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ORGANIZED CRIME

MERCENARIES AND ILLICIT MARKETS

RUSSIA'S AFRICA CORPS AND
THE BUSINESS OF CONFLICT

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CONTENTS

Executive summary..... 1

Introduction 5

KEY FINDING 1: The expanding influence of Africa Corps/Wagner Group and evidence of their involvement in atrocities and proximity to illicit economies undermine African security 7

KEY FINDING 2: Africa Corps retains many of Wagner Group’s military, political and economic goals, and uses similar strategies to achieve them..... 11

KEY FINDING 3: Wagner Group’s residual operations and associated illicit activities have continued in Africa 14

KEY FINDING 4: There has been a change in how Russian PMCs operate, both in Russia’s war in Ukraine and in Africa 17

KEY FINDING 5: Worsening security, illicit economies and changing narratives challenge Africa Corps’/Wagner Group’s Sahel expansion 19

Implications and recommendations..... 22

Notes..... 25



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, Russia has expanded its influence in Africa, offering an alternative to Western and former colonial powers. With no colonial history on the continent, Russia supported African liberation movements during the Cold War, fostering strong ties. Though its influence waned in the 1990s, it revived under President Vladimir Putin, allowing Russia to re-establish strategic relationships on the continent.

The Wagner Group mercenary force and its successor, the Africa Corps, have played a pivotal and controversial role in growing Russia's influence on the continent. Initially a covert proxy of the Russian state able to exercise some deniability, the Wagner Group soon became the most influential and public form of Russian engagement in Africa, particularly in the Sahel and Central Africa. It is unique not only in the scale and boldness of its activities, but also in how it navigated the grey zone where licit and illicit economies meld.

For more than a decade, Russia and its intelligence services have strategically deployed criminal networks to carry out a range of activities, such as smuggling, assassinations, sanctions-busting, spying and cybercrime. As the war in Ukraine has left Russia increasingly isolated, using military and security proxies like the Wagner Group and Africa Corps has grown rapidly, allowing Russia global projection.¹

Implicated in murders, massacres, rapes and other atrocities in some African countries, the mercenaries have been accused of terrorizing civilian populations, carrying out industrial-scale smuggling of gold, diamonds and timber, notably in the Central African Republic (CAR), spearheading political disinformation campaigns and election-rigging.

In 2023, the United States designated the Wagner Group a 'significant transnational criminal organisation'. The Ukrainian parliament followed suit, adopting a resolution calling it an 'international criminal organisation'. The European Union, meanwhile, designated the Wagner Group a 'terrorist organisation', and the United Kingdom added it to a list of proscribed terrorist groups.

This paper reviews how Russia's Wagner Group and the Africa Corps have developed since the death of Wagner's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in a plane crash (likely to have been a Russian state-sponsored assassination) in August 2023, including their evolving role in illicit markets, and the implications for African peace and security. It builds on research published in the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC)'s February 2023 report, *The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa*. That study found that the Wagner Group, with its opaque networks

of front companies and organizations, employed strategies that reflected broader trends in Russia's criminal underworld, which have become essential components in Russia's geopolitical arsenal.

After Prigozhin's death, many international observers speculated that Russia's dangerous disruption in Africa would wind down. Despite setbacks, however, Russia's mercenary, military and criminal engagement in Africa continued apace throughout 2024 and early 2025 through Wagner and, later, Africa Corps.

1 The expanding influence of Africa Corps/ Wagner Group and evidence of their involvement in atrocities and proximity to illicit economies undermine African security

The Africa Corps – the state-backed successor to Wagner, managed by Russian military intelligence – now has a presence in Burkina Faso and Niger. At the same time, Wagner Group maintains its legacy operations in Mali and the CAR. Russian 'military instructors' have arrived in Equatorial Guinea (though it is unclear if these so-called instructors are affiliated with either organization). Russia has adroitly positioned itself as an alternative security partner in the Sahel, mainly in the service of autocratic and military regimes. This has capitalized on disenchantment with former colonial powers and Western assistance in African security, which has been unsuccessful in containing major insurgencies.

2 Africa Corps retains many of Wagner Group's military, political and economic goals, and uses similar strategies to achieve them

The Africa Corps has pursued similar strategies to Wagner's. These include the aims and target countries Africa Corps has pursued, its use of political influence campaigns, and its personnel and tactics. Many of its recruits are Wagner veterans; it has targeted many of the same countries courted by Prigozhin in Africa; and uses similar approaches of sending 'expeditionary forces' to kickstart its new operations in Niger and Burkina Faso. Political influence operations and disinformation campaigns were part of Wagner's African operations, and similar strategies are carried out by the Africa Corps, including through an organization known as African Initiative. Ostensibly an African-focused media house, African Initiative has shared disinformation and promoted Africa Corps' role in Africa. It appears that Russia may be expanding its presence in the natural-resources sector in countries where the Africa Corps operates, echoing how Wagner's role allowed Prigozhin's network to operate, spanning both licit and illicit activities.

3 Wagner Group's residual operations and associated illicit activities have continued in Africa

Russian mercenary operations in CAR and Mali continue to use the Wagner name and insignia, rather than being re-branded as part of Africa Corps. While it appears that Wagner's operations now have more oversight from the Russian state, it has thus far been allowed to retain its command structures. High-ranking Wagner commanders from the Prigozhin era remain in charge of operations, covering military, political and economic roles. It appears that Prigozhin's son, Pavel Prigozhin, has maintained some role in the residual Wagner operations in Africa. Wagner has continued its illicit business operations in CAR, including its involvement in smuggling extractives. At the same time, it has taken casualties in Mali where illicit economies are fuelling jihadist and rebel competition and violence.

4 There has been a change in how Russian PMCs operate, both in Russia's war in Ukraine and in Africa

Before Wagner, private military companies (PMCs) were not a significant part of the Russian military apparatus. During the invasion of Ukraine, new PMCs emerged to provide additional support. After the Wagner mutiny, these PMCs were brought under the oversight of the Volunteer Corps and managed by the Russian defence ministry. This has formalized the role PMCs play in Russia's military, and made Russian war-making a public-private collaboration. Similarly, Wagner's former leaders have been absorbed into the Russian military establishment or PMCs. PMCs such as the Bear Brigade, which had a short-lived operation in Burkina Faso, have also had a role in Africa, albeit a more minor one than Africa Corps/Wagner. Since Prigozhin's death, an expanding Russian military-business complex has emerged, blurring the lines between state and corporate entities.

5 Worsening security, illicit economies and changing narratives challenge Africa Corps' and Wagner's Sahel expansion

Russia's expanding role in Africa, through Africa Corps and the Wagner Group, has seemed swift and unstoppable. Yet expanding so rapidly brings its risks. The fall of Assad in Syria has had a detrimental impact on Russia's logistics, as airbases in Syria are a crucial supply line for Russia's African operations. Similarly, the Sahel faces more complex, deadly security threats than ever before. Wagner suffered significant casualties in Mali in 2024. Russia's growing profile in the Sahel has made it the target of rhetoric from armed groups that have increasingly positioned themselves as hostile to Russia as an intervening foreign force. Ironically, like Wagner in CAR, these groups are financed by the proceeds of illicit trade in gold. There is growing local anger towards the Russian forces among Sahel communities. Furthermore, as Russia has expanded into more countries, it increasingly positions itself on multiple sides of ethnic boundaries and regional alliances. It is not clear that Russia has a strategy for navigating these dynamics, which may pose challenges in future.

Implications and recommendations

This latest era of Russian military and mercenary engagement in Africa has brought many changes, from the emergence of Africa Corps and its expansion across the Sahel to a recalibration of the Russian state's relationship with PMCs. Yet some factors have remained the same. While Africa Corps is more explicitly state-backed than the Wagner Group was in the Prigozhin era, it is primarily made up of Wagner veterans pursuing many of the same goals. Africa Corps and Wagner Group remain the most influential and strategic tools for Russia in Africa. They will continue to exacerbate the deteriorating security trends in the Sahel and spread disinformation. As seen with the case of the African Initiative, Russia's military engagement in Africa continues to be accompanied by political influence operations that seek to spread disinformation and target Western engagement in Africa. Africa Corps could also follow Wagner strategy by creating a transactional model that provides security in return for access to natural resources.

To counter this concerning forecast, the international community, African states and multilateral organizations should consider:

- Using diplomatic channels to pressure Russia's supply lines into Africa via air and sea. After the fall of the Assad regime, air supply routes through the Middle East are already facing disruption.
- Investing further in countering Russian disinformation in Africa and increasing messaging highlighting the Africa Corps/Wagner's indiscriminate violence and inability to contain security threats.
- Enacting more rapid and coordinated sanctions efforts against Russian mercenary actors. While sanctions designations must follow rigorous due diligence processes, a more rapid and coordinated response is needed.
- Engaging rather than isolating states hosting Russian presence.
- Prioritizing assistance towards countering illicit economies to engage states and buttress stability.
- Addressing the security challenges posed by private military and security contractors, whose operations threaten human rights and stability across the continent, by developing coordinated strategies to manage these risks.
- Exploring ways to counter disinformation more broadly and mitigate its political impact. This issue is by no means solely limited to organizations affiliated with Africa Corps, Wagner Group or Russia, but is part of a growing threat of global disinformation that is disseminated online.



INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, Russia has expanded its role and influence in parts of Africa significantly. For some countries in the Sahel, West and Central Africa, and elsewhere on the continent, Russia offers a strategic alternative to the dominance of the United States, China or former colonial powers, notably France. The latter has faced bitter criticism from African partner governments and their citizens in recent years, which has upended its ties with many of these former colonies.

Russia therefore emerged as a more palatable alternative to Western powers for many African countries. Historically, Russia was not a colonial power in Africa and it provided diplomatic, economic, military and educational support to liberation movements between the 1950s and the 1980s. Russia's relations with Africa grew to surpass the influence of colonial partners in many countries, only waning in the 1990s. Putin took office in 1999 and renewed ties. Old loyalties fostered over decades and forged in the continent's liberation wars ensured that Russia was well positioned to quickly regain diplomatic, political and economic clout as a trusted partner.²

Russia also has far fewer qualms than its Western counterparts about which African states, leaders and military units it will do business with. In contrast, the United States, for example, must factor in the provisions of its Leahy Laws.³ Central to Russia's influence in West and Central Africa and the Sahel has been its involvement in providing political and security support to authoritarian and military-led regimes in return for access to natural resources.

These operations began in Sudan in late 2017, followed by deployment to Central African Republic, then Libya in 2019, a year in which there was also a short-lived deployment to northern Mozambique. Wagner also began operations in Mali in 2021.

However, this changed after Wagner Group's leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, led a failed mutiny against the Putin regime in June 2023, and then died when his plane crashed two months later in what is widely believed to have been a state-sponsored assassination carried out on Putin's orders.⁴

At the time, many international observers wondered whether (and some would have arguably hoped that) the fall of Prigozhin would derail Russia's period of dangerous disruption in Africa. While operating as an arms-length proxy of the Russian state, the Wagner Group was driven by Prigozhin's sprawling business empire and idiosyncratic leadership.

However, rather than declining, Russia's mercenary and military engagement in Africa continued apace throughout 2024. The Russian state has taken more direct control of African military operations

and set up a new operation – Africa Corps. Although the structures and branding around Russian overseas mercenary operations may have changed, some of the same strategies pursued under Wagner’s playbook are being deployed, with a similar disregard for protecting civilians or preventing human rights abuses.

The sections that follow assess how Russia’s military-business complex in Africa has evolved since Prigozhin’s death, the impact on regional criminal economies, and the implications for African peace and security.

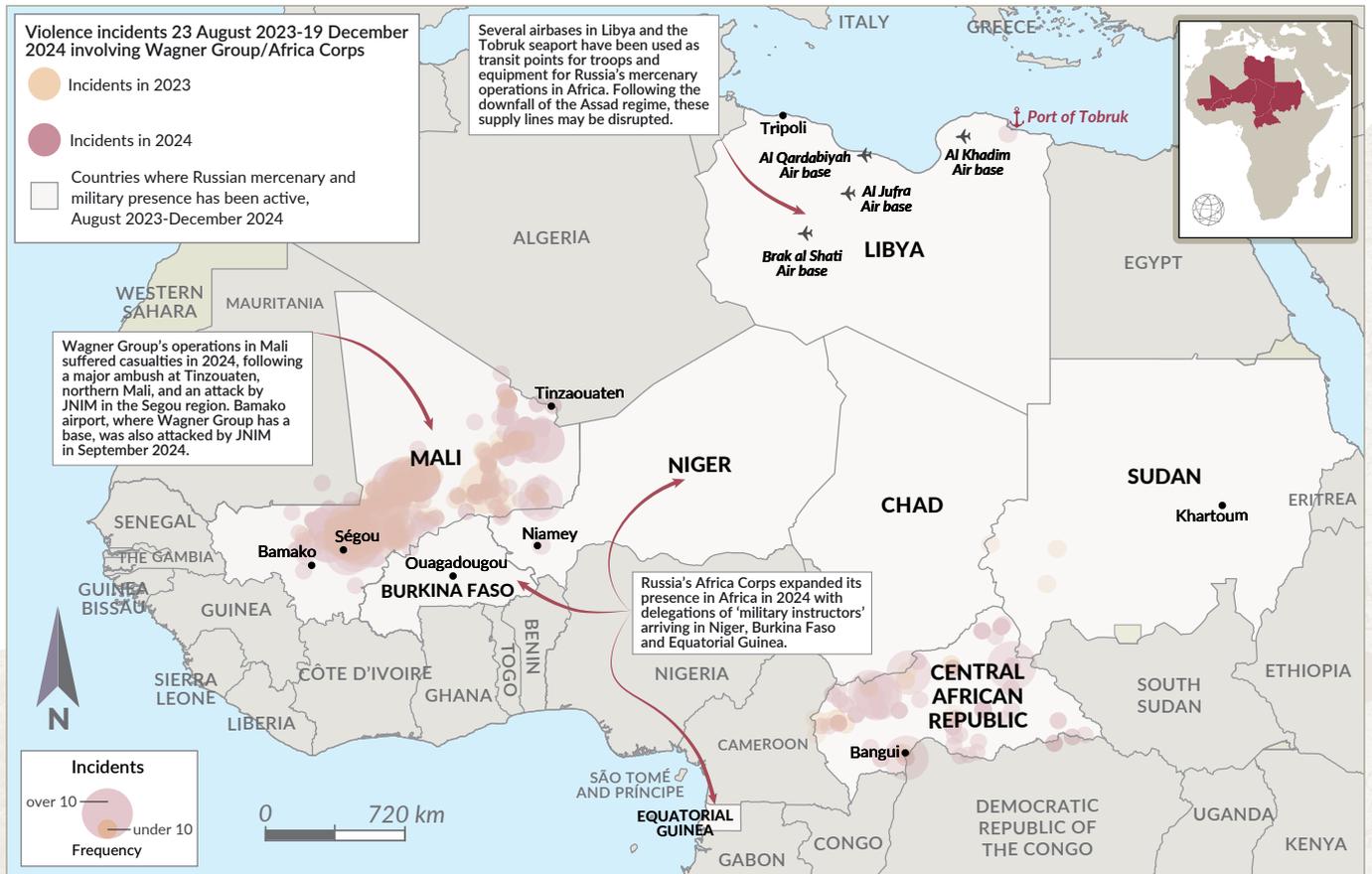


FIGURE 1 Wagner Group and Africa Corps’ activity in the Sahel since the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023.

SOURCE: ACLED



KEY FINDING 1

The expanding influence of Africa Corps/ Wagner Group and evidence of their involvement in atrocities and proximity to illicit economies undermine African security

Since the ill-fated Wagner Group mutiny, Russian mercenary-related political violence in Africa has become both more intense and geographically widespread. Data provided by the Armed Conflict Location Event Data (ACLED) project shows that the frequency of violent incidents involving Wagner Group or Africa Corps on the continent intensified in the second half of 2023, and that such incidents began to occur in a larger number of countries (see Figure 2). The peak in violent incidents involving Russian military actors came in late 2023.

The data reflects how the Russian military apparatus galvanized in the aftermath of the Wagner mutiny. Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, accompanied by high-ranking military intelligence officials, immediately embarked on a tour of Wagner's partner countries in Africa to affirm Russian state control over rogue mercenary actors and to ensure continuity in operations.⁵ In late 2023, a contingent of troops operating under the auspices of the Africa Corps was deployed to Burkina Faso, in the first such deployment by this new Russia-backed military grouping.⁶

The Africa Corps was established as a successor to the Wagner Group, managed through Russia's military intelligence agency, the GRU.⁷ High-ranking GRU official Andrey Averyanov was sanctioned by the European Union in December 2024 for his role in managing Africa Corps.⁸ Averyanov is the leader of a notorious unit within the GRU (Unit 29155) known for its involvement in disruption operations overseas, such as the attempted assassination of former Russian spy Sergei Skripal in the UK in 2018.⁹ Because Africa Corps is more directly affiliated with the Russian government than Wagner Group was, it gives the impression of being 'more legitimate' to African governments – in the words of Sergey Eledinov, a security analyst and former Russian PMC representative.¹⁰

However, Wagner still maintains residual operations in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR). According to a UK intelligence update shared in August 2024, 'in comparison to its peak personnel count of around 50 000 in 2023 [which included Wagner's operations in Ukraine], Wagner now highly likely maintains around 5 000 total personnel across its residual deployments in Belarus and Africa'.¹¹

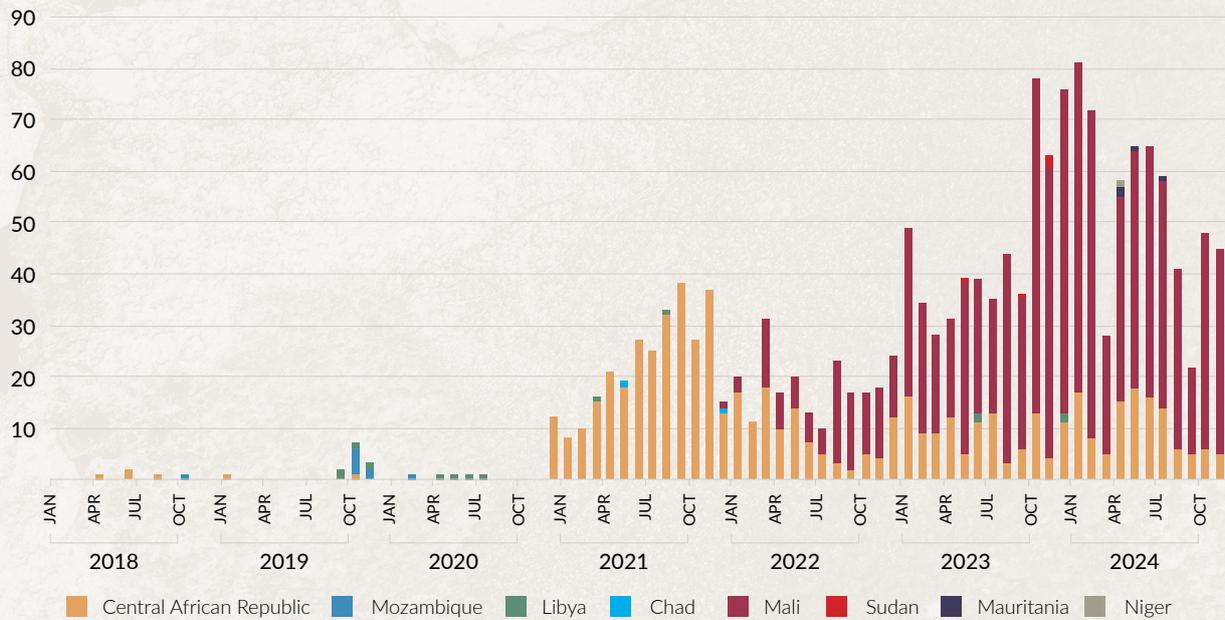


FIGURE 2 Frequency of violent incidents involving Russian mercenary actors in Africa, 2018–2024.

SOURCE: ACLED.

While the launch of Africa Corps offers potential new African partner nations the assurance of closer ties to the Russian state, allowing Wagner’s legacy operations to continue maintains consistency with established partner countries. At the same time, Russian military sources suggest that these Wagner legacy operations are now kept under closer GRU control, again through Averyanov.¹²

Russian troops continue to move through air bases in eastern Libya,¹³ which have been controlled to a degree by the Wagner Group. According to recent satellite image analysis, Russia appears to have expanded and invested in the air bases it uses in Libya, not least by reactivating a facility in the far south.¹⁴ However, many of the flights coming into these air bases have moved through Russian outposts in Syria, which now face an uncertain future since the fall of Assad, which will potentially disrupt Africa Corps/Wagner operations in the future.¹⁵

In the aftermath of the Wagner Group’s mutiny in June 2023, its presence in Ukraine – which made up the majority of its operations and included many troops recruited from Russian prisons – was withdrawn, and large amounts of Wagner weaponry and other equipment were transferred to Russia’s Ministry of Defence.¹⁶ Wagner mercenaries were offered several options. They could sign a contract with the Russian Ministry of Defence; demobilize; take exile in Belarus; join Russia’s National Guard; or sign up with other PMCs. The latter, which deploy mainly in Ukraine, operate under a new umbrella known as the Volunteer Corps, which, in turn, is under the ultimate authority of the GRU.¹⁷ However, the legacy operations in Africa continue under the Wagner banner, and some Wagner units returned to Ukraine several months after the mutiny.

The newly formed Africa Corps has led the charge in expanding to new countries in Africa. It announced its arrival in Burkina Faso in late 2023, where its ‘military instructors’ have been assisting the country’s military junta, helping it to maintain its grip on power in Ouagadougou.¹⁸ And in April 2024, Russian military personnel and equipment arrived in Niamey, Niger.¹⁹



Africa Corps troops and military equipment arrive in Burkina Faso, January 2024. *Photo: African Initiative*

Until recently, military partnerships and training in Niger had been led by the United States and France. French troops pulled out of Niger in December 2023 at the behest of a military government that had seized power in July that year.²⁰ In May 2024, Russian troops were deployed to an airbase where US troops were previously stationed after Niger's junta ordered the US personnel (numbering nearly 1 000) to leave.²¹ However, numbers are low: Africa Corps personnel in Niger reportedly totalled between 150 and 300, as of August 2024.²²

Russian 'military instructors' were also confirmed to have arrived in Equatorial Guinea in September 2024,²³ after local media reported the presence of a small number of Russian troops in the capital, Malabo, some weeks earlier.²⁴ This came several weeks after a meeting between Yevkurov and the vice-president of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Nguema Obiang Mangue.²⁵

The expansion of Africa Corps and the continuation of Wagner operations may prove costly for African peace and security in the longer term. Russia's expansion across the Sahel region has capitalized on a deep-seated mistrust in the region of Western security assistance, which has, ultimately, been unsuccessful in containing extremist Islamist movements. Regional cross-border insurgencies in the Sahel steered by JNIM (Jama'at Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin, a coalition of al-Qaeda-linked groups) and Islamic State Sahel Province (IS Sahel) have pushed states to the brink of collapse.²⁶ Russian political messaging has been harnessed to position itself as a backer of African governments in both regaining security and casting off Western influence, so that they reclaim national autonomy.

However, in Mali and CAR, the Wagner Group/Africa Corps, operating alongside state forces, have disproportionately targeted civilians.²⁷ Across the Sahel, Wagner and Africa Corps alike have been accused of massacres, rape, torture and arbitrary imprisonment.²⁸ Not only are these atrocities in themselves, but they defeat any long-term hope of reconciliation and peacebuilding. Ultimately, the brutality levelled against civilians by Russian mercenaries will only exacerbate marginalization, injustice and grievances, feeding into insurgencies. While previous attempts to stem conflict in the

Sahel through UN peacekeeping forces and Western partners may not have been successful, Russian mercenaries offer no credible or broad-based alternative; instead, they offer only what has been described by observers as 'regime survival' for autocratic governments looking to shore up their shaky grip on power. Alongside Wagner's brutality has come its well-documented involvement in illicit economies, wresting control of natural resource economies, such as gold mining, and engaging in large-scale smuggling operations.

Along with the expansion of Africa Corps/Wagner Group, Russia has also extended its political influence in Africa. For example, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger have all announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the creation of a new tripartite Alliance of Sahel States (AES, from the French). Russia has been influential as the primary political backer of this new alliance.²⁹ All three AES member states have commissioned security assistance from Africa Corps/Wagner Group.

Russia's influence also appears to be shaping policy. In the CAR, where Wagner has long held significant political influence, a new law is being drafted to govern the role of 'foreign agents', who would be defined as any person carrying out work under 'foreign influence' that is deemed to undermine the state.³⁰ This bears striking similarities to a 2012 law passed in Russia that has been weaponized against journalists, NGOs and political opponents. CAR's bill has been criticized by human rights groups, media and civil society.

Meanwhile, Russian businesses appear to be stepping up their operations in the natural-resources sector in countries in the region where Russia has a military presence. In Niger, the military junta withdrew licences for two uranium mines from a Canadian and a French company in mid-2024. At the same time, Niger's mining minister called on Russia to invest in the country's uranium and other extractive industries.³¹ Bloomberg reported that the Russian state-owned nuclear energy company, Rosatom, and Turkey are seeking to take over these uranium assets in Niger and are in initial talks with the Nigerien junta.³²

The security support that Russia offers in the form of Africa Corps/Wagner is a major part of its broader diplomatic push into Africa. Russian political influence, economic expansion and military presence continue to go hand in hand.

Overall, the political economy of Wagner Group's – and latterly Africa Corps' – operations in Africa, coupled with their promotion of illicit economies, fundamentally undermines and damages African security over the long term.



KEY FINDING 2

Africa Corps retains many of Wagner Group's military, political and economic goals, and uses similar strategies to achieve them

Since the early days of its operations, Africa Corps has shown that, in many ways, it does not strategically differ much from Wagner. The strategic goals and target countries Africa Corps has pursued mirror those of Wagner, as do its use of political influence campaigns, and its personnel and tactics. This backs up the assessment of many Western observers that although launching a new entity with a new name has allowed the Russian state to boost Africa Corps' legitimacy with its African partners, it is, largely, Wagner by another name.

Of course, Wagner was always acting as a proxy for the Russian state. This was clear early in its Africa operations. In 2019, an internal document leaked from Wagner to Western intelligence outlined its strategic aims in Africa, among which were to strong-arm the US and the former colonial powers, the UK and France, out of the region and to see off any pro-Western uprisings'. Such geopolitical aims indicate that Wagner was by no means solely a private, profit-driven entity.³³ After the Wagner mutiny, it became politically expedient for the Russian state to acknowledge the extent of its links to this PMC, after denying any links for many years. 'I want to point out – and I want everyone to know about it: the maintenance of the entire Wagner Group was fully provided for by the state,' Putin told a Russian Ministry of Defence meeting in 2023. He claimed that this government funding amounted to almost US\$ 1 billion in the preceding year.³⁴

Africa Corps has stated on its Telegram channel that around half of its recruits are Wagner veterans.³⁵ This seems to include some Wagner troops transferred immediately to the new entity while they were still deployed in Africa. In the early days of the transition to Africa Corps, the group proudly announced that most Wagner troops in Libya had been re-contracted into Africa Corps.³⁶ Many of the specialist roles that Africa Corps advertises for on social media – from field medics to drone operators – are the same as those that the Prigozhin-led network brought into its ranks.³⁷

The countries to which Africa Corps has now deployed troops are many of those identified as targets by Wagner in its 2019 strategy document. For example, authorities in Burkina Faso – the first country where Africa Corps troops were seen – were courted by Prigozhin and Wagner affiliates. Prigozhin made several statements following the two coups that Burkina Faso experienced in 2022, including

describing the country's military leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who came to power in the second coup, in September 2022, as 'a truly worthy and courageous son of his motherland'. He also claimed that the people of Burkina Faso were throwing off the yoke of colonialism.³⁸ Following the first coup, which took place in January 2022, the Officers Union for International Security (COSI) – a security company that acts as a front for Wagner in CAR – publicly offered the new Burkinabe government Russian 'instructors', akin to the mercenary support that it provides in CAR.³⁹

There are further similarities in how Wagner and Africa Corps use their troops and resources. Africa Corps' deployments to its new partner countries – including Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad – are small in personnel numbers, consisting of little more than 200 troops apiece. These small units are 'expeditionary forces' that operate in the capitals and protect the leaders of the military juntas from internal tensions and possible countercoups. This mirrors the approach taken by Wagner in previous years. For example, the initial Wagner deployment in CAR provided presidential security, a mandate that only later expanded into broader, offensive operations.⁴⁰

Political influence operations, disinformation campaigns and media manipulation were an integral part of Wagner's African operations. Alongside the mercenary troops, a sprawling network of Prigozhin-linked groups worked as part of 'Project Lakhta', a code name revealed by documents leaked from inside Wagner.⁴¹ Among other activities, these groups illegally financed Russian-friendly candidates in African elections,⁴² set up phoney election-monitoring missions, spread disinformation and created local media groups to spread the pro-Wagner message while posing as grassroots organizations.⁴³

Similar strategies have accompanied the arrival of Africa Corps personnel, including through the African Initiative, which was set up in September 2023 and describes itself as a 'Russian news agency (reporting) about events on the African continent'.⁴⁴ Since its inception, African Initiative has regularly been the first to share new images of Africa Corps' operations, suggesting it is closely linked to the military operation and is far from an independent media group.

Mikhail Zvinchuk – an influential Russian military blogger formerly employed by the Russian Ministry of Defence's press service and who now runs Rybar, a prominent pro-Kremlin military analysis channel on Telegram⁴⁵ – described the African Initiative as a 'media project' deployed as part of Africa Corps' roll-out. The African Initiative would, he said, push narratives 'about the correctness of the struggle against French and American occupation [in Africa]'.⁴⁶ It has, like Wagner, been accused of spreading disinformation, in part by seeking to discredit US-funded public health programmes in Africa.⁴⁷ Several of its staff are either former members of Wagner-linked political groups or linked to Russian intelligence services.⁴⁸ This reportedly includes its editor-in-chief, Artem Kureev, who, according to EU sanctions listings, is a Federal Security Service (FSB) officer who oversees disinformation and influence campaigns.⁴⁹

The third key tenet of Wagner's engagement in Africa, alongside its military and political engagement, was its economic role: alongside its deployment of mercenary troops, a network of companies was set up, operating primarily in the extractives sector. Smuggling of resources – particularly gold – started through Wagner networks from Sudan and CAR. Dmitri Sytyii, the architect behind the establishment of Wagner in CAR in 2018, allegedly 'continues to orchestrate the predation of natural resources – timber, gold and diamonds – through the same companies that belonged to Prigozhin's network'.⁵⁰

However, evidence that Africa Corps is similarly attempting to gain control of mining operations and exploit illicit extractive economies in Niger and Burkina Faso is so far inconclusive. It may simply be too soon for a similar network of companies to have been established. Alternatively – since the new

Corps is not backed by an individual Russian businessperson, like Prigozhin, but rather the Russian intelligence and military apparatus – the economic side of its engagement might take a different approach, opening political space for state corporations. For example, in the case of Niger's potential reallocation of uranium mining permits to Rosatom, Russia's rising regional influence in the Sahel appears to have brought with it similar access to natural resources and opened space for economic engagement. Whether Russia's war-battered economy will be able to capitalize on this space for engagement remains to be seen.



A sledgehammer, a symbol of the Wagner Group, donated to a museum in Russia by a former Wagner commander who fought in Mozambique. *Photo: Telegram*



KEY FINDING 3

Wagner Group's residual operations and associated illicit activities have continued in Africa

Russian mercenary operations in CAR and Mali continue to use the Wagner name and insignia rather than being re-branded as part of Africa Corps. On the battlefield in Mali, for example, a rebel fighter confirmed to our research team that the Wagner flag and insignia were widely used in 2024.⁵¹ Public statements on Africa Corps channels continue to refer to the 'Wagner Group' in CAR and Mali,⁵² as do Russian military commentators,⁵³ suggesting this is not just a continued use of the group's name by their adversaries in the field. In addition, while the operations may now be overseen by the GRU,⁵⁴ it seems that not just the name, but seemingly some of the command structures in Africa, have remained the same.

In the CAR, Wagner remains actively engaged in military operations. In late 2024, its mercenaries killed and captured rebel fighters near Birao, in the north-west near the border with Cameroon.⁵⁵ It has also fought rebels from the insurgent Coalition of Patriots for Change in eastern CAR.⁵⁶ Wagner has also maintained an economic presence in this region for some time, by controlling the border with Cameroon and providing security for trade routes, while using both countries' infrastructure for its own illicit mining and logging operations.

Wagner's military operations in Mali faced setbacks in 2024. Satellite images of construction work at the group's former base at Modibo Keita International Airport near Bamako in early 2024 hint at possible expansion.⁵⁷ However, Wagner's presence was unable to prevent an attack on the airport in September by JNIM, in which the Islamist insurgents held this facility for several hours before retreating.⁵⁸ In July, dozens of Wagner troops and Malian military personnel were killed in an ambush in Tinzouaten.⁵⁹ This attack is thought to have resulted in the highest number of fatalities Wagner has suffered in a single incident, with estimates ranging between 20 and 80 fighters killed.⁶⁰

Wagner has continued its business operations in CAR. For example, Wagner-linked companies were moving mining equipment into the country using front companies in early 2024, suggesting continued investment in the extractives sector.⁶¹ Analysis by investigative group All Eyes on Wagner suggests that the group renamed some of its companies operating in CAR and Cameroon (on a route by which it moves equipment and goods such as timber).⁶² The approach of renaming companies has been



Dmitri Sytyii (left), head of Wagner's business operations in CAR, receives a plaque at a memorial in Bangui dedicated to Prigozhin, October 2024. *Photo: Officers Union for International Security, via Telegram*

Above: Anton Elizarov, Wagner's highest-ranking surviving commander, appears in a video message from the group's base in Rostov, February 2024. *Photo: Telegram*

seen in previous years to disguise entities sanctioned by Western nations and allow them to continue trading by keeping trading partners in the dark.⁶³

Wagner has reportedly reinforced its presence at the Ndassima gold mine.⁶⁴ Controlled by Wagner, this is CAR's only industrialized gold mine. It was previously run by the Unité pour la paix en Centrafrique (Union for Peace in the Central African Republic), which resents Wagner seizing control of the mine and ejecting its fighters.⁶⁵

At the beginning of 2024, Russian forces also took control of the artisanal N'thaka gold mine,⁶⁶ the largest in northern Mali. Various armed factions in the region have fought to control it.

There also appears to be some continuity in Wagner's leadership. Some Wagner commanders and high-ranking operatives in Africa have remained in their posts, rather than being replaced by Russian intelligence or military officials in the post-Prigozhin overhaul. For example:

- Anton Elizarov. Using the call sign Lotus, Elizarov remains in position as Wagner's top commander, which includes overseeing its deployments in Africa. Elizarov emerged as the de facto highest-ranking officer after the August 2023 plane crash took out many of Wagner's leadership council.⁶⁷ Discussions in Russian media around the restructuring of PMC operations continued to refer to Elizarov as Wagner's commander in December 2024.⁶⁸ Elizarov has been a Wagner fighter since 2016, having fought in Syria, CAR, Libya and the occupied territories of Ukraine.⁶⁹
- Dmitri Sytyii. The head of Wagner's business operations in CAR, Sytyii has been a long-standing figure in the network of companies that underpin Wagner's operations and work in the extractives sector. Sytyii has also been active politically in CAR – at one stage as head of the Russian House cultural centre in Bangui – and has appeared at public events in 2024 commemorating Prigozhin and Wagner co-founder Dmitri Utkin.⁷⁰
- Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov is commander of Wagner operations in Mali.⁷¹ He was sanctioned by the US in May 2023.⁷² Discussions in Russian media around the restructuring of PMC operations continued to refer to Maslov as the Wagner commander in Mali in December 2024.⁷³
- Alexander Ivanov. Head of COSI, the front organization for Wagner troops in CAR. A long-time intermediary with the CAR government and a Prigozhin ally, Ivanov remains a public interlocutor for Russian 'instructors' operating in CAR.⁷⁴



Dmitri Podolsky, a Wagner commander recently appointed as an advisor to CAR's President Faustin Archange Touadéra.

Photo: Grey Zone Telegram Channel

Another long-time Wagner officer, Dmitry Podolsky (call sign Salem), was unveiled by Pavel Prigozhin in September 2024 as a new advisor to CAR president Touadéra.⁷⁵ Other Wagner officials and Prigozhin allies had previously served in this role.⁷⁶ The choice of another Wagner loyalist, rather than someone from Russian intelligence, is a further indicator of continuity among Wagner's command structures in countries where the outfit has a long-established presence.

However, other personnel changes suggest increased supervision of Wagner's activity. December 2023 saw the arrival in CAR of Denis Pavlov, purportedly as a Russian diplomat. However, in reality, he is an intelligence officer from Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service, who assumed control of the security partnership with the General Directorate of the Central African National Police.⁷⁷ Pavlov is based in the Russian embassy, where he reportedly supervises all Wagner activity.⁷⁸

Much of Prigozhin's business network and assets are now controlled by the Russian military or intelligence services. For example, ownership of the Concord catering management company – a central part of Prigozhin's business empire, which earned him the nickname 'Putin's Chef' – has reportedly been transferred to a seemingly minor Russian military official.⁷⁹ Similarly, two Ministry of Internal Affairs officials were named as directors of former Wagner companies in Syria.⁸⁰

However, investigations by All Eyes on Wagner in September 2024 suggest that the Prigozhin family has maintained control of some parts of its business empire, including those that were used to channel troops and equipment to Africa.⁸¹ In late 2023, Pavel Prigozhin reportedly took a role in negotiating the future of Wagner with the National Guard.⁸² Some reporting has suggested Prigozhin's son maintains an interest in Wagner's operations in Africa.⁸³ A former Prigozhin colleague told the BBC: 'Moscow gave the heir the go-ahead to continue doing in Africa what his father did – on condition that it does not contradict the interests of Russia.'⁸⁴ In recent months, Russian military bloggers have discussed Pavel Prigozhin's ongoing role alongside Anton Elizarov in managing Wagner's Africa operations.⁸⁵

Yevgeny Prigozhin has become a martyr in Russia and some parts of Africa, with monuments commemorating him in both.⁸⁶ The Wagner symbol of the sledgehammer – a reference to the brutal torture of a Syrian man by Wagner fighters, endorsed by Prigozhin as a symbol of his brutality – has become an emblem of the movement.⁸⁷ The mutiny – and the likelihood that Prigozhin's death was a Russian state-sponsored assassination – does not appear to preclude a certain loyalty to his memory, which it seems the Russian state allows to continue, both in Africa and elsewhere.



KEY FINDING 4

There has been a change in how Russian PMCs operate, both in Russia's war in Ukraine and in Africa

International observers have analyzed how the Russian military and intelligence apparatus has changed Wagner, carving up the operation and Prigozhin's business and criminal empire, and reshaping it into part of the Russian state. Yet, in turn, the Wagner PMC has also had a lasting impact on how the Russian state is conducting warfare. This will shape how Russia engages with PMCs and engages in Africa going forward.

In the wake of Prigozhin's death, the Russian PMC landscape has evolved and become more complex. Before Wagner, PMCs were not a major part of the Russian military apparatus.⁸⁸ Then Wagner emerged as a unique, initially monolithic organization. During the invasion of Ukraine, new Russian PMCs emerged to meet demand for additional manpower.⁸⁹ After the Wagner mutiny, those PMCs were brought under the oversight of the Volunteer Corps, managed by the Russian Ministry of Defence.⁹⁰ This has, in a way, formalized the role these PMCs play in Russia's military. They offer additional, flexible military reinforcements to the Kremlin while their oligarchic financial backers gain access to influence, lucrative government contracts and their own private armies.⁹¹ Today, there are more Russian PMCs than ever before. 'Russian warfighting has become a public-private partnership,' notes Russia expert Mark Galeotti.⁹²

Similarly, far from being sidelined for their association with a mutinous force, Wagner's surviving former leaders have been absorbed into either the Russian military establishment or an ever-increasing number of other PMCs. For example, Andrei Troshev, Wagner's former chief executive, joined the Ministry of Defence and was tasked with leading the establishment of the Volunteer Corps, consisting of PMC units deployed to fight in Ukraine.⁹³ Alexandr Kuznetsov (call sign Ratibor) was one of Wagner's highest commanders and worked in Syria, Libya and Sudan, but subsequently joined the Chechen special forces.⁹⁴ Konstantin Pikalov, the former operational head of Wagner in CAR,⁹⁵ now leads Convoy, another PMC reportedly backed by Putin ally Arkady Rotenberg.⁹⁶



Former Wagner commanders who had operations in Ukraine and Africa. Centre is Alexandr Kuznetsov, who led Wagner troops in Sudan, Libya and Syria. Photo: Telegram

Beyond these high-ranking officials, many other Wagner fighters are now integrated into Russian military structures, whether directly within the Ministry of Defence or the National Guard, or in other PMCs under the Volunteer Corps.

Other Russian PMCs are also playing or eyeing a role in Africa, albeit a more minor one than Africa Corps/Wagner. This includes the so-called Bear Brigade, which deployed a small number of troops to Burkina Faso, but later withdrew.⁹⁷ Led by Vitalij Nikolaevich Ermolaev,⁹⁸ the Bear Brigade was sent back to Russia to fight against Ukraine in Kursk. Information suggests that two more PMCs, Redut and Convoy, have been recruiting for other operations in Africa.⁹⁹

Since Prigozhin's death, an expanding Russian military-business complex has emerged. Rather than one PMC, Wagner, acting as a proxy for the Russian state, there are now more PMC players in Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, Africa. While Africa Corps is an explicitly state-backed entity, there is also a more complex set of private actors pursuing military goals on Russia's behalf.

The Wagner Group was emblematic of Russia's use of proxies, including organized crime groups, as instruments of the state in a range of activities, including smuggling, influence operations, sanctions-busting and illicit financial flows. The Africa Corps and other PMCs are likely to perpetuate this. It is unclear how exploitation of illicit economies has changed since Prigozhin's death, the absorption of most of his companies and the Wagner Group by the Kremlin, and the emergence of Africa Corps. Yet the most recent available evidence suggests that Wagner's exploitation of natural resources in CAR, for example, continues apace.



KEY FINDING 5

Worsening security, illicit economies and changing narratives challenge Africa Corps'/Wagner Group's Sahel expansion

Russia's expanding role in Africa by means of Africa Corps/Wagner Group has seemed swift and unstoppable. For some, this has seemed to be a *fait accompli*. 'Russia has effectively gained the upper hand in the geopolitical arms race in the Sahel and won committed, albeit fragile, allies in the region,' Ikemesit Effiong of SBM Intelligence, a Lagos-based geopolitical risk consultancy, told *The Guardian*.¹⁰⁰ Yet, by expanding so rapidly, Africa Corps/Wagner Group is facing a correspondingly larger set of risks, both in the Sahel and through logistical exposure to Syria.

The fall of the Assad dictatorship in Syria has been described by Russian commentators as a 'catastrophe' for Russia's presence in Syria and Africa.¹⁰¹ Assad – a long-time ally of Russia and who is now exiled there – had allowed Russia to maintain a naval base in Tartus and the Khmeimim air base in Latakia. At the time of writing, Syria's new authorities have reportedly cancelled the lease on the naval base at Tartus, and operations at Khmeimim airbase have been drawing down.¹⁰² Military equipment from these bases is reportedly being moved from Syria to Libya.¹⁰³

The Syrian bases have been a critical refuelling point for Russian aircraft carrying equipment and personnel to Russia's operations in Africa. These flights would transit the airspace of Iran, Syria and Iraq, stop off in Latakia, and then fly onwards to bases in Libya as the next logistics hub. Heavy-loaded cargo planes cannot fly directly between Russia and Libya without refuelling – hence the importance of the Syrian stopover. In addition, if Russian planes are barred in future from flying through Syrian airspace – following Turkey's lead of barring Russian aircraft flying to Syria from Turkish airspace – these logistics flights would be forced to take a more circuitous route.¹⁰⁴

If this were to become the case, Russia could seek to expand its naval presence in Africa to boost supply lines to Africa Corps/Wagner. In Libya, Russia could press its ally, the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, to allow greater naval access. However, access to bases in Libya is precarious in the long run, since Haftar is hostile to the internationally recognized government in Tripoli. The Russian military presence in Libya depends on Haftar maintaining his fiefdom and it is not institutionally vested, as elsewhere in the Sahel.¹⁰⁵

In Sudan, Russia has negotiated with a succession of governments in the hope of establishing a naval base on the Red Sea coast. The outbreak of civil war in Sudan in April 2023, however, has complicated Russia's calculations, not least because it has pitted Sudan's army against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary organization long favoured by the Wagner Group because of its control over Sudanese goldfields. However, Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs has more recently provided support to Sudan's military and reopened discussions on a potential Red Sea naval base. However, neither Libyan nor Sudanese port access is a near-term solution for Russia's logistical challenges in Russia.¹⁰⁶

Even if Africa Corps/Wagner Group can keep supply lines open, other challenges could prevent them from delivering on security pledges to partner governments. The Sahel region faces more complex and deadly security threats than ever before. Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso are contending with protracted insurgencies, among which JNIM and IS Sahel play the leading roles.¹⁰⁷ According to ACLED, reported conflict-related fatalities across these three Sahelian states reached a record high in the first half of 2024, up 190% on those recorded in the same period in 2021.¹⁰⁸ These conflicts also became more lethal in 2024 than they were in 2023.¹⁰⁹ While Wagner/Africa Corp have an appetite for illicitly sourced natural resources, those same illicit economies finance and sustain rebel and jihadist groups in the Sahel, fuelling competition and violence in a struggle for resources.¹¹⁰ For example, Mali's N'thaka gold mine attracts the attention of virtually every armed group.¹¹¹

This means that Russia is expanding its military presence into a security situation that was already deteriorating, after a decade of unsuccessful interventions by Western governments. As discussed above, the troops it has provided to its new partners in Niger and Burkina Faso are small forces focused on regime protection: it is not clear that these forces will be able to improve or even maintain security



The Russian flag hangs on the monument of the Russian 'instructors' in Bangui. © Barbara Debout/AFP via Getty Images

in the face of the well-armed and sophisticated insurgent threats that JNIM and IS Sahel represent. The security situation in northern Mali has deteriorated significantly since Wagner deployed there. In Sudan, the vast scale of the civil conflict between the RSF and Sudan's military has meant that Wagner's small role in assisting the RSF has essentially been marginalized.

Russia's growing profile in the Sahel has increasingly made it the target of rhetoric from insurgents and armed groups, who increasingly position themselves as hostile to Russia as an intervening foreign force.¹¹² For example, in December 2023, JNIM's leader, Iyad Ag Ghaly, announced a new phase in the jihadist group's war, one in which the enemy is now Mali's military and Wagner, rather than the French military, which was previously seen as the 'foreign', non-Islamic invading enemy.¹¹³ IS Sahel has similarly changed its narratives to frame Russia as a key target. There is also growing popular anger towards the Russian contingents, particularly among Tuareg and Arab communities in northern Mali. Africa Corps/Wagner's brutality towards civilians may spur a backlash against their presence from communities, putting their military and economic operations at greater risk.

Furthermore, as Russia has expanded into more countries in Africa, it is increasingly positioning itself on multiple sides of ethnic boundaries. For example, it is fighting against Tuareg groups in northern Mali, while in Libya, the LAAF (i.e. Wagner's local ally) includes Tuareg contingents. In northern Niger, the current regime is seeking to build alliances with influential Tuareg groups.¹¹⁴ It is not clear that Russia has a strategy for navigating these regional ethnic dynamics, which could pose complex political challenges in future.

Another potential (albeit less significant) operational risk that Africa Corps/Wagner could face is disruption by Ukrainian special forces. Claims by Ukrainian intelligence sources that they have conducted drone strikes on Wagner positions in Sudan first emerged in early 2023, and continued until mid-2024.¹¹⁵ While the claims appear to be genuine – corroborated by video evidence and observations in the field that Ukrainian-operated drones have been used in Khartoum – these operations have been limited in scope, particularly given Wagner's small-scale role in Sudan. However, they do show a symbolic willingness by Ukraine to challenge Russia outside Ukrainian territory.

In August 2024, Mali severed diplomatic ties with Ukraine in the aftermath of an ambush in Tinzouaten that killed dozens of Wagner fighters and Malian troops.¹¹⁶ In a widely shared photo, Tuareg fighters were seen posing with a Ukrainian flag; two days after the battle, the spokesman for Ukraine's military intelligence service stated that the Tuaregs had 'received the necessary information, and not just information, which enabled a successful military operation against Russian war criminals'.¹¹⁷ However, Ukraine's foreign minister subsequently denied his country's involvement and claimed that there was no evidence implicating Ukraine in the fighting.¹¹⁸ Sources in northern Mali also dispute claims of Ukrainian involvement in the ambush or support enabling it. Niger and Burkina Faso followed suit in severing diplomatic ties with Ukraine. In a joint letter, Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso asked the UN Security Council to investigate Ukraine's 'open and assumed support for international terrorism'.¹¹⁹



IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This latest era of Russian military and mercenary engagement in Africa has brought with it many changes, from the emergence of Africa Corps and its rapid expansion across the Sahel to a recalibration of the Russian state's relationship with PMCs. Looking to the future, the following trends could intensify:

- Africa Corps/Wagner Group will remain Russia's most influential and strategic tool in Africa, seeking to capitalize on deteriorating security in the Sahel to exert greater political and economic influence.
- Africa Corps/Wagner Group will continue to exacerbate the already-deteriorating security trends in the regions where they are active. Small, expeditionary contingents of Russian troops can only provide survival for the autocratic regimes they serve and will be unable to build up sustained security amid intensifying insurgencies. Wagner's inability to curb insecurity in northern Mali is a testament to this. Instead, stoking violence against civilians will exacerbate the drivers of insurgencies.
- While Africa Corps' expansion across the Sahel has been rapid, it will face future challenges. These include the disruption of supply lines from Syria and the potential political risks of intervening in conflicts on multiple sides of ethnic boundaries.
- The line between PMCs and the Russian state has become increasingly blurred. Other Russian PMCs can be expected to operate in Africa in future.
- Africa Corps is likely to continue operating in proximity to illicit economies, as well as engaging in sanctions busting, smuggling and the industrial scale exploitation of gold, diamonds and timber in certain countries.
- As shown by the African Initiative, Russia's military engagement in Africa remains accompanied by political influence operations that seek to spread disinformation and discredit Western engagement in Africa. These same strategies will remain employed going forward.

African multilateral organizations such as the African Union (AU), ECOWAS and the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) have little power to pressure member states with close ties to Russia and Russian entities like the Africa Corps into addressing these concerns directly. However, the actions of the Africa Corps, Wagner Group and their affiliates have a ripple effect on neighbouring countries and the wider region. The following recommendations for these continental regional blocs aim to mitigate these effects:



A monument to Yevgeny Prigozhin and Wagner co-founder, Dmitri Utkin, in Bangui, December 2024. © Annela Niamolo/AFP via Getty Images

- All three organizations have a mandate to enhance security and stability across their respective member states, regions and – in the case of the African Union – the continent. The activities of the Africa Corps and other mercenary groups operating in various parts of Africa have severe repercussions for human rights and foment instability. The AU, ECOWAS and ECCAS should evaluate the implications and risks posed by PMCs and private security contractors across the continent to develop clear and coordinated strategies to mitigate those threats.
- The disinformation campaigns spearheaded by the Wagner Group and, more recently, Africa Corps, are not limited to the countries in which they are contracted, but have a corrosive impact on neighbouring states and people across the region who consume this propaganda. This is also an issue that is not solely limited to Russian influence or affiliated organizations, but points to a growing global threat of disinformation more broadly, particularly as social media giants Facebook and X roll back monitoring and moderation efforts and increasingly rely on users to identify and report disinformation. As such, the AU, ECOWAS and ECCAS can pursue broader efforts to find ways of addressing the spread of disinformation and counter its detrimental political impact across the continent.

The international community could act on the following recommendations:

Use diplomatic channels to put pressure on Russia's supply lines into Africa. This includes engaging with Turkey and the new de-facto leaders of Syria to close Russian bases and close airspace to Russian military flights. In Africa, engaging in Libya and Sudan to discourage the creation of Russian naval bases could create challenges for sustaining Africa Corps/Wagner operations.

Invest further in countering Russian disinformation in Africa and increase messaging highlighting Africa Corps'/Wagner's indiscriminate violence and inability to contain security threats. Efforts have been made to track and highlight Russian disinformation,¹²⁰ yet more investment could be made in countering false narratives through diplomatic and media channels with African countries.

Enact more rapid and coordinated sanctions efforts against Russian mercenary actors. For example, the African Initiative was only sanctioned as an Africa Corps proxy actor and purveyor of disinformation by the European Union in December 2024,¹²¹ even though its role was obvious to observers (and highlighted by the United States) several months prior.¹²² While sanctions designations must follow rigorous due diligence processes, a more rapid and coordinated response could have targeted the African Initiative's disinformation narratives sooner.

Engage rather than isolate states hosting Russian presence. The intersection of coups throughout the Sahel and increased strategic ties with Russia have led a number of donor states to cut their aid, close embassies and/or impose sanctions. However, this has not resulted in either a return to democracy or blunted Russia's expanding influence. If anything, isolation has arguably ceded the initiative in the region to Russia and helped cement its security role.

Given this, an international approach to African states aligned with Russia should be premised not on isolation but on smart engagement. This keeps communication and information-sharing channels open. It also allows for the tracking of evolving trends and conditions, and a baseline capability to respond to shifts rapidly through tailored, evidence-based interventions.

Prioritize assistance towards countering illicit economies to engage states and buttress stability. As detailed in this report, human rights abuses have risen in many of the countries that have seen Russian military involvement. Such abuses are unlikely to go away in the near to medium term, and are likely to worsen. This means that for foreign donors, any direct military or security support to address the conflict or as a tool for continuing engagement will become increasingly difficult, raising public opinion risks in Africa and potentially political and legal risks in their domestic contexts.

International engagement with states hosting Russian presence could mitigate this risk by focusing not on direct military support but on law enforcement assistance and cooperation to counter transnational organized crime and illicit economies. GI-TOC research has underscored how illicit economies, such as arms trafficking, banditry, cattle rustling and the artisanal gold sector, have significant impacts on conflicts and instability by financing, resourcing or building legitimacy for armed groups.¹²³ A focus on law enforcement assistance and cooperation, including training, equipment provision and building cross-regional investigative links, offers more politically palatable spaces for engagement for both the international actors and regional states, which can nonetheless positively shape the security and conflict landscape and limit the demand for Russian PMC assistance.



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