, and illicit services – and as criminal entrepreneurs, rather than taking over territories as mafia groups in their own right abroad. In some instances, the Kremlin has made use of criminal networks to pursue its interests overseas.

We can see these characteristics reflected in Africa. While some individuals in the older model of 'violent entrepreneurs' seen in post-Soviet era did appear on the continent, particularly in South Africa, in the 1990s, primarily in the years since the Russian criminal footprint has been stamped by entrepreneurial individuals rather than wholesale transplantation of mafia-style groups. This includes notorious arms trafficker Viktor Bout and cocaine smuggler Konstantin Yaroshenko, both of whom were recently returned to Russia from prison in the United States as part of prisoner-exchange deals. Other prominent Russian criminal entrepreneurs have also operated in Kenya.

There are also other sources of Russian-linked illicit flows to Africa. During this research, the GI-TOC obtained evidence of Russian state-produced arms linked to state arms exporter Rosoboronexport being transported to South Sudan in violation of sanctions regimes, via Kenya and Uganda.

## Russian business and political interests in Africa

Much in the same way that Russian organized crime has evolved in its relationship with the Russian state over the past three decades, so has the relationship between Russia's business sector and the state. During Putin's administration, oligarchs and other politically linked businesspeople have become more dependent on the state to maintain power and wealth. This has led to supposedly private business interests becoming tools of Russian foreign policy.

The Wagner Group can be seen as an extreme example of an ostensibly private entity being utilized (or in this case quite literally weaponized) to further the foreign policy aims of the Kremlin. Some oligarchs whose business interests lie in Africa – such as Oleg Deripaska and Konstantin Malofeyev – have also been accused of (and placed under Western sanctions for) operating on behalf of the Kremlin.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, sanctions imposed by Western countries against Russian financial institutions, Russian state-owned businesses and Russian businesspeople who are perceived as working in the interests of the Putin regime have been wide-ranging. The sanctions are having an impact on how Russian-linked business interests operate in Africa. Broad sanctions on Russian financial institutions – including their suspension from international payment systems such as SWIFT – are disrupting a significant part of Russian trade relations with Africa, as the vast majority of Africa's international trade (including to Russia) is conducted in dollars or euros. Sanctions on individuals and businesses have forced many to search for alternative routes of export and means of doing business.

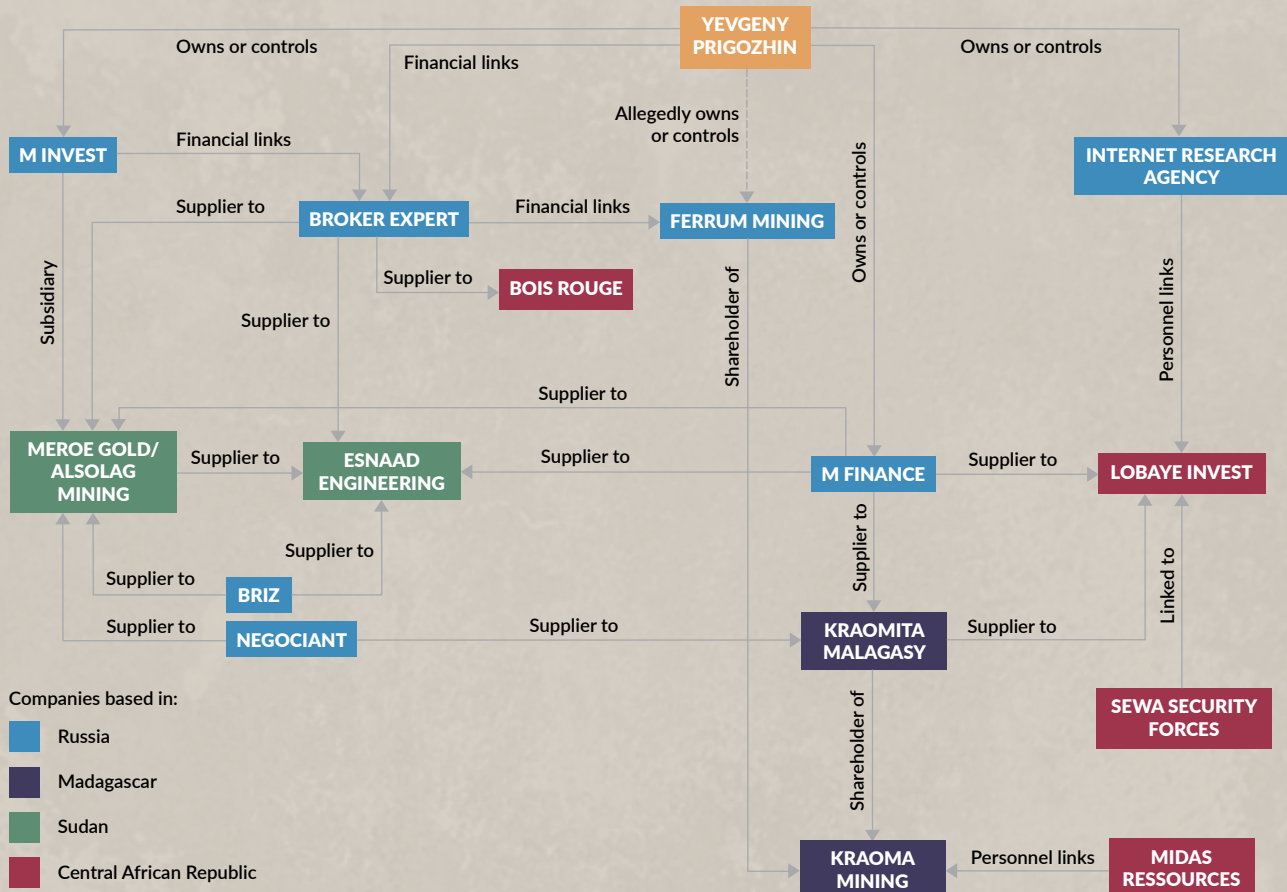
In response, Russia is exerting political influence in Africa to encourage shifts towards ways of doing business that can bypass sanctions. Wagner plays a central role in furthering this political influence. The group's role in illicit economies can also be seen as a response to Western sanctions in finding alternative routes for shipping resources to Russia.

### Case studies: Wagner's operations in Africa

The country case studies presented here describe and analyze Wagner's activities in Africa and situate its activities in each country within the tripartite model of Wagner's strategy outlined above.

#### Wagner's closest state partnerships: CAR and Sudan

In the CAR and Sudan, Wagner entities have embedded themselves deeply, developing significant political influence, extensive commercial interests and a mercenary role.



**FIGURE 2** Wagner Group corporate structures.

NOTE: The information contained in these graphics has been drawn from a variety of sources, including commercial data, news reports, NGO research and governmental resources identifying sanctioned entities. As such, these graphics are only intended to demonstrate connections between what appear to be interrelated persons and entities, based on information that is available in the public domain. As such, the identification of any particular party or person is not intended to imply any wrongdoing on the part of any such identified party or entity. More comprehensive descriptions are contained in the body of the report.

CAR is the most developed example of the Wagner business model in Africa, to the point where its interventions could be described as state capture. In exchange for access to natural resources – principally diamonds and gold – Wagner has provided President Faustin Archange-Touadéra with military and political support, which has proven pivotal in sustaining his embattled presidency against an onslaught of rebel groups. The military dependence of the CAR administration on Wagner has translated into a very influential political role for the mercenary organization.

Wagner has developed a huge footprint in the CAR economy through companies linked to Prigozhin, including Lobaye Invest, Midas Ressources and Bois Rouge, whose most significant operations are in the mining sector and logging. These companies have been granted access to natural resources by the CAR government, often expropriating

existing rights granted to other companies. Wagner troops have provided the muscle necessary to defend these economic interests.

Wagner has likewise developed an economic powerhouse in Sudan through cooperation with the country’s military elite. The group has maintained a military presence in Sudan since late 2017. Unlike the diversified economic interests seen in CAR, in Sudan Wagner-linked companies have been concentrated in the gold sector. Wagner has leveraged relationships with members of Sudan’s military to profit from mining concessions (through the Prigozhin-linked companies M Invest and Meroe Gold) and large-scale gold smuggling. As seen in CAR, Wagner has also provided strategic political support. Disinformation campaigns targeting Sudanese social media users have been a consistent part of their playbook since 2017.

## **Primarily mercenary engagement: Mozambique, Mali and Libya**

Wagner's involvement in Mozambique, Mali and Libya has been primarily military. Unlike their engagement in CAR or Sudan, the mercenary group has not – for various reasons – developed the same level of economic engagement or political influence. In Mozambique, Wagner troops suffered an ignominious defeat and withdrew mere months after their arrival. In Libya, while Wagner has had a robust presence since 2019, factors in Libya's fractured political landscape and the nature of its resources have prevented Wagner from developing a widespread economic footprint. In Mali, Wagner's intervention is still in its early stages, and while it is likely that the group is negotiating access to the country's mining resources (as seen in Sudan and CAR) its control over mining sites has not been confirmed.

## **Political and economic engagement: Madagascar and elsewhere**

While Wagner has engaged militarily in five African countries, its political operations cover a far larger segment of the continent. The techniques used by Wagner-linked political groups include online disinformation and influence campaigns conducted on social media, sometimes used to amplify Wagner-supported media outlets. As discussed above, these techniques have been widely used in Sudan and CAR. Other techniques include using politically biased election observation groups to promote pro-Kremlin influence.

Madagascar is a key example of where such political strategies appear to have been deployed by Wagner to leverage economic gain. As was widely reported at the time, a group of Russian political strategists descended on Madagascar offering funding for candidates during the 2018 presidential election campaign. These strategists were allegedly financed by Prigozhin and sought to promote their chosen candidates in return for access to mining resources. Madagascar is now looking ahead to its next presidential elections in 2023. Some sources suggest that Wagner operatives are again seeking to support candidates in the upcoming election.

## **New frontiers and logistical corridors: Burkina Faso, Kenya and Cameroon**

Wagner's influence extends beyond the countries where they have established military, economic and political operations. During 2022, some signs emerged that several other African countries – such as Burkina Faso – are looking to engage more closely with Russia, and Wagner has made overtures to these countries. Other countries appear to play a role within the Wagner ecosystem as logistics and transport hubs to support operations in other countries. Douala, Cameroon, has been identified as such a hub, and Nairobi appears to play a similar role. Our research in Cameroon suggests that it is not only being used by Wagner as a logistical hub, but is also a potential target country for military and economic engagement in future. Some early-warning signs, which were precursors to Wagner's intervention in places like Sudan and CAR, can now be detected further afield, which could indicate a growing Russian influence leading to eventual mercenary deployment.

## Conclusion and recommendations

In just a few years, Wagner has become the major means of engagement between Russia and Africa, and the group is an example of where crime, business and politics converge in Russia's projection into Africa. The increasing footprint of the group is just one, albeit highly significant, part of increasing foreign policy engagement in Africa by Russia.

As this paper aims to show, some of the characteristics of Wagner – through its role within both licit and illicit economies, its operations in the military and security space, and links with Russian politics – are similar to those of Russian criminal networks that have engaged in Africa in previous decades. The US designation of Wagner as a transnational criminal organization appears to be an accurate characterization of how Wagner operates around the world.

Similarly, as the case studies demonstrate, the Wagner Group and Prigozhin as its leader are a personification of the symbiotic relationship between Russia's politically linked businesspeople and the state. In its operations in CAR, in particular, the diplomatic and military engagement of the Russian state and the operations of the Wagner Group appear to have worked in lockstep.

Looking ahead, it appears that Wagner is looking to expand into new territories in Africa, even as some of its troops have been drawn into supporting Russia's increasingly long-term war in Ukraine. Considering the corrosive effect that Wagner's operations are having on human rights, democracy and the rule of law, this is a considerable risk to Africa's future security.

Considering this, we make the following recommendations:

- Western countries should review current sanctioning approaches relating to the Wagner Group to ensure all available tools are being used. Sanctions regimes aimed at reducing transnational organized crime, human rights abuses and corruption can be used against Wagner and its facilitators in Africa.
- Western countries should strengthen their relationships with African partner countries to counteract the Wagner Group's growing presence and, more broadly, Russia's growing malign political influence on the continent. This should be particularly targeted at countries that are deemed likely to engage in Wagner either politically or militarily in the near future. Western countries may also consider closer cooperation with countries through which Wagner has logistical supply routes, to encourage the implementation of sanctions against Wagner facilitators.
- The Wagner Group's strategy in Africa is threefold, encompassing military operations, political strategy and economic projects. In addition to disrupting Wagner's economic activity through targeted sanctions, the international community should aim to counter the disinformation narratives promoted by Wagner-linked political groups.
- Civil society organizations and investigative journalism groups have been some of the most influential sources documenting abuses and criminal activity perpetrated by the Wagner Group. However, they often do so at great personal risk. The international community should support, protect and empower civil society organizations to continue this vital work.



- Banks and financial institutions should be proactive in their due diligence, identifying and freezing accounts linked to sanctioned entities, and conducting enhanced security checks on individuals and entities operating in the regions and sectors where Wagner is known to be active, to ensure they are not exposing themselves to the risk of money laundering, corruption and sanctions evasion. Companies active in sectors such as gold and diamond trading, which operate in countries with a Wagner presence, should also take stringent due diligence approaches to ensure that goods and finance from Wagner-linked companies do not flow into international markets.
- In October 2021, a group of UN experts called on the CAR government to end their relationship with the Wagner Group, based on the group's 'systemic and grave human rights and international humanitarian law violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances and summary execution ...'. Since this pattern of behaviour has not only continued unabated but has also been more recently replicated in other countries, particularly Mali, we would echo this recommendation and extend it to all African governments with a military relationship with the Wagner Group, even if it is unlikely that these governments will disengage from their Wagner partners. Aside from disengaging with Wagner, these governments should investigate allegations of human rights abuses and criminal activity by Wagner troops and ensure accountability for any proven abuses. Other African countries should, through diplomatic channels, encourage these governments to disengage with Wagner and promote investigations and accountability. Other countries should, through diplomatic channels, encourage investigations into Wagner's activity within the context of wider efforts to support human rights and the rule of law.
- UN bodies should explore all available options to prevent Wagner's criminal activities and human rights abuses. The UN stabilization missions in Mali and CAR (MINUSMA and MINUSCA) should do all within their mandates to document Wagner's violations of international law and prevent them from posing a threat to civilians. The UN Working Group on Mercenaries has made statements denouncing Wagner's activities: further investigations and fact-finding by this working group could provide a catalyst for international action against the Wagner Group.



# INTRODUCTION

Visitors wearing military camouflage stand at the entrance of the 'PMC Wagner Centre' in St Petersburg, opened by Yevgeny Prigozhin in November 2022. © Olga Maltseva/AFP via Getty Images



**R**ussian private military company (PMC) the Wagner Group has become notorious internationally for the high-profile role its troops have played in Russia's invasion of Ukraine. However, the group's operations are global in scope. Wagner has fast become one of the most prominent forms of Russian influence in Africa, since its first documented military engagement on the continent in late 2017, as an ever-increasing body of evidence shows. Controlled by a historically close ally of President Vladimir Putin, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner is ostensibly a private enterprise. Yet the group also appears to have a mutually beneficial relationship with the Russian state, as its profit-making aims often align with promoting Russian state interests in Africa.

The group offers a package of services that would appeal to autocratic leaders: mercenary troops who can help ensure territorial control and political strategists who can manipulate and shape public debate through the use of social media and, at times, disinformation. In return, Wagner seeks commercial gain, not just in cash but in access to natural resources, particularly in mining. The group has expanded rapidly across Africa and now holds interests in diverse sectors.

Wagner has been accused of using whatever means necessary – including criminal activity on a vast scale – to achieve its apparent aims of commercial gain and furthering Russian influence. International NGOs and the media have levelled a variety of accusations at the group: from the indiscriminate use of violence against civilians in its military engagements to disinformation campaigns, election-rigging and industrial-scale smuggling of natural resources. In late January 2023, the US government took the unusual step of designating Wagner a 'transnational criminal organization' – a move that will allow for wider sanctions against Wagner and its enablers.



**Yevgeny Prigozhin, nicknamed 'Putin's chef' because his company Concord has catered for the Kremlin, is a historically close ally of President Vladimir Putin. Prigozhin controls the mercenary Wagner Group.** © Alexey Druzhinin/Sputnik/AFP via Getty Images

Wagner operates in 'the grey zone': the ambiguous space spanning from out-and-out organized criminal activity, covert and exploitative business deals, and corrupt bargaining to activities that may present themselves as legal or legitimate. 'The Grey Zone' is also, coincidentally, the name of an anonymously run channel on the messaging service Telegram thought to be closely linked to Wagner, which shares updates, news and propaganda linked to the mercenary group. This is one of the many pro-war blogs that have become an increasingly popular source of information distribution following Russia's invasion of Ukraine.<sup>1</sup>

The Wagner Group is unique as an organization in the breadth, scale and boldness of its activities. Yet it should not be viewed in a vacuum. Rather, the emergence of Wagner reflects broader trends in the evolution of Russia's oligarchs and organized criminal groups, their respective relationships with the Russian state and their activities in Africa.

Russian oligarchs and other politically linked businesspeople have been accused by the West of representing the Kremlin's interests abroad, beyond merely pursuing their own commercial interests through their global business empires. During the years of Putin's administration, experts argue, Russia's business tycoons have become more dependent upon the good favour of the regime to maintain their power and wealth. Prigozhin's Wagner can be seen as an extreme example of this trend: rather than an independent business entity, Wagner appears to further the interests of the Russian state.

Organized criminal groups generally occupy a unique role within the Russian political landscape, and Russian-based criminal networks have a global footprint. Over time, the profile of Russian organized crime has evolved, from the violent role of mobsters known as the *vory* to a more modern type of organized criminal, embedded in the legal economy. Many of these changes and characteristics are reflected in the activity of Russian criminal actors in Africa. Here, similarly, Wagner's activities can be seen as the latest iteration of these decades-long trends.

This report has two main aims: first, to describe and analyze Wagner's activities in Africa; and second, to place the mercenary group in context, and explain how Wagner has emerged as part of broader trends in Russian business and military interests and the operations of Russian criminal groups overseas. This report draws on research conducted in the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, South Sudan, Kenya, Cameroon, Mali, Madagascar and Libya from July 2022 onwards, as well as other sources from across the continent. It is also based on a range of open-source material and existing literature on Wagner and the evolution of Russian criminal and business interests in Africa.

Russia has been intensifying its political and economic engagement in Africa since its annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>2</sup> However, Africa has become more strategically important for Russia, both economically and politically, as Russia has been increasingly isolated by the deluge of Western sanctions in 2022. Through political and economic summits, cooperation agreements on military affairs, nuclear deals and mining investments, Russia has been making a range of overtures to African leaders, while Russian arms exports to African countries have steadily risen. Sanctions – which have prevented targeted entities from accessing much of the global banking system and globalized supply chains – are also having a disruptive effect on sanctioned Russian businesses in Africa. These entities are seeking alternative routes of making payments and moving goods to keep conducting business.

While some Wagner troops – in CAR and, reportedly, in Libya – have been drawn away from deployment in Africa to shore up Russia's military efforts in Ukraine, this purportedly hasn't stopped Wagner from maintaining its military deployment, in Mali (its newest theatre of operations), CAR, Sudan and Libya, and making overtures to other African nations seemingly with the aim of expanding its footprint.

In this geopolitical context, Wagner's operations in Africa – and the 'grey zone' interests that the group pursues – are an increasing threat to security, development and democracy.



# THE WAGNER GROUP'S STRATEGY IN AFRICA

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and his Malian counterpart Abdoulaye Diop hold a joint press conference following their meeting in Moscow in May 2022. Mali is the latest theatre of Russian influence, facilitated through Wagner Group operations, in Africa. © Yuri Kadobnov/Pool/AFP via Getty Images

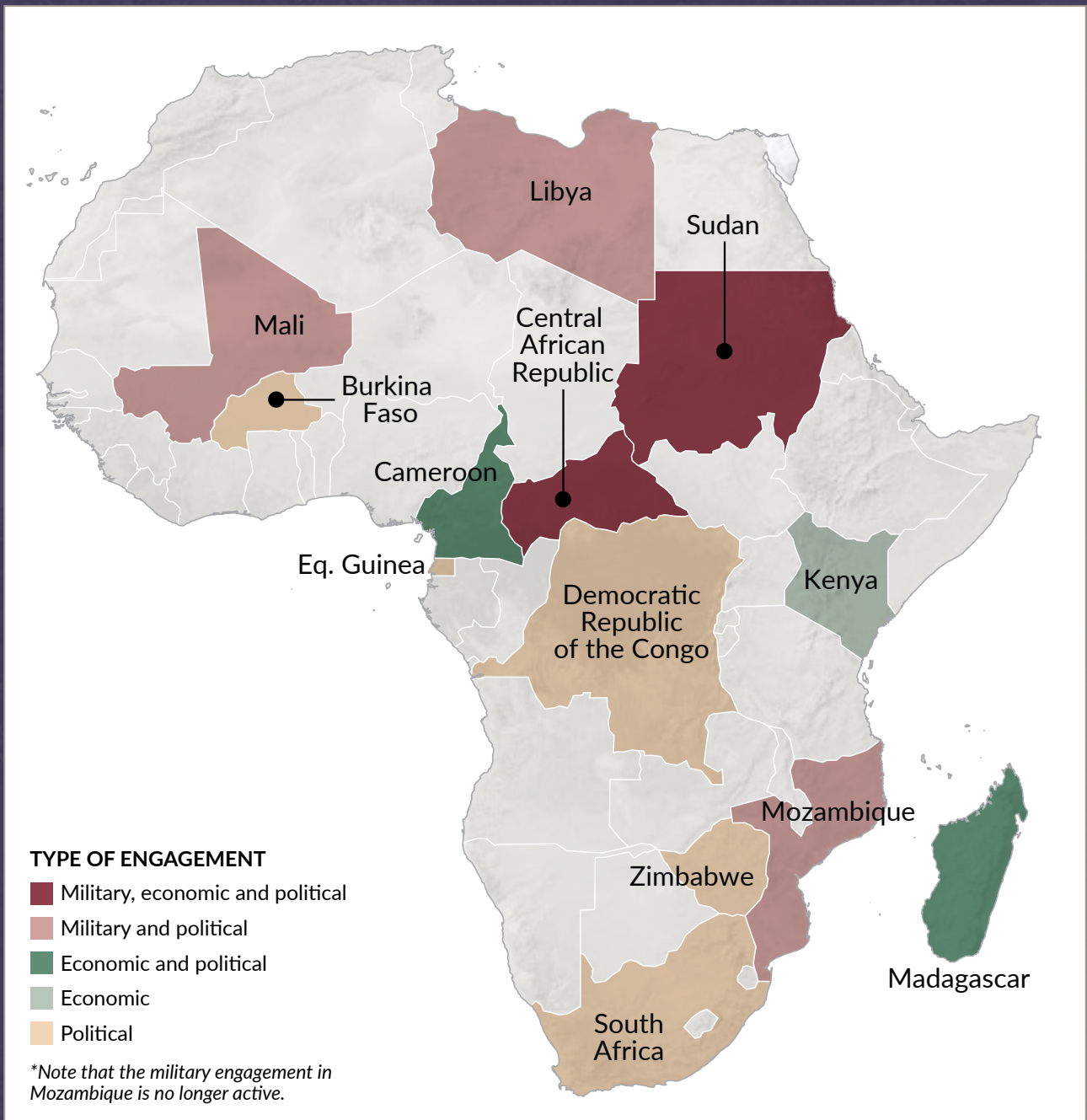


## What is the Wagner Group?

Although best known for being a mercenary organization providing hired guns to autocratic regimes, the Wagner Group is in fact the mercenary arm of a complex network of corporate entities – including companies involved in extractive industries such as mining and political strategy and influence organizations, as well as the aforementioned mercenaries – which cooperate and are interlinked. This network (which is referred to collectively as ‘the Wagner Group’ throughout this paper) has been accused of committing widespread human rights abuses and engaging in organized criminal activity, such as large-scale gold smuggling.

This network is ultimately controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of Vladimir Putin and widely known as ‘Putin’s chef’ for his role in providing catering services to Putin and Russian government ministries through his company, Concord Management and Consulting. Wagner mercenaries first emerged in 2014 fighting in eastern Ukraine, then were later deployed in Syria.<sup>3</sup> The group has expanded rapidly across Africa following its first documented military engagement on the continent in late 2017.<sup>4</sup>

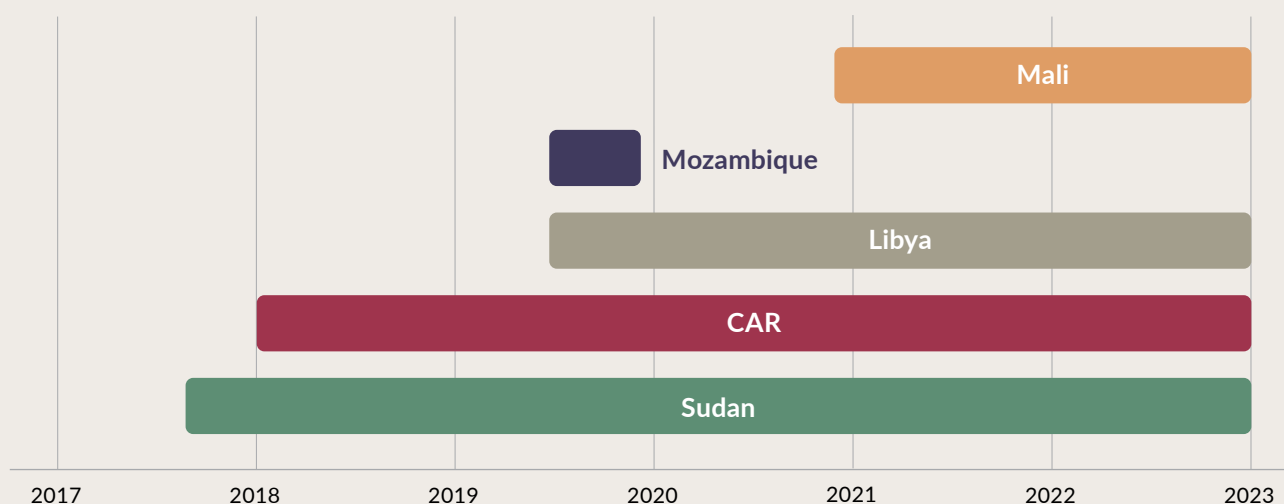
Although ostensibly a private enterprise, Wagner is closely linked with the Russian state. Historically, the group has operationally been linked with the Defence Ministry and the GU (formerly GRU) military intelligence branch. Investigations into Wagner have shown how the group has made use of Russian military infrastructure,<sup>5</sup> maintains a base alongside the GU within Russia, and has received other support (such as, in one case, passports issued to Wagner troops by the same Moscow office that issues to the Defence Ministry and the GU).<sup>6</sup>



**FIGURE 3** Countries where Wagner has engaged militarily, economically and politically.

NOTE: 'Political engagement' includes a range of activities – from biased election monitoring missions to social media influence operations targeting a particular country – via organizations linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin. 'Economic engagement' refers to the presence or operation of companies linked to Prigozhin and Wagner's mercenary operations.





**FIGURE 4** Timeline of Wagner's engagement in Africa.

However, especially since the start of the Ukraine war, this operational relationship has reportedly become less intimate.<sup>7</sup> Although Wagner fighters are a key component of Russia's Ukraine campaign, this does not necessarily translate into Wagner being part of Russian military command structures.<sup>8</sup> The growing profile of Wagner has led to some friction with the Russian military, as Prigozhin has made some outspoken criticisms of certain generals' strategic decisions, and there have been competing claims over which group – Wagner or the Russian military – can take credit for battlefield victories in Ukraine.<sup>9</sup>

Wagner's role in Africa is, however, closely linked to the Russian state on a strategic level. Internal documents leaked in 2019 – describing Wagner's strategy to exert influence in Africa – describe one of the group's aims as to 'strong-arm' Western powers (the US, UK and France) out of the region and disrupt pro-Western political movement, an aim more in line with a Russian foreign-policy entity than a purely profit-seeking enterprise.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the Russian government has supported Wagner's interventions – for example, lobbying at the UN for an exception to the arms embargo in CAR, which created space for Wagner military instructors to begin operating there.

It appears to be a mutually beneficial relationship: while Wagner has a profit-making aim (through leveraging access to natural resources and direct cash payments from governments that contract the mercenary group), this aim also often appears to align with Russian state interests overseas, as the services that the Wagner Group offers also promote Russia's political interests and seek to displace Western influence.



Front page of the nationalist newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Комсомольская правда), one of Russia's largest tabloids, in July 2022, featuring an article about Wagner's operations in the Donbas. Wagner has adopted a much more public profile since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

## Out of the shadows: Wagner's changing public profile

Until recently, Russian leadership (including Putin himself and foreign minister Sergei Lavrov) denied that Wagner had any link to the Russian state and rarely acknowledged its existence.<sup>11</sup> The same line has applied to Wagner's operations in Africa: the Russian state has tried to distance itself from Wagner's involvement in Libya and Mali, for example, with Lavrov insisting that these are private arrangements.<sup>12</sup>

Wagner's African partners have similarly often kept the group's operations secretive. There has never, for example, been an official recognition by the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) of a contract with the Wagner Group, which has been present in Libya since 2019.<sup>13</sup> The Sudanese government officially denied that Wagner was present in Sudan as recently as March 2022, despite (as described below) their operations having been widely documented.<sup>14</sup> Lavrov and his Malian counterpart, Abdoulaye Diop, denied any arrangement between Mali and Wagner in November 2021, just days before the deployment of the first Wagner troops in Bamako.<sup>15</sup>

However, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has thrust Wagner into the spotlight, shattering this illusion of shadowy deniability.<sup>16</sup> Wagner's operations in Ukraine led to more open media coverage of the group in Russia during 2022,<sup>17</sup> while the group has been openly recruiting for fighters to join its Ukraine operations. Online, the group's successes are pored over in detail by enthused supporters on the messaging service Telegram (and a pro-Kremlin pop artist Vika Tsyganova – formerly known for recording a Ukrainian separatist anthem in 2014<sup>18</sup> – even released a stirring and discordant Wagner theme song).<sup>19</sup>

Prigozhin's own public statements about Wagner reflect this changing public profile. He denied that the group existed as recently as June 2022,<sup>20</sup> and has routinely responded to Western journalists' questions about Wagner with sarcastic, trolling and, at times, unhinged responses.<sup>21</sup> He sued against sanctions in an EU court – in relation to Wagner operations in Libya – claiming to have no link to the group (the case was dismissed in June 2022).<sup>22</sup>

This changed in September 2022. Videos circulated on social media showed Prigozhin recruiting new troops to the Wagner Group from a Russian prison, in which he acknowledged both the existence of the group and his role.<sup>23</sup> Days later, Prigozhin finally made a public statement acknowledging that he had founded Wagner and was 'proud' of setting up the 'group of patriots'.<sup>24</sup> In November 2022, Prigozhin announced the opening of the 'PMC Wagner Centre' in St Petersburg,<sup>25</sup> with video footage and images from the site showing a grand office building bedecked with Wagner branding. In a macabre twist, Prigozhin's company Concord sent a sledgehammer – marked with the Wagner logo and smeared with fake blood – to the EU parliament after members demanded in November that the group be placed on the EU terrorist watchlist.<sup>26</sup>

More recently, on 27 December 2022, the company 'PMC Wagner Centre' was registered as a legal entity in Russia. Previously, the mercenary group had not had its own identifiable legal entity, but instead operated through the complex network of corporate entities controlled by Prigozhin.<sup>27</sup> Wagner's transition from shadowy, deniable organization to being a central public presence in Russia's military engagements overseas seems now to be complete.



A sledgehammer, bearing the Wagner logo and stained with fake blood, was sent hidden in a violin case to the EU parliament after its members demanded that the Wagner Group be placed on the EU terrorist watchlist. *Photo: Cyber Front Z, Telegram, [https://t.me/cyber\\_frontZ/7589](https://t.me/cyber_frontZ/7589)*

## What is Wagner's role in Africa?

The Wagner Group operates in Africa in three main areas, through the interlinked military, economic and political entities that constitute the group:

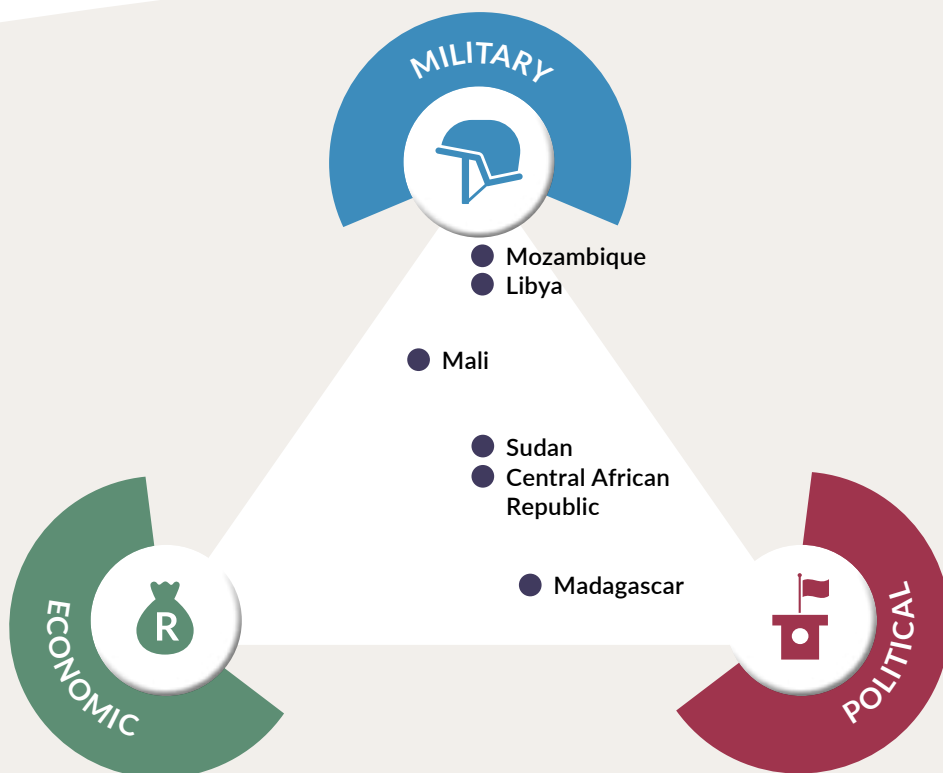
- 1. Mercenary activities:** In Africa, Wagner troops have (so far) been documented as being on the ground in Mali, Sudan, CAR, Libya and (formerly) Mozambique. These military interventions have largely been in the service of weakened autocratic governments seeking support in fighting insurgencies, rebel groups or civil wars, and have (in the case of Mali and CAR, in particular) displaced former colonial powers, such as France, as these countries' primary military partners.
- 2. Political strategy, advice and influence:** Wagner-linked political strategy organizations have engaged politically in a wide set of African countries. They have allegedly offered political strategy and advice for leaders engaging with Wagner,<sup>28</sup> conducted politically biased election-monitoring missions,<sup>29</sup> run political

influence and disinformation campaigns through social media and interfered in elections.<sup>30</sup>

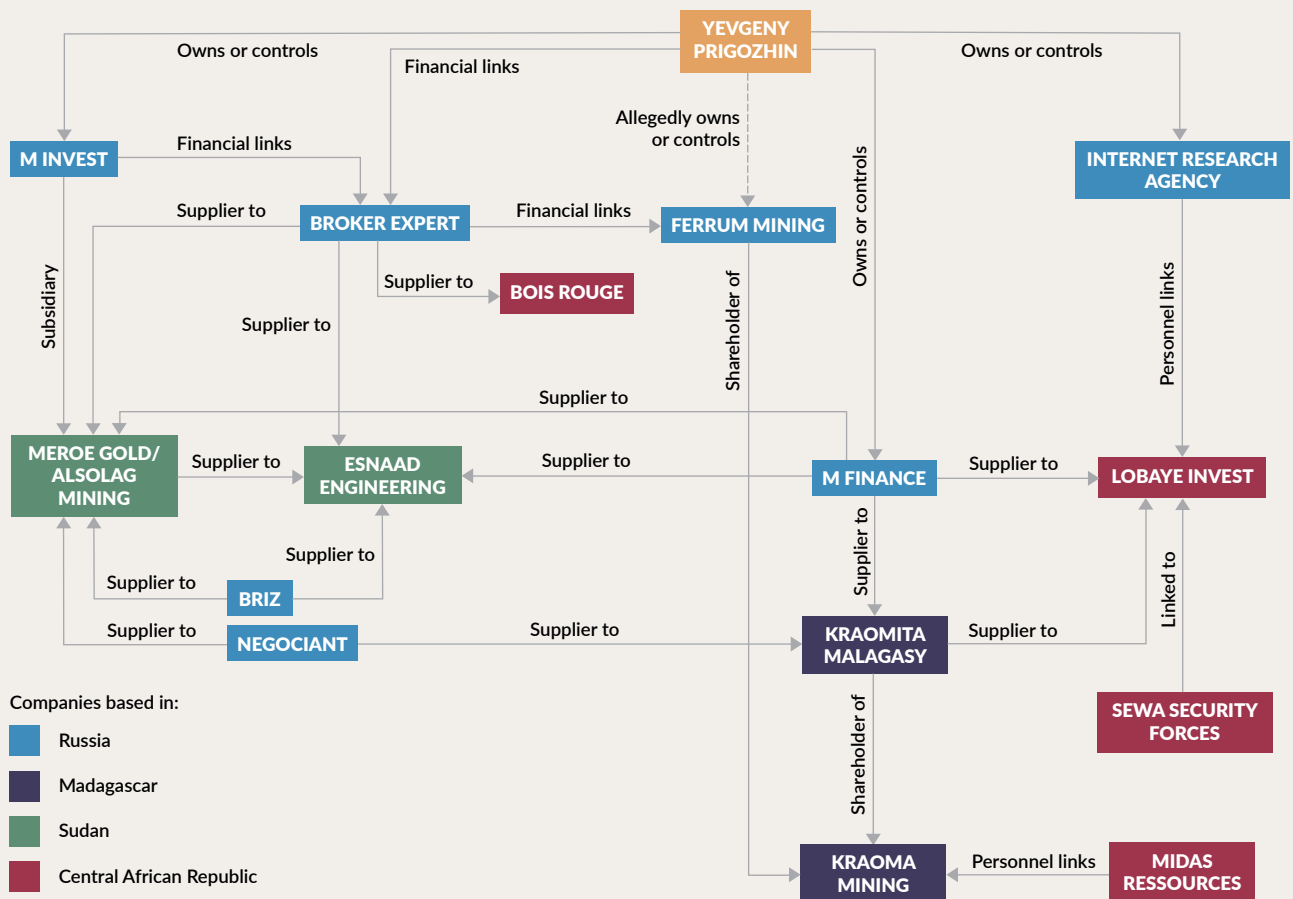
These operations have been carried out by political organizations, think tanks, election-monitoring missions and other groups linked back to Prigozhin.<sup>31</sup>

- 3. Commercial, grey market and illicit activities:** a network of companies – primarily mining companies – linked to Wagner have also pursued commercial interests in countries where Wagner has provided military or political support. Access to resources comes in exchange for their other support.<sup>32</sup>

The degree to which Wagner engages in each of these areas varies across countries – whereas some are more purely military engagements, others are limited to political and commercial roles. This can be visualized as a three-part spectrum (see Figure 5). The case studies later on in this paper describe how different countries are situated within this spectrum.



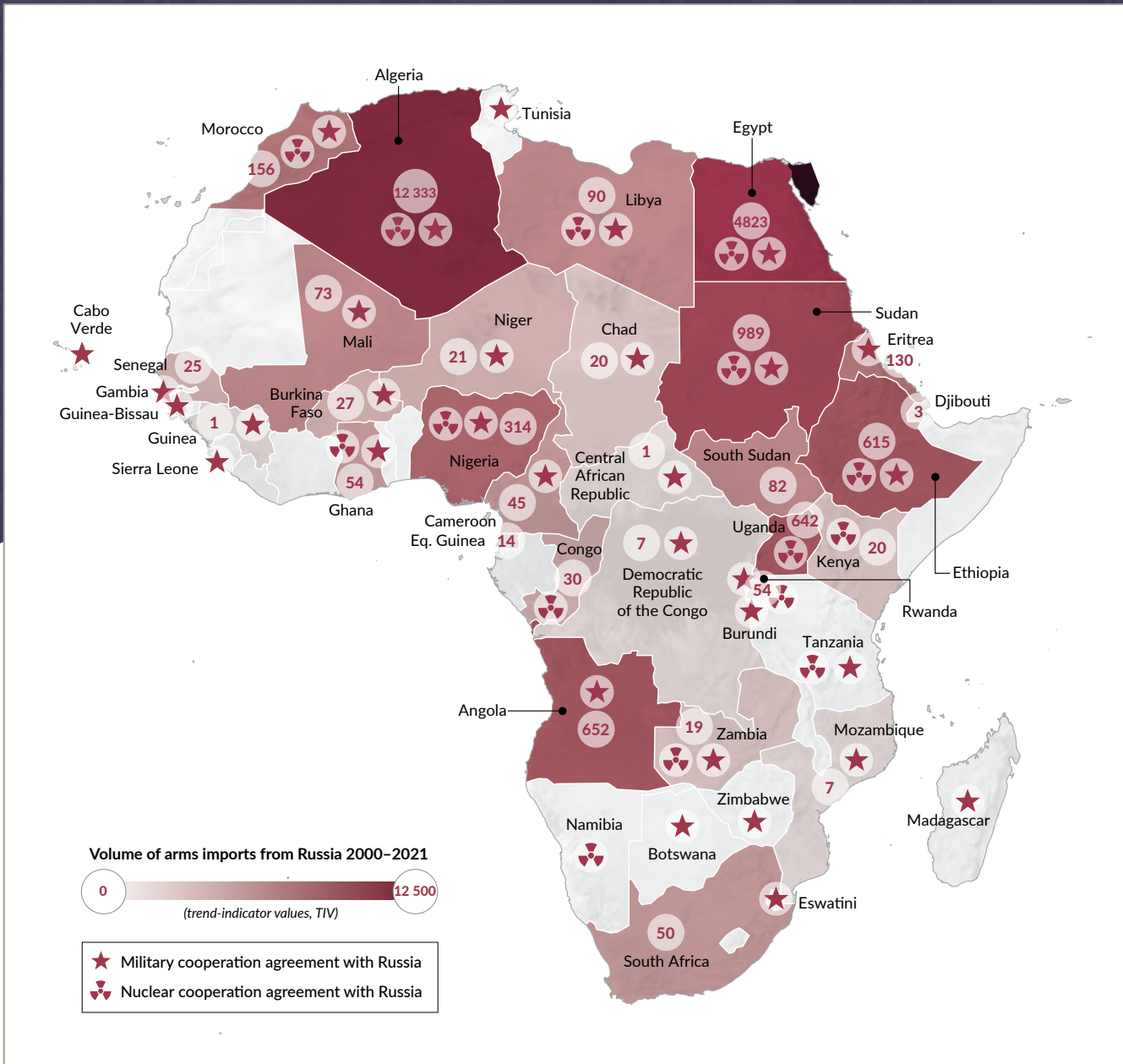
**FIGURE 5** The tripartite structure of Wagner engagement.



**FIGURE 6** Wagner’s economic footprint: this diagram shows the interconnections between companies in Russia known to be linked to Prigozhin and companies in Africa. Many of these companies – such as Lobaye Invest, Midas Ressources and Meroe Gold – have been shown to be linked to the Wagner Group’s mercenary interventions in Africa.

Common across Wagner’s engagements in Africa, however, is the fact that the organization has seemingly used any means necessary to achieve its goals, including the exploitation of legal grey areas and engaging in criminal activity. In its operations in Africa, the group stands accused of the following abuses:

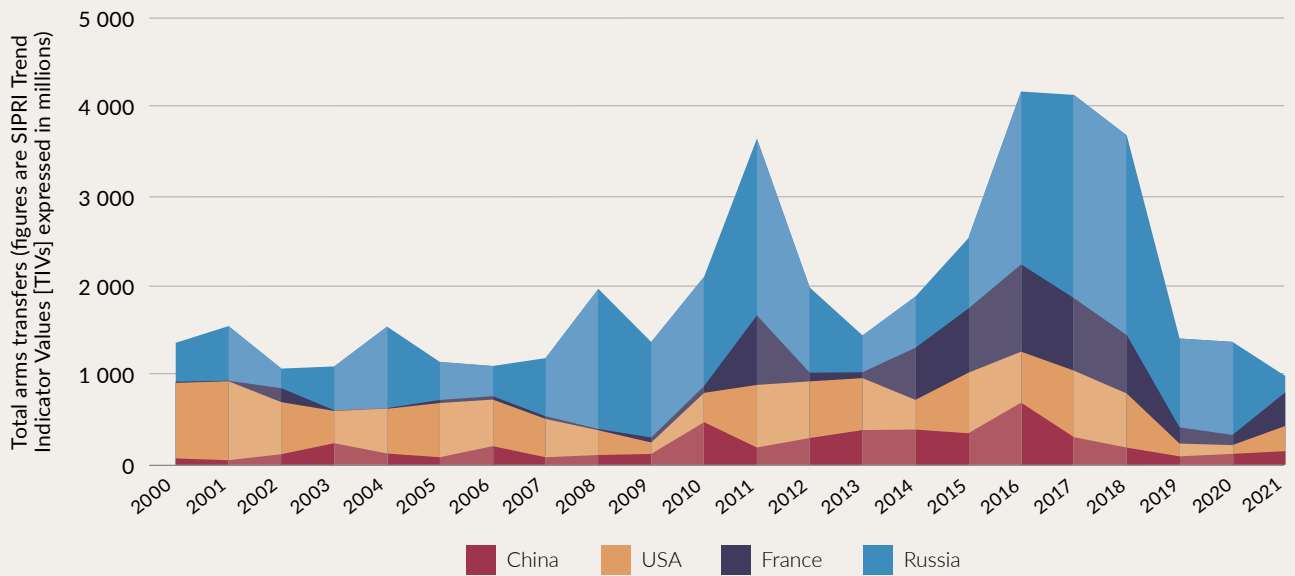
1. Wagner mercenaries have allegedly perpetrated grave human rights abuses and violations of humanitarian law, including the torture and execution of civilians.<sup>33</sup>
2. Wagner-linked companies have been accused of illegally exploiting mineral resources and of gold smuggling.<sup>34</sup>
3. Military operations and arms imports from Wagner to Africa have taken place in violation of UN sanctions regimes.<sup>35</sup>
4. Political organizations linked to Wagner have been accused of illegally interfering in overseas elections,<sup>36</sup> spreading disinformation<sup>37</sup> and stoking political disputes.<sup>38</sup>
5. As a mercenary organization, the group itself is in a legal grey area. Private military companies are illegal under Russian law, yet this has not deterred Russian officials from supporting Wagner’s presence overseas. In a rare acknowledgement of Wagner’s existence in 2018, Putin ambiguously said, ‘As long as they don’t violate Russian law, they have the right to work, to pursue their business interests, in any spot on the planet.’<sup>39</sup>



**FIGURE 7** Key indicators of Russian diplomatic engagement in Africa.

NOTE: Data on arms transfers from Russia to African countries is sourced from the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>

Wagner's growing footprint in Africa is just one, albeit very significant, part of increasing Russian engagement on the continent. In fact, Moscow has been expanding its political and economic activities in Africa for over a decade – in particular, in the years since its annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russian arms exports to African countries have increased to far outweigh other major arms suppliers, as have the number of bilateral military cooperation agreements, which have, in some instances, been a precursor to the deployment of Wagner troops in an African partner country (see figures 7 and 8).



**FIGURE 8** Major arms exporters into African countries, 2000–2021.

SOURCE: Data from the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>


While Russia remains a far smaller economic partner to African countries than Western countries or China, its economic interests are concentrated in key strategic areas – namely, arms, mining and energy (including nuclear energy). Analysts of these interests have highlighted how this provides Russia with surprisingly significant political influence on the continent given the relatively small size of its economic interests.<sup>40</sup> Wagner, through the array of military and political services it offers its clients, can be seen as part of this power-projection toolkit.



# RUSSIAN ORGANIZED CRIME IN AFRICA

Russian organized crime has developed a footprint in Africa, with involvement in weapons smuggling, money laundering, corruption and fraud. The majority of weapons used in South Sudan, for example, are reported to be of Russian origin. © Tony Karumba/AFP via Getty Images





**M**uch like the Italian mafia and Mexican cartels, Russian organized crime has achieved grisly global notoriety, as much for its influence outside of Russia as within. The literature documenting Russian organized crime describes how it has evolved significantly over the past three decades, amid changing economic and political conditions within Russia and a changing relationship between organized crime and the state. This evolution has influenced how Russian organized crime has developed a footprint overseas, including in Africa. The activities of Wagner in illicit economies in Africa are the latest iteration of many of these trends and characteristics.

## **The evolution of Russian organized crime in Russia**

The 1990s have been described as the 'glory days' of Russian gangsterism.<sup>41</sup> After the fall of the Soviet Union, as state assets were privatized and the weakened Russian state lacked the resources to effectively enforce order, criminality and violence exploded. The *vory* (plural of *vor*, meaning 'thief') who had emerged as a subculture in Russian prisons during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, stepped forward as the enforcers of the new order.<sup>42</sup> As Catherine Belton, an investigative journalist and chronicler of Putin, describes, 'In the chaos of the Soviet collapse, the institutions of power appeared to be melting away. Organized crime groups moved in to fill the vacuum, running protection rackets, extorting local businesses and taking over trade'.<sup>43</sup>

It is amid this violent context – characterized by gang wars, car bombings and drive-by shootings – that many of the modern oligarchs made their fortunes, violently taking control of newly privatized state industries.<sup>44</sup> Battles for control of Russia's aluminium industry, for example, grew so violent that the period became known as the 'aluminium wars'. Oleg Deripaska, the oligarch who rose to the top of the industry following this violent period, remains a major player in the industry today.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, over time, the relationship between organized crime, oligarchs and the state shifted. Experts have described how, while organized crime and corruption have continued to flourish during the Putin years, criminal and oligarch activities have been brought more under state control. As observed by Misha Glenny, a leading analyst of Russian organized crime, 'in the 1990s, the oligarchs and gangsters quite clearly controlled the Kremlin. Under Vladimir Putin [...] the situation was reversed: criminal and oligarch interests were subordinated to state interests. It does not follow that Putin and his friends persecuted criminals or dispensed with corrupt practices. On the contrary, they flourished as before but they are now much more carefully controlled.'<sup>46</sup>

The origins of this cooperative relationship between the state and organized crime can be traced back decades. During the Soviet period, KGB officers controlled a network of black-market operations, smuggling schemes overseas through so-called 'friendly firms' to exchange Russian goods (mainly natural resources) for embargoed items such as Western technology.<sup>47</sup> Putin himself played a role in brokering relationships between business and organized criminal groups as St Petersburg's deputy mayor in the 1990s.<sup>48</sup> It has been argued that this became a 'blueprint' for the Putin regime's own symbiotic relationship with organized crime.

At the same time, between the 1990s and today, there has been a shift from the violent criminal model of Russian organized crime, characterized by the vory and violent enforcers, to a new type of gangster, the 'criminal-businessman' or *avtoritet*. As Mark Galeotti, another expert on Russian organized crime describes, 'he – and it almost always is still he – is a criminal-businessman. His portfolios of interests will typically span the legitimate and illegitimate economies but also politics'.<sup>49</sup> After three decades of evolution, Russia's criminal world has become closely integrated with the legitimate economy and embedded within its politics.



A man with tattoos indicating affiliation with Russian criminal groups, such as the vory. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the vory (meaning 'thieves'), a prison subculture, stepped up as enforcers of a new order characterized by extortion.

© Alexander Aksakov/Getty Images

## The evolution of Russian organized crime overseas

Globally, Russian criminal networks pose a formidable challenge. They traffic in drugs, people and arms, and trade criminal services, from money laundering and hacking to cryptocurrency scams and stolen data.<sup>50</sup> In Europe alone, Russian-based organized criminal groups were estimated in 2017 to control most illegal weapons imports and a third of all heroin imports.<sup>51</sup> (The term 'Russian-based organized crime' comprises not just Russian-speaking organized crime but also criminal groups from throughout the former Soviet Union which retain strong ties to Russia.)<sup>52</sup>

Rather than acting as wholesale 'mafia' groups overseas, muscling in on the territory of homegrown organized criminal groups, Russian-based organized criminal groups internationally have been described as 'service providers' to the world's criminal economy, as suppliers of specialist skills and goods to local gangsters.<sup>53</sup>

The Kremlin has also reportedly leveraged the close links between the criminal and political worlds to, on occasion, use criminal actors to serve political ends. Galeotti has described how 'Russian-based organized crime groups in Europe have been used for a variety of purposes, including as sources of "black cash", to launch cyber-attacks, to wield political influence, to traffic people and goods, and even to carry out targeted assassinations on behalf of the Kremlin'.<sup>54</sup>

## Russian-based organized crime in Africa since the 1990s

Many of these characteristics are reflected in Russian-based organized criminal activity in Africa.

Globally, the overseas influence of Russian-based organized crime is concentrated in Europe, particularly in states neighbouring Russia.<sup>55</sup> Russian groups are also not as influential as some other 'foreign actors' in terms of organized crime in Africa – for example, the dominance of Chinese organized criminal groups.<sup>56</sup> Asian-based organized criminal groups (particularly from China and Vietnam) are dominant in certain African criminal markets, such as the illegal wildlife trade.

However, Russian criminal groups have a long history in Africa. For example, in the 1980s, Russian mobsters reportedly established a smuggling and money laundering hub in Sierra Leone.<sup>57</sup> In the late 1980s and the 1990s, Russian citizens were believed to be involved in criminal groups in several southern African states, including Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland and South Africa, concentrating mainly on 'diamond and weapon smuggling, corruption, fraud and money laundering schemes, as well as investment in legitimate businesses'.<sup>58</sup>

South Africa provides a case in point of how Russian organized crime developed a footprint overseas, and how this was shaped by local factors. In the 1990s, at the same time as Russian organized crime was booming, South Africa was going through its own political and economic transition, opening up to the global economy at the end of the apartheid era. During this time, the country became a target for many transnational criminal syndicates, not only from Russia but also from Nigeria, South America, Europe and elsewhere, muscling in on the country's burgeoning drugs market, the trafficking of weapons and minerals, and other illicit flows.<sup>59</sup> The country's developed market economy but weak policing administration provided an opportunity for criminal networks to flourish.<sup>60</sup>

The involvement of Russian nationals in organized crime in South Africa came to the attention of the South African Police Service (SAPS) around 1995.<sup>61</sup> By 1998, Russia and South Africa had signed a cooperation agreement to counter transnational organized crime.<sup>62</sup>

A 2003 study from the Pretoria-based Institute for Security Studies described how, rather than a cohesive 'Russian mafia' group, these were primarily individual criminal entrepreneurs and small criminal networks who had formed relationships with South African criminal groups.<sup>63</sup> 'The local network facilitates their entry into South Africa, often because they can offer the South African-based network a particular skill,' the study argued.<sup>64</sup> This is a similar description to the role of 'criminal service provider' associated with Russian-based organized crime in other regions, such as Europe.<sup>65</sup> These criminal entrepreneurs had interests in a range of illicit markets, including arms trafficking,<sup>66</sup> drugs,<sup>67</sup> gemstone smuggling,<sup>68</sup> vehicle theft and smuggling,<sup>69</sup> human trafficking,<sup>70</sup> cybercrime<sup>71</sup> and money laundering schemes.<sup>72</sup>

Among these criminal entrepreneurs were some who could arguably fit the mould of the Russian vory, the 'violent enforcers' who became so powerful following the Soviet Union's collapse. In 1990s Cape Town, a coterie of underworld figures from the former Soviet Union teamed up with local gangsters to run protection rackets, drugs markets, money laundering and human trafficking operations. One prominent example, Yuri 'The Russian' Ulianitski, developed close ties with major South African underworld figures. Despite his moniker as 'The Russian', Ulianitski was originally from Ukraine (while the country remained a Soviet Republic) and arrived in Cape Town in the late 1980s from Moscow.<sup>73</sup> He rose to notoriety as part of the extortion economy surrounding Cape Town's nightclub scene, in association with infamous organized crime leader Cyril Beeka, head of one of the private security companies that battled for control of the nightclubs and the associated protection fees and drug economies.<sup>74</sup> At the time of his murder in 2007, Ulianitski was on bail for conspiracy to kidnap, possession of illegal firearms and drug-related offences.<sup>75</sup>



Viktor Bout, a convicted arms trafficker, is emblematic of the 'ex-securocrat', criminal entrepreneurs in Africa who emerged from the remains of former Soviet military and intelligence institutions. © US Department of Justice via Getty Images

## Criminal 'ex-securocrats', intelligence and the military

Some of the most prominent Russian criminal entrepreneurs in Africa emerged from the remains of former Soviet military and intelligence institutions. As an officer in the Scorpions, the former SAPS elite unit, described to researchers in 2001, many of the Russian criminal networks operating in southern Africa at the time were 'ex-securocrats who [had] gone private'.<sup>76</sup>

The most well-documented case of this type of criminal entrepreneur is, of course, that of Viktor Bout, arguably the most prolific arms trafficker of the post-Cold War era. As has been extensively documented elsewhere, after serving as an intelligence officer, allegedly in the Soviet foreign military intelligence directorate,<sup>77</sup> Bout set up an air freight business specializing in shipping to dangerous locations that other providers could not reach.

His planes carried shipments of former Eastern Bloc military equipment, destined for conflict zones across Africa and around the world. Bout's companies were implicated in trafficking arms to 17 African countries – including rebels in Angola, Sierra Leone and the Liberian government, during their respective conflicts – as well as to the Taliban (and its rivals) in Afghanistan.<sup>78</sup>

Bout ultimately built up a network of 30 companies around the world.<sup>79</sup> Formerly based in Sharjah, UAE, he relocated to Johannesburg in the late 1990s, where he became the target of an assassination attempt.<sup>80</sup> South Africa and Swaziland formed a strategic base for part of Bout's transnational business network,<sup>81</sup> but he later relocated his business empire to Moscow.<sup>82</sup> Ultimately, he was arrested in Bangkok in 2008 following a US–Thai sting operation in which he was attempting to broker a deal to sell arms to the FARC rebel group in Colombia. In November 2010, Bout was extradited to the US and was subsequently convicted for offences including arms trafficking.<sup>83</sup>

Bout's operation spanned the worlds of legitimate and illegitimate business. Part of the curious ambiguity of Bout's role is that his companies were also involved in transporting aid, peacekeeping forces and, on occasion, Western troops.<sup>84</sup> He has been described as the 'quintessential example' of how the Kremlin has made use of criminal networks as tools for leverage abroad: as a private operator offering a deniable front for Kremlin-backed arms deals.<sup>85</sup> Associates, successors and rivals of Bout built criminal enterprises on their access to post-Cold War military stockpiles in Russia and to former Soviet planes for use in transporting these stockpiles.<sup>86</sup>

In a similar vein is the case of Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot and aviation expert who had previously served in the Russian military and then, in later years, was recruited as part of a criminal network transporting large shipments of cocaine from South America to West Africa, en route to destination markets in Europe and elsewhere.<sup>87</sup> Yaroshenko, like Bout, was ultimately arrested in a US sting operation, this time enacted in Liberia in 2010 with the assistance of the Liberian president's stepson, whom the network had attempted to bribe into allowing them to use the country as a trafficking hub.<sup>88</sup> In the course of the sting operation, Yaroshenko and his associates had planned to transport over five and a half tonnes of cocaine to the US via Liberia, according to US prosecutors.<sup>89</sup>

Both Bout and Yaroshenko were returned to Russia in 2022 as part of separate prisoner-exchange agreements.<sup>90</sup> Requests for the release of the two men had been made by Russian officials, including Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, in previous years.<sup>91</sup>

Almost immediately upon his return to Russia, Bout joined the pro-Kremlin ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) in December 2022, which some expect is a step towards seeking a seat in the Russian parliament.<sup>92</sup> Bout's return was welcomed by Prigozhin, who described him as an 'ideal of unshakeableness'.<sup>93</sup> In an interview with Russia Today given shortly after his release, Bout claimed to have 'a lot of thoughts and observations' about how Russia and the West are engaging Africa, arguing that the West is bringing about the 'suicide of civilization', due to its fixation on progressive ideology and gender equality, to which Africa is 'waking up'.<sup>94</sup> Yaroshenko also spoke publicly following his release, maintaining that both he and Bout were framed by the US for alleged offences outside US jurisdiction.<sup>95</sup>

## Criminal–business convergence

Other examples of Russian-linked criminality in Africa adhere more to the stereotype of the ‘newer’ generation of Russian organized crime, whose interests span legal and illegal business entities and politics.<sup>96</sup> To take Kenya as a case study, two scandals featuring different sets of Russian brothers gripped the country and led to discussions about the involvement of foreigners in organized crime and state capture.

The first controversy involved brothers and businessmen Artur Margaryan and Artur Sagasyan. Upon their arrival in Kenya in early 2006, the brothers claimed to be of Armenian nationality; yet it later transpired that they were in fact Azerbaijani and based in Moscow.<sup>97</sup> Owing to their close connections within Kenya’s State House during the tenure of President Mwai Kibaki,<sup>98</sup> both Arturs were given controversially high levels of access to the Kenyan state: appointed as deputy commissioners of police (the second most powerful posting in the Kenyan police hierarchy); provided with documents, including Kenyan passports and security passes to airports; and irregularly given registration and tax exemption for their companies.<sup>99</sup>

A 2007 report from a parliamentary committee found that the brothers were ‘protected at the highest levels of government’, which led to their controversial police appointments, and that ‘their presence [in Kenya] was part of a conspiracy to commit atrocities’.<sup>100</sup>

In March 2006, the brothers – in what then-Minister for Internal Security John Michuki described as a ‘government operation’<sup>101</sup> – led a raid on the offices of *The Standard* newspaper and its sister company Kenya Television Network (KTN), both owned by the family of former president Daniel arap Moi, torching that day’s newspapers and destroying TV station equipment. The raid was allegedly in response to rumours that the media group planned to publish reports linking powerful people within the Kenyan government to drug trafficking. A Kenyan MP later claimed that Minister Michuki had asked the brothers to assassinate the son of former president Moi, which Michuki denied.<sup>102</sup> Artur Margaryan made the same claim in interviews with the Kenyan press.<sup>103</sup>

Eventually, the Arturs were deported from Kenya after threatening security guards at a Nairobi airport at gunpoint. An inquiry into their role was never made public, leaving questions about the true nature of their involvement at the highest levels of the Kenyan state unanswered. A parliamentary committee described the saga, and their eventual deportation, as part of a ‘labyrinthine cover-up’.<sup>104</sup>

The second controversy relates to businessmen Artur and Vadim Mildov – Russian nationals who are associated with a fleet of companies registered in Kenya, the UAE and offshore hubs such as Cyprus and the British Virgin Islands.<sup>105</sup> Artur Mildov first came to the attention of authorities in 1999, when his business associate Victor Gontcharenko was found murdered in a Nairobi dam. The Kenyan government has made repeated attempts since the initial years of the 2000s to successfully deport the Mildovs over allegations of drug trafficking and money laundering.<sup>106</sup> The case remains murky: the Kenyan state has never prosecuted the brothers or made evidence public to support these claims. The latest deportation order, issued in 2020, is currently being challenged by the Mildovs in the Kenyan courts.<sup>107</sup> The brothers have said that they are innocent investors who have contributed to the Kenyan economy.

## Modern Russian illicit arms flows to Africa

While the Russian-based arms trafficking networks of Viktor Bout and his associates operating in Africa may have declined over the years, other covert flows of Russian-made weapons to the continent appear to continue. During our research, we received information about the alleged trafficking of Russian weapons to South Sudan via Kenya and Uganda. This seems to be a highly organized and state-sponsored illicit flow, operating with the involvement of Kenyan and Ugandan officials. These shipments would violate the UN Security Council embargo on arms sales to South Sudan, which was renewed in May 2022.<sup>108</sup>

A customs officer at the Busia border point, on Kenya's border with Uganda, told our research team that caches of South Sudanese-bound Russian arms come through Kenya and are transported through Uganda. They are heavily protected. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the consignment was as regular as every two months, yet following the pandemic, this has slowed to an average of once every four months.<sup>109</sup>

A retired paramilitary officer who twice escorted arms destined for South Sudan, from Mombasa (Kenya's largest port) to Lokichoggio (a town near the border with South Sudan), described how 'the consignment of arms in shipping containers would get to Nanyuki [a town north of Nairobi], where we would repackage them in small quantities ready for transport to the South Sudanese border'.<sup>110</sup> Mining machinery imported from Russia (declared as farm machinery) has also been transported to South Sudan via Lokichoggio in recent years.<sup>111</sup>

The weapons are reportedly imported by a company linked to top South Sudanese military officials.<sup>112</sup> Some of the arms specified that they originated from Rosoboronexport, Russia's state-owned weapons exporter. According to the Busia customs official who oversaw the shipments, the majority of Russian arms transported to South Sudan in 2019 were from Rosoboronexport.<sup>113</sup>

Data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database records that Russia exported arms to South Sudan in 2011, 2015 and 2016, primarily military aircraft and armoured vehicles.<sup>114</sup> However, according to our sources, these shipments of weapons are far more numerous than this data suggests and remain hidden from official records. The majority of weapons used in South Sudan are reported by observers to be of Russian origin.<sup>115</sup>

These sources told us that weapons had been transported to South Sudan for many years. In 2007, this flow hit international headlines after the MV *Faina*, a Ukrainian ship carrying Russian-made military equipment, was hijacked in Somali waters. The Kenyan government claimed that the shipment was headed for Kenya, yet evidence later emerged that the weapons were almost certainly destined for South Sudan, then engaged in its struggle for secession from Sudan.<sup>116</sup> Following international scrutiny of the *Faina* debacle, a customs officer and former paramilitary officer told our research team that the flow shifted from wholesale containers of weapons to smaller caches that would be more difficult to detect.<sup>117</sup>





Holding placards with pro-Russian slogans, demonstrators gather in Bangui, CAR, on 5 March 2022 during a rally in support of Russia.  
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## Wagner and the evolution of Russian criminal networks in Africa

The Wagner Group has emerged against the backdrop of these broader shifts in Russian organized crime, its relationship to the state and its evolving role in Africa.

While some of Russia's *vory*-style 'violent enforcers' did materialize in Africa in the 1990s and the first years of the 2000s, especially in South Africa, over time these have been eclipsed by different types of criminal actors, more embedded in legitimate business as well as illegal business. This reflects the greater change from *vory* to *avtoritet* that has been described over time within Russia. In many ways, the Wagner Group is the ultimate example of this trend: making use of a complex set of corporate structures to conduct activities that range from the legal to the criminal.

As a provider of hired guns in return for natural resources, including gold to be smuggled out from source countries using military planes, Wagner can be seen as an example of Russia's criminal 'service providers' or 'securocrats who have gone private' operating in Africa.

Finally, as Russia's criminal groups have become more subordinate to the state during Putin's administration, and the Kremlin has also reportedly made use of criminal groups overseas to serve political ends, so too does Wagner seem to operate not only for profit but also to achieve Russian foreign policy aims abroad.



# WAGNER AND OTHER SANCTIONED RUSSIAN BUSINESS INTERESTS IN AFRICA

Russian business tycoon Konstantin Malofeyev was first sanctioned by the US and other Western countries in 2014 for his role in providing financial support to separatist movements in Crimea.

Malofeyev's business empire is an example of private interests aligned with Russian foreign policy.

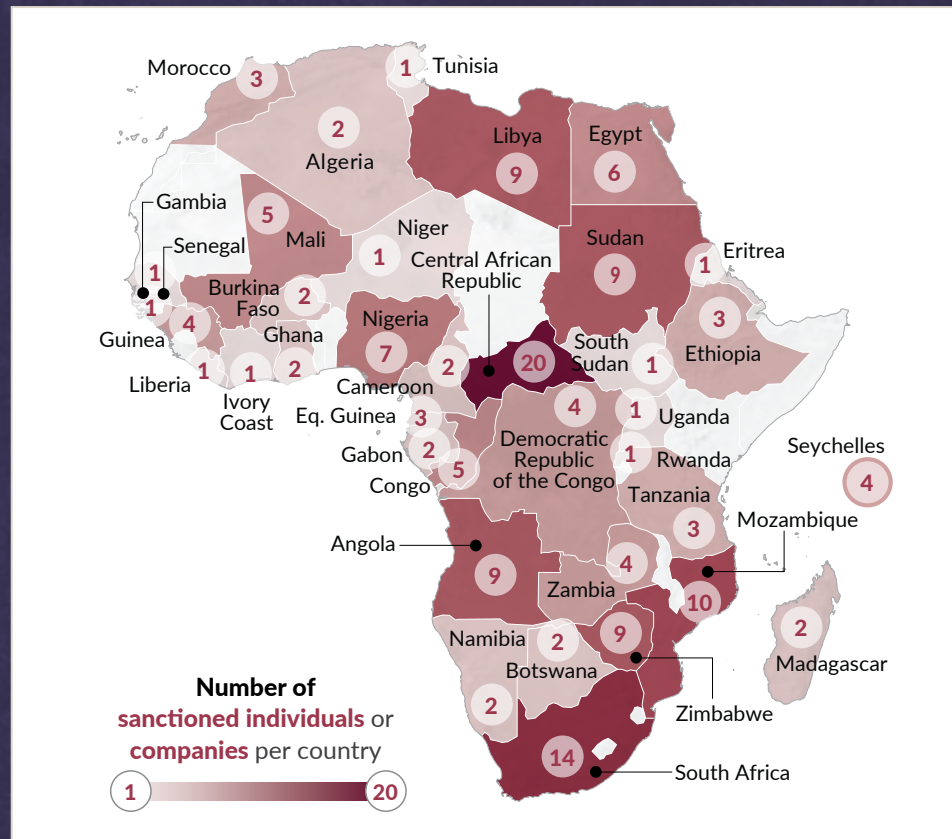
© Tatyana Makeyeva/Reuters via Alamy Stock Photo



**M**uch in the same way that Russian organized crime has evolved in its relationship to the Russian state, so has the relationship between Russia's leading oligarchs and wealthy businesspeople and the state. During Putin's administration, Russia's business elite – such as Prigozhin – have become more dependent on the state to maintain their power and wealth.<sup>118</sup> This has led to supposedly private business interests becoming increasingly aligned with Russian foreign policy. The Wagner Group's operations in Africa can be seen as an extreme example of this trend.

Prigozhin himself first became the target of US sanctions in late 2016, accused of providing support to Russia's military involvement in Crimea.<sup>119</sup> Sanctions against the Wagner Group as an organization – for its activities threatening the territorial integrity of Ukraine – followed some months later.<sup>120</sup> Wagner was first sanctioned by the EU in December 2021, for human rights abuses committed in its operations in several countries, including in CAR and Libya.<sup>121</sup> In 2022, following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Prigozhin and an increasing number of companies and individuals associated with the Wagner Group were targeted by a broad range of Western sanctions, including from the EU, Canada and the UK.<sup>122</sup> The January 2023 designation of Wagner as a 'transnational criminal organization' by the US is a further significant step.<sup>123</sup>

Yet Prigozhin is just one of many prominent Russian business interests in Africa. In the course of our research, our team compiled a database of Russian companies and individuals with business interests in Africa that are subject to sanctions, with the aim of understanding how Wagner fits within the broader context of sanctioned Russian business interests on the continent. Our research has also aimed to understand the impact that Western sanctions – which escalated during 2022 – have so far had on targeted Russian entities working in Africa, and how these entities (such as the Wagner Group) have responded to these wide-ranging financial restrictions.



**FIGURE 9** Sanctioned Russian companies and individual business interests in Africa.

DISCLAIMER: Russia has condemned Western sanctions imposed following the invasion of Ukraine.<sup>124</sup> The GI-TOC does not take a position on the justifiability of sanctions against a particular entity, nor does inclusion in the underlying dataset mean that any or all of the companies or individuals named are complicit in criminal activity.

## Russia under the Putin administration: A nexus between business and politics

Analysts of Russia’s political landscape have described how Russia’s prominent businesspeople and oligarchs are controlled by the Putin regime in a way that goes far beyond the usual relationship between private business interests and the state.<sup>125</sup> This has become even more pronounced during the Ukraine war, as the administration is requiring state and private assets to be mobilized to support the war effort.

In a kind of symbiotic relationship, these individuals are dependent on the state for their economic survival, but in turn provide political and economic support for Kremlin policy.<sup>126</sup> As Karen Dawisha, an academic and analyst of Russian politics, has described, ‘they [oligarchs and political leaders close to Putin] are able to maintain that power and wealth as long as they don’t challenge Putin publicly’ within the kleptocratic and authoritarian regime that Putin and his allies control.<sup>127</sup> Some rivals of Putin – such as former oligarch Mikhail Khordokovsky (once the richest person in Russia, before a

dispute with Putin saw him arrested, imprisoned and later forced into exile in London) – have found this out at their own expense.<sup>128</sup>

This nexus between business and politics has become more pronounced over time. While Russian organized crime has been shaped by the domestic political environment – from its explosion following the collapse of the Soviet Union to becoming ever-more integrated with the legal business world – so the role of the oligarchs has become more subordinate to the state during the Putin years. Catherine Belton describes this reliance on Putin’s whims in her book *Putin’s People*:

The fortunes being made under Putin were many times larger than those of the Yeltsin years, and the way the tycoons built their wealth was very different [...] Opportunities in business hinged on Putin [...] ‘Putin sees it this way,’ said [a Russian business tycoon who received a state loan]. “I gave you loans. You have to be loyal to me.” [...] It’s a feudal system.<sup>129</sup>

Others have similarly described how, over time, oligarchic interests have become subordinate to the state.<sup>130</sup>

The reliance on Putin’s favour to maintain control of business empires has prompted Russian private businesspeople to become aligned with the aims of Russia’s foreign policy. At the same time, many of these individuals have developed increasingly global business portfolios, finding amenable environments for their investments in Western hubs, such as London, as well as other regions, including Africa.<sup>131</sup>

An example of this is the role of Russian business tycoon Konstantin Malofeyev, who was first sanctioned by the US and other Western countries in 2014 for his role in providing financial support to separatist movements in Crimea.<sup>132</sup> Russia considers such sanctions illegal. In April 2022, the succinctly named Autonomous Noncommercial Organization for the Study and Development of International Cooperation in the Economic Sphere International Agency of Sovereign Development (IASD) was also designated by the US as an organization acting on behalf of Malofeyev in Africa and Asia. According to the US designation, this organization ‘markets itself as a financial advisory structure that offers services, like debt restructuring, to African governments. In practice, IASD, in close coordination with the GoR [Government of Russia], pursues deals around the world to facilitate business opportunities for sanctioned Russian companies and to enrich Malofeyev himself.’<sup>133</sup> While ostensibly a private business entity, the IASD stands accused of being a proxy for the Russian state in promoting its interests overseas.

Metals tycoon Oleg Deripaska told the UK’s *Financial Times* in 2008 that he would surrender control over the aluminium giant Rusal (of which he is a founder) if the Russian state asked him to. ‘If the state says we need to give it up, we’ll give it up,’ he said. ‘I don’t separate myself from the state. I have no other interests.’ He later denied that these comments had been made seriously.<sup>134</sup> Rusal – one of the world’s largest aluminium producers – operates two bauxite mines in Guinea. Rusal also owns a stake in the multibillion-dollar mining group Nor Nickel,<sup>135</sup> which also has mining interests in South Africa and Botswana. Deripaska relinquished control over Rusal and its parent company EN+ Group in a sanctions deal with the US Treasury in 2019,<sup>136</sup> after both companies and Deripaska personally had been sanctioned in 2018 in reaction to alleged Russian meddling in the 2016 US election.<sup>137</sup> (Deripaska still part-owns Rusal through his stake in EN+ Group.)



Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska controls aluminium giant Rusal, which operates two bauxite mines in Guinea. Rusal also owns a stake in Nor Nickel, which has mining interests in South Africa and Botswana. © Andrey Rudakov/Bloomberg via Getty Images

The Wagner Group can be seen as an example of this trend, in which private and state foreign policy interests come together (as the case studies later in this report aim to demonstrate). As described above, internal documents leaked from Wagner in 2019 show how the political aims of Russia to dislodge Western powers from alliances with African governments formed part of the group's central policy.<sup>138</sup> Aligning with Kremlin interests allows Prigozhin to prosper from Wagner's operations overseas.

## Sanctioned business interests in Africa

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, sanctions imposed by Western countries against Russian financial institutions, Russian state-owned businesses and Russian oligarchs, who are perceived as working in the interests of the Putin regime, have been wide-ranging. As described above, Russia's political and economic engagement in Africa – particularly in the mining sector – has intensified in recent years, primarily in autocratic states and those with weak governance. Sanctions are currently shaping how many of these businesses engage in Africa.

Sanctioned Russian business interests in Africa are particularly prevalent in the mining and energy sectors. Sanctioned business interests are also – perhaps unsurprisingly – concentrated in some countries that had strong ties to the Soviet Union during their respective wars of independence from Western colonial powers, such as Mozambique and Angola, as well as countries such as CAR due to Wagner's prominent role there.

Naturally, any description of oligarch-linked business interests in Africa will only show part of the true picture, which remains heavily shrouded. Vast amounts of Russian assets, including those targeted by sanctions, are stored in offshore accounts and obscured by complex corporate structures in jurisdictions around the world. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists reported that Russian nationals were more prevalent in the Pandora Papers than any other nationality, linked to around 14% of companies whose ownership structures were revealed in the leak.<sup>139</sup>

To give an example of these corporate structures, assets belonging to Prigozhin were targeted by US sanctions in 2019.<sup>140</sup> This included a private jet with the registration M-SAAN. While the jet itself is reportedly registered in the Isle of Man, it is owned by a company registered in the Seychelles (Autolex Transport Ltd.), linked to Prigozhin.<sup>141</sup> According to accounts from the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), this jet was used to transport Russian military officials for talks in Khartoum immediately following the coup that removed beleaguered president Omar al-Bashir from power.<sup>142</sup>

Domestic factors in Africa may also conceal sanctioned Russian business interests. The business landscape in South Sudan provides an example: the country's economy and politics remain heavily controlled by the military elite, especially in key sectors such as oil and mining.<sup>143</sup> Transparency in these sectors is very low, which has led to international civil society organizations calling for greater transparency to stem abuse and corruption by the ruling elite.<sup>144</sup> Officially, few Russian companies are involved in the mining and energy sectors in South Sudan. However, officials at the South Sudan Chamber of Commerce and key development experts are convinced that Russian companies have expanded into South Sudan through proxy companies of other nationalities and local companies.<sup>145</sup> As an official at the Chamber of Commerce described, 'Russians want to partner with locals and other African companies owned by Kenyans, Nigerians and South Africans. Because of fear of sanctions, they don't reveal their identities; they operate in the background. You won't know that they are there. It is difficult to know the number of Russian businesses in the country.'<sup>146</sup>

In some cases, in which oligarchs' business interests have been made public, they have developed ties to African political leadership. Viktor Vekselberg was one of seven oligarchs sanctioned by the US in 2018, owing to perceived links to the Kremlin, and sanctions against him were intensified in 2022.<sup>147</sup> Vekselberg is a beneficiary of the South African mining operation United Manganese of Kalahari (UMK) through a series of companies registered in Cyprus, according to reporting from South African investigative journalism group amaBhungane.<sup>148</sup> The Cyprus-registered entity New African Manganese Investments (NAMI) – of which Vekselberg is ultimately a beneficiary – owns 49% of UMK. The US sanctions rules find that any entity in which a designated person holds 50% or more interest also automatically becomes designated.<sup>149</sup> The remainder of UMK is partly owned by Chancellor House, a funding front for South Africa's ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC).<sup>150</sup> Dividends from the mining project could therefore significantly benefit the (currently embattled) party's finances. The arrangements between Chancellor House and companies linked to Vekselberg have drawn criticism in South Africa, with observers warning that financial interests could influence the ANC's position on Ukraine.<sup>151</sup>

## The impact of Western sanctions on Russia in Africa

Business interests in Africa have become more strategically important for Russia as Ukraine-related sanctions have hit Russia's domestic economy and disrupted business in Western economies.<sup>152</sup> At the same time, broad sanctions imposed on Russian financial institutions – including their suspension from international payment systems such as SWIFT – are disrupting a significant part of Russian trade relations with Africa, as the vast majority of Africa's international trade (including to Russia) is conducted in dollars or euros.<sup>153</sup> While Russia is a far smaller trading partner to the African continent than, for example, China or the EU, its trade with Africa is concentrated in key strategic areas, such as grain, agricultural fertilizers and arms.<sup>154</sup> Russia's war in Ukraine has therefore had a disruptive impact on African food security.<sup>155</sup>

Sanctions on individual people and businesses have also had an impact on their operations in Africa. Russian gold producer Nordgold provides an example. The company produces over 1 million ounces of gold per year, operating eight mines in Russia, Kazakhstan, Burkina Faso and Guinea.<sup>156</sup> The company is registered in the UK,<sup>157</sup> but its operational headquarters are in Moscow.<sup>158</sup> Alexey Mordashov, reported to be one of the richest people in Russia, stepped down as a director and transferred control of a stake of over 50% of the company (estimated to be worth over US\$1 billion) to his wife in early 2022 after he was targeted by sanctions. In light of sanctions against both Nordgold and Mordashov personally, Nordgold was no longer able to export its gold to a refinery in Switzerland,<sup>159</sup> which posed difficulties for the company in moving stockpiled gold from its African mines. Reporting from news agency Africa Intelligence has said that, in subsequent months, Nordgold has reportedly found new routes for its gold exports, moving gold from Burkina Faso and Guinea to neighbouring countries before exporting to Dubai.<sup>160</sup> Despite these challenges, Nordgold was granted a licence to operate a new gold mine in Burkina Faso in December 2022.<sup>161</sup>

Alexey Mordashov's superyacht, *Nord*, in the Kiel Fjord. Mordashov, who earned a large part of his fortune as director of gold producer Nordgold, stepped down after being the target of sanctions. © Axel Heimken/picture alliance via Getty Images





The invasion of Ukraine has also reshaped the activities of Russian-owned businesses in Africa, not only because of the direct effect of Western sanctions but also due to the wider impacts of the war on global supply chains. The global routes for aluminium production provide a case study of how this is affecting Africa. The Ukraine war has caused a 'warp in the forcefield' of the aluminium and bauxite industry, to quote one industry expert.<sup>162</sup> Russian aluminium giant Rusal, which operates mines and a refinery, has had to reroute bauxite exports that were previously being transported to a refinery in Ukraine.<sup>163</sup>

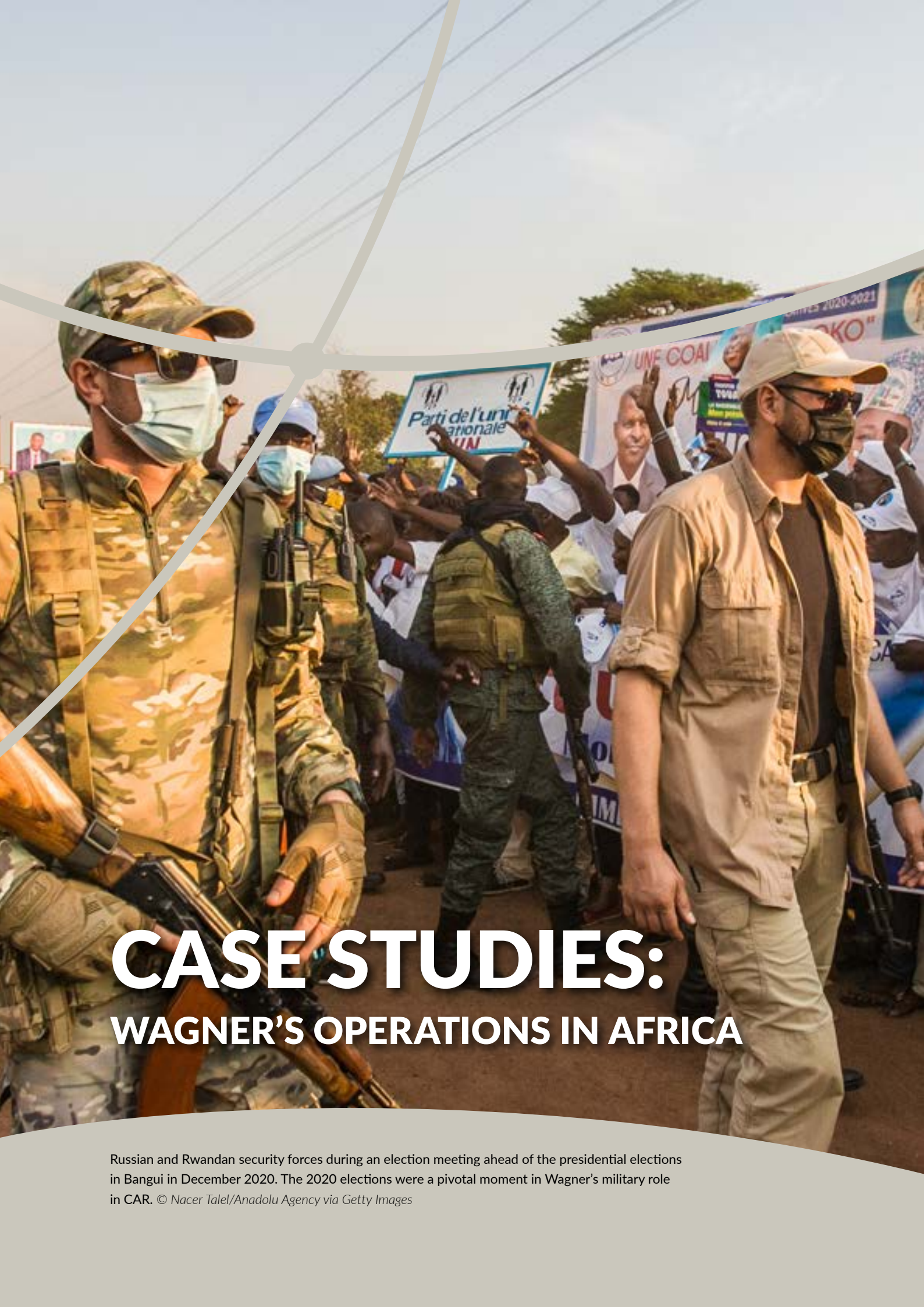
In short, as a result of targeted sanctions on individual oligarchs and their interests, broad sanctions on financial institutions, and the complex knock-on effects on global supply chains, the Ukraine invasion is reshaping how Russian businesses engage in Africa.

In response, Russian firms are looking for ways to circumvent sanctions. Monitoring of Russian-affiliated oil tankers in south Atlantic waters, surrounding Africa, found that the number of instances of these vessels 'going dark' and conducting ship-to-ship operations – which may be an indication of illicit oil transfers – doubled in the late 2022 compared to previous months.<sup>164</sup> This can be seen as a sign of sanctions-busting activity circumventing new restrictions on the sale of Russian oil.

It is also in Russia's interest to encourage shifts towards ways of doing business that can bypass sanctions. In one example of where this influence may have been realized, several aspects of CAR's sudden initiative to launch a cryptocurrency (Sango Coin, named after one of the country's official languages)<sup>165</sup> have raised questions about whether it was a Russian-sponsored project.<sup>166</sup> The initiative has faced backlash from a ruling in CAR's constitutional court,<sup>167</sup> as well as criticism from institutions such as the IMF and the Bank of Central African States (BEAC).<sup>168</sup> Russia has the ability to exercise tremendous influence in CAR's political, economic and military spheres through the Wagner Group (see case studies).

The cryptocurrency initiative emerged following Russian declarations suggesting the use of cryptocurrencies for trading with African countries and circumventing international sanctions.<sup>169</sup> CAR was also advised on the initiative by Cameroonian expert on finance and cryptocurrency Emile Parfait Simb, a controversial businessman against whom several complaints of fraud have reportedly been lodged in Cameroon, France, Canada and the US, relating to his role in cryptocurrency investment schemes.<sup>170</sup> Following his arrest in Cameroon in May 2022, accused of defrauding his cryptocurrency investors, Simb denied any illegal activity.<sup>171</sup> Simb also appears to have developed business ties in Russia, where he attended the St Petersburg Forum in June 2022.<sup>172</sup>

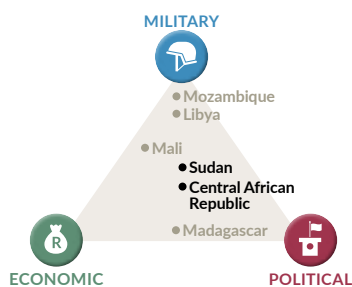
The increasing involvement of the Wagner Group in illicit economies (explored in the case studies), such as smuggling gold from Sudan and CAR, and illegally operating a logging concession in CAR,<sup>173</sup> could also be seen as a response to Western sanctions in finding alternative routes for shipping resources to Russia. More broadly, observers have warned that illicit arms sales to Africa from Russia, illegal mining and resource smuggling could increase as forms of sanctions-busting.<sup>174</sup>



# CASE STUDIES: WAGNER'S OPERATIONS IN AFRICA

Russian and Rwandan security forces during an election meeting ahead of the presidential elections in Bangui in December 2020. The 2020 elections were a pivotal moment in Wagner's military role in CAR. © Nacer Talel/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

Wagner's threefold mode of engagement – encompassing military operations, political strategy and disinformation operations, and economic projects – is manifested differently in each African country in which the group has been involved. The following case studies aim to describe how Wagner has engaged in each country, and how this fits in the overall tripartite model of Wagner engagement. Our research has also focused on Wagner's economic activities and where this crosses into criminality.



## Wagner's closest state partnerships: CAR and Sudan

### Central African Republic

CAR is the most developed example of the Wagner business model in Africa. In exchange for access to natural resources – principally diamonds and gold – Wagner has provided President Faustin-Archange Touadéra with military and political support which has proven pivotal in sustaining his embattled presidency against an onslaught of rebel groups. The extent to which Wagner is embedded and wields influence in CAR can be characterized as 'state capture'.

The military support was first triggered following a high-level meeting between CAR and Russian authorities in Sochi in October 2017.<sup>175</sup> Shortly after, a team of Russian close security personnel was sent to the presidency in Bangui. In January 2018, they were followed by Russian military trainers and a first shipment of weapons, for which Russia had obtained authorization from the UN in exemption of an arms embargo. The status of the Russian military trainers was not made official for some time, and they did not wear any Wagner or Russian military signs on their uniforms. As reporting from a UN Panel of Experts stated at the time, the Russian security personnel among the presidential guard were replaced in April 2018 with Russian nationals employed by Sewa Security Forces, which is believed to be a Wagner front company.<sup>176</sup> The 'Russian military instructors' soon became embedded with the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) across the country during 2018.



Members of the close protection unit for President Touadéra, composed of Russian operatives from Sewa Security, seen in Berengo in 2018. Russian military consultants set up training for FACA and the Internal Security Forces after delivering weapons to the country. © Florent Vergnes/AFP via Getty Images

A Russian national (and former intelligence officer) Valery Zakharov – who has been linked to Prigozhin’s company M Finance and is understood to have been the head of the Wagner structure in CAR at the start of its operations<sup>177</sup> – was installed as national security advisor to President Touadéra.<sup>178</sup> Zakharov was since succeeded in 2022 by another Wagner commander, Vitali Perfilev,<sup>179</sup> who, recent reports suggest, also left CAR in late 2022.<sup>180</sup> Wagner operators, including Prigozhin himself, reportedly played a key role in negotiating a 2019 peace agreement in Khartoum between the CAR government and rebel groups.<sup>181</sup>

The December 2020 elections were a pivotal moment in Wagner’s military role in CAR. A loose alliance of armed groups (the Coalition of Patriots for Change, CPC) launched an offensive against the government to disrupt the election. FACA, working closely with Wagner fighters and a contingent of the Rwandan army, blocked their march towards Bangui, then organized a successful counter-offensive from January to March 2021, pushing back the rebels far from the capital.<sup>182</sup>

Reporting from the UN Panel of Experts on CAR at the time described how, ‘deliveries of materiel in support of State security forces were observed at a pace unprecedented since the establishment of the arms

embargo in 2013, some of which were non-compliant and others in violation of the embargo’ and how ‘Russian instructors [...] played a prominent role in military operations to push back CPC combatants’.<sup>183</sup>

Wagner became the survival guarantee of the CAR government and progressively became more influential in directing FACA operations, acting independently of FACA and guiding the national security apparatus. In doing so, Wagner has sidelined both MINUSCA (the UN peacekeeping force in CAR) and the EU, which was previously supporting security sector reform.<sup>184</sup> On the ground, Wagner forces have been accused of preventing human rights investigations by MINUSCA personnel,<sup>185</sup> blocking MINUSCA patrols and harassing UN staff.<sup>186</sup>

Operating seemingly without any accountability, soldiers believed to be employed by Wagner have been accused of carrying out horrific human rights violations, which have allegedly intensified since the counter-offensive in early 2021.

These allegations have been made by the group of UN experts on CAR, who raised concerns in 2021 that Wagner and other groups in CAR were ‘committing systemic and grave human rights and international humanitarian law violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances and summary execution, a pattern that



*Tourist*, an action movie shot in CAR, dramatically portrays Wagner troops saving the country from the rebels. T-shirts bearing the slogan *Je suis Wagner* were distributed at the film screening in Bangui in 2021.

Photos: Screenshot from *Tourist* (left); Tom Bullock on Twitter (right)

continues unabated and unpunished'.<sup>187</sup> Other groups such as Human Rights Watch have subsequently documented and collected victims' accounts of abuses such as torture, arbitrary detention and extrajudicial killings.<sup>188</sup>

Under international pressure, a special commission of inquiry was set up by the CAR government to shed light on violence in the country. It partly confirmed in November 2021 that human rights and international humanitarian law violations have been committed, including by 'Russian instructors', but the report concluded that only the Russian courts are competent to judge them.<sup>189</sup>

Even though many Wagner troops have been withdrawn to redirect forces towards Ukraine<sup>190</sup> – unofficial estimates from local observers, UN and diplomatic staff in CAR suggest the number of troops has more than halved – the preceding years' events mean the mercenaries remain a powerful influence within CAR's security apparatus.

Along with the military support has come a range of soft-power political techniques to win the hearts and minds of CAR citizens: from the creation of a pro-Russian radio station (Lengo Songo)<sup>191</sup> to sports and cultural events sponsored by Wagner's mining companies (which included the circulation of a cartoon fictionalizing Russian cooperation with CAR against the rebels as a tale about a

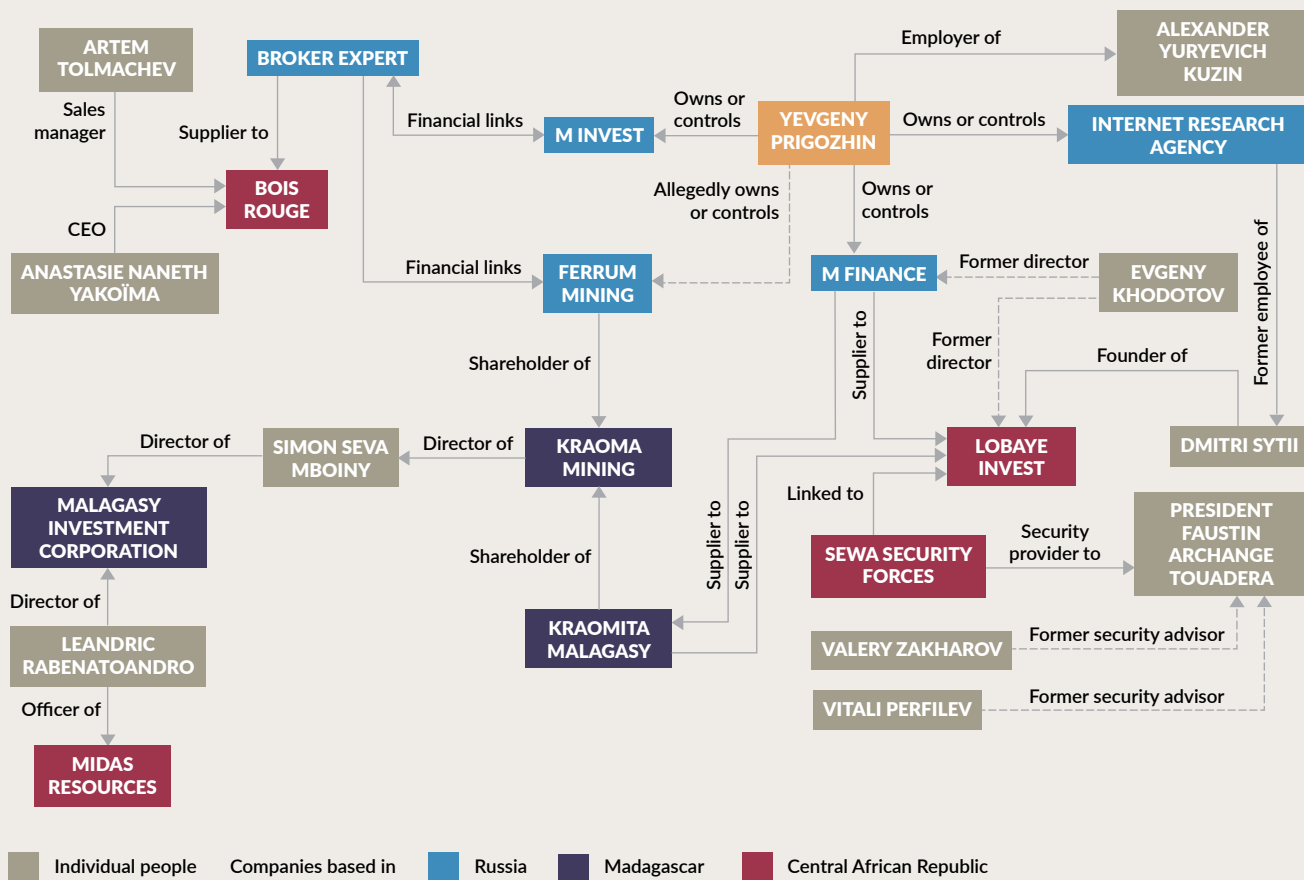
friendly bear helping a lion fight off hyenas).<sup>192</sup> *Tourist*, an action movie shot in CAR, dramatically portrays Wagner troops saving the country from the rebels, including some Wagner mercenaries playing their own roles.<sup>193</sup> Translated into Sango, the film screened in a crowded Bangui stadium in May 2021, with *Je suis Wagner* ('I am Wagner') T-shirts distributed as merchandise.<sup>194</sup> A coordinated network of pro-Russian Facebook pages operating across central and West Africa amplified the distribution of the French version of the film.<sup>195</sup>

The military dependence of the CAR presidency on Wagner and the popular support generated around the Wagner project have translated into a very influential political role for the mercenary organization. Wagner counts several close allies within the CAR political elite.<sup>196</sup> Wagner troops reportedly intervened to prevent the minister of livestock, former UPC warlord Hassan Bouba, from being brought before a special criminal court for war crimes;<sup>197</sup> Bouba is now back in office.<sup>198</sup> According to local sources, the resignation of Prime Minister Henri-Marie Dondra in February 2022 is thought to have been due to his opposition to Wagner's financial pressure, and a proposed constitutional change to allow a third mandate for Touadéra has been supported by Wagner and Russia, who consider him a reliable partner.<sup>199</sup>

In return for the military support – as the state budget of the cash-strapped CAR government does not reflect any payments to the mercenaries – Wagner has developed a huge footprint in CAR’s economy, in the formal and informal sectors and the fiscal system. Several of these companies have been linked to Russian national Dmitri Sytii, who is understood to be one of the leaders of the Wagner force in CAR and is also director of the ‘Russian House’ cultural centre in Bangui. Sytii is reported to have been injured in a parcel bomb attack in Bangui in December 2022.<sup>200</sup> The companies’ most significant operations are in the mining sector (the largest provider of export revenue to the CAR government) and logging. However, Wagner-linked companies have also been identified in other sectors. First Industrial Company – reportedly registered in Sytii’s name – runs a brewery and drinks production operation in Bangui.<sup>201</sup>

Three key companies – Lobaye Invest, Midas Ressources and Bois Rouge – show the hallmarks of how the Wagner business model operates.

First, Wagner-linked companies have been granted access to natural resources by the CAR government, often expropriating existing rights granted to other companies. The earliest of these was Lobaye Invest, a mining company registered in Bangui in late October 2017, even before the first Wagner troops arrived in CAR.<sup>202</sup> The company has received licences to mine gold and diamonds across a wide swathe of CAR territory.<sup>203</sup>



**FIGURE 10** Network of Wagner-linked companies and individuals in CAR and connected entities overseas.



Midas Ressources, a Wagner-linked company, has received licences to mine gold across a large segment of CAR territory, including at the expansive Ndassima gold mine pictured here. © *Thierry Bresillon/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

Mining company Midas Ressources – named, perhaps appropriately, after a king of Greek myth whose story is a parable about the dangers of excessive greed – was granted a mining exploitation permit by the CAR government on 17 March 2020 to mine in Ndassima, an area with extensive gold deposits.<sup>204</sup> The existing licence for the area – which had been held by Canadian company Axmin – was revoked.<sup>205</sup> Similarly, a local CAR logging company had been granted the forestry concession for the area in Lobaye province which was subsequently cancelled and reallocated to Bois Rouge.<sup>206</sup>

Axmin has since been in negotiations with the CAR government to either restore their licence or agree damages for taking away their mining rights.<sup>207</sup> Wagner forces have since taken over the site, bringing in machinery and geological experts.<sup>208</sup> Midas is also reportedly the only mining company in CAR to receive an industrial mining permit, which gives it special status regarding its gold and gems exports (in that the exports do not have to be mediated by a state body).<sup>209</sup>

The company website and company contact number are linked to a former MP (elected in 2011 until the parliament was dissolved in 2013).<sup>210</sup> The politician was, as of 2017, a senior member of the MOUNI Party, which is part of the government coalition.<sup>211</sup> The party has consistently

backed Touadéra.<sup>212</sup> This raises questions about Midas's political linkages in CAR.

Second, Wagner forces have provided the muscle necessary to defend these economic interests. Local testimony has alleged that Russian mercenaries and CAR troops have violently expelled local miners from the deposits and carried out summary executions around the mining areas granted to Midas.<sup>213</sup> Investigations by The Dossier Center, an organization backed by exiled Putin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsky which has published several investigations based on documents leaked from Wagner-linked companies, have found Wagner troops registered on Lobaye Invest's payroll.<sup>214</sup> In July 2018, three Russian journalists were killed while investigating Wagner's activities in CAR, immediately before planned filming at gold mines operated by Lobaye Invest.<sup>215</sup> Research by the investigative project All Eyes on Wagner found that the area of Bois Rouge's logging concession was brought back under FACA and Wagner control from rebel groups at the time that the permit was reallocated, suggesting Wagner may similarly be providing security to Bois Rouge.<sup>216</sup>

Where Wagner troops have not been able to secure these interests, these companies have pursued other means. In 2021, Midas was accused by the UN Panel of Experts on CAR of working with the Union for Peace in the Central



The websites of Wagner-linked companies Midas Ressources and Bois Rouge, both of which have been granted access to natural resources by the CAR government. The two websites clearly use the same template, even though ostensibly they are separate companies.

African Republic (UPC) rebel group,<sup>217</sup> who they were paying to provide security at their mine, in what was described by the panel as 'a systematic violation of the sanctions regime'.<sup>218</sup>

Third, while these companies are all ostensibly independent (both from each other and from Wagner), investigations have revealed their connections to other parts of the Prigozhin business empire.

The connections between Prigozhin and Lobaye Invest have been well documented: the company is under US sanctions for being under Prigozhin's control.<sup>219</sup> The Dossier Center reported that Lobaye Invest is a subsidiary of M Finance, a Russian-based company controlled by Prigozhin.<sup>220</sup> The former director of Lobaye Invest, Evgeny Khodotov, is also former General Director of M Finance. Customs records show that M Finance has also supplied Lobaye Invest with equipment.<sup>221</sup> Dmitri Sytii, who is a founder of Lobaye Invest and (as mentioned above) one of the top Wagner officials in CAR, was identified in

US sanctions lists as a former employee of the Internet Research Agency, the infamous 'troll farm' with which Prigozhin sought to influence the 2016 US election.<sup>222</sup>

The All Eyes on Wagner project has reported on the connections between Bois Rouge and Wagner: the company's logging areas have been under the control of Wagner forces; import records show that Bois Rouge is supplied by companies in Russia, such as Broker Expert, which has been shown to play a role in providing financing and equipment to Wagner-linked companies overseas; and although Bois Rouge is ostensibly a CAR company, the project sourced photographic evidence of what appears to be Russian equipment being used by the company, and found that the company has been presented as Russian overseas.<sup>223</sup>

Midas Ressources, although registered in CAR as a Russian entity,<sup>224</sup> has connections to Wagner-linked companies based in Madagascar. Léandric Rabenatoandro, a Malagasy national who has represented Midas Ressources, has links to the director of Kraoma Mining, a joint mining venture between state-owned Kraomita Malagasy and Ferrum Mining, a company alleged to be owned by Prigozhin.<sup>225</sup> The joint venture, Kraoma, is purported to have been set up as a quid pro quo arrangement, giving Wagner a slice of Madagascar's mineral resources in return for their interference in the country's 2018 presidential election. Import records show that Kraomita Malagasy also made shipments from Russia on behalf of Lobaye Invest.<sup>226</sup> This included several consignments of riot protection gear, such as batons, helmets and shields, between 2018 and 2020.

Outside of the mining concessions that Wagner has been able to gain control over, the group has also been accused of looting and smuggling diamonds and gold. In Lobaye province, as far back as 2019, Wagner has reportedly been covertly buying diamonds from local collectors.<sup>227</sup> The group has allegedly purchased gold and diamonds directly from rebel groups.<sup>228</sup> Elsewhere in CAR, Wagner troops have attacked artisanal mining communities and confiscated diamonds and gold.<sup>229</sup> Diamville, another company dealing in diamonds that investigative work from the All Eyes on Wagner project has linked to the Wagner ecosystem in CAR, has similarly been accused of engaging in illegal practices: trading in gems looted from mining sites, and coercion of diamond collectors.<sup>230</sup>





Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), leader of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces, meet in Moscow in February 2022. Hemedti's visit to Moscow coincided with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. © Sudan's Presidential Palace/ Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

This has even included cross-border incursions into South Sudan. Though monitoring of Wagner deployment in CAR has found their presence to be concentrated in the west of the country,<sup>231</sup> a local official in Raga County in South Sudan (an area on the borders with CAR and Sudan) confirmed that Russian mercenaries have been crossing into the area to conduct illegal mining operations, with no regard for the international border.<sup>232</sup> State presence is limited in the remote Raga region (where the local government primarily operates on revenues from the gold fields).<sup>233</sup>

Wagner also appears poised to involve itself in other informal and illicit economies. The annual cattle migration – from Chad and Cameroon to the CAR grazing fields during the dry season from November to April – has long been a lucrative business for armed groups, either engaging in cattle theft or providing protection to herders.<sup>234</sup> UN personnel suspect that Wagner – which has a close relationship with Bouba (the former UPC commander and minister of livestock) – plans to become active in the coming cattle migration.<sup>235</sup>

Wagner has also been involved in collecting customs revenue on behalf of the CAR government, following an agreement signed in April 2021.<sup>236</sup> After an outcry from donors and import companies (who denounced the Russians for illegal taxation),<sup>237</sup> the CAR finance ministry announced that they had cancelled the contract.<sup>238</sup> Despite the ministry's announcement, the direct control of customs revenue collection by Russians in Beloko (the border

crossing on the main supply road between Cameroon and CAR) continues. In March 2022, they blocked and seized trucks carrying weapons for MINUSCA and only gave them back to the UN in Bangui after several requests.<sup>239</sup>

## Sudan

Wagner has similarly developed an economic powerhouse in Sudan. Unlike the diversified economic interests seen in CAR, in Sudan, Wagner-linked companies have been concentrated in the gold sector. Wagner has leveraged relationships with members of Sudan's military elite to profit from gold mining concessions and large-scale gold smuggling. In a 2019 Wagner strategy document detailing its operations in Africa (which was leaked to Western media), Sudan (along with CAR and Madagascar) is identified as a top Wagner priority country.<sup>240</sup>

Wagner's operations in Sudan appear to have followed a November 2017 meeting between Sudan's then-president Omar al-Bashir and Russian officials. A collection of cooperation agreements were signed, including a deal with Prigozhin-owned company M Invest and the Sudanese ministry of minerals, granting M Invest concessions to explore gold mining sites.<sup>241</sup> The 2017 raft of agreements is part of a series of economic and political rapprochements between Moscow and Khartoum – ranging from oil, arms and nuclear energy deals to the potential establishment of a Russian military base at Port Sudan – that have taken place since 2014.<sup>242</sup> This has also translated into mutual support in international forums, such as the UN.<sup>243</sup>

Wagner mercenaries arrived in Khartoum soon after the agreement with M Invest was established.<sup>244</sup> Flight details (originally sourced by the Ukrainian security services) showed over 100 Wagner troops travelling to Sudan in 2018.<sup>245</sup> Wagner operatives, via the company M Invest, provided a range of services to support al-Bashir's embattled presidency, including disinformation campaigns and advice to suppress pro-democracy protests, outlining how to conduct disinformation campaigns and hold public executions.<sup>246</sup>

After al-Bashir was ousted, the relationship with Wagner persisted: Prigozhin's private jet was found to have shuttled Sudanese officials for talks in Russia just days after al-Bashir's removal from office.<sup>247</sup> In the months since a military coup in October 2021, Wagner has intensified its relationship with General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo,<sup>248</sup> leader of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the paramilitary group that grew out of the Janjaweed militias notorious for their atrocities during the war in Darfur. Dagalo, widely known as 'Hemedti', is second in command to General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan within Sudan's ruling Sovereign Council. Hemedti visited Moscow at the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.<sup>249</sup>

Wagner has maintained its military presence in Sudan. Videos that emerged on social media in 2022 appear to show Wagner troops training the Sudanese army and RSF forces.<sup>250</sup> The group also maintains a base in an area named Um-Dafuq, close to the border with CAR, at which armoured vehicles and helicopters have been stationed.<sup>251</sup> Wagner troops have been accused of massacring civilian miners at artisanal mining sites in the Um-Dafuq area in April and June 2022.<sup>252</sup>

As seen in CAR, Wagner has also provided strategic political support to Sudan. Disinformation campaigns, using social media pages operated by Sudanese staff to shape political opinion, have been a consistent part of the group's playbook since it arrived in 2017.<sup>253</sup> Facebook shut down several of these pages in 2019 and 2021, linking them to the Prigozhin-backed Internet Research Agency.<sup>254</sup> Russia also attempted to promote a Russian academic with ties to Prigozhin inside the UN group of experts on Sudan.<sup>255</sup>

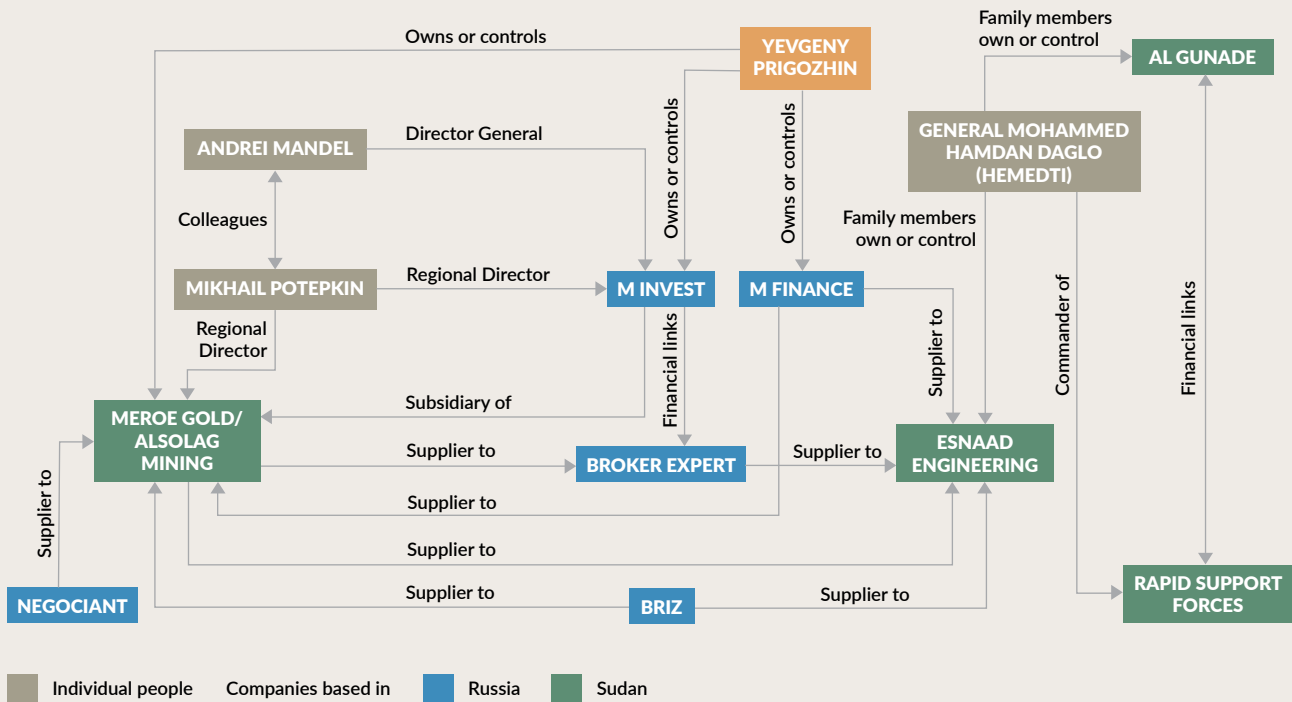
The current relationship is a symbiotic one for Russia and Sudan's military leaders, as both countries are looking to shore up their economies in the face of biting international sanctions. 'It's a form of mutualism. They will do anything to sustain this, even if it means using underworld approaches,' said an influential South Sudanese policy and development expert, who was based in Khartoum before South Sudan's independence.<sup>256</sup>

Sudan's military leaders wield enormous power over the country's economy: a 2022 study from investigative organization C4ADS, which mapped out military control of the country's economy, described the military as a 'cartel' of Sudan's 'deep state' that obstructed any shifts towards democracy under the previous civilian government.<sup>257</sup> The October 2021 coup further concentrated political, economic and military power within the same elite.

This kind of elite military control is particularly evident in the gold sector. The RSF, and by extension Hemedti, wrested control of major gold mining sites in Darfur and South Kordofan, violently displacing small-scale miners.<sup>258</sup> The vast personal wealth that Hemedti has accrued from interests in the gold trade underpins his political power.<sup>259</sup> Investigations have tied Hemedti and members of his family to several companies registered in Sudan and the UAE which have interests in the gold sector and a role in channelling funds to the RSF.<sup>260</sup> Foremost among these is the major gold trading company Al Gunade.<sup>261</sup>

A slew of UN and NGO reports have described how Sudan's gold sector is rife with smuggling and high-level kleptocracy.<sup>262</sup> The bulk of Sudan's gold (its largest export commodity)<sup>263</sup> is smuggled abroad. Hemedti – among other leaders – has been accused of benefiting from large-scale gold smuggling.<sup>264</sup>

It is within this context that Wagner has expanded its interests in the gold sector. According to a human rights advocate based in Darfur, 'To make headway in Sudan, if you are a potential investor, you first have to know the big people in authority, and in this case the military. Russians understand patronage. Hamdan [Hemedti] is in power because he was bankrolled by a number of Russian companies interested in our resources. And he knows what payback means; it's a mutual relationship.'<sup>265</sup>



**FIGURE 11** Network of Wagner-linked companies and individuals in Sudan.

Wagner’s main entity in Sudan’s gold sector is a US-sanctioned company previously called Meroe Gold, a subsidiary of Prigozhin-owned M Invest. Protests from local miners against the award of mining concessions to Meroe Gold in 2018 were met with violence, which reportedly left one demonstrator dead, shot by a Russian security guard.<sup>266</sup> Meroe now controls a number of gold mining and processing operations concentrated in River Nile State.<sup>267</sup> The company was recently renamed Al Solag Mining (ج لوصلا in Arabic).<sup>268</sup>

Import records show that Meroe Gold has imported a range of military and construction equipment, including helicopters that have since been identified in neighbouring CAR, suggesting the company has been a supplier for Russian mercenary operations there.<sup>269</sup> The latest identifiable import of this kind, a transport helicopter, took place in early 2021. Meroe Gold has also been supplied by other Prigozhin-controlled companies in Russia, such as Broker Expert.<sup>270</sup>

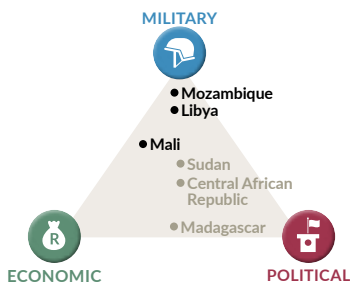
As seen in CAR, Wagner’s companies in Sudan are directed by individuals who have a history as part of Prigozhin’s operations. The US Treasury Department reports that Mikhail Potepkin, regional director for M Invest and Meroe Gold in Sudan, was formerly employed by the Internet Research Agency.<sup>271</sup>

Meroe Gold appears to have a cooperative relationship with the Sudanese military. Meroe Gold contracted a security company connected to Sudanese military intelligence services – Aswar – to provide planes for Wagner’s use in Sudan via military airfields, as well as logistical support and weapons.<sup>272</sup> During the period of the civilian transitional government, a government task force aimed at ‘dismantling’ the structures that underpinned the regime of al-Bashir and recovering state assets made two interventions in the activities of Meroe Gold. First, it denied a request by Meroe Gold Agricultural company (a subsidiary) to transfer machinery to a company owned by the military.<sup>273</sup> Second, it suspended the transfer of ownership of Meroe Gold to Al Solag.<sup>274</sup> After the military coup in October 2021, General al-Burhan suspended the committee and the transfer to Al Solag was finalized.

Import data also shows that Meroe Gold received several import shipments on behalf of Esnaad Engineering, a company controlled by members of Hamedti’s family.<sup>275</sup> This includes several consignments of riot-control gear (both in 2019 and 2020), similar to shipments made to Wagner-linked companies in CAR. Esnaad Engineering has also received import shipments from Prigozhin’s Russian-based companies (such as M Finance and Broker Expert) directly.<sup>276</sup>

Meroe Gold is just one of several Russian-linked mining companies with interests in Sudan, some of which have reportedly also developed links with the military authorities.

Wagner's gold mining operations in Sudan and its proximity to the country's military leaders are being used to carry out gold smuggling on an extensive scale. Whistleblowers from within the aviation industry and sources within the Sudanese government have described to Western media investigations how military cargo planes have been used to smuggle gold by the tonne from military airports in Sudan to Russia. Meroe Gold's processing plant at Al-Ibediyya, River Nile State, was described by CNN as the 'nerve center' of Russia's gold smuggling operations in Sudan.<sup>277</sup> This has allegedly intensified since the start of the war with Ukraine, to bolster Russia's gold reserves and counter Western sanctions.<sup>278</sup> A joint statement in March 2022 from the embassies of Norway, the US and the UK in Sudan alleged that Wagner was engaged in 'illicit activities related to gold mining'<sup>279</sup> and undermining the rights of the Sudanese people.



## Primarily mercenary engagement: Mozambique, Libya and Mali

Wagner's imprint in Mozambique, Mali and Libya has primarily been a military one. Unlike its engagement in CAR or Sudan, the mercenary group has not – for various reasons – developed the same level of economic engagement or political influence in these three countries. In Mozambique, Wagner troops suffered an ignominious defeat in 2019 and withdrew. In Libya, while Wagner has had a robust presence since 2019, factors in Libya's fractured political landscape and the nature of its resources have prevented Wagner from developing a widespread economic footprint. In Mali, Wagner's intervention is still in its early stages: while it is likely that the group is negotiating access to the country's mining resources (as seen in Sudan and CAR), this is seemingly not yet fully developed.

### Mozambique

A small force of 200 Wagner troops was first deployed to Mozambique in September 2019, to shore up the Mozambican military in their fight against an insurgent group in the northern region of Cabo Delgado, which, since its first attacks in October 2017, had grown in strength and aligned itself with the Islamic State.<sup>280</sup> This came weeks after a visit of Mozambique's President Felipe Nyusi to Russia – Mozambique's old ally from its liberation struggle – to meet with Putin.<sup>281</sup>

Just two months later, Wagner withdrew from Cabo Delgado. This was after the group had suffered around a dozen casualties at the hands of the insurgents.<sup>282</sup> Allegations of 'serious disagreements' between the Mozambican military and Wagner over strategy also emerged.<sup>283</sup> It was also reported that the government of Mozambique had expected that the Russian troops would be deployed by their old ally, rather than a private contractor, a telling indication of close coordination between Wagner and the Russian state.<sup>284</sup>

If the Wagner intervention in Mozambique had grown into a long-term presence, the group could potentially have developed interests in mining and natural resources as it has done in CAR and Sudan. Cabo Delgado, despite being one of Mozambique's poorest and most marginalized regions, has a vast wealth of natural resources, including



A Russian-made Libyan Mil Mi-8 helicopter flies over Benghazi in November 2020. Wagner troops operate air defence systems and drones in Libya and provide additional security to Khalifa Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces. © Abdullah Doma/AFP via Getty Images

some of the largest ruby deposits in the world and enormous offshore gas reserves. The agreement between Wagner and the Mozambican government – including its costs and how the troops were paid for – was never made public.<sup>285</sup>

## Libya

Wagner has provided military assistance to Libyan warlord Khalifa Haftar, commander of the LAAF, since at least February 2019 in the conflict against the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA).<sup>286</sup>

Wagner support to the LAAF became publicly recognized during the war for Tripoli, a war lasting from April 2019 until around May 2020, during which the LAAF attempted to take control of the capital. Open-source evidence accumulated during this period in the form of videos of Wagner mercenaries in Tripoli, the later discovery of dead mercenaries and abandoned Wagner documents. The military impact of this intervention was also too significant for it to remain covert. The UN Panel of Experts on Libya later confirmed that Wagner mercenaries had participated in the war.<sup>287</sup>

In the earlier stages of its deployment in 2019, Wagner had supported the LAAF in expanding its dominion in the south-west of the country against resistance from the Tebu ethnic group.<sup>288</sup> A Tebu commander involved in fighting the LAAF in an agricultural area south of the

regional capital, Sebha, told our research team in early 2019 that he was taken to meet Russian soldiers who were supporting the LAAF from a sophisticated mobile control room.<sup>289</sup> The Wagner support played a role in persuading the Tebu to abandon resistance.

Turkish support to the GNA eventually forced Wagner and the LAAF back from Tripoli. Since then, Wagner has kept a lower profile and its forces deployed in other LAAF-controlled areas.<sup>290</sup> Wagner troops operate air defence systems and drones and provide additional security to the LAAF. The group has also operated and helped to maintain warplanes supplied to the LAAF by the Russian state.

Although the Wagner Group's presence in Libya is murky, and its local partners in the LAAF are suspected of being deeply involved in transnational organized crime, there is little evidence that the group is either taking a significant role in exploiting natural resources or in illicit economies, as seen in Sudan and CAR.

The reasoning for this may be found in the structural dynamics of Libya's main resource: oil. The politics around oil in Libya are complex: while many parts of Libya's oil fields are under the physical control of Haftar, or groups allied to him, sales of Libyan oil to the international market can only take place via the state oil company, the National Oil Corporation (NOC), based in Tripoli. This arrangement – divided as it is between the warring parties – makes it

more difficult for Wagner commercial interests to be accommodated in Libya in the same way that they have been in CAR and Sudan.<sup>291</sup> Prigozhin himself complained in early 2022 that, in his view, the NOC is controlled by Western interests, preventing other powers (such as Russia) from gaining a foothold in the industry.<sup>292</sup>

The oil industry also presents a different challenge in terms of illicit flows than the smuggling of gold and diamonds. 'In Libya, the dynamics are structurally not the same,' said one expert observer. 'While fuel smuggling is a multibillion-dollar industry, the capital-intensive nature of the sector, coupled with the logistics involved in smuggling the oil, render this a slightly more expensive and complicated effort to carry out', meaning the extent to which fuel smuggling – rather than state-sanctioned access to the resource – could be used by Wagner may also be limited.<sup>293</sup>

If not providing sanctions-busting revenue (beyond receiving payment for the mercenary support) in the form of gold, diamonds or oil, Wagner's presence in Libya – embedded at airbases across the country – can be seen as a geopolitical and strategic advantage. Wagner appears to be using these Libyan airbases to support its operations in Mali and elsewhere in the Sahel.<sup>294</sup>

Wagner's presence at these airbases also offers Russia potential leverage over the supply of Libyan energy to Europe. Although the group does not have any permanent role guarding oil fields, its importance to overall LAAF control in oil-rich regions such as the Fezzan gives it access to these strategically important locations. In July 2020, the NOC issued a statement calling on 'all mercenaries to withdraw from Libyan oil facilities' after a Wagner contingent was mobilized at an oil facility,<sup>295</sup> showing concern about the potential influence of Russian mercenary presence on critical energy infrastructure.

## Mali

Mali is the newest theatre for Wagner military operations. The country – which is undergoing an all-encompassing security crisis that started with an insurgency in the north in 2012 – had two successive military coups in 2020 and 2021.<sup>296</sup> The relationship between the Malian military and France, the Sahelian country's main international partner, worsened to the extent that Paris put an end to Operation Barkhane, its counterterrorism mission in Mali. By mid-August 2022, all French troops based in Mali had been relocated to other parts of the Sahel and West Africa.<sup>297</sup>

The end of Operation Barkhane, combined with strong anti-French sentiment among the Malian authorities, opened a window of opportunity for greater Russian engagement in Mali.<sup>298</sup> The first Wagner troops were deployed to Bamako in November 2021, provoking a wave of condemnation by Mali's Western partners, including France and the US.<sup>299</sup> Since 2022, at least 1 000 Wagner officers have been deployed in Mali, mostly in the capital region but also spread across a series of bases further to the north and east.<sup>300</sup> Satellite images have documented the establishment of Wagner's suspected headquarters close to Bamako's Modibo Keita International Airport.<sup>301</sup>

Military sources who spoke to the GI-TOC on a confidential basis,<sup>302</sup> said the Wagner operations in Mali are under the command of one Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov, encompassing both the Russian instructors stationed in Bamako as well as the troops deployed



Protesters hold a banner reading 'Thank you Wagner' during a demonstration to celebrate France's announcement to withdraw French troops from Mali in February 2022. The end of Operation Barkhane opened a window of opportunity for greater Russian involvement in Mali. © Florent Vergnes/AFP via Getty Images

to the north of Mali. Maslov was previously identified as a Wagner commander in CAR in information shared by the Ukrainian security services in October 2017.<sup>303</sup>

In February 2022, Mali's transitional authorities said that the Russians identified in Mali were only instructors and not involved in combat roles.<sup>304</sup> Nevertheless, many testimonies from the local population and media reports confirm that Wagner contractors have been seen in joint patrols with the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) along the border with Burkina Faso and Niger, on the western frontier with Mauritania and in northern Mali.<sup>305</sup>

In the short months since Wagner's first deployment, evidence has mounted of human rights abuses and massacres of civilians carried out by FAMA and Wagner troops.<sup>306</sup> One of the most serious massacres occurred in March when the Wagner units were involved in an alleged massacre in Moura, a village in the Mopti region controlled by Islamist extremists, where between 350 and 380 Malians were killed over four days.<sup>307</sup> FAMA systematically denied allegations of civilian targeting, abuses and summary executions, despite documented cases.<sup>308</sup> In the year since Wagner's deployment, violence against civilians has soared.<sup>309</sup> Analysis of data by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) concluded that Wagner has targeted civilians in a significantly higher proportion of incidents in CAR and Mali than their allied forces or the insurgent groups they are fighting against.<sup>310</sup>

According to US diplomatic sources, the Malian authorities hired Wagner for an estimated US\$10 million per month.<sup>311</sup> Officially, it is unclear how Wagner is remunerated, and US\$10 million would be a large share of the Malian national budget, which has spurred speculation that Wagner may be given access to mining concessions in the future, as an alternative form of payment. Mali is one of Africa's largest gold producers<sup>312</sup> and has important reserves of silver, manganese, diamond, lithium and other rare metals.<sup>313</sup>

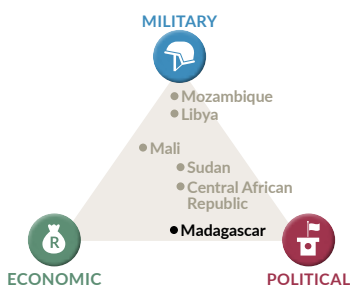
Questioned in February 2022 about Wagner’s payment, Malian Prime Minister Choguel Maiga indicated that ‘they [Wagner] are paid by the money of Malians’, suggesting a direct transfer of money to the mercenary group.<sup>314</sup> However, he did not reject the idea of granting them full access to mining sites. ‘Let’s even suppose that we give them a mine [...] But it is our property. Nothing is above the security of Malians,’ he said. In late August 2022, the director of the National Directorate of Geology and Mines (DNGM), Karambé Awa Goundiam, said that ‘no permit has been granted to a military group, Wagner or any other force’.<sup>315</sup>

Some reports have claimed that Wagner-linked companies may be making inroads into the Malian mining sector. Investigative reporting from *Jeune Afrique* claimed that that two mining companies – Alpha Development and Marko Mining – have been created by individuals with Wagner links in order to gain access to mining concessions.<sup>316</sup> A representative of Alpha Development denied that the company has links to Wagner.<sup>317</sup>

Our research has not been able to independently confirm any links between these companies and Wagner. By January 2023, the register of mining concessions reported by Mali’s Ministry of Mines did not list any concessions relating to Alpha Development (though this does not, of course, preclude the either that the company has been formed or has such links to Wagner).<sup>318</sup> A company named Malian Russian Mining Company ‘Marco Mining’ SARL, however, has been in possession of exploration permits dating back to 2009 and currently holds a mining licence in the Sikasso region.<sup>319</sup> The company is not, therefore, a recent creation but has been operating in Mali since well before the deployment of any Wagner troops. It may be possible that Wagner has co-opted Marco Mining as an existing Russian company operating in Mali, or that the company has built a cooperative relationship with Wagner, but this is, so far, speculative.<sup>320</sup> Our research found that sources who work with Marco Mining say that the company has recently increased the number of Russian nationals on its board.<sup>321</sup> The terms of Marco Mining’s operating contracts were also reportedly revised following the start of Wagner’s operations in Mali, giving more control to the Russian partners.

## Political and economic engagement: Madagascar and elsewhere

While Wagner has engaged militarily in five African countries, the group’s political operations cover a far larger portion of the continent. The techniques used by Wagner-linked political groups include online disinformation and influence campaigns conducted on social media, sometimes intended to amplify Wagner-supported media outlets. As discussed above, these techniques have been widely used in Sudan and CAR. Other techniques include using politically biased election observation groups to promote pro-Kremlin influence – such as the Prigozhin-backed (and, as of 2021, US-sanctioned) Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC), which sent observers to monitor elections in Zimbabwe – and using Wagner-linked think tanks to influence policy and promote anti-Western civil society voices.<sup>322</sup>





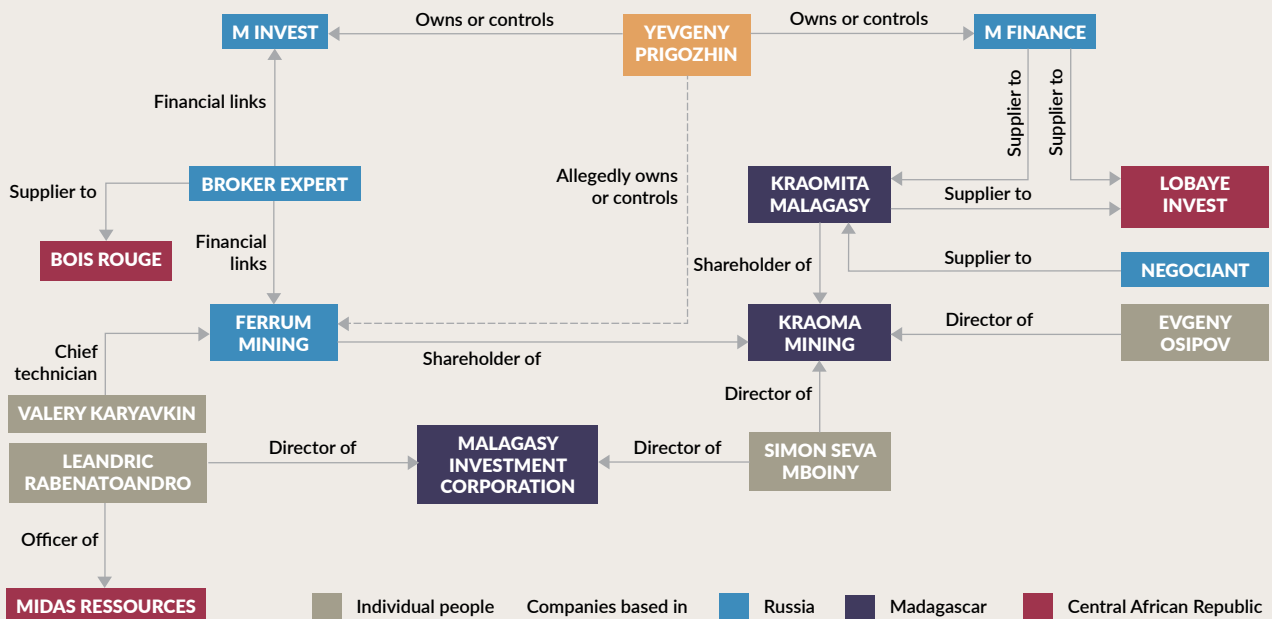
Madagascar is a key example of where such political strategies appear to have been deployed by Wagner to leverage economic gain. As was widely reported at the time, a group of Russian political strategists descended on Madagascar, offering funding for candidates during the 2018 presidential election campaigns.<sup>323</sup> According to media reports, these strategists were allegedly financed by Prigozhin.<sup>324</sup> Prigozhin, however, denied involvement with any political strategists in Africa. While the Russian political strategists were initially there to support the incumbent president, Hery Rajaonarimampianina, they later changed tack to support as many as six other potential candidates<sup>325</sup> – reportedly offering money to their campaigns as well as advertising, supportive media coverage and social media campaigns – before throwing their weight behind the eventual winner, Andry Rajoelina. Meanwhile, sanctioned think tank AFRIC also promoted anti-Western narratives, and Russian agents paid protestors to demonstrate against Western neo-imperialism.<sup>326</sup>

In return, the Russian strategists wanted access to mining resources. ‘Yes, they were from Wagner,’ confirmed a former colleague of André Christian Dieudonné Mailhol, the founder and pastor of the ‘Church of the Apocalypse’, and one of the erstwhile Wagner-supported candidates.<sup>327</sup>

This colleague, who directly worked with the Russian strategists, claimed there was a reciprocal arrangement with Mailhol that, in exchange for their help, the pastor (if victorious) would be obligated to grant them mining concessions in Madagascar.

In the run-up to the 2018 election, Ferrum Mining, a Russian company reportedly controlled by Prigozhin (and represented in Madagascar by a former official of the Russian defence ministry),<sup>328</sup> formed a joint chromium mining venture (Kraoma Mining SA) in partnership with state-owned mining company Kraomita Malagasy.<sup>329</sup> This venture has been reported as a quid pro quo to Rajaonarimampianina for election support, which Wagner later negotiated to keep benefiting from after Rajoelina’s victory.<sup>330</sup>

Ferrum Mining is by no means the only Russian mining interest in Madagascar. There is a long history of Russian business in Madagascar and Russian involvement in the mining sector. One of the longest-established Russian mining companies, Hola Firm, recently saw its former CEO, Evgeny Plekhanov, imprisoned on fraud charges.<sup>331</sup> Our investigation could not establish any confirmed links between Wagner’s influence in Madagascar and Russian mining companies, aside from Ferrum Mining.



**FIGURE 12** Network of Wagner-linked companies and individuals in Madagascar.

As far as Wagner's economic ventures go, Ferrum Mining has not been a success story. Within months, the joint mining venture had run into difficulties, as workers went on strike complaining of unpaid wages,<sup>332</sup> and its operations ceased and have not reopened.<sup>333</sup> However, the economic links that Wagner built in Madagascar have been used to support its operations elsewhere (see the case study on Wagner's operations in CAR, above): Kraomita Malagasy has imported goods from Russia (including riot-control gear in 2020) on behalf of Wagner-linked company Lobaye Invest in CAR, and the director of Midas Ressources, a Malagasy national, also has links to the Ferrum Mining joint venture. This suggests that Madagascar may have proven to be a useful country from which Wagner can support its other business ventures in Africa.

Madagascar is now looking ahead to its next presidential elections in 2023. Two high-level officials in Malagasy counterterrorism police and the national gendarmerie confirmed that Wagner operatives are present in Madagascar today.<sup>334</sup> These sources verified that these individuals are working on behalf of Wagner (rather than on behalf of, for example, Russia's embassy in Madagascar) and again are offering services in exchange for access to mineral resources, especially gold. Publicly, Madagascar's foreign minister has stated that there is no Wagner presence currently in the country.

It must be noted that Madagascar (much like Sudan) has a significant gold smuggling issue, to the extent that President Rajoelina suspended all gold exports from the country in late 2020 in an attempt to curb smuggling, and has not yet reinstated them. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when international commercial flights were suspended to and from Madagascar for a significant period, several incidents of large-scale gold smuggling were uncovered of Malagasy gold en route to Dubai, which implicated several high-level officials.

These Wagner operatives are thought to be currently searching for new candidates to support in the 2023 election, to repeat the strategies seen in 2018. The incumbent president Rajoelina, who received Russian support to bring him to power, has maintained a policy of abstentionism on matters relating to the Ukraine war in UN forums. In October 2022, Rajoelina fired his foreign affairs minister for disobeying this official line, when he voted in support of a motion to condemn Russia's orchestrated referendums to annex four regions of Ukraine.<sup>335</sup>

However, Wagner is apparently still looking for alternative candidates, perhaps for one who can offer more financial benefits or more fulsome support for Russia on the international stage. Three separate sources reported that one candidate, Siteny Randrianasoloniaiko, held a meeting with a Russian 'recruiter' suspected of being linked to Wagner. Randrianasoloniaiko, president of the African Judo Union, is widely perceived as being politically aligned with Russia.<sup>336</sup>

## Maxim Shugalei: A Wagner-linked political strategist in Africa

Of the dozens of Russian political strategists who sought to influence Madagascar's 2018 presidential election, one was a well-known Prigozhin-linked operator: Maxim Shugalei. According to reporting from the BBC, Shugalei entered Madagascar as an 'election observer', but then proceeded to take an active role shaping the chosen candidates' campaigns, including offering cash.<sup>337</sup>

Shugalei describes himself as an 'international sociologist'<sup>338</sup> and political scientist, and he has a long track record of working as a political influencer across Africa and in Afghanistan and Ukraine. His career in Africa shows how Prigozhin-linked groups have deployed the same techniques and, in some cases, the same individuals to shape political events in the Russian interest.

Shugalei is president of the Foundation for National Values Protection (FNZC), an organization that has been sanctioned by the US. The US Treasury claims the FNZC is funded by Prigozhin and has 'facilitated Prigozhin's global influence operations since at least 2019'.<sup>339</sup> The founder of the organization, Alexander Malkevich, has previously denied any connection to Prigozhin.<sup>340</sup> Shugalei likewise told the *Washington Post* in early 2022 that Prigozhin did not control the organization, yet acknowledged that he was among the organization's funders.<sup>341</sup> Prigozhin appears to hold Shugalei in personal high regard: when Russian arms trafficker Viktor Bout was returned to Russia, Prigozhin described him glowingly as an 'ideal of unshakeableness' and compared him to Shugalei.<sup>342</sup>

Following his work in Madagascar, Shugalei was arrested in Libya in 2019 on a 'research trip' on behalf of the FNZC and accused of conspiring to undermine Libyan interests, after he had met with former Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi's son. In the FNZC's version of events, Shugalei was in fact arrested because 'he conducted a sociological study in Libya and was the first to reveal the truth about the situation in this country: the secret ties of local rulers with transnational oil corporations on the one hand and with ISIS and Al Qaeda terrorists on the other'.<sup>343</sup> Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency led a concerted online campaign to influence the Libyan authorities to free Shugalei, and he was released in December 2020.<sup>344</sup>

Some of the FNZC's more recent work has been focused on Mali, releasing studies in 2022 that conclude that the current president, Colonel Assimi Goita (who, as outlined above, came to power in 2021 via a military coup and has chosen to partner with Wagner in lieu of France), enjoys 'unconditional trust among the population'.<sup>345</sup> 'The reason for President Goita's popularity', an August 2022 study concludes, is that 'he is a real patriot who, while in power, does not fill his pockets, but works for the people of his country'.<sup>346</sup>

Shugalei has also promoted Russian disinformation narratives in Mali. In April 2022, claims surfaced on social media asserting that French soldiers had massacred civilians near a military base. The French military accused Wagner of staging the massacre, releasing drone footage that appeared to show Russian mercenaries burying the bodies to create the set-up.<sup>347</sup> Shugalei was quoted in Malian media as saying that the incident was a 'recent example' of the kind of atrocities committed by France in its former colonies, and rejecting the French narrative about a conspiracy.<sup>348</sup>



Maxim Shugalei, political consultant for Prigozhin, was one of dozens of Russian political strategists who sought to influence Madagascar's 2018 presidential election.

© Bloomberg via Getty Images

Shugalei has also made appearances on behalf of the FZNC in CAR. In March 2021, while a major counter-offensive against rebels was ongoing, Shugalei gave a press conference on national TV and published a poll on billboards in the streets of Bangui. According to his poll, 98% of the people supported president Touadéra and 87% wanted the leaders of the CPC rebels to be arrested and sentenced.<sup>349</sup>

Most recently Shugalei has offered his services in Afghanistan to facilitate Russian cooperation with the Taliban,<sup>350</sup> and was later pictured in Russian-occupied territory in Ukraine.

A series of action movies – *Shugalei 1, 2 and 3* – have been released and were promoted heavily by the FZNC.<sup>351</sup> The series tells the story of Shugalei's arrest, imprisonment and torture in Libya and subsequent exploits. Several other movies have been released about Wagner's exploits: *Tourist* set in CAR, and *Granite* set in Mozambique (though both reportedly filmed in CAR). *Granite* is a notably revisionist narrative presenting the Wagner Group as comprising ideologically driven heroes fighting off the oncoming insurgents, a far cry from the actual unsuccessful outcome of the mercenary group's operations in Cabo Delgado.<sup>352</sup>

The *Shugalei* series and the other Wagner movies have reached a global audience: attracting millions of views on YouTube, airing on Russian television and translated into multiple languages. Entertaining as the films are – complete with unconvincing CGI explosions, scowling Libyan militiamen and the eponymous character Shugalei – in real terms, they show how Wagner-linked groups are seeking to present themselves to an audience at home and abroad.

## New frontiers and logistical corridors: Burkina Faso, Kenya and Cameroon

Wagner's influence extends beyond the countries where it has established military, economic and political operations. During 2022, some signs emerged that several other African countries – such as Burkina Faso – are looking to engage more closely with Russia, including via Wagner. Other countries seem to play a role within the Wagner ecosystem as logistics and transport hubs to support operations elsewhere. Douala, in Cameroon, has been identified as such a hub, and Nairobi appears to play a similar role. Our investigations in Cameroon suggest that it is not only being used by Wagner as a logistical hub but is also a potential target country for future military and economic engagement. Some of the 'early warning signs' that were precursors to Wagner intervention in places such as Sudan and CAR can now be identified further afield, which could indicate a growing Russian influence leading to eventual mercenary deployment.

### Burkina Faso

Two recent coups in Burkina Faso fuelled Western fears about Russian mercenary presence expanding across the Sahel, although there has been no official confirmation of a contract formed with Wagner. On 30 September 2022, army captain Ibrahim Traoré seized power from former ruler Lieutenant-Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, accusing him of being unable to manage the country's struggle against Islamic extremists, which has forced 2 million to flee their homes. Damiba had come to power through a coup mere months earlier,<sup>353</sup> and yet another coup was attempted in November 2022.<sup>354</sup>

The question of whether Burkina Faso will align itself either with France (its erstwhile colonial power) or with Russia became a central part of the country's political turmoil. The latest coup saw hundreds of protestors in Ouagadougou waving Russian flags, attacking a French embassy and cultural centre<sup>355</sup> and holding Russian flags atop UN armoured vehicles.<sup>356</sup> This was an escalation of other pro-Russia protests seen during the January coup and in the months since.

In their announcement of the regime change on state TV, the September coup leaders declared their wish to seek 'other partners ready to help [them] in [their] fight against terrorism'.<sup>357</sup> In a later TV appearance, the incoming prime minister attempted to walk a fine line, acknowledging the difficulties Burkina Faso would face in breaking ties with its historical partner, France, but arguing that the country 'needed to diversify' its international partners.<sup>358</sup>

The military leaders have put these words into action, ending their military cooperation agreement with France in late January 2023, giving French troops one month to depart the country.<sup>359</sup> Prior to this move, the Burkina Faso government also called for both a prominent UN official and the French ambassador to leave the country.<sup>360</sup>



Supporters of Burkina Faso's new junta leader Ibrahim Traoré hold national flags of Burkina Faso and Russia during a demonstration in Ouagadougou in October 2022. © Issouf Sanogo/AFP via Getty Images

This has fuelled speculation that Wagner is either poised to capitalize on the pro-Russia sentiment in Burkina Faso or covertly stoking it.<sup>361</sup> US intelligence officials reported fears that the country would become the next target for Wagner,<sup>362</sup> and reports in French media claimed that Wagner instructors had been monitored entering the country in April 2022.<sup>363</sup> President Nana Akufo-Addo of Ghana claimed at a US–Africa summit that Burkina Faso had granted rights to a gold mine to Wagner in return for mercenary reinforcements against insurgents, a claim that sparked anger from Ghana’s otherwise close diplomatic neighbour.<sup>364</sup> No evidence was given to support the claim. At the time of writing, no agreement with Wagner has been confirmed by the Burkinabe authorities.

These fears have been stoked by public statements from Prigozhin and other Russian figures. Prigozhin made several statements following both coups in support of the putschists aims, most recently in September 2022, describing Traoré as ‘a truly worthy and courageous son of his motherland’, and noting that the people of Burkina Faso were throwing off the yoke of colonialism.<sup>365</sup> Following the January coup, Russian PMC the Officers Union for International Security (COSI)<sup>366</sup> (see box on following page) publicly offered the new Burkinabe government Russian ‘instructors’, the same kind of mercenary support offered to CAR. Former Kremlin advisor Sergei Markov claimed on his Telegram channel that ‘our people’ helped the new leader come to power in the September coup,<sup>367</sup> although this claim has not been substantiated.

## Officers Union for International Security (COSI): Another Russian PMC operating in Africa?

One of the Russian overtures to Burkina Faso's new military leaders has come from COSI. The Russian PMC, which describes itself as 'an association of people who advocate for peace and tranquility' and is headed by Alexander Ivanov, represents the Russian military 'instructors' in CAR.<sup>368</sup> As of March 2022, Ivanov claimed, COSI represented 1 135 instructors in CAR.<sup>369</sup>

Ivanov publicly denies any link with Wagner, arguing that any 'confusion' between his organization and Wagner is part of a deliberate attempt to discredit Russia and to smear PMCs like COSI.<sup>370</sup> As Prigozhin himself had until recently done, Ivanov has denied that Wagner even exists.

However, there do appear to be connections between Prigozhin and Ivanov. In October 2021, when approached with questions about Russian mercenaries in CAR by the *Financial Times*, Prigozhin provided the newspaper with responses from Ivanov and Shugalei, suggesting that there is at least some cooperation between them.<sup>371</sup> Ivanov appeared alongside Shugalei at an FZNC-sponsored event in Bangui in 2021. Prigozhin also publicly praised Ivanov for the work of COSI in CAR in early 2022.<sup>372</sup>

COSI's public statements have also aligned with Wagner strategy. There is the aforementioned statement to Burkina Faso's coup leaders in January, offering the services of Russian instructors as an alternative security partner to France. In October 2021, Ivanov spoke to Malian media outlet MaliActu, similarly saying that Russian instructors could provide assistance to the Malian military. This came just weeks before Wagner troops were deployed to Bamako.<sup>373</sup> COSI continues to share regular updates via its Telegram channel about the work of its 'instructors' as well as those of Wagner and other Russian specialists in training African military personnel.<sup>374</sup>



An instructor with the Officers Union for International Security trains FACA forces in the Central African Republic. *Photo: COSI Telegram*

## Kenya

Kenya may be being used as a transit hub for Wagner operations in countries in the wider East African region, such as Sudan. Several sources reported to our research team that a company operating as a Wagner proxy is offering airline charter services based at Nairobi Wilson airport, providing air-based logistics support to Wagner operations in nearby countries – for example, when the group had a military operation in Mozambique.<sup>375</sup> A large number of charter companies are based at Wilson airport, meaning that this company would blend in among the high volume of air cargo traffic. More broadly, Nairobi is the established financial and logistics hub for East Africa, so it can also provide much of the business infrastructure that may be of use to Wagner's corporate structures expanding into Africa.

Kenya is not, otherwise, a country where Wagner's business or military operations have gained a foothold. Prigozhin's visit to the country in December 2018, where he met with high-level officials (the details of these meetings have not been made public), spurred speculation at the time about Wagner taking a role in the country.<sup>376</sup> A Nairobi-based security expert told our research team that some officials in the Uhuru Kenyatta administration had a proposal for Wagner to provide security to oil developments in Turkana, northern Kenya, but these never materialized.<sup>377</sup>

An influential policy and security expert based in Nairobi (a former police officer) argued that Wagner leadership has used Nairobi as its 'Africa logistical centre' for operations: 'They are operating from here; their helicopters are here at Wilson airport. They have charter planes that are used to ferry relief. The ownership of the charter planes is concealed [...] Kenya's capital is very important for Wagner's operations on the continent.'<sup>378</sup>

This could be viewed in the context of the through-flow of Russian arms to South Sudan via Kenya (described in the first section of this report). Previous reporting from research group C4ADS has also tracked imports of military vehicles from Russia to South Sudan via Kenya's seaport at Mombasa.<sup>379</sup> While these flows have made use of seaports and overland transport for military supply chains, instead of air transport, in all of these instances Kenya is being used as a springboard for Russian and Russian-backed military operations elsewhere on the continent.

## Cameroon

Unlike Burkina Faso, Cameroon has not been largely discussed in international debate over the expanding role of Wagner in Africa. However, our investigations in the country identified several new developments. While the picture remains unclear – and the role of Wagner within this cannot be confirmed – these developments collectively suggest expanding Russian involvement in Cameroon and, in some respects, echo events that led up to Wagner intervention in other countries such as CAR.

First, Cameroon is strategically important to Wagner. In an internal Wagner strategy document outlining the group's target operations in Africa, leaked in 2019, Cameroon is listed as a high-priority country. The document set out countries using a grading system of levels 1–5, from highest to lowest strategic importance. Cameroon ranked at level 2, falling behind only Sudan, Madagascar and CAR as the highest-priority countries. Wagner's assessment of Cameroon stated that the group aimed to support Russian businesses in the extractives sector and noted that civil unrest between Cameroon's anglophone and francophone communities is intensifying.<sup>380</sup> Wagner may have actioned this strategy in the intervening years.

Second, there is increasingly close collaboration between Russia and Cameroon, with a military cooperation agreement signed in April 2022. A similar arrangement helped pave the way for Wagner's interventions in CAR, for example, as Russian military instructors could be brought into the country under the auspices of this agreement. A source with links to the Cameroonian Ministry of Defence reported that Cameroon is looking to receive additional assistance and military materials from Russia to equip them in the fight against Islamist extremism in the country.<sup>381</sup>

Third, Douala is being used as a logistical transit point by Wagner-linked companies. Douala is the most accessible seaport to the otherwise landlocked CAR, the western regions of which are the site of Wagner-controlled logging and mining operations.<sup>382</sup> Prigozhin-linked company Broker Expert, based in St Petersburg, has been importing machinery for Wagner-linked companies in CAR through a company based in Douala. This echoes the findings of previous investigations into Wagner in CAR, including investigations into Bois Rouge<sup>383</sup> and into Wagner's role in



the agricultural sector, which have also identified Douala as a key transit point.<sup>384</sup>

Fourth, there has been an increase in the number of Russian nationals arriving in Cameroon in search of business opportunities in the gold and diamond mining sectors. However, the role and aims of these businesspeople remain unclear and may well be legitimate. A Cameroon-based intermediary dealing with gold and diamonds, who has dealt with several of these Russian 'entrepreneurs' during their visits to the country, described their approach. These people have toured gold and diamond production areas in the east of Cameroon, ostensibly searching for opportunities to purchase and export from Cameroon-based dealers. However, this intermediary (and two other sources in the sector) also reported that these businesspeople have always stopped short of actually making any deals or purchases. This has aroused suspicion among Cameroonian intermediaries about what their ultimate aims and role as businesspeople are.

Our research team investigated these businesspeople further. We identified two individuals who had presented themselves as Russian nationals, working in the mining sector and operating from the UAE. However, checks of these individuals' names and passport numbers against Russian identification databases found no records of their identities. A further check against a Russian Ministry of

Internal Affairs database also found no definitive match. This suggests strongly (but not conclusively) that they are travelling to Cameroon using false passports.


Passport data for another Russian national in the mining sector – who has stayed for an extended period in Cameroon – did find a match on the same Russian identification databases. According to the records, this individual worked for a company called Falcon-95 in the 1990s: a private security company which was reported to be a front for a St Petersburg-based organized criminal group.<sup>385</sup> Investigations into members of the group – who were accused of murder, extortion, kidnapping and arms trafficking – established that the company served as a public front for their activities, according to the prosecution case.<sup>386</sup> This individual now in Cameroon had, at the time, obtained a firearms licence on behalf of the private security company.

Our investigations did not confirm any links between these operators in the mining sector and the Wagner Group, or any affiliation to other Russian government or private entities. However, similar developments to this were seen prior to Wagner interventions in other countries such as CAR: an influx of apparently independent mining experts exploring new territory, who prepared the ground for Wagner-linked companies to work in the mining sector.



# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Russian embassy in Washington, DC. In January 2023, the US government designated Wagner as a 'transnational criminal organization', allowing for wider sanctions against the group and its enablers. © Mandel Ngan/AFP via Getty Images



In a few short years, Wagner has become the most influential Russian actor in Africa. Wagner's engagement in Africa is an example of the interconnection between crime, business and politics, and the group has had a severely detrimental effect on the security of civilians in many of the countries where it operates.<sup>387</sup>

As this paper has aimed to show, some of the characteristics of Wagner – through its role within both licit and illicit economies, its operations in the military and security space and links with Russian politics – are similar to characteristics of Russian criminal networks, and in particular criminal networks that have engaged in Africa in previous decades. Russian organized crime has evolved over the years, into a sophisticated form of modern organized crime in which the legal upperworld and criminal underworld are closely blended. Wagner is, in some ways, the ultimate example of this trend.

Similarly, as the case studies have aimed to demonstrate, the Wagner Group, and Prigozhin as its leader, is also a particularly extreme example of the symbiotic relationship between Russia's business elite and the state. In some instances – in Wagner's operations in CAR, in particular – the diplomatic and military engagement of the Russian state and the operations of Wagner appear to have worked in lockstep. Many observers have described Wagner as a 'proxy' for the Russian state in Africa. While this may oversimplify the complex relationship between Wagner and the state, it does seem that Russia has, to a certain extent, outsourced its engagement in Africa to Prigozhin and the Wagner network. Essentially, this offers Wagner political support and autonomy, while at the same time expecting the group to generate revenue and show political gains for Moscow.

Looking to the future, it appears that Wagner is considering expanding into new territories, even as some of its troops have been drawn into supporting Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Considering the corrosive effect that Wagner's operations are having on human rights, democracy and the rule of law, this is a considerable risk to Africa's future security.

The US announced that it would designate Wagner as a ‘transnational criminal organization’ in late January 2023, while urging other countries to similarly target the mercenary group.<sup>388</sup> This designation signals a new approach by the US in targeting Wagner and associated companies and individuals. If effectively implemented, the new designation could have an impact on Wagner’s financial ability to manage its operations in Africa, particularly if ‘derivative’ designations, which can apply to facilitating individuals or organizations of the designated entity, are increased.<sup>389</sup> At the time that this research paper was being finalized, the details of the justification behind this decision and any detailed sanctions stemming from it were not yet public. Yet the designation appears – based on our independent analysis (concluded before the US designation was announced) – to be an accurate characterization of how Wagner operates around the world.

In light of this, we make the following recommendations:

- Western countries should review their current sanctioning approaches relating to the Wagner Group and consider whether all available tools are being used to respond to Wagner’s transnational criminal activities and its threats to human rights, peace and security.<sup>390</sup> Sanctions regimes aimed at reducing transnational organized crime, human rights abuses and corruption can be – and are already being – used against Wagner and its facilitators, not only by the US. The EU designation of Wagner in 2021, for example, cited the looting of natural resources and serious human rights abuses in countries including Libya and CAR.<sup>391</sup> Other countries may want to consider making use of similar sanctions regimes to target Wagner’s criminal activities overseas and associated corruption and human rights abuses. The UK, for example, has two relatively new tools – the Global Anti-Corruption Sanctions Regime and the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime.<sup>392</sup> These tools create more opportunities to levy targeted sanctions on individuals or entire entities involved in transnational organized crime and human rights abuses,<sup>393</sup> and have been used in other instances with the aim of breaking the link between politics, business and illicit activity overseas.<sup>394</sup>
- Western countries should strengthen their relationships with African partner countries to counteract the Wagner Group’s growing presence on the continent. This should be particularly targeted in countries that are deemed likely to engage with Wagner either politically or militarily in the near future. Western countries may also consider closer cooperation with countries through which Wagner has logistical supply routes, to encourage the implementation of sanctions against Wagner facilitators. However, as observers have argued elsewhere, strengthening relationships in African countries will require Western partners to acknowledge and address some of the political and economic imbalances in these relationships and to become more equitable partners in economic and development terms.<sup>395</sup>
- The Wagner Group’s strategy in Africa is threefold, encompassing military operations, political strategy and disinformation operations, and economic projects. In addition to disrupting Wagner’s economic activity via targeted sanctions, the international community should also aim to counter the disinformation narratives promoted by Wagner-linked political groups. There have

been instances in which Wagner's disinformation has been countered: for example, in April 2022, the French military shared information that proved Wagner had staged a mass grave in Mali and attempted to direct blame at French troops.<sup>396</sup> Similar actions that promote transparency, debunk disinformation and counter Wagner narratives may help to counter the group's political influence.<sup>397</sup>

- Civil society organizations and investigative journalism groups have been some of the most influential actors documenting the abuses and criminal activity perpetrated by the Wagner Group. However, they often do so at great personal risk. Consider the three Russian journalists killed while investigating Wagner in CAR,<sup>398</sup> the risks faced by human rights activists in Sudan, or the fact that the Malian government banned NGOs funded or supported by France in late November 2022, including humanitarian groups.<sup>399</sup> The international community should support and empower civil society organizations to continue this vital work in the face of increasing pressure.
- Banks and financial institutions should be proactive in their due diligence, identifying and freezing accounts linked to sanctioned entities, and conducting enhanced security checks on individuals and entities operating in the regions and sectors in which Wagner is known to be active, to ensure they are not exposing themselves to the risk of money laundering, corruption and sanctions evasion. Companies active in sectors such as gold and diamond trading, which operate in countries with a Wagner presence, should also take stringent due diligence approaches to ensure that goods and finance from Wagner-linked companies do not flow into international markets.<sup>400</sup>
- In October 2021, a group of UN experts called on the CAR government to end their relationship with Wagner, based on the group's 'systemic and grave human rights and international humanitarian law violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, disappearances and summary execution, a pattern that continues unabated and unpunished'.<sup>401</sup> Since this pattern of behaviour has not only continued unpunished but has also been replicated in other countries, particularly Mali, we would echo this recommendation and extend it to all African governments with a military relationship with the Wagner Group, even if it is unlikely that these governments will disengage from their Wagner partners. Aside from disengaging with Wagner, these governments should investigate allegations of human rights abuses and criminal activity by Wagner troops and ensure accountability for any proven abuses. Other countries should, through diplomatic channels, encourage investigations into Wagner's activity within the context of wider efforts to support human rights and the rule of law.
- UN bodies should explore all available options to prevent Wagner's criminal activities and human rights abuses. The UN stabilization missions in Mali and the Central African Republic (MINUSMA and MINUSCA) should do all within their mandates to document Wagner's violations of international law and prevent the group from posing a threat to civilian populations. The UN Working Group on Mercenaries has previously made statements denouncing Wagner's activities: further investigations and fact-finding by this working group could provide a catalyst for international action against the Wagner Group.

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