

RUSSIA'S QUEST FOR INFLUENCE IN AFRICA AFTER THE 2022 UKRAINE INVASION: Instruments, causes and consequences

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This report offers an analysis of Russia's Africa policy since its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine. Three major conclusions emerge from it. First, Russia is engaged in a concerted effort to maintain and, if possible, extend its politico-military influence on the continent. To this end, it employs a range of relatively cheap but effective policy instruments. These include the provision of security assistance, weapons transfers, information operations and diplomatic levers. Second, the primary drivers, or sources, of Russia's influence-seeking policy can be attributed to aspirations of great power status, geopolitical considerations and commercial interests. Third, Russia has been able to convert its activism on the continent into political influence, at least to some extent. This is shown through an analysis of Moscow's impact upon African states' voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly. At the same time, it also becomes clear that Russia's influence is not limitless; on the contrary, it is heavily conditioned by regional dynamics and local factors.



### INTRODUCTION

In the wake of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many commentators expected that Moscow would scale back its activities in Africa to divert resources to the ongoing war effort. Thus far, however, this has not happened. Quite the opposite: Russia has continued and, in some regards, ramped up its activities on the continent. In February 2023, for instance, the Russian Navy participated in a 10-day long military exercise with South Africa and China off South Africa's east coast. Moreover, Russian military advisers and operatives of Kremlin-connected security companies have maintained a robust presence in several African countries. Parallel to that, high-level delegations of Russian diplomats and government officials have made frequent trips to the continent. For example, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov undertook three major tours to Africa in 2022 and 2023, visiting Egypt, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, South Africa,

Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Angola, Eritrea, Mali, Mauritania and Sudan. In short, rather than retrenching, Russia is working hard to maintain, and if possible, expand its influence in Africa

Western government officials and analysts view this development with growing unease and concern. For example, recently leaked US intelligence documents warned that Moscow was planning to build a 'confederation' of pro-Russian states across the Sahel and West Africa.<sup>2</sup> The EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Joseph Borell, complained that Russia was taking 'advantage' of Western missteps on the African continent, 'with devastating consequences (...) for local populations and their safety'.<sup>3</sup> In a similar vein, French President Emmanuel Macron accused Russia of being 'a power destabilising Africa'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock predicted 'that Russia (...) will continue with its cynical game not only in Ukraine but, above all, in Africa'.<sup>5</sup>

Worries about Russia's rising influence in the region are amplified by African states' voting behaviour in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly.

Worries about Russia's rising influence in the region are amplified by African states' voting behaviour in the United Nations (UN) General Assembly. In an emergency session of the UN General Assembly on 2 March 2022, 28 African countries condemned Russia's attack on Ukraine. Only Eritrea's rabidly anti-Western government sided with Moscow (along with Belarus, North Korea and Syria). However, 17 African states abstained while another eight did not show up for the vote. African countries thus accounted for more than two thirds of the 35 abstentions. It is also worth noting that hardly any African states followed the West's lead in imposing economic sanctions and trade restrictions on Russia. This caught many Western diplomats and observers by surprise, and it gives rise to a number of questions. First, to what extent can Russia affect the political alignment choices – and attendant voting behaviour in the UN – of African states? Second, how, and with what instruments, is Russia seeking to exert influence vis-à-vis African states? Finally, what are the underlying sources, or drivers, of Russia's influence-seeking efforts on the continent?

This report addresses these questions. In doing so, it aims to provide decision-makers, practitioners and academics with in-depth insights about Russia's Africa

policy since its 2022 Ukraine invasion. To deliver on this objective, the report is organised as follows.

The first chapter provides an overview of Russia's engagement in Africa, which comprises diplomatic initiatives, soft power campaigns as well as weapons sales. In particular, however, Moscow continues to use parastatal military companies such as the notorious Wagner Group in combination with information operations to influence local actors and events. The second chapter examines the underlying sources of Russia's stepped-up presence on the continent. It identifies three major drivers – status aspirations, geopolitical considerations and commercial interests. The third chapter investigates whether and to what extent Russia has been able to convert its proactive stance into actual influence over African states' policy choices, with special focus on their UN voting behaviour. The concluding chapter summarises the study's main findings, discusses their implications and lays out some recommendations for Western policy.

Before proceeding, however, three points of clarification are in order. First, the overarching caveat for anyone exploring Russia's Africa policy is the scarcity of reliable sources. Russia has become an increasingly closed political system. This has restricted opportunities for interviewing Russian government officials as well as for institutional research co-operation. Moreover, given the contemporary nature of the topic, access to all the relevant documents - such as transcripts of high-level meetings and diplomatic cables - is at best many years away. To compensate for this, we collected data from a wide range of sources. These include publicly available speeches and publications by Russian government officials, open-source documents such as foreign policy concepts, databases of international organisations like the International Monetary Fund and the UN Dag Hammarskjöld Library, interviews with subject-matter experts, the work of area specialists and investigative reporting by journalists. By comparing and crosschecking the fragmentary information provided by these sources, it is possible to piece together a preliminary, plausible picture of Russia's stepped-up engagement in Africa in the post-February 2022 period.

Second, and related, this report presents one of the first comprehensive collations of available information on Russia's Africa policy since the start of the Ukraine war.<sup>6</sup> Pursuing an analysis on this scale requires a trade-off that favours scope over detail. The purpose of this report, in other words, is to identify major patterns and drivers. Finer-grained accounts of specific events and particular cases can be found in the referenced works

Third, it should be stressed that while our primary focus is on Russia, this is not to deny agency to local actors. African governments and decision-makers are not the hapless pawns of Russia, or any other outside power for that matter. On the contrary, they obviously have their own interests and ambitions, as our analysis demonstrates. This provides both opportunities and challenges for Russia – as well as for the West – to promote their agendas across the continent.



## RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE-SEEKING EFFORTS IN AFRICA: TOOLS AND TACTICS

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow downsized its economic, diplomatic and military engagement in Africa. As a result, during the following two decades, Russia played at best a marginal role on the continent. This started to change only in the mid-2010s when Moscow sought to recapture some of its lost influence and standing in the region. A high point of these efforts was the first-ever Russia-Africa Summit, which was held with much fanfare in the Black Sea city of Sochi in October 2019. In total, 43 African heads of state attended the summit, and more than 90 economic agreements worth several billions of dollars were signed.<sup>7</sup> But most of these agreements were memorandums of understanding rather than binding contracts; indeed, many of them never materialised.<sup>8</sup>

Exports to Africa 2019-2022

Imports from Africa 2019-2022

28%

1%

61%

European Union United States China P.R.: Mainland Russian Federation

Figure 1. Trade with Africa, 2019-2022

Source: International Monetary Fund

This is reflective of the fact that Russia's economic activities in Africa remain exceedingly modest compared to those of other global players such as the United States, China and the European Union (see Figure 1). To be sure, Russia plays an important role in certain sectors like nuclear energy and mining. Overall, however, it lacks the financial wherewithal to meet Africa's need for foreign investments or to serve as a major export market. To compensate for this, Russia is pushing for influence through other means – in particular through the provision of security assistance, arms transfers, diplomatic levers and information operations.

#### **SECURITY ASSISTANCE**

In the last few years, Russia has signed more than twenty military co-operation agreements with African states.<sup>9</sup> These agreements comprise joint military exercises, coordination of defence policies, military-technical assistance and intelligence sharing. Perhaps most importantly, however, these agreements often involve the deployment of ostensibly private but in fact Kremlin-linked military companies. While there are by now a range of Russian parastatal military companies that operate in Africa – including Redut (formerly Shield), Patriot and RSB Group –

the by far most important one is Wagner Group. Prime examples of Wagner's heavy footprint on the continent are its activities in the Central African Republic (CAR), Libya and Mali.

In the CAR, Wagner Group contractors started to arrive in 2018 after President Faustin-Archange Touadéra had signed a defence agreement with Moscow. Initially, the Wagnerites trained and advised the CAR's armed forces in carrying out counterinsurgency operations. Soon, however, they began participating in combat activities themselves and played a central role in suppressing several rebel offensives. In parallel, they started to guard key economic assets, including gold and diamond mines, and to provide bodyguards for senior government officials. In Importantly, this has not changed since the start of Russia's war against Ukraine. To be sure, in the summer of 2023, several hundred Wagner contractors suddenly left the country, which led to speculations of a large-scale withdrawal. Yet both Russian and CAR government officials shrugged off any such suggestions, describing it instead as a 'routine rotation of forces'. In Indeed, in July 2023, dozens of new Wagner contractors arrived in the CAR to secure a controversial constitutional referendum, which, among other things, removed presidential term limits. This will allow Touadéra, Moscow's close ally, to run again for the presidency. In the contractors arrived in the country of the presidency.

In Libya, Russia is supporting Field Marshal General Khalifa Haftar in his armed conflict against the UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA). Since at least 2017, Wagner units have been involved in combat activities there, numbering at times close to 2,500 fighters. In the early weeks of the Ukraine war, several hundred of them were withdrawn to Russia. However, approximately 1,000 Wagnerites have remained in Libya, providing key assistance to Haftar to maintain control over large swathes of the country's east and south. Moreover, in the last two years, several delegations of high-ranking Russian defence officials visited Haftar at his headquarters in Ar Rajma, just outside the city of Benghazi. Returning the favour, in late September 2023, Haftar went to Moscow. During the visit, he met with President Putin and Defence Minister Shoigu. This has given rise to speculations that Haftar and Russia are about to extend their military co-operation, a point to which we return in the next chapter.

In Mali, Russia is also actively expanding its military presence. Following two consecutive coups in 2020 and 2021, the coup maker Colonel Assimi Goïta broke a long-standing alliance with France and other European states in the fight against jihadi insurgents. Instead, he signed a defence agreement with Russia. A few months later, in December 2021, several hundred Russian military instructors and Wagner

operatives arrived in Mali. The terms and scope of their deployment remain somewhat unclear. Recent satellite imagery shows, however, that Wagner operatives are overhauling and expanding their base capacity near Bamako, the country's capital. This strongly suggests that Russia intends to ramp up, rather than downsize, its operations in Mali. Moscow, in effect, is emerging as the Malian regime's new security patron.

Russia, despite its grinding military campaign in Ukraine, continues to provide security assistance to Moscow-friendly governments and elites.

These examples demonstrate that Russia, despite its grinding military campaign in Ukraine, continues to provide security assistance to Moscow-friendly governments and elites. That said, Wagner's aborted mutiny against the Russian military leadership in June 2023 raised questions about what this would imply for its operations. These uncertainties were only reinforced two months later, when Wagner chief Yevgeny Prigozhin and several of his top aides died in a mysterious plane crash between Moscow and St. Petersburg. As we write, in mid-November 2023, the future of Wagner remains an open question (see Box 1).

#### **BOX 1. THE FUTURE OF WAGNER GROUP: THREE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS**

At this stage, it is too early to confidently predict what the future will hold for Wagner Group. But one can identify at least three possible scenarios. One is that Russia's defence ministry or its military-intelligence agency, known as the GRU, will take over Wagner's operations in Africa. What speaks for this thesis is that the GRU's deputy chief, Andrey Averyanov, was spotted at the July 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg. Together with Deputy Defence Minister Yevkurov, Averyanov also toured several African states immediately after the death of Prigozhin.<sup>18</sup>

A second option is that Wagner will be merged with other Russian military companies that are more tightly linked to the Kremlin. One such company is Convoy, a relatively new group headed by Sergey Aksyanov, the Kremlinappointed governor of Crimea, and Konstantin Pikalov, a former Wagner Group

leader. Convoy is reportedly financed by VTB Bank and Arkady Rotenberg, an oligarch and long-time acquaintance of Putin.<sup>19</sup>

A third possibility is that Wagner Group will continue to operate semiautonomously under a new, Kremlin-approved leadership. A candidate would be Andrey Troshev, a former Wagner commander who fell out with Prigozhin prior to the mutiny. Putin has already tasked Troshev to set up volunteer battalions for the war in Ukraine. Another candidate would be Prigozhin's son, Pavel, who has taken over large parts of his father's business empire.<sup>20</sup>

But regardless of Wagner's concrete fate, what becomes increasingly clear is that Moscow is set to keep the network of influence and connections that the group has established across Africa. Following the failed mutiny, Foreign Minister Lavrov announced immediately that Wagner personnel 'will continue' their missions on the continent.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, following Prigozhin's death, Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov undertook several trips to African countries, making it clear that Russia has no intention to scale down its military-related operations there.<sup>22</sup> After meeting Yevkurov, a close adviser to President Touadéra of the CAR declared, 'It's sad news [referring to Prigozhin's death]. But for us it changes absolutely nothing. We'll continue to have Wagners on the ground thanks to our agreement with the Kremlin'.<sup>23</sup>

Words are matched by deeds. As described above, Wagner operatives remain active in the CAR, Libya and Mali. Wagner Group is also heavily engaged in Sudan, although the situation there has become increasingly complex due to an armed power struggle between different factions of the Sudanese military (see Box 2). Additionally, Russia has strengthened its defence and security-related co-operation with Burkina Faso. In early October 2023, Deputy Defence Minister Yevkurov went to Ouagadougou, followed by a visit of the Burkinabe defence minister to Moscow in early November. A few weeks later, a first deployment of some 20 Russian military advisers arrived in Burkina Faso. <sup>24</sup> Similarly, in early December 2023, the military junta controlling Niger proclaimed the 'strengthening of defence co-operation' with Russia when publicly receiving Deputy Defence Minister Yevkurov. <sup>25</sup> This announcement followed in the wake of the junta's decision to terminate its security co-operation with the EU in late November that same year. Finally, leaked documents from the Pentagon have emerged, as of yet unconfirmed, which suggest that Wagner operatives have started training Chadian rebels in its bases in the CAR. <sup>26</sup> All in all, there is no sign that Russia

prepares to downscale its military presence and engagement on the African continent. To the contrary, Moscow works hard in an effort to become even more entrenched.

#### BOX 2. THE CURIOUS CASE OF RUSSIA'S SUDAN POLICY

Wagner Group arrived in Sudan in 2017, providing security assistance to the country's long-time dictator, Omar al-Bashir, in return for mining concessions. But Wagner could not prevent the ouster of al-Bashir in 2019. Having lost their primary partner and ally, Prigozhin and Russian government officials started to build up closer ties with leaders of the Sudanese military forces. Thus, as a military coup in 2021 took place, Moscow was well positioned to advance its commercial and strategic interests. Yet, in April 2023, the situation changed once again. Fighting broke out between different military factions, pitting General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, chief of the Sudanese armed forces, against his deputy, General Mohamed 'Hemedti' Hamdan Delgado, who commands Sudan's powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (formerly known as *Janjaweed*).<sup>27</sup>

In response, Russia offered its services to mediate a resolution of the power struggle. Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov officially declared that Moscow was committed to facilitate a peaceful settlement of the conflict.<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, the late Prigozhin offered himself to arbitrate between the rivalling factions.<sup>29</sup> Alongside this, however, reports have emerged that Wagner is providing training and military supplies, including surface-to-air missiles, to Hemedti's Rapid Support Forces via bases in Libya and the CAR.<sup>30</sup> One interpretation is that Wagner, in this case, acts without the Kremlin's authorisation and conducts a maverick operation. Another, more likely interpretation is that Moscow has a preference for Hemedti, but at the same time wants to avoid putting all eggs into one basket in a power struggle whose outcome remains uncertain. In other words, Moscow apparently seeks to keep all options open and maintain some leverage, regardless of how and when the conflict ends.

Adding yet another layer of complexity, according to an investigative CNN report, Ukrainian special services have started operating in Sudan as well. Among other things, they have carried out a series of drone strikes on Hemedti's forces.<sup>31</sup> In a rather bizarre twist, then, the conflict in Sudan might become Africa's first proxy war between Russia and Ukraine.

#### ARMS TRANSFERS

The provision of security assistance is complemented by arms transfers. Between 2019 and 2022, Russia supplied roughly 51% of the arms sold to countries in Africa, far ahead of France (21%), the United States (19%) and China (9%), according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (see Figure 2).

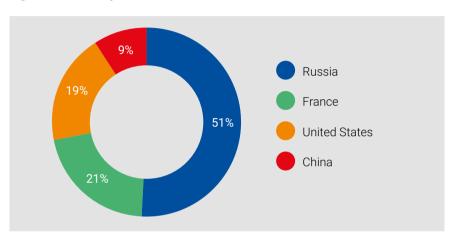


Figure 2. Arms exports to Africa, 2019-2022

Source: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

In this context, it is notable that many African states have a poor payment record. Nevertheless, Russia continues to supply them with military hardware; in fact, it tends to offer rather generous financing schemes, including extended repayment schedules and interest rate reliefs. This suggests that Russian arms exports to Africa cannot be understood solely or even primarily by narrow calculations of financial gain; they also serve as a means of achieving and maintaining political influence. The underlying logic is simple. Arms exports create path dependencies, which is to say that African 'customers' become dependent on ammunition, spare parts and technology upgrades provided by Russia. This, in turn, raises the costs of any opposition to Moscow.<sup>32</sup> As President Putin himself stated a few years ago, 'We see active military technical co-operation as an effective instrument for advancing our national interests, both political and economic'.<sup>33</sup>

Yet, following the start of the Ukraine war, questions arose as to whether Russia would be able to remain a key arms supplier for African states. After all, Russia's military-industrial complex is hard pressed to keep up with the production of

weapons and combat equipment for the ongoing war in Ukraine. Naturally, the supply of Russia's own forces is prioritised over foreign customers. As a result, exports of Russian top-of-the-line equipment to African states are likely to drop. Indeed, inklings of this are already appearing. For instance, a major arms deal with Algeria – including SU-34, SU-35 and SU-57 fighter jets – stands to fall through as Russia is unable to meet its delivery commitments. At the same time, however, available evidence suggests that Russia is able and willing to continue providing Moscow-aligned governments with Soviet-legacy equipment and small arms. All Mali, for example, after signing a military co-operation agreement with Moscow, received arms shipments from Russia in April 2022, August 2022 and January 2023. Arms transfers are thus likely to remain one of Russia's critical tools for building political relationships on the African continent.

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#### **DIPLOMATIC INSTRUMENTS**

A third set of tools that Russia uses to generate political capital with African leaders are diplomatic instruments. One important lever here is Russia's ability, as a permanent veto-bearing member of the UN Security Council, to protect governments from international condemnation and sanctions. For example, in 2021, Russia helped thwarting discussions in the UN Security Council about the humanitarian consequences of a de facto blockade imposed by Ethiopian forces against a rebel region in the country's north. The Ethiopian government, in turn, thanked Moscow for its diplomatic assistance. Similarly, in August 2023, Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution that would have prolonged the presence of an independent monitoring mission in Mali. This has been well appreciated by the Malian military rulers. Russia, in other words, supplies Moscow-friendly governments not only with security assistance and arms but also with diplomatic cover.

Parallel to that, Russia has engaged in a diplomatic charm offensive on the continent. As noted in the report's introduction, Foreign Minister Lavrov made several trips to Africa since the start of the Ukraine war. During his visits, Lavrov talked about everything from economics and counter-terrorism operations to food security and healthcare co-operation.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, after several postponements, Russia went

ahead with organising a second Russia-Africa Summit in July 2023, which was held in St. Petersburg. The summit was attended by merely 17 African heads of state – compared to 43 leaders who came to the first summit in 2019. Still, it provided an important venue for exchanging viewpoints and, in some cases, simply to buy goodwill. During the summit, for instance, Putin gifted the President of Zimbabwe a helicopter, and he promised to provide up to 50,000 tonnes of grain to six of the poorest African countries free of charge.<sup>39</sup>

Additionally, Russia engages in public diplomacy to burnish its image in Africa. At the core of these activities is Rossotrudnichestvo, the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States' Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Co-operation. From 2021 onwards, the agency has opened new Russian language and culture centres in a slew of African countries, including: Algeria, Angola, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Mali, Morocco, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Tunisia and Zambia. Of course, not all efforts by Moscow to expand an appreciation of Russian culture and language are guided by calculations of power and influence. Yet at least some activities are clearly geared towards attracting the favour of African publics and elites groups. At times, these activities are closely aligned with Russian military and security-related operations. For example, shortly after the arrival of Wagner contractors in the CAR, Russia's cultural centre in the country teamed up with a Prigozhin-linked mining company to organise a beauty pageant as well as a youth soccer tournament. Russia, in other words, mixes and meshes hard power and soft power instruments.

#### INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Finally, and related to the previous point, Russia resorts to so-called information operations. This means that Russia seeks to influence the narratives, beliefs and thus policies of African states' decision-makers and the wider population. Towards that end, Kremlin-funded media outlets, including TASS, RIA Novosti, RT (formerly Russia Today) and Sputnik, have significantly increased their presence across the continent. These media outlets promote pro-Russian viewpoints and anti-Western sentiments. In particular, a recurrent trope is to depict Western countries as neocolonial, while emphasising Moscow's contribution to decolonisation.<sup>42</sup>

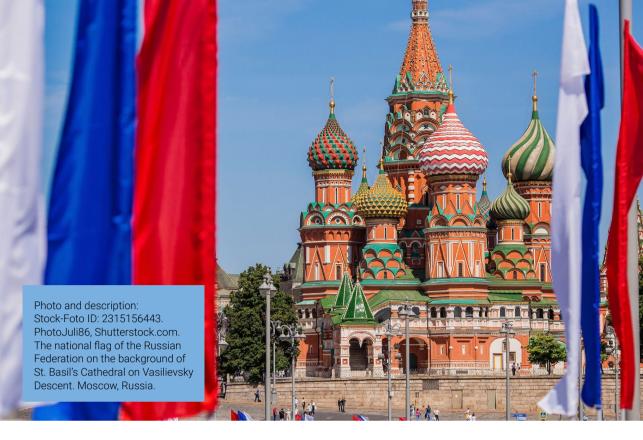
In the last few years, Russian media houses have also signed partnership agreements with – or acquired – African-based outlets. This allows the former to present their messages as supposedly authentic local voices.<sup>43</sup> For example, Wagner Group has

reportedly bought several newspapers across the continent, including in Madagascar and the CAR. In the CAR, a Russian mining company linked to Wagner also finances a popular radio station, *Lengo Songo*, which promotes pro-Kremlin narratives.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, in May 2021, a Russian action movie, called *Touriste*, was screened in front of 10,000 people in one of the CAR's biggest soccer stadiums. The movie, which was most likely financed by the late Prigozhin, tells the story of a group of heroic Russian mercenaries fighting off a group of murderous rebels. At the film screening, promotional T-shirts with the slogan *Je suis Wagner* ('I am Wagner') were handed out to the crowd.<sup>45</sup> This very obvious attempt at propaganda is the exception to the rule, but it shows the scope of Russian information operations.

Another prong of Russian information operations are social media platforms. In 2019, Facebook identified and removed several networks of accounts associated with Prigozhin that had been spreading pro-Russian content in eight African countries. In May 2021, Facebook removed a string of profiles and pages, which were engaged in disinformation campaigns in Sudan. It Likewise, the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Lab identified a network of Facebook accounts which had systematically drummed up pro-Russian and anti-French propaganda in Mali prior to the country's coup in August 2020. The September 2022 coup in Burkina Faso also coincided with a swell of pro-Russian and anti-French online content. Although no hard proof has emerged as of yet, circumstantial evidence suggests that 'pro-Russian entities' were behind this influence campaign as well.

## Moscow has stepped up its engagement on the African continent since February 2022.

To sum up: This tour d'horizon of Russia's foreign policy activities in Africa shows that Moscow is making a concerted effort to extend its influence. What is especially notable in this connection is that Russia, despite its costly war against Ukraine, has not downscaled these activities. If anything, Moscow has stepped up its engagement on the African continent since February 2022. The next chapter discusses the major drivers and motivations that animate this policy.



## THE SOURCES OF RUSSIAN CONDUCT

Russia's motivations for an increased presence in Africa fall into three broad categories: status aspirations, geopolitical considerations and commercial interests. Together, these three sets of factors go a long way to explain why Africa has become an ever-greater priority in Russian foreign policy.

#### STATUS ASPIRATIONS

One principal reason for Russia's stepped-up engagement in Africa is closely tied to its self-conception as a great power. To briefly give some background, the belief that Russia is destined to be a great power is deeply embedded in the country's prevailing strategic discourse. One could say that it is almost part of Russia's national self-

identity. As such, the theme of Russian great powerhood is present in virtually all major Russian strategy documents that have been published since the fall of the Soviet Union, where the ambition has evolved from being little more than a regional 'great power' (*veliko derzhav*) to one of the 'leading world powers' (*lidiruyushchikh mirovykh derzhav*).<sup>50</sup>

In the mid-2000s, the Putin leadership recognised the opportunity to restore Russia's status as one of the world's great powers. Due to a steep rise in the price of oil and natural gas, Russia could repay its government-owned debts and amass huge currency reserves. In parallel, Moscow began to rebuild its armed forces and to pursue an increasingly assertive foreign policy. The primary focus of Russia's international activities at the time was the post-Soviet space. Moscow effectively sought to establish some form of hegemonic influence over its part of the world, resulting in Russia's 2008 war with Georgia and its annexation of Crimea in 2014.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, as the academic literature shows, great power status cannot be unilaterally asserted; it depends on recognition from 'significant others'. The 'significant other' in Russia's case is the West in general and the United States in particular. Simply put, Kremlin officials want US decision-makers to treat Russia as a co-equal in international affairs. This, however, has not always been the case. Far from it, in fact. The political discourse in the United States has tended to depict Russia as a second-class power. This became especially pronounced in the wake of Russia's annexation of Crimea. In a March 2014 speech at the Nuclear Security Summit, President Obama dismissively branded Russia as just a 'regional power' that was preoccupied with its former imperial borderland rather than a major international player. Similarly, Senator John McCain declared that 'Russia is not a great power on par with America. It is a gas station run by a corrupt, autocratic regime'. Set

Many Kremlin officials regarded statements such as these, and the underlying attitude, as acts of blatant disrespect for Russia and its self-perceived status as a major power. As Fyodor Lukyanov, research director for the Valdai International Discussion Club, noted, 'neither Russian elites nor ordinary Russians ever accepted the image of their country as a mere regional power'. To put it in political science parlance, Russia experienced so-called status dissatisfaction.

Frustrated that it was not given its due, Moscow started to increase its foreign policy activities in regions of the world beyond the post-Soviet space. By doing so, Russia sought to demonstrate that it was not merely a regional power – but a major power with global reach. Relatedly, Russia started to advocate more actively for a

'polycentric' world – meaning a world with multiple power centres – to supplant the US-dominated international order that had emerged after the Cold War. It is in this context that Russia's stepped-up engagement in Africa since the second half of the 2010s is best understood. As Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov noted in November 2018, 'Russia regards Africa as an important and active participant in the emerging polycentric architecture of the world order'. Similarly, at his opening speech of the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit, President Putin stressed, 'As a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia is determined to continue taking an active part in (...) strengthening peace and stability in Africa and maintaining regional security'. Strengthening peace and stability in Africa and maintaining regional security'.

Russia has intensified its outreach and collaborations with African states to demonstrate that Russia is not isolated internationally but remains a respected world power.

The role of Africa in Russia's quest for great power status has not diminished since its 2022 invasion of the Ukraine. If anything, the opposite is the case. Africa has become more important, as the West seeks to isolate Russia on the world stage. In response, Russia has intensified its outreach and collaborations with African states to demonstrate that Russia is not isolated internationally but remains a respected world power.

A glimpse of Russia's status-driven aspirations in an African context is provided by Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in an April 2023 interview with the Russian newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty*. In the interview, Lavrov notes that Western attempts to torpedo the upcoming July 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in Saint Petersburg is yet another attempt to diminish Russia's global reach. 'Indeed', he argues, 'the United States and its allies are doing all they can to isolate Russia internationally'. Fortunately, Lavrov goes on, 'fewer and fewer [are] willing to sacrifice their vital interests for Washington and its henchmen and to pull the chestnuts out of the fire for the former colonial powers'. <sup>58</sup> Likewise, at the summit itself, Putin stressed the importance of Russian-African co-operation 'in the difficult period of international turbulence, when a truly multipolar world order is evolving and the era of domination by one country or a group of countries is coming to an end'. <sup>59</sup>

In Russia's most recent Foreign Policy Concept, a document issued publicly in March 2023, Africa also figures prominently. The concept declares, among other things,

that Africa and Russia are working together for the emergence of 'a more equitable polycentric world'. <sup>60</sup> This is especially noteworthy, as Africa was barely mentioned in previous iterations of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept (2000, 2008, 2013, 2016). In other words, the discursive representation of Africa in Russian government documents and statements by high-ranking Kremlin officials has changed: from an area of at best secondary priority during the 1990s and 2000s to one of greater importance for Russia's world order preferences and its attendant great power aspirations. From Moscow's point of view, a strong presence in Africa is seen as an increasingly important symbol of the country's global reach and as a way to dispel the notion that Russia is an isolated, second-tier power.

#### **GEOPOLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

A second set of drivers behind Russia's engagement in Africa relates to more concrete geopolitical considerations. Over the course of the past decade, Russia has been striving to gain access to strategic ports and military bases on the continent. In the last few years, Kremlin officials have stepped up these efforts and held talks about the establishment of base facilities with the governments of Burundi, Egypt, Eritrea, Mozambique, Somaliland and Sudan.<sup>61</sup>

Discussions with the Sudanese government progressed the furthest. Already back in 2017, Russia signed an agreement with Sudan's then-leader Omar al-Bashir to build a naval base along the Red Sea. According to the agreement, Russia would be allowed to construct docking bays for four ships and a logistics centre for up to 300 personnel at Port Sudan, the country's main seaport. However, the toppling of al-Bashir in 2019 – followed by the country's 2021 military coup and the outbreak of armed clashes between different factions of the Sudanese military in 2023 (described in the previous chapter) – has put the implementation of that agreement on hold. Still, Russian government authorities have made it clear that they are eager, if the circumstances permit, to move ahead with the project. As Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova declared, 'We confirm our interest in strengthening partnership with Sudan in various areas, including military and military-technical cooperation, to the development of which, we believe, the agreement on the creation of a logistical support point for the Russian Navy is designed to promote'. 63

There are also indications that Russia has reactivated its talks with Eritrea about a logistics centre on the Red Sea coast.<sup>64</sup> During his January 2023 visit to Eritrea, Foreign Minister Lavrov noted at the post-meeting press conference, 'We will have to

conduct an in-depth assessment of the logistics potential of the Massawa seaport and airport. The latter is quite interesting in terms of its transit potential'. He continued, 'We reaffirmed plans being implemented in the field of military and military-technical co-operation'. Seen from a geopolitical perspective, Russia's ambition to gain a foothold in the Red Sea region is not difficult to comprehend. The Red Sea, with its connection to the Suez Canal, is an international shipping bottleneck. If established, a base in the region would allow Russia's navy to maintain a regular presence in the area. Furthermore, it would give Russia a greater ability to project naval forces into the Indian Ocean, specifically the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. A permanent base along the Red Sea coast could be used to refuel and resupply Russian vessels operating in the area; at present, they have to make a costly and time-consuming detour through the Suez Canal to Russia's naval facility at Tartus in Syria. Sea.

Government officials in Moscow work strenuously in an effort to bolster Russia's military presence along the Red Sea and Mediterranean coasts.

Recent reports also suggest that Kremlin officials are in talks with warlord Khalifa Haftar to expand Russia's military presence in Libya. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in late September 2023, Putin and Haftar held a face-to-face meeting in Moscow. During the meeting, the two reportedly clinched a deal, according to which Russia is going to supply Haftar's forces with air-defence systems. In exchange, Haftar will provide Russia access to several airbases as well as docking rights in Tobruk on the Mediterranean coast.<sup>67</sup> On a military-strategic level, this would significantly increase Russian operational capabilities on NATO's and the EU's southern flank (see Box 3). As of this writing, it is too soon to tell whether and which of these proposed basing deals will actually materialise. What is clear, though, is that government officials in Moscow work strenuously in an effort to bolster Russia's military presence along the Red Sea and Mediterranean coasts. Finally, it is worth noting that beyond the purely operational and logistical advantages of such bases, their establishment would also contribute to the enhancement of Russia's status as a major power with a long reach. Geopolitical considerations and status aspirations thus provide a mutually reinforcing incentive structure for Russia to expand its military footprint on the continent.

#### **BOX 3. RUSSIA, THE SAHEL REGION, AND WEAPONISED MIGRATION**

The Sahel region and North Africa, especially Libya, have emerged as key smuggling and human-trafficking routes. Russia's growing influence in the area thus provides it with 'the ability to provoke humanitarian and political crises for Europe', as one seasoned observer warned. Russia may accelerate refugee flows across the Mediterranean as a means to destabilise Europe. This is known in the academic literature as 'weaponised migration', a time-honoured tool of statecraft. Hat said, there is, as of yet, no direct evidence that Russia has sought to instrumentalise migration streams passing through the Sahel region. Nor are such considerations likely to be a major driver behind Moscow's stepped-up engagement in the region. Still, Russia may seek to exploit the leverage of being a gatekeeper of Europe's southern approaches at a future point in time, especially if Russia-EU relations remain adversarial.

#### COMMERCIAL INTERESTS

Beyond status-driven aspirations and geopolitical considerations, a third principal reason for Russia's activism in Africa is the promotion of commercial interests. In particular, natural resource riches make the continent an attractive and profitable target for Russian companies. Of course, Russia itself is rich in natural resources. Yet, in some cases, it is less expansive to mine and market African natural resources – such as oil, natural gas, and precious metals – due to lower extraction costs. <sup>71</sup> In the last few years, therefore, Russian state-owned energy and mining companies have bolstered their presence across the continent. This includes companies such as Lukoil (oil), Gazprom (gas), Rosneft (gas, oil), Tatneft (gas, oil), Zarubezhneft (gas, oil), Rosatom (nuclear energy, uranium), Alrosa (diamonds), Norisk Nikel (iron ore), Rusal (aluminum, bauxite), Severstal (steel), and Nordgold (gold).

In this connection, it is notable that Russia has been actively leveraging its provision of diplomatic and military assistance to African governments as way to gain economic benefits. For example, in 2017, Wagner Group operatives were deployed to Sudan to support al-Bashir's regime in suppressing protests. A few months later, the Russian company Meroe Gold, which is linked to Wagner Group owner Prigozhin, received rights to mine gold in Sudan.<sup>72</sup> In the CAR, the Touadéra government

granted gold and diamond prospecting licences to Lobaye Invest, another front company of Prigozhin, most likely in exchange for military training and security assistance. Likewise, Wagner contractors were deployed to Mozambique in September 2019, shortly after Mozambique's President Filipe Nyusi had visited Moscow and signed several mineral and energy extraction deals. In Zimbabwe, after Moscow had provided campaign support to help President Emmerson Mnangawa win a contested election, Russia's diamond-mining company Alrosa secured contracts to exploit diamonds. A few months later, Russia's state-owned defence conglomerate Rostec finalised a USD 4 billion deal to operate a new platinum mine in Zimbabwe. There are also rumours, as of yet unconfirmed, that Russian companies will receive access to uranium, diamond and gold mines in Mali as payoff for the deployment of military advisers.

In many cases, the main benefactors of such ventures are business tycoons closely connected to the Kremlin. Russia's 'protection for concessions' approach thus serves as a vehicle for elite enrichment. This in turn helps to sustain support for the Putin regime at home. After all, even in a highly centralised and personalised political system, like Putin's Russia, the leadership needs to satisfy the, often pecuniary, interests of key elite groups to stay in power.

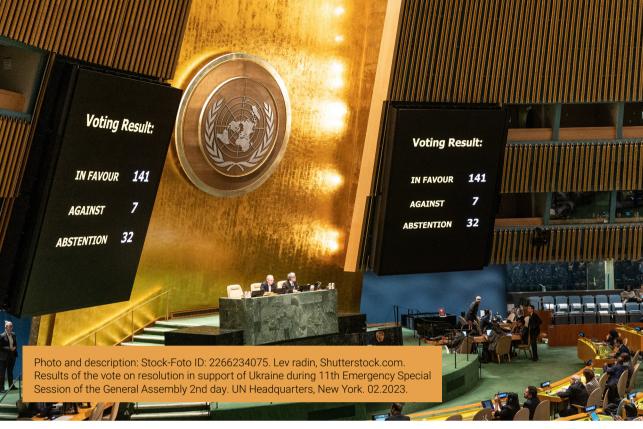
Finding new income-generating opportunities for Kremlin-aligned oligarchs is, of course, only part of the story. More generally, as the Russian economy is labouring under the burden of US-EU sanctions imposed after the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow seeks to strengthen its ties to the so-called Global South. This includes many African states. Of note, during all of his 11 visits to African states since February 2022, Foreign Minister Lavrov has emphasised the importance of building stronger economic partnerships to offset the effect of Western sanctions. Similarly, in an article published by President Putin briefly before the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, he highlighted that 'Russian companies are interested in working more actively on the continent (...). The changes taking place in the world require the search for solutions related to the establishment of new transport and logistical chains (...) that are safe and free from unfavourable external impacts'.78 During his speech at the summit, President Putin doubled down, calling for closer economic relations between Russia and Africa 'despite the illegal sanctions imposed on our exports, which seriously hinder the supply of Russian food, complicate transport logistics, insurance and bank payments'.79

Indeed, there are several instances where Russia apparently has taken advantage of its growing presence in Africa to circumvent financial and trade-related restrictions

imposed by the West. For example, according to an investigative CNN report, between February 2022 and February 2023, Russia smuggled an estimated USD 1.9 billion of gold out of Sudan. 80 If confirmed, this would mean that Sudanese gold has emerged as an important source of revenue for bolstering Russia's war chest. Similarly, in May 2023, the US State Department reported that Wagner Group was trying to secretly ship weapons to its fighters in eastern Ukraine using Mali as a transit point. 81 Moreover, in April 2022, the CAR government authorities declared an ambition to introduce, as the first country in Africa, their own cryptocurrency. This came briefly after Russia had suggested the use of cryptocurrencies for trading with African countries as a way to bypass international sanctions. Hence, many observers suspect that it was in fact a Russian-driven project. 82

Russia apparently has taken advantage of its growing presence in Africa to circumvent financial and trade-related restrictions imposed by the West.

To sum up: Facing a near-complete isolation from the West after February 2022, Russia's engagement in Africa has become an important feature of its wartime foreign policy. The three factors described above – status-based aspirations, geopolitical considerations and commercial interests – explain why. Russia's engagement in Africa enhances its self-perception as a major world power, expands its military reach, and provides opportunities to dodge trade restrictions as well to offset some of the economic losses resulting from the West's sanctions regime.



# RUSSIAN INFLUENCE SEEKING AND AFRICAN STATES' VOTING BEHAVIOUR IN THE UN GENERAL ASSEMBLY

The previous two chapters have discussed the means and motives of Russia's stepped-up engagement in Africa. This chapter evaluates whether Russia has been able to convert its growing activism into political influence. More specifically, we assess Russia's impact upon African states' voting behaviour regarding Ukraine-related resolutions in the UN General Assembly. Of course, there are many other ways in which the effects of Russian influence seeking can be measured (e.g. where EU missions are closed, how misinformation campaigns affect UN peacekeeping forces, changes over time in public opinion polls). Still, we decided to focus on African states' UN voting behaviour, for three reasons.

First, the UN General Assembly has emerged as a major diplomatic battlefield and bellwether of how states position themselves towards Russia's war in Ukraine. Second, as foreshadowed in the report's introduction, the relatively large number of abstentions by African states caught many Western observers and diplomats by surprise, leaving them wondering about the causes of Africa's apparent ambivalence. Third, given that Africa's 54 states constitute the biggest voting bloc in the UN General Assembly, Russia has a strong incentive to use its increased involvement on the continent to sway votes against the United States and its allies. Indeed, on numerous occasions, Kremlin officials have stressed the importance of cooperating closely with African states in the UN.83 Thus, an examination of Russia's ability (or inability) to affect African states' voting decisions is important, both in its own right and because it provides a valuable opportunity for assessing the nature and limits of Russian influence on the continent. To kick off this analytical exercise, we first present an overview of how African states have voted in the UN General Assembly on Ukraine-related resolutions.

The UN General Assembly has emerged as a major diplomatic battlefield and bellwether of how states position themselves towards Russia's war in Ukraine.

#### THE VOTING RECORD OF AFRICAN STATES: AN OVERVIEW

Since March 2022, there have been six major UN General Assembly resolutions related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

- Resolution ES-11/1 on Russia's aggression against Ukraine (2 March 2022)
- Resolution ES-11/2 on the humanitarian consequences of Russia's war in Ukraine (24 March 2022)
- Resolution ES-11/3 on Russia's suspension from the Human Rights Council (7 April 2022)
- Resolution ES-11/4 on the unlawfulness of Russia's annexation referenda (30 September 2022)
- Resolution ES-11/5 on the payment of reparations by Russia to Ukraine (14 November 2022
- Resolution ES-11/6 on a principled and fair peace in Ukraine (23 February 2023)

An overview of African states' voting reveals several interesting aspects and patterns (see Figure 3; for a detailed breakdown of African states' voting behaviour, see Appendix). To start with, resolution ES-11/4 – declaring Russia's annexation of four regions in Ukraine as illegal – received the strongest backing. In total, 30 African states supported it, while 24 abstained or were not present for the vote. No country sided with Russia. This demonstrates the high importance that African states attach to upholding the territorial integrity norm. The reason for this stance is simple. As a result of the colonial era, many borders in Africa do not reflect the ethno-political and cultural identities of people. Thus, many African governments fear that a weakening of the territorial integrity norm may open a Pandora's box and lead to new territorial conflicts on the continent

Figure 3. How African states voted in the UN General Assembly

	ES-11/1	ES-11/2	ES-11/3	ES-11/4	ES-11/5	ES-11/6	Total
YES	28	27	10	30	15	30	140
NO	1	1	9	0	5	2	18
ABSTAIN	17	20	24	19	27	15	122
NON-VOTING	8	6	11	5	7	7	44

Source: Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN General Assembly Documentation

The voting record also shows that resolutions preparing concrete measures to punish Russia have received rather limited support from African states. Only ten voted in favour of resolution ES-11/3 demanding a suspension of Russia from the Human Rights Council. Similarly, only 15 African states backed resolution ES-11/5, which prepares the ground for payment of reparations by Russia to Ukraine.

A tally of all six ES-11 resolutions shows 140 African votes in favour, 18 votes against, and 166 abstentions or absences. This stands in stark contrast to Latin America and Asia, where most countries have backed resolutions condemning Russia's invasion (see Figure 4).<sup>84</sup> At first blush, therefore, Russia's increased presence in Africa seems to have paid political dividends for Moscow. But is this really so? The question is, in other words, whether and how Russia's stepped-up engagement on the continent translates into actual influence.

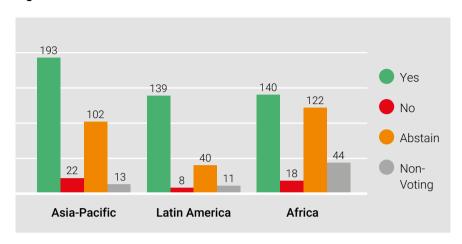


Figure 4. Accumulated vote distribution for all six ES-11 resolutions

Source: Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN General Assembly Documentation

#### INFLUENCE THROUGH REGIME SUPPORT PACKAGES

As described in the first chapter, Russia has offered a number of African governments varying degrees of security assistance, often through parastatal military companies, against internal rivals and armed insurgents. This is accompanied by weapons supplies, political assistance and/or diplomatic cover in international forums like the UN Security Council. In effect, Russia provides these governments with 'regime support packages', as two scholars aptly put it.85 Hence, one would expect that these governments are disinclined to vote against Russia in the UN General Assembly. This is exactly what we observe.

African governments who receive Russian security assistance, weapons supplies and/or political-diplomatic assistance have generally shied away from supporting ES-11 resolutions.

African governments who receive Russian security assistance, weapons supplies and/or political-diplomatic assistance have generally shied away from supporting ES-11 resolutions. This comprises the governments of Algeria (5 abstentions/absences, 1 vote against), Burundi (5 abstentions/absences, 1 vote against), the CAR (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes against), Equatorial Guinea (6 abstentions/

absences), Ethiopia (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes against), Guinea (6 abstentions/absences), Madagascar (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes in favour), Mali (3 abstentions/absences, 3 votes against), Mozambique (6 abstentions/absences), Sudan (6 abstentions/absences), Uganda (6 abstentions/absences) and Zimbabwe (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes against).

Of course, correlation does not imply causation. But the overall pattern strongly suggests a link between the provision of military and political-diplomatic assistance by Russia on the one hand, and the voting behaviour of those African governments on the other. This is backed up by anecdotal evidence. In some cases, African governments' reluctance to vote in favour of ES-11 resolutions can be linked to threats issued by Moscow. For example, ahead of the abovementioned UN General Assembly vote on suspending Russia from the Human Rights Council (ES-11/4), Russia's mission to the UN circulated a confidential letter that was leaked to the press. The letter urged countries to 'speak out against the anti-Russian resolution', and went on to state that 'not only support for such an initiative, but also an equidistant position in the vote (abstention or non-participation) will be considered as an unfriendly gesture'. <sup>86</sup> The letter concluded by warning that 'the position of each country will be taken into account both in the development of bilateral relations and in the work on the issues important for it within the framework of the UN'. <sup>87</sup> Seen in this light, it is unsurprising that only 10 African states supported the resolution.

In other cases, African governments have sought to avoid provoking Moscow's ire, even in the absence of any discernible direct pressure. A rather bizarre but telling example in this regard is the case of Madagascar, where President Andry Rajoelina sacked his Foreign Minister Richard Randriamandrato in October 2022. This action was reportedly taken because the latter had voted in support of resolution ES-11/4. As Rajoelina was betting on Russian support for his re-election bid in 2023, the foreign minister had to go.<sup>88</sup> This example shows that some leaders are willing to align their country's diplomatic posture – and, in this case, diplomatic staff – with Russia's interests to win its favour.

All of this suggests that Russia's increased activism and presence on the continent has affected the UN voting behaviour of a range of African governments, particularly of those who are dependent on Moscow for their political survival. That said, it is also clear that the effect of Russian military and political-diplomatic assistance on states' voting behaviour is by no means automatic or inevitable. Take, for instance, Libya. As described above, Russia offers substantial military support for the strongman Khalifa Haftar. But this does not have any impact on Libya's voting

behaviour. After all, it is the Government of National Accord – not Haftar – who represents the country in the UN General Assembly.

Another case in point is Egypt. Egypt is an important customer for Russian arms, yet it abstained from only two of the six ES-11 resolutions (and supported the other four). The reason for Russia's limited influence over the government in Cairo is simple. Egypt is also heavily dependent on US economic and military assistance, and in general has an array of international co-operation partners apart from Russia. Thus, Egypt has a greater room for manoeuvre to pursue an independent foreign policy. In other words, Russia's ability to garner influence through the provision of regime assistance packages seems to be strongest vis-à-vis governments who face severe security problems at home and lack other potential external supporters (see Box 4).

#### **BOX 4. RUSSIA IN AFRICA: SPOILER OR STABILISER?**

Western observers often describe Russia as a purely disruptive power that contributes to instability in African conflict zones. There is some truth to this claim. Operatives of Russian military companies have been involved in a series of grave human rights violations, including beatings, torture and summary executions. Moreover, they have proven rather ineffective in quelling insurgencies, at least in some cases. In September 2019, for example, Wagner Group deployed some 200 troops to Mozambique to help the government fighting Islamist rebels in the country's Cabo Delgado province. The Wagner operatives failed badly, however, suffering heavy casualties as they were repeatedly ambushed. A few months later, they withdrew from Mozambique.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, in Mali, after the arrival of Wagner operatives and Russian military instructors in December 2021, violence has soared.<sup>90</sup>

That said, one should not overlook that yearlong Western-led stabilisation operations also failed to pacify Mali and the Sahel region at large. What is more, there are cases where Russia has served as a stabilising force. Take the CAR. Before the arrival of Wagner operatives and Russian military instructors in 2018, the CAR government's writ did not extend much beyond the capital Bangui. Yet, in the following years, Wagner fighters – alongside Rwandan intervention forces – were able to push back various rebel groups. 91 As a result, the government of President Touadéra is strongly supportive of Russia's

continued presence in the country. As an administration official put it, 'When your house is burning, you don't mind the colour of the water you use to put out the fire. We have calm thanks to the Russians. They are violent and they are efficient' 92

## INFLUENCE THROUGH INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

A second mode through which Russia seeks influence is by shaping the narratives, beliefs, and thus policies, of African states' elites and the wider population. Towards this end, Russia has applied an array of public diplomacy and information operations, as detailed in one of the previous chapters. The impact of such operations is inherently difficult to measure. A way to approximate their effect, however, is to explore whether there is a relationship between spread of pro-Russian support on social media and a country's diplomatic positioning.

The number of postings of pro-Russian content and the activities of so-called 'Kremlin bots' (i.e. software programmes that automatically generate pro-Russian content) are two often-used indicators of Russian information operations. <sup>93</sup> If we look at the frequency of Twitter/X users posting pro-Russian content across the African continent, we see the highest numbers in the following countries (their voting record on ES-11 resolutions is displayed in brackets): Algeria (5 abstentions/absences, 1 vote against), Chad (6 votes in favour), Egypt (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes in favour), Ethiopia (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes against), Ghana (1 abstention/absence, 5 votes in favour), Kenya (1 abstention/absence, 5 votes in favour), Nigeria (2 abstentions/absences, 4 votes in favour), Tanzania (6 abstentions/absences) and Zimbabwe (4 abstentions/absences), Uganda (6 abstentions/absences) and Zimbabwe (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes against). <sup>94</sup> As this brief overview suggests, there is no clear relationship between the frequency of pro-Russian postings and states' voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly. The picture is decidedly mixed.

But this changes if we look at the African states with the relative highest frequencies of bots per country on the continent. These comprise Algeria (5 abstentions/ absences, 1 vote against), the CAR (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes against), Ethiopia (4 abstentions, 2 votes against), Gabon (2 abstentions/absences, 3 votes in

favour, 1 vote against), Libya (1 abstention/absence, 5 votes in favour), Madagascar (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes in favour), Mali (3 abstentions/absences 3 votes against), Niger (1 abstention/absence, 5 votes in favour), Sierra Leone (1 abstention/ absence, 5 votes in favour), South Sudan (4 abstentions/absences, 2 votes in favour) and Sudan (6 abstentions/absences).95 Most of these states have displayed a clear tendency to abstain or to vote alongside Russia in the UN General Assembly, with the exceptions of South Sudan, Sierra Leone, Niger and Libya. Yet, as mentioned earlier, the situation in Libya is rather peculiar and hence might be disregarded. Niger is also a special case, as it experienced a military coup in late July 2023. The new leadership quickly adopted a Moscow-friendly stance, which makes it unlikely that it will support any future ES-11 resolutions. In this context, it is notable that Niger did not have any strong historical or political ties to Moscow prior to the coup. Nevertheless, the military takeover was accompanied by coup supporters taking to the streets of Niamey, the country's capital, waving Russian flags and chanting pro-Putin slogans.<sup>96</sup> This indicates that Russian influence operations do have some impact (see Box 5).

#### **BOX 5. RUSSIA AND THE COUPS IN MALI, BURKINA FASO AND NIGER**

The military takeovers in Niger (June 2023), Burkina Faso (September 2022), and Mali (May 2021) are marked by country-specific features, but they also display an array of interesting similarities. In all three cases, anti-French and pro-Russian information operations on social media platforms preceded the coups; in all three cases, coup supporters roamed the streets expressing pro-Russian attitudes; and in all three cases, the new military leaderships almost immediately started to establish closer political-diplomatic ties with Moscow. Subsequently, the military junta in Mali refrained from supporting any ES-11 resolutions, and it is improbable that Burkina Faso's and Niger's coup-makers will do so with regard to any future resolutions condemning Russia's war in Ukraine. This suggests that Russian information operations play some role, although the primary drivers of the three coups are clearly domestic in nature.

The discussion so far might give the impression that only military juntas and authoritarian regimes have abstained from voting against Russia in the UN General Assembly. This, however, is not the case. Even African states with robust democratic institutions – such as South Africa and Namibia – have opted to consistently abstain from Ukraine-related resolutions. There are obviously many reasons for their voting

decisions, including longstanding non-alignment traditions and domestic political dynamics.<sup>97</sup> Yet another important factor is that in many African countries, the reputation of European states is tainted by collective memories of colonial abuses. Moreover, there is a widespread perception across the continent that Western states have failed to act in solidarity with Africa in the recent past. An oft-heard example is the West's failure to support African states during the COVID-19 pandemic. Another is the seemingly inconsistent stance regarding refugees. While Ukrainian refugees have been received with open arms in many European countries (at least immediately after the outbreak of the war), migrants from Africa are treated as a security problem to be managed. Russian information operations tap into these grievances, seeking to amplify existing frustrations among African political elites and parts of the population.<sup>98</sup>

Even African states with robust democratic institutions – such as South Africa and Namibia – have opted to consistently abstain from Ukraine-related resolutions.

At times, Russia combines information operations with public diplomacy. For example, as noted above, Putin promised to gift up to 50,000 tonnes of grain to six African countries hardest hit by acute food insecurity. In parallel, Moscow initiated an extensive media campaign, attributing rising energy and agricultural product prices in Africa to Western sanctions against Russia. The irony, of course, is that Russia's attack on Ukraine and its withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative have contributed, more than anything else, to undermine food security. Many African leaders acknowledge this, and yet, they hold the West responsible as well. For example, speaking at a press conference with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa bitterly complained that 'bystanders' are going to 'suffer from the sanctions that have been imposed against Russia'.99 Similarly, the African Union Commission's Chairperson, Faki Mahamat, bemoaned that Africa was a 'collateral victim' of the Ukraine war. 100 This is not to say that such complaints are completely baseless. Nor is it to suggest that African statespeople mindlessly mirror Russian propaganda. Rather, it is to show that Russia deliberately capitalises on existing discontent among Africa's political elites with Western policies through information operations. In doing so, it seeks to influence their diplomatic positioning regarding the Ukraine war and their attendant voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly.

To sum up: A wide range of factors shape the voting decisions of African states in the UN. This makes it difficult to determine exactly the impact of Moscow's actions. Still, the available evidence strongly suggests that Russia's provision of regime assistance packages and information operations have influenced the diplomatic stances of African states regarding the war in Ukraine. At the same time, it is also clear that Russia's influence is mediated by the domestic conditions and international circumstances of the country in question.

# World

# War in Ukraine and exit from grain deal loom over Putin's summit with African leaders



■ Vladimir Putin, right, with the Ethiopian leader, Abiy Ahmed, left, in St Petersburg yesterday before the start of the summit PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY

fuel security for the continent and a

Photo and description: Kathy deWitt / Alamy Stock Photo. Guardian newspaper article. London. Great Britain. 07.2023.

to offer, said raunite programme deputy director at the

# **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

This report has analysed the conduct, causes and consequences of Russia's Africa policy, with a special focus on the post-February 2022 period. Four major conclusions emerge from it. First, Russia seeks to expand its influence across Africa through the application of a wide range of tools and tactics, including the provision of security assistance, weapons sales, information operations and diplomatic levers. What is especially noteworthy in this connection is that Russia has not scaled down its activities on the continent after the onset of the Ukraine war. To the contrary, Russia has worked hard in an effort to extend its influence.

Second, Russia's stepped-up engagement across Africa is driven by the interaction of three sets of factors: status aspirations, the quest for geopolitical influence and economic interests. These are structural factors, which implies that Russia's activism in Africa is not a fad but a long-lasting trend. It is reasonable to conclude,

therefore, that Russia will continue with its proactive policy in the region – despite indications of a military and personnel-related overstretch in Ukraine. The upshot is that states and regional institutions in Africa as well as Western states and institutions will have to learn how to deal with Russia's presence on the continent.

Third, Russia has been able to translate its expanding footprint in Africa into actual influence, at least to some extent. To be sure, Russian trade and investments activities on the continent remain miniscule compared to that of other international players like China, the European Union or the United States. Yet Russia has emerged as a crucial provider of security for several African governments. Russia offers military assistance, weapons and diplomatic coverage to leaders facing internal strife and/or international pressure. In return, they provide Russia with mining concessions, access to valuable natural resources and support in the UN General Assembly. Russia, in other words, does not simply impose itself. When it succeeds in exerting influence, it does so because Moscow offers attractive goods to embattled leaders. Additionally, Russian information operations and public diplomacy campaigns contribute to bolster a historically-rooted scepticism towards the West among African states' elites and certain segments of the population. Russia, in short, is an opportunistic actor who is capitalising on existing dissatisfactions and fears. As a result, the Kremlin has achieved traction with only limited financial means.

Fourth, having said that, Russia's influence in Africa should not be exaggerated. Russia has actively tried to gain military basing rights in several African states – but so far, to little avail. Thus, in comparison with the 34 US military bases on the continent, Russia's military presence remains limited. Moreover, Russia's most direct influence is confined to a handful of fragile states run by authoritarian or semi-authoritarian leaders. In many cases, these leaders do not even fully embrace Russia. Rather, they turn to Moscow due to a lack of alternative external security providers. Overall, then, the glass of Russian influence is half-full, but it is also half-empty. Russia is certainly not a 'paper tiger', as some observers have suggested; but neither is it a hegemonic power in the making, who stands on the cusp of building a new, Moscow-dominated regional order in Africa. The reality is somewhere in between. Russia's influence has increased, but remains limited.

### WHAT THIS MEANS FOR THE WEST

Going forward, what does all of this mean for the West? To begin with, Western governments need to recognise that local actors and factors play a central role in determining the extent of Russian influence. African leaders are not remote-controlled by Moscow. They pursue their own interests and aspirations, which are essential for understanding their alignment decision and diplomatic postures – including their voting behaviour in the UN General Assembly. Accordingly, the West should not treat African states as pawns in its rivalry with Russia, but as actors in their own right.

Furthermore, Western finger wagging and lecturing needs to be avoided. If anything, it will only deepen the feeling of alienation among African leaders. Similarly, penalising African governments who do not toe the line of the West – by imposing economic and political sanctions, for instance – will at best have a limited effect. Some leaders may adjust their policy vis-à-vis Moscow in response to pressure from the West. But others will be driven away and may even seek closer ties with Russia or, for that matter, China.

To win more support of African states against Russia's war in Ukraine, Western government officials should stress the importance of defending the territorial integrity norm as a fundamental principle of international order. Given the strong commitment of African states to this norm, such an approach will strike a chord with many leaders and governments on the continent. Thus, norm protection in collaboration with regional partners – e.g. the African Union where the EU already has a delegation<sup>102</sup> – is likely to be a more successful diplomatic strategy than one that is fixated on countering Russia.

On the ground, meanwhile, the West should consider the adverse implications of its growing reluctance to offer military capacity building and training programmes to local states. As the above analysis shows, security provision for embattled leaders is one of Russia's preferred instruments to exert influence on the continent. The West should not leave the playing field to Russia. This may require at times setting aside demands for political reforms and democratisation. That said, we shy away from providing more specific policy recommendations, at least within the confines of this study. The reason for our reservation is simple. A successful strategy must take into account the particularities of individual African countries. Thus, hard and fast recommendations and broad-brush approaches will be of limited utility and, in the worst case, may be counterproductive. Instead, we take this opportunity to

emphatically stress that Western states (and the governments acting on their behalf) need to develop strategies based on contextually-grounded knowledge and expertise about the country in question. This, in turn, presupposes a robust presence on the ground – via embassies and diplomatic missions, for example – as well as regular exchanges with country specialists. Simply put, effective strategies to counter Russian influence in African states requires working with, not against, dynamics at the local and/or national level.

Parenthetically, it is important to note that there might be even instances where it could make sense for Western states to cooperate – or at least coordinate their stabilisation efforts – with Moscow. In the mid-2000s, for example, Russia and the West deployed warships to jointly combat the escalating pirate attacks on merchant vessels in the Gulf of Aden. Russia and the European Union even signed an agreement on co-operation in anti-piracy operations. After Russia's 2022 attack on Ukraine, such co-operation is of course next to impossible. The current political climate is marked by mutual distrust and sharpening military-strategic competition. In the longer term, however, it is worthwhile to keep in mind that Russian and Western interests in Africa do not automatically need to conflict with each other.

As regards Russian information operations, Western governments and diplomats should call out blatant acts of propaganda and misinformation. Counter-narratives need to be established and promoted. Yet, even more important, words must be matched by deeds. This means that Western governments should show – not only tell – African governments that they take regional ownership seriously with regard to political, economic and social matters.

Finally, and following from the above, rather than pushing African states to confront Russia, the West should engage with leaders and societal actors on the continent as equal partners. The focus ought to be on areas of common interests including such issues as economic development, digitalisation, public health, food security and domestic stability. This is of course easier said than done. The point to be stressed here is that disengagement or simple carrot-and-stick methods are unlikely to be successful. In short, the West's engagement on the continent must be about more than 'containing' Russia.

APPENDIX

VOTES OF AFRICAN STATES IN THE UN EMERGENCY SPECIAL SESSIONS: ES-11

	ES-11/1	ES-11/2	ES-11/3	ES-11/4	ES-11/5	ES-11/6
Algeria	AB	AB	NO	AB	AB	AB
Angola	AB	AB	AB	YES	AB	AB
Benin	YES	YES	/VOTE	YES	YES	YES
Botswana	YES	AB	AB	YES	AB	YES
Burkina Faso	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE
Burundi	AB	AB	NO	AB	AB	AB
Cabo Verde	YES	YES	AB	YES	YES	YES
Cameroon	/VOTE	/VOTE	AB	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE
CAR	AB	AB	NO	AB	NO	AB
Chad	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Comoros	YES	/VOTE	YES	YES	YES	YES
Congo	AB	AB	NO	AB	AB	AB
Côte d'Ivoire	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
DRC	YES	YES	YES	YES	/VOTE	YES
Djibouti	YES	YES	/VOTE	/VOTE	YES	YES
Egypt	YES	YES	AB	YES	AB	YES
Equatorial Guinea	AB	AB	/VOTE	/VOTE	AB	/VOTE
Eritrea	NO	NO	NO	AB	NO	NO
Eswatini	/VOTE	AB	AB	AB	AB	/VOTE
Ethiopia	/VOTE	AB	NO	AB	NO	AB
Gabon	YES	YES	NO	YES	AB	AB
Gambia	YES	YES	AB	YES	AB	YES
Ghana	YES	YES	AB	YES	YES	YES
Guinea	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE	AB	AB	AB
Guinea-Bissau	/VOTE	AB	AB	YES	AB	/VOTE
Kenya	YES	YES	AB	YES	YES	YES
Lesotho	YES	YES	AB	AB	AB	YES

	ES-11/1	ES-11/2	ES-11/3	ES-11/4	ES-11/5	ES-11/6
Liberia	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Libya	YES	YES	YES	YES	AB	YES
Madagascar	AB	AB	AB	YES	AB	YES
Malawi	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Mali	AB	AB	NO	AB	NO	NO
Mauritania	YES	YES	/VOTE	YES	AB	YES
Mauritius	YES	YES	YES	YES	AB	YES
Morocco	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE	YES	/VOTE	YES
Mozambique	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB
Namibia	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB
Niger	YES	YES	AB	YES	YES	YES
Nigeria	YES	YES	AB	YES	AB	YES
Rwanda	YES	YES	/VOTE	YES	AB	YES
Sao Tome & Principe	YES	YES	/VOTE	/VOTE	/VOTE	YES
Senegal	AB	YES	AB	YES	/VOTE	/VOTE
Seychelles	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Sierra Leone	YES	YES	YES	YES	AB	YES
Somalia	YES	/VOTE	/VOTE	YES	YES	YES
South Africa	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB
South Sudan	AB	YES	AB	AB	AB	YES
Sudan	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB
Togo	/VOTE	AB	AB	AB	YES	AB
Tunisia	YES	YES	AB	YES	AB	YES
Uganda	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB	AB
Tanzania	AB	AB	AB	AB	/VOTE	/VOTE
Zambia	YES	YES	/VOTE	YES	YES	YES
Zimbabwe	AB	AB	NO	AB	NO	AB

Source: Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN General Assembly Documentation

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