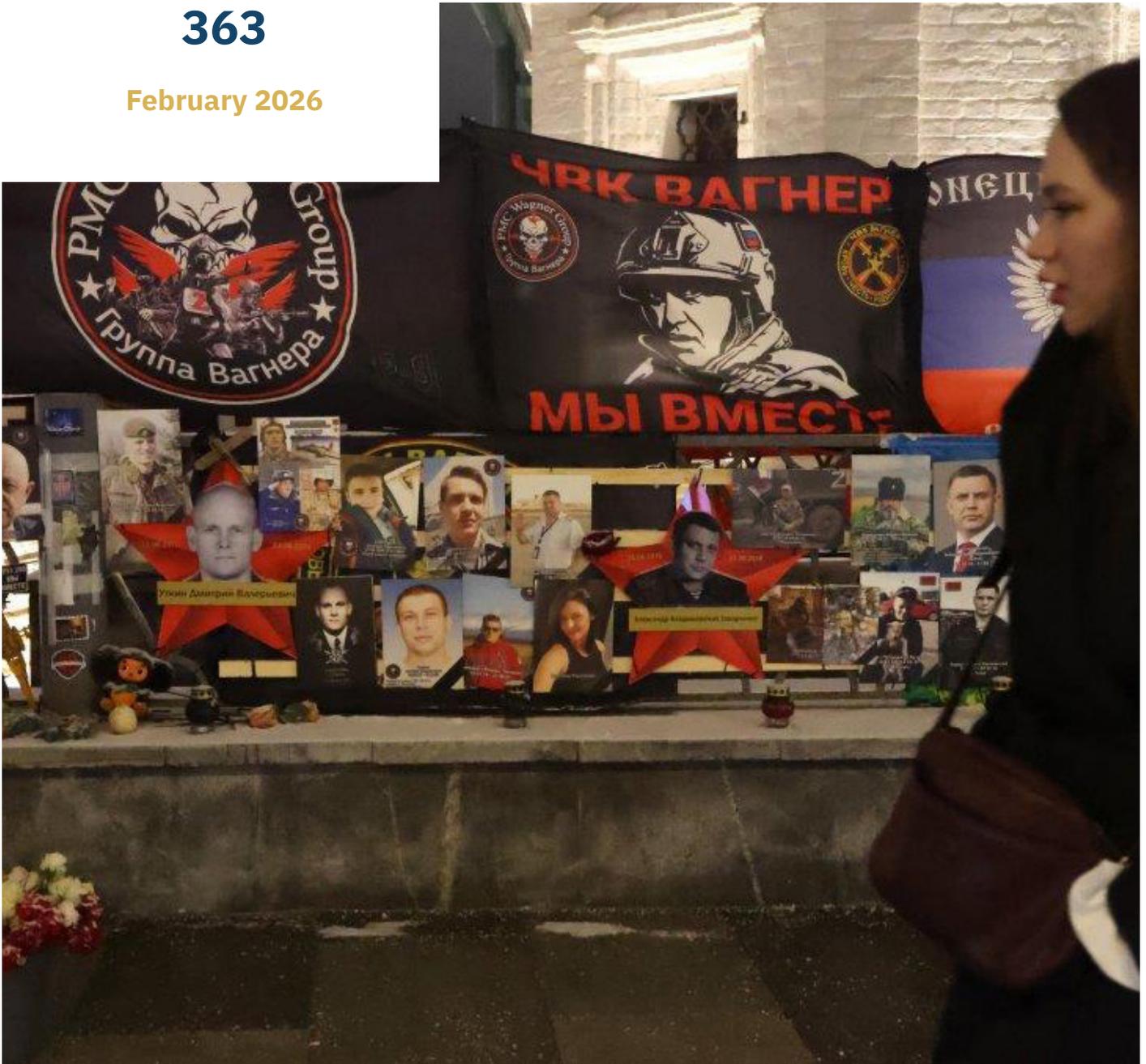


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Back to the Shadows: Russia's African Security Engagements Since Prigozhin

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Abstract

This paper examines Russia's security engagements in Africa since the death of the founder of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin. Despite reports of a diminished presence, the Kremlin continues to rely on the deployment of military force and information operations to shape regional politics and sustain its footprint on the continent. Since 2023, Moscow has tightened control over these efforts, with Kremlin-linked figures, state agencies and federal funds underwriting them. Russia's engagements follow the top foreign policy priorities of the Kremlin while operating under a constrained environment. The demands of Russia's war in Ukraine have limited the Kremlin's ability to cooperate with partner governments, including in Africa. In turn, Russia's presence depends on how its security offer is perceived, making blowback a risk to this presence.

Introduction

The death of oligarch and leader of the Wagner Group Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023, the fall of Syria's former president Bashar al-Assad, the 'withdrawal' of the Wagner Group from Mali, military setbacks in the Sahel and declining arms sales have fuelled perceptions of Moscow being on the back foot in Africa. In September 2025, *The Wall Street Journal* referred to the Russian military deployments in the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya and the Sahel as 'unravelling' in the face of military reversals for the Russians and their partners.¹ More broadly, Russia's global reach has been characterised as 'shrinking', including in Africa.² In turn, the 2025 US-Russia encounters concerning Russia's war in Ukraine have attracted global attention, painting Russia as preoccupied with matters beyond its African engagements.

This image contrasts sharply with portrayals of Russia-Africa ties made two years ago. Despite the economic and military demands from its war against Ukraine, the Kremlin still dedicated resources to sustaining a visible role in the African security domain. Rising Russian military deployments, a few battlefield victories and high-profile trade deals created the impression of an unstoppable Russian rise in Africa, prompting analysts to ask: 'what's the limit?'³

Despite the economic and military demands from its war against Ukraine, the Kremlin still dedicated resources to sustaining a visible role in the African security domain

Beyond these changing perceptions and media portrayals, the reality is that Russia's security presence in Africa has evolved, but Moscow continues to build on its existing strengths. Indeed, the death of Prigozhin, who was the main actor leading Russian political efforts in Africa, led to the restructuring of Moscow's security engagements with the continent. Given these changes, the years 2017–2023 marked a period in Afro-Russian security relations during which military deployments and information operations became prevalent.

1 Benoit Faucon and Nicholas Bariyo, "Russia's Ambitious Plans in Africa Are Unraveling", *The Wall Street Journal*, September 29, 2025.

2 Ronald H. Linden, "Russia's Shrinking World: The War in Ukraine and Moscow's Global Reach", *The Conversation*, February 10, 2025.

3 Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia, *Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa. What's the Limit?* (Center for Strategic & International Studies, 2023).

In turn, after 2023, relations have been shaped by closer Kremlin control, accompanied by more restrained military deployments. Far from the sensational headlines that dominated the previous era, developments in 2025 demonstrate that Moscow remains engaged through discreet, underhanded means, rarely making global headlines but featuring in national news in African states.

In August 2025, Angolan counterintelligence detained two Russian citizens in Luanda, accusing them of conducting intelligence operations designed to amplify the grievances that had sparked deadly protests the previous month. The two individuals were linked to ex-Prigozhin structures and were found carrying books with titles such as *Colour Revolutions* and *Dirty Wars*.⁴ The Angolan press covered the detention widely, while international media showed little interest in the case.⁵

In October 2025, Madagascar experienced a military coup, and the new leadership, under Col. Michaël Randrianirina, quickly established ties with Russian contacts. These included both official diplomatic channels and Russian state-controlled media, *Sputnik*, as well as pro-Russian local actors in the Madagascar Friends of Russia group.⁶ Malagasy government delegations to Moscow quickly followed, promising to expand cooperation in various spheres.⁷

Just as quickly, the Kremlin dispatched Sergey Kiriyyenko to Dodoma on 6 November 2025 to personally deliver a congratulatory message from Russian leader Vladimir Putin to Tanzania's leader, Samia Suluhu Hassan.⁸ This was likely Moscow's sign of support for Hassan following the presidential vote, which, according to the AU, 'did not comply with AU principles' and 'standards for democratic elections'.⁹ After the Kiriyyenko visit, Russian 'electoral observers' – the only foreign ones operating in the vote – declared the controversial vote 'competitive' and 'inclusive'.¹⁰

These episodes are only some of the latest in Russia's ongoing efforts to build influence and seize opportunities in Africa. Confronted with international sanctions, the demands

4 Serviço de Investigação Criminal de Angola – SIC, Facebook, August 13, 2025, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=1169520305205430&set=pb.100064424156540.-2207520000&type=3>.

5 The exception was *RFI*. "How Moscow is Reinventing Its Influence Machine Across Africa", *RFI*, August 19, 2025.

6 Emre Sari and Matteo Maillard, "Entre Moscou, Paris, Washington et Pékin, Madagascar tente de tracer sa voie [Between Moscow, Paris, Washington and Beijing, Madagascar is trying to forge its own path]", *Jeune Afrique*, October 23, 2025.

7 "Rossotrudnichestvo Leadership Agrees with Madagascar's National Assembly Chair on Opening Partner Russian House and Expanding Cooperation", *Rossotrudnichestvo*, November 11, 2025, <https://rs.gov.ru/en/news/rukovodstvo-rossotrudnichestva-dogovorilos-s-predsedatelem-nacziionalnogo-sobraniya-respubliki-madagaskar-ob-otkrytii-partnerskogo-russkogo-doma-i-rasshirenii-sotrudnichestva/>.

8 "Congratulatory message from President of Russia Vladimir Putin to President of Tanzania Samia Suluhu Hassan", Embassy of the Russian Federation in the United Republic of Tanzania, November 6, 2025, tanzania.mid.ru/en/press-centre/news/congratulatory_message/.

9 "Preliminary Statement of the African Union Election Observation Mission to the October 2025 General Elections in the United Republic of Tanzania: the African Union Election Observation Mission Calls for Urgent Constitutional Reforms and Inclusive Politics", AU, November 5, 2025, <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20251105/aeom-preliminary-statement-october-2025-general-elections-tanzania>.

10 "Наблюдатели Общественной палаты России признали выборы в Танзании состоявшимися [Observers from the Russian Public Chamber Recognised the Elections in Tanzania as Having Taken Place]", *Gazeta.ru*, November 10, 2025.

of its invasion of Ukraine and a degree of semi-isolation, Russia's emerging approach to Africa reflects the aggressiveness of the Prigozhin era, albeit deployed in a more centralised and covert manner.

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Building on Prigozhin's legacy

Under Putin, Moscow only slowly began to show interest in Africa. The agenda in the 2000s was principally shaped by commercial interests and norms promotion, especially opposition to sanctions and democratisation by force. On the former, the Russian government has been pursuing a trade policy in which Africa has become a customer for Russian products and a supplier of limited inputs to Russian industry (eg, bauxite from Guinea). But trade with the continent remains skewed towards northern Africa, especially Egypt, which is Russia's largest trade partner on the continent.¹¹

In turn, trade leans heavily in Russia's favour. In 2024, trade with sub-Saharan Africa amounted to about \$8 billion, while Russian imports of African goods accounted for a paltry \$500 million.¹² Summarising the state of play, in October 2025 *The Africa Report* referred to the country's footprint on the continent as an 'economic power in appearance only'.¹³ The relative lack of commercial relevance means that Moscow has had to lean on other levers for influence on the continent.

The Kremlin's interest in African politics began in the late 2010s. The context is important. Facing partial isolation following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Moscow sought new international partners, with certain African governments appearing open to closer ties. Moscow's 2015 military intervention in Syria enhanced the image of the Russian armed forces as a capable counter-insurgency force, willing to support friendly governments. This contributed to the perception of the Kremlin as open to deeper security cooperation with countries worldwide.

When it comes to the specific means deployed, since 2014, Moscow has increasingly relied on covert operations, disinformation campaigns, transnational repression and other

11 According to 2023 figures from "Russia", Observatory of Economic Complexity, accessed November 13, 2025, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/rus?selector343id=Export>.

12 According to 2024 data from the International Monetary Fund, IMF, accessed November 27, 2025, [https://data.imf.org/en/Data-Explorer?datasetUrn=IMF.STA:IMTS\(1.0.0\)](https://data.imf.org/en/Data-Explorer?datasetUrn=IMF.STA:IMTS(1.0.0))

13 Louise Margolin, "Russia in Africa, an Economic Power in Appearance Only", *The Africa Report*, October 16, 2025.

underhanded methods in its foreign policy. These efforts are meant to sustain Russia's global ambitions when its economic and military means fall short.¹⁴ This has been the case across Europe, starting with the 2014 Russian sabotage operation that saw the destruction of a weapons storage facility in the Czech Republic and still continues.¹⁵ In hindsight, Prigozhin's activities in Africa can be seen as the start of the deployment of this toolkit to African contexts.

Moscow's 2015 military intervention in Syria enhanced the image of the Russian armed forces as a capable counter-insurgency force, willing to support friendly governments

In the late 2010s, according to various accounts, Prigozhin became closer to Putin's inner circle, effectively 'selling' Putin on the value of Russia developing a larger presence on the continent.¹⁶ The pitch was simple: through relatively small political and military missions deployed across various countries, Russia could reclaim its status as a global power. With local arms and mining deals, the missions could pay for themselves.¹⁷

Some initial attempts failed. For example, the 2017 dispatch of a team of 'political consultants' to influence the following year's Malagasy presidential election failed to elect a pro-Russian candidate to office.¹⁸

Eventually, the successful 'proof of concept' came from Prigozhin's operations in Libya and CAR. His deployment of a few hundred Russian special forces to Libya and CAR in 2018 drew global attention, reinforcing Moscow's image as a global power despite the Kremlin's routine denials of the Wagner Group's existence.¹⁹ At every step, the Russian military – especially its military intelligence agency, the Main Directorate of the General Staff (commonly known as GRU) – provided logistical support, access to facilities and personnel, and more.

14 See Dimitri Minic, *Pensée et culture stratégiques russes: du contournement de la lutte armée à la guerre en Ukraine* [Russian Strategic Thought and Culture: From Circumventing Armed Struggle to the War in Ukraine] (Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2024). On subversion, see Jill Kastner and William C. Wohlforth, *A Measure Short of War. A Brief History of Great Power Subversion* (Oxford University Press, 2025).

15 Andrew Higgins and Hana de Goeij, "Czechs Blame 2014 Blasts at Ammunition Depots on Elite Russian Spy Unit", *The New York Times*, April 17, 2021.

16 "Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin Led the Russian Offensive in Africa", *Proekt*, March 14, 2019.

17 The financial side of the Wagner deployments and operations are difficult to analyse due to their complexity and opacity. Ultimately, a large portion of their expenses may have been covered directly by Kremlin funds. See also Jack Watling, Oleksandr V. Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24*, Special Report (Royal United Services Institute, 2024), 22. See also Julia Stanyard, *Mercenaries and Illicit Markets. Russia's Africa Corps and the Business of Conflict*, (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2025), 12, 13.

18 *Proekt*, "Master and Chef".

19 John Lechner, *Death Is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare* (Bloomsbury, 2025), 127.

In CAR, Prigozhin effectively contributed to the central government's efforts to restore its authority over larger swathes of the country, at a heavy human toll and severe human-rights violations after decades of intermittent civil conflict.²⁰ Riding on its reputation in CAR (and, before that, in Syria since September 2015), Russia gained new standing as a viable 'security' partner and a potential diplomatic mediator in regional conflicts. From these and other operations, Russian actors – such as Prigozhin and the GRU – could present Putin with political 'victories', setting the stage for continued Kremlin interest.

In hindsight, the years 2017–2023 represented a distinct period of Russo-African engagements. After Prigozhin died in a mysterious air crash in August 2023, the military decided to carry on with the oligarch's operations, transferring its leadership to the GRU, specifically to Col. Andrey Averyanov's unit, 21955. According to leaked documents, Russian operations would focus on state-to-state cooperation by offering 'regime survival' services.²¹ These consist of VIP and asset protection services as well as propaganda support from Moscow's large state-controlled media apparatus. Promises of economic support and investment (usually the signature of Memorandums of Understanding with state-owned companies) are meant to reinforce the narrative of partnership despite meagre commercial relations.

The reverse side of this offer was Prigozhin's – and Russia's more broadly – efforts to meddle in African politics. For example, Prigozhin sought to create a pan-African political bloc across French-speaking countries that would view Russia favourably.²² Likewise, other figures close to the Kremlin, such as far-right oligarch Konstantin Malofeev, also sought to translate African influence into favour from Moscow.

By 2023, 18 African countries had experienced Russian political meddling, including covert deals, support for unconstitutional power transfers and electoral disinformation.²³ Despite the prolific nature of these operations, their impact on the ground varied.

Despite the prolific nature of these operations, their impact on the ground varied

The covert nature of these actions – be it media operations or denials of the Wagner Group's existence – points to the Kremlin's subversive intent. Namely, to nudge – if not

20 Lechner, *Death Is Our Business*, 120.

21 "«Вагнер» в Африке: ребрендинг, «пакет выживания режима», эксплуатация ресурсов [Wagner in Africa: Rebranding, a 'Regime Survival Package,' and Resource Exploitation]", *BBC News Russian Service*, February 20, 2024.

22 Roman Badanin et al., "Шеф и повар. Часть третья. Расследование о том, как Россия вмешивается в выборы в двадцати странах [The Boss and the Chef. Part Three. An Investigation into How Russia Interferes in Elections in Twenty Countries]", *Proekt*, April 11, 2019.

23 "Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, May 8, 2024.

pressure – perceived pro-Western governments to ‘switch sides’ or to support those political actors the Kremlin sees as friendly. Ultimately, this amounts to an interventionist foreign policy.²⁴

Subversion, under new leadership

Centralisation under the Presidential Administration

Given his role, Prigozhin's death prompted an evolution in Russia's subversion tactics. The key change is the increased control exercised by the Presidential Administration (the Kremlin), today sitting at the top of Russia's subversive apparatus in Africa. In other words, what followed Prigozhin's demise was the centralisation of the system by placing parts of the oligarch's operations in the hands of top state officials close to the Kremlin. These actors coordinate under the supervision of the Kremlin, as the Russian leadership seeks to minimise competition among agencies and amplify impact and reach, including in Africa.²⁵ While Prigozhin partially funded some of his Africa operations out of his other businesses (including in Russia itself), all Russian actors involved in subversion today are either state or state-controlled and thus underwritten by Kremlin funds.

While initially unclear, by 2025, Prigozhin's African media operations – essentially reduced to individual members of his staff – had partly come under the control of the Kremlin's First Deputy Chief of Staff, Sergey Kiriyenko.²⁶ According to reports, their official goal is to ‘monitor’ the political situation in CAR, Chad, Libya and Mali, and to deliver ‘political services’ to a number of these governments.²⁷ Once considered a liberal technocrat, Kiriyenko is today the leader of the Kremlin's domestic policy team, a role he received as a reward for his activities in occupied Ukraine, which earned him the nickname Russia's ‘Viceroy’.²⁸ Previously, Kiriyenko was part of Dmitry Medvedev's African outreach efforts during his presidency (2008–2012). With this experience and his rising profile in the Kremlin, Kiriyenko is set to become a fixture in Russia–Africa relations.

Media operations and information warfare

Another element of Russia's African operations has come under the influence of the Russian military. This includes *African Initiative* (established in 2023), nominally an independent press agency directed by Artem Kureev, reportedly an intelligence officer. The organisation is supervised by Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, Deputy Defence Minister. Since 2023, Yevkurov has overseen part of Russia's war operations in eastern Ukraine

24 See Kastner and Wohlforth, *A Measure Short of War*.

25 Sam Greene, Andrei Soldatov and Irina Borogan, “[War Without End: Russia's Shadow Warfare](#)” (Center for European Policy Analysis, November 19, 2025), 7, 8.

26 “[Mercenaries, Missionaries, and Mining](#)”, *Meduza*, May 30, 2025; Andrey Pertsev, “[Kiriyenko and Prigozhin's Legacy in Africa](#)”, *Riddle*, April 10, 2025.

27 “[Внутриполитический блок Кремля начал изучать положение в странах Африки \[The Kremlin's Domestic Politics Bloc Began to Study the Situation of African Countries\]](#)”, *RBK*, April 9, 2025.

28 Sébastien Seibt, “[Sergey Kiriyenko, the 'Viceroy of the Donbas' Who Helped Launch Putin's Career](#)”, *France 24*, October 2, 2022.

and has acted as an emissary for the Russian Ministry of Defence in African countries hosting Africa Corps and Wagner Group personnel. Among the staff of *African Initiative* are several people from former Prigozhin media projects, providing continuity to its techniques and networks.²⁹

Reflecting the trend in state-controlled media operations, the post-Prigozhin landscape has seen a proliferation of Russia House branches across Africa

Reflecting the trend in state-controlled media operations, the post-Prigozhin landscape has seen a proliferation of Russia House branches across Africa. Ostensibly Moscow's version of the Goethe Institut, the Confucius Institute or the Institut Français, this Russian government organisation is under the direct control of the Russian foreign ministry.³⁰ In turn, they cooperate with African Initiative, establishing a link with Russia's intelligence agencies.³¹ For instance, the Russian citizens detained in Angola in August 2025 had previously been associated with Rossotrudnichestvo, the parent organisation of Russia House and a Russian state agency.³²

In that sense, Russia House serves Moscow's information operations by providing a plausible cover for intelligence officers and acting as a conduit for Russian state narratives under the benign cover of cultural diplomacy.³³ The number of African countries hosting a Russia House branch is set to reach 22 soon.³⁴

Finally, state-controlled media *RT* and *Sputnik* have expanded their activities across the continent. This comes despite *RT* no longer being carried on DSTV's satellite package in Africa, after the European feed was blocked due to sanctions following the February 2022 Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The 2025 opening of the Addis Ababa *Sputnik* media hub and the launch of the RT Academy are recent examples of this growing outreach. In turn, there has been a proliferation of content-sharing agreements between Russian media companies and journalistic outlets worldwide, including in Africa. This process, which Maxime Audinet and Colin Gérard refer to as the 'clandestinisation' of

29 *African Initiative: From Public Diplomacy to Covert Influence Operations*, Technical Report (EEAS, June 2025), 8; "Vladimir Putin's Kremlin Builds on Wagner's Propaganda Legacy", *Africa Confidential* 65, no. 18, September 6, 2024. See also Stanyard, *Mercenaries and Illicit Markets*, 12.

30 Léa Peruchon, "Propaganda Machine: Russia's Information Offensive in the Sahel", *Forbidden Stories*, November 21, 2024.

31 EEAS, *African Initiative*, 18.

32 RFI, "How Moscow is Reinventing".

33 Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, "Russian Intelligence and Western Counterintelligence", *International Centre for Defence and Security*, May 20, 2024.

34 Brawley Benson, "With 'Russian Houses,' Moscow Expands Soft Power Push Into Africa", *The Moscow Times*, November 6, 2025.

Russian information operations, has led to dozens of such agreements in Africa. It enables content from these state-controlled media to bypass bans, reach new audiences and launder their reputation.³⁵

In sum, the centralisation of Russian influence operations in Africa has led to the implementation of new staff, resources and techniques while retaining key individuals and networks. Combined with closer Kremlin control and coordination, as well as funding, the result is a leaner, more effective media and subversion operations. According to Lou Osborn, '[Russian operatives] are now more discreet but busier than ever, expanding and becoming increasingly professional.'³⁶

The centralisation of Russian influence operations in Africa has led to the implementation of new staff, resources and techniques while retaining key individuals and networks

Measuring the effect of these media operations is challenging. Metrics such as approval rates of Russia are an approximate, if flawed, measure, as they fail to capture the often context-driven nature of information campaigns and the multi-causal nature of public opinion. Moreover, different channels serve different purposes: Russian state-controlled media (ie, *RT*, *African Initiative*) seek to polarise global audiences against the global status quo (the 'liberal international order').³⁷ For example, since 2024, *RT* has broadcast the show 'Lumumba's Africa', featuring Kenyan pan-Africanist figure Patrick LO Lumumba, which has been promoted through a media campaign playing on anti-colonial themes.³⁸

In turn, Russian covert channels (inauthentic social media accounts, undeclared political 'consultants') seek to create impact by strategically planting manipulated information to affect decision-making processes in the target society.³⁹ In Africa, the goal of these operations is to 'reshape geopolitical allegiances' to Russia's benefit.⁴⁰ The case of the now-defunct Kenya-based proxy media operation *African Stream* is illustrative. This organisation was an *RT* proxy set up in 2024 copying media tactics that Prigozhin's operations first implemented (eg, combining disinformation and factual reporting in

35 Maxime Audinet and Colin Gérard, *Under the Radar. Crisis, Reorganization, and Clandestization in Russia's Ecosystem of Information Influence After the Invasion of Ukraine*, Academic Policy Paper Series no. 2 (The Russia Program, October 2024).

36 Quoted in RFI's "How Moscow is Reinventing".

37 Stephen Hutchings, Vera Tolz, Precious Chatterje-Doodly, Rhys Crilley and Marie Gillespie. *Russia, Disinformation, and the Liberal Order: RT as Populist Pariah* (Cornell University Press, 2024), 79.

38 "Russia Turns to TV to Influence African Audiences", *ADF*, September 10, 2024.

39 See Ben Nimmo, "The Breakout Scale: Measuring the Impact of Influence Operations" (Brookings Foreign Policy, 2020).

40 "Challenging the West: Russian Anti-Imperialism Narratives in Nigeria", *African Digital Democracy Observatory*, January 24, 2025.

their coverage). This outlet routinely criticised Western policy in Africa while praising Africa's growing ties with Russia.⁴¹

For Russia, this media effort involves qualitative measures, such as promoting new narratives that cast Moscow as an ally, as well as a quantitative increase in media coverage of Russia and its favoured parties.⁴² The most impactful operations are those that draw on local grievances and established narratives. For example, Burkina Faso's leader, Ibrahim Traoré, has benefited from Moscow's image-building efforts, which cast him as a 'decolonial' hero in the style of Thomas Sankara.⁴³ By hijacking and amplifying local anti-French sentiment, Russia has legitimised both its military presence and the coup regimes in the Sahel.⁴⁴

Governments perceived as not favourable to Russia are the targets of disinformation and negative portrayals. These efforts draw on existing political trends of anti-neocolonialism, particularly the denunciation of African leaders as subservient to France or other Western governments.⁴⁵ Grievances against colonial rule, especially the Françafrique networks, provide a common language that Russian actors hijack to advance Moscow's foreign policy.⁴⁶

Military cooperation: Back to the shadows

Unlike in Chechnya and Ukraine, Russia has not deployed armed forces to remove perceived unfriendly governments in Africa. Military agencies manage parts of Russia's operations in Africa, but lack of resources and reputational concerns keep most efforts covert or locally sanctioned. So, its military missions have been mainly at the invitation of local partners. This was the case during Prigozhin's time and remains so today.⁴⁷

The underlying logic is the same, but Prigozhin-led missions, such as in CAR, Libya, Mali and Mozambique, relied on larger forces to influence conflicts through combat. Upon taking over the Prigozhin structures, the Russian armed forces retained some personnel and leadership on the ground.⁴⁸ Still, seeking to avoid the material costs and reputational damage produced by military defeats, they shifted away from combat roles, adopting a more risk-averse model.

41 Shelby Grossman and David Thiel, "African Stream: Russia's Latest Covert Influence Pipeline Targeting Africa and the US", *Freeman Spogli Institute Blog*, September 17, 2024.

42 Elian Peltier, Adam Satariano and Lynsey Chutel, "How Putin Became a Hero on African TV", *The New York Times*, April 18, 2023.

43 "Avec Ibrahim Traoré, l'Afrique est entrée dans l'ère de la post-vérité [With Ibrahim Traoré, Africa Has Entered the Era of Post-Truth]", *Jeune Afrique*, September 6, 2025.

44 Fitriani, "From Ouagadougou to Oceania: Burkina Faso Leader a Pacific Resistance Symbol", *The Strategist*, August 14, 2025.

45 For example "Anti-Faye Narratives Spread Across Sahel Networks", *African Digital Democracy Observatory*, October 31, 2025.

46 On how Russia does it, see Maxime Audinet, "Down with Neocolonialism! Strategic Narrative Resurgence and Foreign Policy Preferences in Wartime Russia", *European Journal of International Relations*, July 31, 2025.

47 Stanyard, *Mercenaries and Illicit Markets*, 11

48 In parallel, some Wagner Group structures survived under the leadership of Yevgeny Prigozhin's son, Pavel, and reportedly with support from Russian civilian intelligence agencies (as opposed to the military intelligence that support Africa Corps). The Wagner Group continues to operate from Bangui, seeking deals across the central African region, including in Democratic Republic of the Congo. See Benjamin Roger, "Under Prigozhin's Son, Wagner Preserves Roles in the Central African Republic and Mali", *Le Monde*, December 11, 2024.

From combat deployments to risk-averse missions

This shift is visible especially in Mali. There, the initial Wagner force participated in large-scale operations, including the 2023 capture of Kidal. Since Prigozhin's death, Russia's mission in Mali has gained resources but become more cautious, especially after setbacks, such as the 2024 Tinzawaten convoy ambush.⁴⁹ Africa Corps operations in Burkina Faso, Equatorial Guinea and Niger now favour smaller, restrained missions focused on training, protection and intelligence.⁵⁰

Training, protection and intelligence as the core offer

The Wagner Group and Africa Corps have made the training of local forces one of their key offers to local partners. Russia's reputation as a martial power attracted the attention of African militaries, an interest that remains viable because of its experience in deploying new technologies in the war in Ukraine.⁵¹ Significant is its deployment, piloting and maintenance of small drones capable of dual-use civilian and security operations. As unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) become more prevalent across Africa, this offer will become more attractive.⁵²

Elite and asset protective services have also been a constant since 2017, with Libya and Sudan witnessing these missions first

Elite and asset protective services have also been a constant since 2017, with Libya and Sudan witnessing these missions first. As with training, this more discreet service is essential for countries where elite trust in the military is low. For Russia, it offers a straightforward way to gain elite access. The leadership of Burkina Faso, CAR and Equatorial Guinea have all been seen with Russian bodyguards.⁵³ In Sudan, Wagner Group and Africa Corps forces have guarded gold mining assets controlled by the leader of the Rapid Support Forces, Muhammad 'Hemedti' Dagalo.⁵⁴ According to *The Sentry*, the Wagner mission in Mali has gradually transformed into asset protection, as Russian

49 Guillaume Maurice, "Battle of Tinzawaten: The Final Hours of Wagner Mercenaries in the Sahara", *The Observers*, September 13, 2024.

50 Stanyard, *Mercenaries and Illicit Markets*, 11

51 Already now, Russia has been sharing this information with partners in China, Iran and North Korea. Dara Massicot, "How Russia Recovered. What the Kremlin is Learning from the War in Ukraine", *Foreign Affairs* November/December 2025.

52 Denys Reva and Tshogofatso Johanna Ramachela, "Can a New Wave of Drone Tech Make Africa's Seas Safer?", *ISS Today*, November 30, 2022.

53 David Ehl, "How the Russian Wagner Group is Entrenching Itself in Africa", *DW*, October 27, 2024.

54 These operations have continued since the 2023 start of the Sudanese civil war, creating a paradox in Russian engagements with Sudan since Moscow began supporting Hemedti's rival, the Sudanese Armed Forces. See *After the Fall. Russian Influence on Africa's Illicit Economies Post-Wagner* (Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2025), 18, 19.

fighters guard the properties of certain leading junta members.⁵⁵ In CAR, Russian-owned assets are under constant Wagner surveillance, as are the logistical routes connecting the country's logging industry with Cameroon's harbours.⁵⁶

Finally, intelligence liaisons, capacity building and information sharing will remain part of Russia's proposition. Radars, surveillance technology, UAV imagery and social media interference techniques are among the means on offer, and are already deployed in the Sahel. For example, Russian officers have reportedly trained their Burkinabè counterparts in information warfare techniques, particularly to improve Traoré's image and target perceived opponents in Côte d'Ivoire.⁵⁷ Satellite imagery – in significant demand across Africa, as demonstrated by the proliferation of space programmes across the continent – could expand were it not for Russia's wartime needs.⁵⁸ The central Sahel militaries have been the primary beneficiaries of this support. That reflects, in part, their historically weak intelligence services, as well as mounting challenges in gathering human-source intelligence after the coups.⁵⁹

While military cooperation draws headlines, other forms of intelligence capacity-building deserve attention too. For example, the Ugandan government awarded a 10-year contract to a surveillance firm to develop the country's vehicle number plate monitoring system.⁶⁰ Similarly, the System of Operative Investigative Search (SORM in Russian) is a lawful interception technology that provides constant 'backdoor' access to Russian intelligence services. Russian vendor PROTEI promotes this and similar products worldwide. As of 2023, its clients included entities in Comoros, Kenya and Niger.⁶¹ In so far as these products are linked to Russian intelligence, they add to the influence of the services in the contexts where they are deployed.

Outlook

Ultimately, the post-Prigozhin era of Russian interventionism in Africa cannot not last. Two key factors are likely to render the current stage transitory. The first is the response of African governments and societies to Moscow's opportunistic manoeuvres. At the level of foreign policy, Russia's security cooperation has broadly benefited from the wider trend of 'active non-alignment' or 'multi-alignment' that several African governments have espoused – implicitly or explicitly – in their foreign policy.⁶² Indeed, as governments seek

55 *Mercenary Meltdown. The Wagner Group's Failure in Mali* (The Sentry, August 2025), 22.

56 *Wood for Mercenaries. On The Road to International Markets* (AEOW, May 2023).

57 Benjamin Roger, "Burkina Faso: Ibrahim Traoré, superstar de la désinformation [Burkina Faso: Ibrahim Traoré, a Superstar of Disinformation]", *Le Monde*, June 30, 2025.

58 To the point of requesting imagery support from China. "Ukraine War Briefing: China Providing Russia with Intelligence on Missile Targets, Ukrainian Official Claims", *The Guardian*, October 5, 2025.

59 *The Sentry, Mercenary Meltdown*, 11

60 Ian Katusiime, "Analysis: How Uganda's Digital Number Plates Became Spy Tools", *The Independent*, October 8, 2025.

61 For example, "Professional Telecommunication Incorporation", Africa Tech Festival, accessed November 13, 2025. "Smart/Safe City", PROTEI, accessed November 13, 2025.

62 Ronald Lamola, "How Non-Alignment Shapes South Africa's Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World", *Daily Maverick*, September 2, 2025.

to avoid a perceived monopoly of security cooperation by the West, the Kremlin appears as a viable partner. While this will continue to anchor Moscow's security footprint, Russia's covert operations could see non-aligned states becoming unwitting participants in its war against Ukraine, creating the possibility of blowback.

Ultimately, the post-Prigozhin era of Russian interventionism in Africa cannot not last

For example, the 'Lady R' scandal of 2022 raised questions about the viability of South Africa's non-alignment in the case of the war. In that incident, accusations were made – including by the US embassy – that an internationally-sanctioned, Russia-flagged vessel transferred South African military supplies to Russia. While an inquiry ultimately dismissed the case, the incident points to the risk of African jurisdictions being exploited by actors involved in Russia's war.⁶³

Blowback risks and reputational limits

In a similar way, Russia's media operations can backfire, denting Moscow's standing with audiences and policymakers. For example, revelations about Russia's 'Alabuga Start' programme – ostensibly an educational initiative for young African women – have prompted condemnations and led local actors to distance themselves from Russian affiliations. The Alabuga scheme inveigles candidates into travelling to Russia and participating in the country's war effort against Ukraine by manufacturing kamikaze drones.⁶⁴ The covert and deceitful nature of this recruitment has led to police alerts in Botswana, politicians slamming the operation in Zimbabwe and investigations in Malawi and South Africa.⁶⁵ Russian media operations – including large programmes such as *RT* – have promoted 'Alabuga Start'. As of the time of writing, this case has produced neither wider diplomatic fallout nor deterrence for Moscow's expansion of its media operations in Africa. Still, it points to the limits of Russia's media influence on the continent.

Likewise, Russian military deployments have a poor reputation for accountability, discipline and reliability, which militates against their long-term sustainability and local

64 Emma Burrows and Lori Hinnant, "Africans Recruited to Work in Russia Say They Were Duped Into Building Drones for Use in Ukraine", *Associated Press*, October 10, 2024.

65 Reuters, "South Africa to Investigate How 17 Citizens Were Lured Into Fighting in Ukraine", *Daily Maverick*, November 6, 2025; Antony Sguazzin and Fasika Tadesse, "Russia Expands Global Outreach for Program Linked to Drone Production", *Bloomberg*, April 25, 2025; "Africa's Youth at Risk? Zimbabwean MP slams Alabuga Start programme", *The Nation*, July 30, 2025.

buy-in.⁶⁶ More aggravating still, reports indicate that Wagner and Africa Corps personnel participated in operations in Mali that targeted and placed the Fulani minority at 'grave risk'.⁶⁷ In this sense, Russian military deployments not only pose societal dangers but also damage the reputations of the militaries that cooperate with them. Reputational risk and diverging approaches between Africa Corps and the Wagner Group remnants reportedly hindered Russia's entry into the Democratic Republic of Congo's security market in 2024.⁶⁸ Russian deployments depend on the political support of their local partners, meaning that a change of government could threaten the continuity of cooperation.⁶⁹

Ukraine's war and competing priorities

Another key factor shaping Russia's long-term African security policy is the evolution of the battlefield in Europe. The two are connected in numerous ways. The demands of the war affect the materiel available for Russia's African operations. Estimates suggest that up to 1 400 African citizens are fighting on Russia's side, in part by being tricked or coerced into service.⁷⁰ There are also African volunteers fighting on Ukraine's side, although no similar cases of forced recruitment have been reported. Moreover, the war shapes the decision-making of Russian players involved in African projects. Notably, Prigozhin's conflict with Russia's Ministry of Defence over the conduct of the war was the key motivation for his 2023 mutiny.

Two paths ahead: Consolidation or retrenchment

Based on these factors, one can envision two scenarios: consolidation or retrenchment. If the Russo-Ukrainian war enters a new, less intensive stage, some of these resources could be diverted to Africa to consolidate Moscow's narrative of Russia as a security provider to the continent. Russian 'spare' materiel has already ended up in Africa: in 2025, deliveries of several hundred Russian military vehicles to Mali and Uganda were recorded.⁷¹ These became surplus as the rise of first-person-view, one-use kamikaze drones changed the role of lightly armoured vehicles in the war, reducing their relative utility. While the transfer of this equipment has been viable, personnel has remained a challenge. Upon founding the Africa Corps, the Russian military aimed to increase its personnel on the continent to 40 000, a figure later revised down to 20 000.⁷²

66 Matteo Maillard, "Exclusif: des vétérans de Wagner règlent leurs comptes avec l'armée malienne [Exclusive: Wagner Veterans Settle Scores with the Malian Army]", *Jeune Afrique*, September 24, 2025.

67 *Mali: Army, Wagner Group Disappear, Execute Fulani Civilians*, (Human Rights Watch, July 22, 2025).

68 "Wagner Group is Still Struggling to Sell Arms to Tshisekedi", *Africa Confidential*, December 24, 2024.

69 An example of this break is yet to be witnessed in Africa, but Syria's case is revealing. While the post-Assad government in Damascus has not broken ties with Moscow, the Russian military no longer operates in the country.

70 "More Than 1 400 African Nationals Fighting Alongside Russian Troops in Ukraine, Kyiv Says", *Africanews*, November 8, 2025.

71 "How Guinea Became a Gateway for Russian Weapons to Reach the Sahel", *RFI*, June 20, 2025; Blanshe Musinguzi, "What's Behind Russia's Military Bromance With Uganda?", *The Africa Report*, November 10, 2025.

72 Watling, Danylyuk, and Reynolds, *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare*, 20.

A second scenario – retrenchment – would result from serious setbacks for the Kremlin in Ukraine, combined with a concerted effort by African governments to preserve their non-alignment. In this case, the Kremlin's perception of opportunity in Africa would shift, driven by resource constraints tied to the war and by the lack of positive response from local partners. Regarding the latter, the reputational, political and societal risks – including in surveillance projects – could lead countries to curtail such cooperation. Likewise, in their currently more restrained role, the perceived military effectiveness of Russian armed deployments might no longer meet the standards set by Prigozhin's early operations. Under this scenario, Russia would retrench from its expansive presence in Africa and prioritise other regions for strategic gain.

Conclusion

Unable to match other major players in economic or military terms, the Kremlin has supplemented its foreign policy with subversive tactics and military deployments to maintain its claim to major-power status. While this applies to all recent Russian foreign engagements, the approach has become especially relevant in Afro-Russian relations. Since the 2017–2023 period, when these efforts were led by Prigozhin, the Kremlin has effectively centralised control over them, aligning the operations more closely with its broader foreign policy agenda, including the war in Ukraine.

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Regarding information operations, these remain a low-cost, high-impact tool and are likely to continue as the key lever of Russian influence on the continent. They encompass both covert and overt activities and involve digital assets as well as personnel on the ground. This complex web amounts to attempts at implanting Russia's information ecosystem in the target country, creating a powerful lever for Moscow to shape local perceptions to its advantage.

Meanwhile, combat missions have become rarer, as it is unlikely that Moscow will sign off on new large-scale deployments. What we might see is a continuation of the current, leaner model of training, protection and intelligence missions, meant to help perceived partners on the continent (and around the world). In this sense, Russia's military deployments will remain state-controlled, but their missions are likely to more closely

resemble those of risk-averse, conventional private military companies. While this might lower the costs of new and sustained deployments, it also undermines the type of security offer that the Wagner Group proposed to clients in CAR and Mali.

Given Russia's ongoing interest, the future of these operations will be determined by Ukrainian resistance and African agency. Resources and bandwidth depend on the war in Europe, judged by the Kremlin to be of paramount importance. In turn, African partners' continued willingness to cooperate with Moscow will remain key for Russia to pursue opportunities as they emerge. Given Russia's wider strategic landscape, its engagement with the countries of Africa is instrumental as a step towards other priorities, namely being seen as a major power.

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Cover image

A woman walks past flags and photos of the PMC 'Wagner Group' and its founder Yevgeny Prigozhin near the Kremlin December 31, 2023 in Moscow, Russia (via GettyImages/Contributor)

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