

The Wagner Group in Africa. The sham battle of Russian mercenaries against terrorism

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Abstract

In recent years, the Wagner Group has significantly increased its presence in several African countries. Russian mercenaries have become involved in many conflicts in an effort to expand their influence. One of their main tasks was to fight against terrorism. The analyses carried out, in which the author used qualitative methods and sources relating to the theoretical and practical dimensions of the issue at hand, indicate that the Wagnerists have been posing as their operations in order to maintain military presence on the African continent. Intensifying the Wagner Group's presence is a long-term strategy of the Kremlin, which pursues interests along two tracks – benefiting from cooperation at the state level and engaging mercenaries. Countries of the wider West (members of the North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union) are also seeking to develop cooperation with African partners. Terrorist organisations also intend to fight for influence on the continent. In this regard, it is necessary to constantly monitor Russia's proactive foreign policy aimed at the rivalry as it affects the presence of Poland and its allies in Africa.

Keywords

Wagner Group, Africa, Russia, terrorism, anti-terrorism, mercenaries

Introduction

The Wagner Group was founded¹, with the approval of the Chief of General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation, around 2010 by Dmitry Utkin and financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin. The first mercenaries were sent on missions abroad in 2014 - to Crimea and the Donbass, and more of them in 2015 to Syria². The strategy of engaging mercenaries abroad had the support of Vladimir Putin, and in the following years became an important part of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation (RF). The Wagner Group (in the sense of a Private Military Company, PMC) should be seen as an organisation that is a tool used by Russia to carry out operations of a political, military and economic nature on a global scale.

Unlike Western European states, Russia has no negative experience of occupying, either politically or economically, African countries (it did, however, attempt to subjugate and impose dependency on Central and Eastern European countries and colonise Somaliland, among others). Moreover, it has gone down in the history of some African countries as supporting national liberation movements. Today, Russia's actions in Africa are multifaceted.

The Kremlin provides armaments, mercenaries and finances the extraction of natural resources. It also uses political lobbying, which translates into both the achievement of political objectives and concrete financial benefits, including by creating a market for Russian equipment.

Nearly 40 African partners are interested in strengthening cooperation with Moscow in such an important area as the military³. The Russian Federation is the leader in arms supplies to Africa, with a market share of 26% for purchases by sub-Saharan African countries. When Maghreb

¹ The studies give different information about the formation and organisation of the Wagner Group.

² For more on the formation of the Wagner Group, see: Ch. Faulkner, *Undermining Democracy and Exploiting Clients: the Wagner Group's Nefarious Activities in Africa*, "CTC Sentinel" 2022, vol. 15, no. 6, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/CTC-SENTINEL-062022.pdf>, pp. 29–31 [accessed: 4 XII 2023].

³ A. Olech et al., *Militarne zaangażowanie Federacji Rosyjskiej w Afryce. Zawarte porozumienia i umowy* (Eng. The Russian Federation's military engagement in Africa. Agreements and arrangements concluded), Instytut Nowej Europy, 23 V 2023, <https://ine.org.pl/militarne-zaangazowanie-federacji-rosyjskiej-w-afryce-zawarte-porozumienia-i-umowy/> [accessed: 23 V 2023].

countries are included, this percentage rises to as much as 40%⁴. Russia mainly supplies rocket and artillery weapons, small arms and armoured vehicles. The most important customers from the sub-Saharan African region are: Angola, Mali, Nigeria and Sudan.

Between 2019 and 2023, the Wagner Group has become an important instrument in Russian foreign policy, particularly in Africa, where Moscow seeks to expand its influence and compete with the West. To achieve this goal, the Wagnerists have established relationships with the governments of a number of African countries, offering military and security services in exchange for mining concessions and expanded political influence. However, the group is not interested in genuine defence capacity building or fighting terrorism. It seeks primarily to capitalise on profits and reap the benefits from prolonged chaos in order to maintain its presence on the continent.

The mercenaries can be used to maintain the security situation, as the Wagner Group has military experience in Africa, particularly in the protection of people and facilities, and is able to move efficiently and carry out ad hoc operations. Importantly, when cooperating with a Russian entity, there are no strictures in terms of meeting certain conditions (e.g. the existence of a democratic government, respect for human rights), as required by international organisations and Western countries. Furthermore, the Wagnerists support governments or juntas leaders after coups. The prospect of changing power and receiving support from Russian mercenaries may tempt some people in unstable African countries.

Research problem

The Wagner Group can be classified as a para-private actor because of its close ties to Russia's political elite and the ways in which the Kremlin uses the organisation in direct foreign policy. The group is not a registered organisation nor does it function as a state actor, making it difficult to determine what kind of threat to combat. It has been deliberately woven into a complex web of business entities and shell companies (part of Prigozhin's

⁴ M. Douet, *Russia overtakes China as leading arms seller in sub-Saharan Africa*, Le Monde, 28 III 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/03/28/russia-overtakes-china-as-leading-arms-seller-in-sub-saharan-africa_6021018_124.html [accessed: 10 XII 2023].

commercial empire at the time and individuals with links to the Russian government), as well as an equally complex web of government entities. The Wagnerists not only carry out strictly military operations, but also, among other things: information operations, training, arms and financial transfers, cyber operations, they also provide logistical support, company protection and surveillance.

In the course of research queries, the author of the article found that there are very few publications, both in Polish and English, that treat in detail the presence and activities of the Wagner Group in each of the African countries, as well as outlining how the issues of terrorism and counter-terrorism intersect, as the Kremlin uses different definitions of these phenomena in favour of its own interests, including in the Russian Federation⁵. The author gathered data from several hundred Polish and foreign articles, reports, books, media reports, as well as numerous materials obtained from his own searches.

The article does not cover the issue of the Wagner Group's presence in Syria and Ukraine, but the author is aware that these are important corps of Wagnerists operating around the world. Nor is a detailed description of the terrorist organisations (groups, cells, battalions) provided, i.e. the history of their formation, the views currently held, the religion represented, plans for expansion and the relationship between the various organisations and the states in which they operate⁶.

Globally, the Wagner Group may have been active, to a greater or lesser extent, in some 30 countries, including Eastern Europe (e.g. Ukraine), the Middle East (e.g. Syria) and South America (e.g. Venezuela), but its presence on the African continent is most visible. This involvement, which has an impact on the internal situation of countries and on their foreign policy, is mainly in Mali, Burkina Faso, Libya, the Central African Republic (CAR) and Sudan (Figure 1). Influence of the Wagnerists on the continent, however, extends much wider, as this analysis will discuss⁷.

⁵ A. Olech, *Ataki terrorystyczne w Federacji Rosyjskiej w XXI wieku* (Eng. Terrorist attacks in the Russian Federation in the 21st century), "Nowa Polityka Wschodnia" 2019, no. 4 (23), pp. 109–127.

⁶ On this topic see: K. Izak, *Leksykon organizacji i ruchów islamistycznych* (Eng. Lexicon of Islamist organisations and movements), Warszawa 2014.

⁷ The research conducted for this article was completed on 31 December 2023.



Figure 1. Countries in Africa where the Wagner Group is or was active.

Source: own elaboration.

Mali

Bamako has turned to Russian private military companies (mainly the Wagner Group) to increase security, due to repeated attacks by terrorist groups⁸, and also to limit the influence of the French Republic in Mali. Representatives of the Wagner Group were already lobbying the Malian interim authorities after they signed a defence agreement with Moscow in 2019. Cooperation intensified after the military putsch in May 2021, when Colonel Assimi Goita came to full power.

The situation in Mali is difficult due to the involvement of several actors vying for influence. Currently, three parties can be distinguished:

⁸ J. Wójcik, *Ekspansja dżihadu w Afryce: z Sahelu ku południu* (Eng. The expansion of jihad in Africa: from the Sahel towards the south), "Układ Sił" 2020, no. 20.

- 1) the Malian armed forces (Forces Armées Maliennes, FAMA) supported by Niger and Burkina Faso within the framework of the Alliance of Sahel States⁹, the Wagner Group and some Tuareg groups;
- 2) Tuareg and Arab militias and armed groups operating within coalitions of Tuareg organisations fighting for an independent Azawad¹⁰[including members of the Permanent Strategic Framework (Cadre stratégique permanent) and the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Coordination des mouvements de l'Azawad, CMA)];
- 3) Terrorist organisations active in, inter alia, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger¹¹, i.e.: the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wa al-Muslimin, JNIM) and the so-called Islamic State (Ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya; Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, ISIS)¹² and its cells, including the Islamic State Sahel Province (ISSP; Sahil Wilajet ad-Dawla al-Islamiyya) and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP)¹³.

The start of the Wagner Group's official and fully military involvement should be dated to December 2021, when the organisation began building

⁹ A regional collective security organisation (Alliance des États du Sahel), but with aspirations to also work together economically, as a sort of counterbalance to the Economic Community of West African States.

¹⁰ The situation in the north of Mali was supposed to calm down after the 2015 peace agreement in Algiers between the central authorities and separatist Tuareg and Arab groups. However, years later, these groupings have re-engaged in fighting over land and influence. At the same time, operations MINUSMA and Barkhane have been unable to stop the resurgence and expansion of terrorist groups linked to al-Qaeda and ISIS. See: J. Czerep, *Przyszłość misji ONZ w Afryce po wycofaniu MINUSMA z Mali* (Eng. The future of the UN mission in Africa after MINUSMA's withdrawal from Mali), PISM, 6 X 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/przyszlosc-misji-onz-w-afryce-po-wycofaniu-minusma-z-mali> [accessed: 2 XI 2023].

¹¹ K. Chesnutt, K. Zimmerman, *The State of al Qaeda and ISIS Around the World*, Critical Threats, 8 IX 2022, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/the-state-of-al-qaeda-and-isis-around-the-world> [accessed: 5 XI 2023].

¹² J. Czerep, *Afryka Subsaharyjska w strategii tzw. Państwa Islamskiego* (Eng. Sub-Saharan Africa in the strategy of the so-called Islamic State), PISM, 1 VIII 2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/afryka-subsaharyjska-w-strategii-tzw-panstwa-islamskiego> [accessed: 2 XI 2023].

¹³ Al-Qaeda and ISIS are in conflict with each other. They repeatedly operate in the same territory and seek to recruit members from the same communities.

a camp next to Modibo Keita International Airport in Bamako, a short distance from Airbase 101, a military facility used by the Malian Air Force. In the early months of 2022, the Wagnerists undertook operations in central Mali, with Russian personnel also deploying to Timbuktu, where they occupied the former bases of the French Barkhane operation. The arrival of Russian mercenaries accelerated the withdrawal of French forces and those of other European countries.

For a \$10.8 million monthly fee and gold mining concessions, the Wagnerists provide security and training to the Malian junta and engage militarily to fight the jihadists. As of early 2024, there are around 2,000 Russian mercenaries operating in Mali. An accurate estimate of their number is difficult, as the Russians arrive in the country bypassing Bamako. Most of the Russian planes land in Gao and Timbuktu, while vagrants are also sent to the east of the country, to Menaka. Their main activity is to support the Malian army in its attempts to take control of the country's northern territories, for years dominated mainly by Tuareg separatists¹⁴. The armed skirmishes in which mercenaries supporting the Malian army are involved concern attempts to take over strategic towns (including Kidal) and military bases (where United Nations forces were previously stationed) in the north of the country¹⁵, and to a lesser extent battles with terrorist groups¹⁶.

As part of its financial capacity building, the Wagner Group uses its presence in Mali to control the transport, agricultural and mining sectors. It collects fees and duties to finance its mercenaries. As in other African countries, the Malian authorities and the national military either accept

¹⁴ Tuareg separatists also have conflicting interests within communities, tribes and clans. See: M. Shurkin (@MichaelShurkin), X, 22 XI 2023, <https://twitter.com/MichaelShurkin/status/1727337675806650866> [accessed: 22 XI 2023].

¹⁵ K. Gadera, *Mali: chaotyczny koniec MINUSMA, Azawad znów walczy o niepodległość* (Eng. Mali: chaotic end of MINUSMA, Azawad fights for independence again), *Konflikty.pl*, 9 XI 2023, <https://www.konflikty.pl/aktualnosci/wiadomosci/mali-azawad-niepodleglosc/> [accessed: 13 XI 2023].

¹⁶ At the end of October 2023, members of the UN mission leaving the country were not given permission to transport their soldiers by air from their base in Kidal. For this reason, the soldiers (from, among others, Chad, Guinea, Egypt, Nepal, Cambodia and Bangladesh) embarked on a 350-kilometre road journey to Gao. The convoy of almost 850 vehicles came under repeated attack. The MINUSMA force base at Kidal initially fell to the CMA and was then quickly taken over by Malian troops and the Wagnerists.

or deliberately overlook the crimes committed by the Wagnerists against civilians¹⁷.

It should be noted that more than two years after the arrival of Russian mercenaries in Mali, the security situation in the country has deteriorated. Despite the fighting between Al-Qaeda¹⁸ and the Islamic State troops in the Sahel, both terrorist groups are combining their capabilities and engaging smaller terrorist and rebel groups, allowing them to significantly expand their territory of operations. The conflict is spilling over into the entire Sahel region and poses a threat to the Gulf of Guinea states. At the same time, the JNIM, whose cells operate in Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo, remains strong in the region.

The Wagner Group has never operated in Mali on its own and is logistically completely dependent on its hosts, the Malian army. In contrast to the Wagnerists, France had many years of experience of activity in the region and had very good military equipment at its disposal. In doing so, it cooperated with a coalition of states in the Barkhane and Takuba Task Force. The capabilities of the Russian mercenaries compared to the Paris-led operations were modest. French troops were specialised in aerially-led operations involving the neutralisation of ships and air facilities belonging to terrorist organisations.

Any action by the Malian junta, backed by the Wagner Group, against movements for an independent Azawad is being watched closely by Algeria. There are fears from the administration of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune that renewed conflict will result in the influx of thousands of refugees across the 1,300-kilometre border. Moreover, Mali's commitment to fighting Tuareg and Arab militias and armed groups is causing the Malian junta to lose sight of the growing terrorist threat. It may soon be too late to neutralise them effectively¹⁹. Already by the end of 2023, it was reported that some arms for Tuaregs and Arabs were entering Mali from Algerian territory, further aggravating the situation. The next step in

¹⁷ Ch. Faulkner, *Undermining Democracy...*, p. 21; P. Wójcik (@SaladinAlDronni), X, 7 XI 2023, <https://twitter.com/SaladinAlDronni/status/1721821654660092201> [accessed: 28 XI 2023].

¹⁸ Al-Qaeda has already united other groups within JNIM in March 2017 and continues to develop its potential.

¹⁹ *Much ado about Kidal*, Africa Confidential, 30 XI 2023, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/14715/Much_ado_about_Kidal [accessed: 30 XI 2023].

the cooling of relations is the cancellation of ambassadors by both sides and the tightening of Morocco's relations with Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger²⁰.

The Wagner's Group will not be able to support Mali's armed forces to fully counter terrorist organisations and Tuareg and Arab groups in the region. The Malian junta must act simultaneously on at least two fronts. It would be realistic to hold on to some of the territory, but greater successes would require large supplies of arms directly from Russia, as well as the deployment of at least several hundred troops to Mali. The Russian Federation, due to the conflict in Ukraine and its involvement in other regions of Africa and the Middle East, cannot afford this. Moscow will therefore be part of a smouldering conflict and, at the same time, will be draining Mali as much as possible financially in order to obtain funds to build up its military presence in the Sahel.

Burkina Faso and Niger

The Wagner's Group was identified on Burkina Faso territory in November 2023. The first transport (20 soldiers) arrived in the country's capital on an Il-76 aircraft belonging to the Russian Air Force. Since the attempted coup in September 2023, President Ibrahim Traoré feared the loss of his regime and therefore asked for support from Russia²¹. This confirms that one of the main tasks of the Wagnerists is to protect senior government officials, especially the president (as in the CAR).

In Burkina Faso, the source of the terrorist threat is the JNIM-affiliated jihadist group Ansar al-Islam. Its ranks are mainly made up of radicalised Fulani (living in the north and east of the country) opposed to the domination of the Mossi people (Burkina Faso's most numerous ethnic group).

The scenario that occurred in Mali was not realised (until early 2024) in Burkina Faso, although Russia had the intention to do so. The authorities in Ouagadougou are primarily interested in enhancing their own counter-

²⁰ F. Bobin, *Coup de froid dans les relations entre l'Algérie et le Mali*, Le Monde, 27 XII 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/12/27/coup-de-froid-dans-les-relations-entre-l-algerie-et-le-mali_6207961_3212.html?fbclid=IwAR0ZDMZbfg7Wz-a4v1ft4pVoLJzi1MmsUqe5LpaYFGYx85_966-Y9yrQ4Y [accessed: 27 XII 2023].

²¹ B. Roger, *Au Burkina Faso, des militaires russes pour protéger Ibrahim Traoré?*, jeuneafrique, 17 XI 2023, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1503219/politique/au-burkina-faso-des-militaires-russes-pour-protoger-ibrahim-traore/> [accessed: 10 XII 2023].

terrorism capabilities and developing counter-terrorism services. This means that joint Russian-Burkina Faso exercises, the purchase of foreign armaments and international action against terrorists (rebel groups) are all realistic. Burkina Faso, however, is reluctant to invite a large group of the Wagnerists. Russian mercenaries are expected to support the consolidation of power by the Burkinese junta.

The presence of the Wagner's Group in Niger is also under scrutiny, as General Abdourahamane Tchiani staged a coup d'état on 26 July 2023, ousting the pro-Western (working closely with France and the US) President Mohamed Bazoum from power. Niger had been a source of stability in the Sahel region for the past years, so the sudden turn towards Russia came as a surprise.

The change of power in Niger has resulted in a halt to all efforts to build resilience against attacks by rebel groups, as well as operations against terrorist groups. The counter-terrorism support maintained by the U.S. (around 1 100 troops) and France (around 1 500 troops)²² (e.g. using the air base in Agadez – crucial for drone operations or the intelligence centre in the capital Niamey), as well as the training of local troops, formed the foundation in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. The main adversaries were – as in Mali and Burkina Faso – terrorists from JNIM, ISSP, ISWAP and partly Boko Haram. Eventually, all French soldiers left Niger and the French embassy ceased to function.

At the end of July 2023, a few days after the coup, representatives of the Wagner Group appeared in Niamey. The junta in Niger, however, decided that instead of strengthening relations with the Wagnerists, it would immediately move closer to the Russian Federation. On 4 December 2023, the two countries signed an agreement to strengthen military cooperation. Niger ultimately opted for Russia, but US troops remain there, leaving little hope for Western cooperation with the country.

In the context of the situation in the Sahel – after coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sudan, there are reports that the Wagner Group is working with rebels from Chad to overthrow the country's current president²³. This also threatens security, as some French soldiers from Niger have gone to Chad and EU countries are planning to support the authorities in N'Djamena, including Hungary sending a contingent of up to 400 soldiers.

²² Belgium, Canada, Germany, Italy and Australia were also involved in Niger.

²³ W. Rampe, *What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?*, Council on Foreign Relations, 23 V 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/what-russias-wagner-group-doing-africa> [accessed: 21 XII 2023].

Although the activity of the Wagnerists in Burkina Faso was small at the beginning, their appearance proved to be a prelude to the development of cooperation. In 2024, their numbers were increased by sending another 100 mercenaries. If the Russian Federation decides that it wants to build its capacity in the region, its presence in Burkina Faso could turn into a bridgehead for Russian mercenaries.

Libya

Today, Libya is a divided country, lacking a single political apparatus to administer the country and conduct foreign policy coherently. Due to rival centres of power, the involvement of other states, and the activity of terrorist groups and mercenaries, including the Wagner Group, it is impossible to emerge with a united government (as the UN and the US are pushing hard to do) that would allow a way out of the crisis and stop the humanitarian catastrophe affecting Libyans and those migrating through the country.

Following contested parliamentary elections in 2014, the country split into two areas with competing centres of power – the High Council of State (HCS), based in Tripoli in western Libya, and the House of Representatives (HoR), based in Tobruk in the eastern part of the country. Thanks to political interventions under the aegis of the UN, a ceasefire was concluded in 2020, which is still partially respected today²⁴.

The House of Representatives from the eastern part of Libya has carved out and supports the Government of National Stability (GNS) and receives support from the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by General Khalifa Haftar (the Wagnerists came to Libya at his invitation). The political rivals of the GNS and HoR are the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the HCS, but relations between the latter two are not harmonious. These so-called Big Five are responsible for the situation in Libya, where an agreement to end the conflict is still far from being reached. In this chaotic environment, the Wagner Group is trying to make its mark.

The Wagnerists emerged in Libya in 2015 with Russian special forces, also supported by another Russian mercenary group, the Rossiskie System Bezopasnosti. Encouraged by General Haftar, the Wagner's Group stepped

²⁴ The October 2020 ceasefire significantly reduced the Wagner Group's involvement in Libya, therefore some personnel were redeployed to Mali and Ukraine.

up activity in late 2018 and by mid-2019 had become a fully committed combatant. Among other things, it supported the LNA's attack on Tripoli against Government of National Accord acknowledged by the UN²⁵.

There are currently up to 2,000 mercenaries working for the Wagner Group in Libya²⁶. They are equipped with, among other things, armoured vehicles, air defence systems, electronic warfare equipment, anti-tank guided missiles, combat aircraft and drones. In Libya, the continent's leading oil producer, Russian mercenaries' activities are focused on accessing both oil and gas deposits²⁷.

In mid-2023, General Haftar threatened military action if oil revenues were not shared fairly. In his view, the profits from this resource are for the most part given to the Government of National Accord, despite the fact that the oil is mainly extracted in fields located in the east of the country²⁸. Russia is doing much to gain influence with the support of the Wagner Group and is using its own energy agreements and the involvement of Russian companies to do so²⁹.

The fight against terrorism has at no time been the purpose of the Wagner Group's presence in Libya, unlike its activities in Syria, Mali or Mozambique. This is because the Islamic State (among others the Islamic-State - Libya Province) had its strongest presence in Libya between 2014 and 2016, and lost large territories in 2018³⁰ (even before the Wagnerists arrived in the country³¹).

It should be pointed out that the methods used during the military operations carried out by the Wagner Group also in Libya fits the definition

²⁵ Ch. Faulkner, *Undermining Democracy...*, p. 30.

²⁶ At the peak of their presence, at least 2,500 mercenaries affiliated to the Wagner Group were carrying out tasks on Libyan territory.

²⁷ Libya's economy is heavily dependent, at around 85%, on hydrocarbon production.

²⁸ P. Wintour, *Fears for Libyan oil production amid military threats*, The Guardian, 4 VII 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jul/04/fears-for-libyan-oil-production-amid-military-action-threats> [accessed: 13 XII 2023].

²⁹ G. Kuczyński, *Russia's Tatneft Discovers New Oil Field in Libya*, Warsaw Institute, 25 V 2023, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russias-tatneft-discovers-new-oil-field-in-libya/> [accessed: 21 XII 2023].

³⁰ Center for Preventive Action, *Civil Conflict in Libya?*, Council on Foreign Relations, 19 IX 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/civil-war-libya> [accessed: 23 XI 2023].

³¹ It is true that some of the Wagner Group's mercenaries were previously active in Syria, where they fought against the Islamic State, but in Libya they had other tasks.

of terrorism. It is an external actor that attempts to destabilise order in the country, engages in armed activities and carries out terrorist attacks. The Wagner Group soldiers who fought alongside the LNA during the 2019 attacks on Tripoli have been accused of carrying out unjustified killings and planting landmines in areas populated by civilians³².

The Russian Federation is currently taking steps to strengthen its military presence in Libya. Following the visit of Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-Bek Yevkurov to Benghazi in August 2023, which took place at the initiative of General Haftar, a plan for the creation of a Russian Army Corps in Afrin was announced. According to it, the soldiers would carry out military operations across the African continent in support of cooperation between Russia and selected states (regimes/governments)³³. At the same time, Moscow is in contact with the government in Tripoli to keep alive the chance of cooperation if there would be a significant weakening of the Wagner Group and General Haftar's forces.

Mozambique

The Wagner's Group emerged in Mozambique due to the increasing activity since 2017 of terrorist groups linked to the Islamic State, operating in the Cabo Delgado region bordering Tanzania. The main reason for the deteriorating security situation in the country was the radicalisation of the economically marginalised population (more than 60 per cent of Cabo Delgado's population is Muslim, while in Mozambique the majority is Christian) and the involvement of extremists from, among others, the group ISIS-Mozambique³⁴, also known as Ansar al-Sunna³⁵ (as well as Ahl-al-Sunna) and locally as Al-Shabaab in Mozambique³⁶. The extremists

³² W. Rampe, *What Is Russia's Wagner Group Doing in Africa?...*

³³ *Russia works with Libya on the creation of a military corps in Africa*, Agenzia Nova, 17 XI 2023, <https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/la-russia-lavora-con-la-libia-alla-creazione-di-un-corpo-militare-in-africa/> [accessed: 23 XI 2023].

³⁴ *ISIS-Mozambique*, Counter Terrorism Guide, November 2022, https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/isis_mozambique_fto.html [accessed: 12 XII 2023].

³⁵ Also operating with Madinat at-Tawhid wa al-Muwahidin from the Democratic Republic of Congo.

³⁶ *State Department Terrorist Designations of ISIS Affiliates and Leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Mozambique*, U.S. Department of State, 10 III 2023, <https://www.state.gov/>

wanted the separation of the region from the country, control of drug routes and profits from discovered resource deposits. Growing tensions in the region led to an uprising³⁷. The Mozambican army and services could not cope with the extremist groups and needed the support of foreign forces³⁸.

Two hundred Russian mercenaries arrived in Mozambique with assault helicopters, drones and ground combat equipment in September 2019. The Wagner's Group was tasked with training and commanding the local armed forces. However, the group's members were not able to find their way in the densely forested terrain, cooperation with Mozambican soldiers did not go well, their equipment proved to be of little use against terrorists focusing on ambushes and irregular attacks, and enemy reconnaissance failed. In the first few weeks, more than a dozen Wagnerists were killed.

By early 2020, the situation in Cabo Delgado was bad - the terrorist groups had gained a significant advantage. The loss of a large part of the territory and subsequent unsuccessful operations led to the abandonment of cooperation with the Wagnerists. In March 2020, they left Mozambique, just six months after arriving. They were replaced by other mercenaries from the private military company Dyck Advisory Group. Thus, the Wagner Group's activities in Mozambique were short-lived and can be considered a failure. This is another example confirming that Russian mercenaries will leave any country where they perceive the opponent to be too demanding and where their presence is neither politically nor financially viable. The Russian Federation ignored the flight of the Wagnerists and took no action to improve and strengthen bilateral relations with Mozambique.

state-department-terrorist-designations-of-isis-affiliates-and-leaders-in-the-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-and-mozambique/ [accessed: 12 XII 2023].

³⁷ J. Penney, *Rwanda Helped Oust Jihadists in Mozambique. Can This Model Work in West Africa?*, PassBlue, 16 VIII 2023, <https://www.passblue.com/2023/08/16/rwanda-helped-oust-jihadists-in-mozambique-can-it-work-as-a-counterinsurgency-model-in-west-africa> [accessed: 14 XII 2023].

³⁸ J. Czerep, *Nowy front dżihadu w Mozambiku* (Eng. New jihadist front in Mozambique), PISM, 22 IX 2020, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Nowy_front_dzihadu_w_Mozambiku [accessed: 21 XI 2023].

Sudan

The Wagner's Group has been present in Sudan since 2017 and, amid an escalating power struggle in the country, has been working directly in support of Russia's interests³⁹. Cooperation between the two countries had been intensifying since 2015. A key moment was a meeting in 2017 between then President Omar Al-Bashir and Vladimir Putin, during which Sudan's ruler explicitly asked for support. The Russian Federation was interested in energy and transport cooperation using the Bab al-Mandab Strait⁴⁰. Agreements were signed at the time and talks were held, including on the establishment of a Russian naval base at Port Sudan in the Red Sea. In addition to those mentioned, gold mining concession agreements were signed in 2017.

In April 2023, another coup d'état took place in Sudan. Both Prigozhin and the Wagner Group would have been reluctant to support General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), but kept up operations in support of General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (alias "Hemetti", "Hemedti") and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF)⁴¹, with whom they already maintained training cooperation, as well as donating equipment (including ammunition, drones and missiles)⁴².

At present, the RF (as a state and with the support of leading Kremlin politicians) wants to maintain links with al-Burhan and the SAF in case it falls to them to win the civil war. At the same time, the Russians may favour the RSF behind the scenes, using the Wagner Group to do so, because of the situation in Libya and the good relations between Haftar

³⁹ I. Sheludkova, *Why is Russia's Wagner Group in Sudan, and what does it have to do with the war in Ukraine?*, EuroNews, 27 IV 2023, <https://www.euronews.com/2023/04/27/why-is-russias-wagner-group-in-sudan-and-what-does-it-have-to-do-with-the-war-in-ukraine> [accessed: 16 XI 2023].

⁴⁰ *Sudan's President Bashir asks Putin for 'protection' from 'aggressive' US*, France24, 23 XI 2017, <https://www.france24.com/en/20171123-sudan-president-bashir-asks-putin-protection-aggressive-us> [accessed: 16 XI 2023].

⁴¹ At the beginning of a conflict, Prigozhin expressed his willingness to engage in peace mediation because of his good contacts with both sides in the conflict.

⁴² Even before the outbreak of the conflict, arms were being supplied to the RSF using Entebbe Airport in Uganda, which received supplies from the CAR via the Wagner Group.

and Hemetti⁴³, as well as the support⁴⁴ given to them both by the United Arab Emirates⁴⁵.

The Wagner Group's objective in Sudan (where 500-700 mercenaries are currently based) is to secure access to raw materials, which Russia will then use to finance the war in Ukraine and to participate in other theatres of operations. Obtaining gold from Sudan, which is the leading (top three⁴⁶) producer of this mineral in Africa, is not difficult due to the unstable situation in the country and the ease of controlling selected mines.

The continuing collapse of power in Sudan and prolonged fighting means that Moscow is finding it arduous to rebuild cooperation. There is a risk that siding with the RSF will not work and the Kremlin will not realise its expansion plans in East Africa. Taking sides means losses not only politically and militarily, but also economically. An exit from Sudan will not be beneficial for the Russian Federation, and maintaining a presence is essential if Russia wants to continue to fight for its position in the region. An analogy can be drawn with the situation in Libya, where Moscow assists General Haftar militarily, but also ensures correct relations with the government in Tripoli, as it is recognised internationally. The situation is the same with Sudan, where Al-Burhan is recognised. In the event of his victory, the Wagner Group would be pushed out because of its cooperation with the RSF.

The Ukrainian thread

It is worth mentioning that there is an increasing number of revealed attacks by Ukrainian special forces on the Wagner Group mercenary

⁴³ G. Aftandilian, *The Fate of the Wagner Group in Syria, Libya, and Sudan*, Arab Center Washington DC, 18 VII 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-fate-of-the-wagner-group-in-syria-libya-and-sudan/> [accessed: 23 XI 2023].

⁴⁴ J. Czerep, *Perspektywy zakończenia wojny w Sudanie* (Eng. Prospects for ending the war in Sudan), PISM, 25 V 2023, <https://pism.pl/publikacje/perspektywy-zakonczenia-wojny-w-sudanie> [accessed: 23 XI 2023].

⁴⁵ In the context of the Emirates, it would also be good for the country to disassociate itself from the Wagnerists and to stop supplying arms to the RSF. The United Arab Emirates wants to emphasise its position on the international stage, for example by organising COP28, and with actions such as in Sudan it is undermining its authority.

⁴⁶ M. Goosen, *Biggest Gold Producing Countries in Africa*, Energy Capital Power, 5 IX 2022, <https://energycapitalpower.com/biggest-gold-producing-countries-in-africa/> [accessed: 25 XI 2023].

positions in Sudan. It remains a priority for Ukraine not only to open new diplomatic missions in Africa in the near future⁴⁷, but also to combat the Wagnerists across the African continent⁴⁸.

It is worth noting that in 2024 (when Kiev is expected to conduct a military counter-offensive in the country), the dissemination of Ukrainian involvement in Sudan in the world media has political objectives. President Volodymyr Zelensky's meeting with Al-Burhan on 23 September 2023 at Shannon Airport in Ireland was a signal of support for the Sudanese commander⁴⁹.

In addition, there are reports that Ukrainian soldiers are training and advising Tuareg rebels in Mali, who are waging hostilities against the pro-Russian government and the Wagner Group stationed there⁵⁰. Ukraine - at least in theory - would like to challenge the Russian Federation, whose political presence in Africa is significant. Even if some states would prefer to cooperate with Kiev, they fear the transfer of the Russian-Ukrainian rivalry to the African continent.

The Central African Republic

The Wagner's Group is particularly active in the CAR. There are approximately 1,000 mercenaries in the country⁵¹. It is worth pointing out that a large proportion of the group's members have left Africa, mainly the CAR, due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and others after the Prigozhin rebellion. Their numbers have decreased significantly compared to their

⁴⁷ *Ukraine Expands Diplomatic Presence in Africa: New Embassy Launches in Ghana*, The Kyiv Independent, 27 XII 2023, <https://www.kyivpost.com/post/26022/> [accessed: 29 XII 2023].

⁴⁸ T. Eydoux, L. Savoye, *Quand les forces spéciales ukrainiennes combattent des mercenaires russes de Wagner au Soudan*, Le Monde, 19 XI 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/videos/video/2023/11/19/quand-les-forces-speciales-ukrainiennes-combattent-des-mercenaires-russes-de-wagner-au-soudan_6201120_1669088.html [accessed: 21 XI 2023].

⁴⁹ R. Black, *ZelenskymeetsSudaneseofficialduring'technicalstopover'inIreland*, The Independent, 23 IX 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/volodymyr-zelensky-north-america-ireland-joe-biden-department-of-foreign-affairs-b2417251.html> [accessed: 10 XII 2023].

⁵⁰ S. Sadkiewicz (@StanSadkiewicz), X, 7 XI 2023, <https://twitter.com/StanSadkiewicz/status/1721882283916079351> [accessed: 7 XI 2023].

⁵¹ R. Chason, B. Debout, *In Wagner's largest African outpost, Russia looks to tighten its grip*, The Washington Post, 18 IX 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/09/18/wagner-central-african-republic-touadera> [accessed: 5 XI 2023].

peak, when there were more than 2,500 Wagnerists active in the CAR⁵². A priority, especially in the early days, was training for the Central African armed forces, primarily for special forces. The joint exercises were intended to improve the interoperability of the country's troops and allow them to carry out rapid strikes against enemy positions, as the CAR struggles with the presence of rebel groups.

Russian mercenaries are carrying out activities in the CAR that allow them to gain significant material benefits. They protect mines and have rights to extract or distribute specific raw materials in exchange for services rendered. Over the years, the Wagner Group has gained a strong foothold in the country. Mainly thanks to the support of President Faustin-Archange Touadéry, who invited the mercenaries in 2018 (talks were already underway in 2017, and the first contracts were signed with another Russian group, Sewa Security Group⁵³).

As in other African countries where the Wagnerists are building up their presence, troops from the French Republic were previously present in the CAR (since 2012). In 2013, they launched Operation Sangaris to combat rebels and terrorists⁵⁴. At its peak, France deployed around 2,500 troops in the CAR, supporting around 10,000 UN peacekeepers as part of the MINUSCA mission⁵⁵. In 2016, French forces finally withdrew from the country. Unlike in Mali, the UN mission in the CAR is being carried out in spite of the continued presence of the Wagner Group, whose mercenaries carry out atrocities against the civilian population and remain

⁵² L. Serwat, *Moving out of the shadows: Shifts in Wagner Group Operations Around the World*, ACLED, 2 VIII 2023, https://acleddata.com/acleddatanew/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ACLED_Report_Shifts-in-Wagner-Group-Operations-Around-the-World_2023.pdf [accessed: 5 XI 2023].

⁵³ Sewa Security Group operated its Lobaye Invest SARLU company executing resource extraction contracts.

⁵⁴ Launched at the end of 2013, Operation Sangaris was the seventh French military intervention in the CAR since the country's independence in 1960, with France officially announcing its end on 30 October 2016.

⁵⁵ *France to end Central African Republic military mission in 2016*, France24, 30 III 2016, <https://www.france24.com/en/20160330-france-end-military-operations-central-african-republic> [accessed: 5 XI 2023].

unpunished⁵⁶. It is worth mentioning that in 2021 a monument was erected to the Wagnerists in Bangui⁵⁷.

In the current situation, French troops will not be returning to the CAR, mainly because of the presence of the Wagnerists. For Paris, however, the relationship with Bangui is not completely lost⁵⁸. The matter is seen in a similar way by Washington which remains in contact with the Touadéry administration and to which it offers security cooperation⁵⁹. Talks are also being held with Bancroft Global Development, an American private military company.

The role of Rwanda

In the context of the CAR, it is worth mentioning the military involvement of the Rwandans, who are a counterweight to the Wagner Group in the country. It is Kigali that has been able to improve the security level in several regions of the CAR, support the reform of security structures and provide training for anti-terrorist groups. Although the Russian mercenaries initially cooperated with Rwandan soldiers, with whom they jointly fought rebel groups, especially in 2021, since mid-2022 (when the Russians began to become more heavily involved in the CAR, Sudan and to support the Democratic Republic of Congo, which remains in conflict with Rwanda) there have been increasing tensions between the two.

The rivalry is mainly over control of resource deposits and activities in conflict areas. Kigali has good relations with Moscow, but does not want to be associated with the activities of the Wagner Group. Both groups - in theory - are fighting the rebels (terrorism), but at the same time they are competing. It is worth mentioning that it is currently Rwanda that has

⁵⁶ *Wagner Group Uses Mafia-Style Tactics to Dominate CAR's Diamond Sector*, ADF, 1 VIII 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/08/wagner-group-uses-mafia-style-tactics-to-dominate-cars-diamond-sector/> [accessed: 25 XI 2023].

⁵⁷ Between 2020 and 2023, the Wagner Group was involved in nearly 40 per cent of the attacks that occurred during the conflicts unfolding in the CAR.

⁵⁸ *Touadéra stirs the geopolitical cauldron*, Africa Confidential, 2 XI 2023, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/14682/Touad%c3%a9ra_stirs_the_geopolitical_cauldron [accessed: 5 XI 2023].

⁵⁹ E. Peltier, *Battle for Influence Rages in Heart of Wagner's Operations in Africa*, The New York Times, 26 XI 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/26/world/africa/wagner-russia-central-african-republic.html> [accessed: 15 XII 2023].

the most numerous and important foreign contingent in the MINUSCA mission.

While the CAR-Rwanda partnership has had positive effects in the context of the fight against terrorism, it has also brought another external actor into the country. The Rwandans have become involved in the same areas in which the Wagner Group operates economically (including the mining sector). The cooperation of the Russian mercenaries with the administration of the CAR is very good and the Kremlin does not intend to make political changes in the country (as, for example, it did in Syria)⁶⁰. However, it recognises the growing role of Rwanda. For the moment, the Wagner Group and the Rwandan military accept their presence in the CAR as they see the benefits of this. However, relations are very tense and conflict could arise.

Democratic Republic of Congo and possible presence of Russian mercenaries

Further information is emerging about the involvement of the Wagner Group in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)⁶¹. It is to conduct coordinated operations with the Congolese armed forces near the border with Uganda. The Wagnerists are also to be present in North Kivu as part of countering the March 23 Movement (supported by Kigali) and terrorist groups [including Madina at Tauheed Wau Mujahedeen (also known as ISIS-DRC)⁶² which originates from the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) linked to the Islamic State⁶³].

The Wagner's Group is another organisation that could greatly support the Congolese army's operations. It is important to add that Russian

⁶⁰ J. Czerep, A. Legucka, *Przyszłość "imperium" Prigożyna* (Eng. The future of Prigozhin's 'empire'), PISM, 17 VII 2023, <https://www.pism.pl/publikacje/przyszlosc-imperium-prigozyna> [accessed: 16 XI 2023].

⁶¹ S. Schlindwein, *Are white mercenaries fighting in the DRC conflict?*, Deutsche Welle, 17 I 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/are-white-mercenaries-fighting-in-the-drc-conflict/a-64407711> [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

⁶² *Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Democratic Republic of the Congo*, U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2020/democratic-republic-of-the-congo/> [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

⁶³ *State Department Terrorist...*

mercenaries based in the DR Congo could benefit from the support of their permanent bases in the CAR. Congo is currently in need of arms supplies, and Russia has promised to help equip the Congolese army with new military equipment, especially armoured vehicles, tanks, helicopters and combat aircraft.

Madagascar

The Wagner Group's building of influence in Madagascar is a rather unique example, as it was involved there not militarily, but politically and economically. In mid-2018, a group of political experts from Russia arrived in the country. They provided financial support, protection and advice to those who the Kremlin thought should win the presidential elections⁶⁴. In addition to this, they organised disinformation campaigns on social media, supported protests and engaged some media outlets to create the impression that spontaneous election campaigns by politicians were taking place in Madagascar. Malagasy authorities tracked the threat and expelled those interfering in the elections from the country⁶⁵. However, a military cooperation agreement between Madagascar and the Russian Federation was signed in March 2022 and the Kremlin's influence on the island is discernible. This makes the risk of Russian mercenary involvement there still high.

Russian terrorism and counter-terrorism

The effectiveness of the Wagner Group in the fight against terrorism in Africa is highly debatable. Interventions by Russian mercenaries in Mali are not working and are leading to an increasing number of terrorist attacks. It is pointed out that the Wagnerists are not motivated to end the conflicts in which they participate, as they are driven by financial motivation. Even

⁶⁴ *Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa*, The Proekt team, 14 III 2023, <https://www.proekt.media/en/article-en/evgeny-prigozhin-africa/> [accessed: 5 XI 2023].

⁶⁵ A. Legucka, J. Czerep, *Wzrost zaangażowania Rosji w Afryce* (Eng. Increased Russian engagement in Africa), PISM, 20 XI 2019, https://pism.pl/publikacje/Wzrost_zaan_gazowania_Rosji_w_Afryce [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

when an operation ends or peace is achieved, military mercenaries are not like reservists who are only engaged when they are needed. Once an operation is over, mercenaries do not integrate and rebuild the state, but seek new employers and profit opportunities. The prolonged fight against terrorist threats is their way of earning⁶⁶.

Another important aspect is that the Russian Federation can carry out what are described as terrorist activities in Ukraine and Syria, among others. At the same time, the Wagner Group's activity in Africa, an extension of Russia's foreign policy, is maintained. The Kremlin, on the one hand, oversees private mercenary groups engaged to fight terrorism and, on the other, obliges Russian soldiers to undertake terrorist activities.

Reference should be made to the actual level of terrorist threat in countries where Russian mercenaries are present. Terrorist groups in the Sahel and the Horn of Africa are very adaptable⁶⁷. The survival of Al-Qaeda for more than 30 years, as well as the regular development of new organisations and groups (including the Islamic State and its cells) is evidence of the very high degree of resilience, proper planning and long-term strategy of these groups. The terrorists in Africa, intermingling with the rebels, are a very difficult opponent that no coalition (including those of Western countries) has been able to defeat. Most of the countries in which the Wagnerists operate are at very high risk of terrorism and its impact on state security⁶⁸.

The direction of counter-terrorism cooperation should be set by African countries, and their partners (the West in the broadest sense) should assist them in this. There is no 'one Africa', including in the dimension of counter-terrorism, because there are as many specificities as there are countries on the continent. One cannot compare the fight against terrorism in the Sahel with that in Mozambique. In countering terrorists and rebels, Russia is not in a position to provide effective support to African countries

⁶⁶ T. Mehra, M. Demuyneck, *Raising the stakes against the Wagner Group: From mercenaries to a designated terrorist group?*, ICCT, 17 I 2023, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/raising-stakes-against-wagner-group-mercenaries-designated-terrorist-group> [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

⁶⁷ J. Warner, *A View from the CT Foxhole: Idriss Mounir Lallali, Deputy Director, African Centre for the Study and Research on Terrorism (ACSRT)*, "CTC Sentinel" 2021, vol. 14, no. 5, <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-idriss-mounir-lallali-deputy-director-african-centre-for-the-study-and-research-on-terrorism-acsr/> [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

⁶⁸ *Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism*, Institute for Economics & Peace, Sydney, March 2023.

financially, militarily, technologically or, as described in the article, by delegating the Wagner Group.

Terrorism remains a huge problem in Africa. The presence on the continent of the Wagner Group, which makes good use of its imitated specialisation, i.e. counter-terrorism, to engage in a selected country, and which seeks to oppose Western countries, means that this threat will not disappear in the coming years. However, if the Wagnerists or other Russian mercenaries are perceived as incompetent or unreliable due to their lack of real impact on improving the security situation, African countries will abandon their services⁶⁹.

Ending and conclusions

The Kremlin will not give up building influence in Africa, as this would damage its growing position as a trusted partner to governments in need of support.

Currently, the Wagner Group is being absorbed by the Russian army and services⁷⁰. After Prigozhin's death, some of the Wagnerists dispersed to find employment in other mercenary groups, or set up their own businesses⁷¹. The important thing is, the group will not be disbanded – because of its position, which it has worked for several years. Some of the contracts, agreements and tasks will be transferred to other mercenary organisations influenced by the RF. Bullion mining in Africa allows, among other things, the financing of the war in Ukraine, and the Wagner Group's profits reach up to a billion dollars a year⁷².

⁶⁹ A. Kadlec, *In Africa, Wagner Is Not the Only Game in Town*, The New Lines Magazine, 17 VII 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/spotlight/in-africa-wagner-is-not-the-only-game-in-town/> [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

⁷⁰ S. Rynn, K. Cockayne, *Where Next for Wagner Group in Africa?*, RUSI, 2 VIII 2023, <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/where-next-wagner-group-africa> [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

⁷¹ *Wagner Leadership Fractures After Prigozhin Death*, ADF, 17 X 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/10/wagner-leadership-fractures-after-prigozhin-death> [accessed: 26 XI 2023].

⁷² *Politico: Wagner Group capable of gaining \$1 billion from mining projects in Africa to finance war in Ukraine*, Kyiv Independent, 20 I 2023, <https://kyivindependent.com/politico-wagner-group-capable-of-gaining-1-billion-from-mining-projects-in-africa-to-finance-war-in-ukraine> [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

Giving Wagner's forces an official, strictly Russian character may be irrelevant in places such as Mali or the CAR, where they have been invited by those in power. But it may be quite different in Libya and Sudan, where such forces can be characterised as terrorists and potentially guilty of aggression against an internationally-backed government. This is not the message Moscow wants to send⁷³. Therefore, depending on the African country, the Kremlin manoeuvres based on whether or not it has ties to the Wagnerists. This undermines the legitimacy of any cooperation with the Russian Federation and this should be emphasised when dealing with African partners. In addition, it must be emphasised that the Wagnerists have no qualms about kill journalists who are interested in their presence in African countries, especially issues of resource extraction from diamond, gold and uranium mines⁷⁴.

Emerging suggestions about the Wagner Group's involvement in contemporary Africa can be divided into two categories: (1) actual minor involvement (confirmed in several source materials) and (2) alleged involvement (negligible past presence and likelihood of future involvement). The rationale for making such suggestions is based on activities such as arms sales from Russia, political cooperation as late as the turn of the 20th century, economic exchanges, emerging offers of training from Russian troops or mercenaries. In the context of actual Wagnerists involvement, South Sudan, Guinea, Burundi and Uganda can be pointed out, with the indication that the background to the mentions of cooperation of the indicated countries with Russian mercenaries is the cooperation of these countries with Russia, which indirectly implies the entry of Russian mercenaries. In the case of an alleged presence⁷⁵, countries such as Chad, Eswatini, Guinea-Bissau, DR Congo, Cameroon, Comoros, Botswana and Zimbabwe can be identified (Figure 2)⁷⁶.

⁷³ *All quiet on the Wagner front*, Africa Confidential, 6 VI 2023, https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/14516/All_quiet_on_the_Wagner_front [accessed: 16 XII 2023].

⁷⁴ S. Ingber, *3 Russian Journalists Killed While Probing Reports Of Mercenaries In Africa*, NPR, 2 VIII 2018, <https://www.npr.org/2018/08/02/635046238/3-russian-journalists-killed-while-probing-reports-of-mercenaries-in-africa> [accessed: 15 XI 2023].

⁷⁵ In the form of, for example, visits by representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defence, the secret services or the Wagner Group instructors to countries where cooperation has developed or could develop.

⁷⁶ A. Askar, *The Increasing Presence and Role of Private Security Firms in Africa: The Russian Company "Wagner" as a Model*, EPC, 6 VI 2020, <https://epc.ae/en/details/featured/the-increasing-presence-and-role-of-private-security-firms-in-africa-the-russian-company->

When analysing the presence of Russian mercenaries in Africa, it is worth adding that one of the Kremlin's disinformation tools is to artificially create Russian power on the continent, as well as Russian inspirational activities must be kept in mind.



Figure 2. Countries in Africa where there can be little actual involvement or implied presence of the Wagner Group.

Source: own elaboration.

The Wagner Group remains Russia's force in Africa. This is nothing more than a substitute Russian military presence, carried out without

wagner-as-a-model [accessed: 29 XII 2023]; *Private military contractors bolster Russian influence in Africa*, France24, 4 II 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220204-private-military-contractors-bolster-russian-influence-in-africa> [accessed: 29 XII 2023]; *Por qué el golpe de Estado en Níger puede ayudar a expandir la influencia del Grupo Wagner y Rusia en África*, BBC News Mundo, 29 VII 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/articulos/c3gz9v41xw9o> [accessed: 29 XII 2023].

the direct, official participation of the Russian armed forces (other than instructors) by a non-state paramilitary group with close ties to the Russian establishment. Russia (as a state) has bilateral and multilateral agreements and contracts with selected African states and entities. These include multi-million dollar technological, energy, military and economic projects. The Wagnerists, on the other hand, directly cooperate in selected countries or regions in Africa and their activities are of a completely different nature. It is, for example, profiting from protection, the implementation of specific missions, training and the acquisition of investments (including major mines). Russia and the Wagner Group are complementary in their impact on a particular African country.

The Russian Federation did not and does not have the economic potential to compete in Africa with the EU and, for example, China. In recent years, however, its involvement has shown that in the long term it is becoming a strong rival in certain areas and is pushing Western countries out of them⁷⁷. This is largely happening with the Wagner Group⁷⁸. Nowadays, the level of concern about the entry of Russian mercenaries into any African country is so high that when an attack or attempted attack takes place (as in 2023 in Sudan, Niger, Gabon or Sierra Leone, among others), questions about the Russian plot are immediately raised.

In the case of the Sahel countries, where the French Republic was previously present and the Wagner Group is now active, another perspective must also be taken into account. Some of the political and military elites of these countries have been reluctant to cooperate with France (and the West more broadly) and have thus become closer to Russia. Many mistakes have been made in relations with African partners and some of the accusations of Western countries taking undue advantage of their position are correct. Thus, the entry of the Wagner Group should be an important lesson in the process of further engaging in Africa, undertaking common ventures and highlighting the benefits of the continent's countries' cooperation with EU and NATO countries.

EU countries should first and foremost focus on a number of areas that are important in countering the Wagner Group and similar formations.

⁷⁷ A. Legucka, J. Czerep, *Wzrost zaangażowania Rosji w Afryce...*

⁷⁸ M. Bartosiewicz, *Kontrolowany chaos: rosyjska polityka wobec Afryki* (Eng. Controlled chaos: Russian policy towards Africa), OSW, 23 VIII 2023, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2023-08-23/kontrolowany-chaos-rosyjska-polityka-wobec-afryki> [accessed: 8 XII 2023].

The most important role in limiting their fundraising is to impose – on a global scale - sanctions on entities (and individuals) associated with both the Russian Federation and the Wagner Group. This should be done in cooperation with African partners. There should also be constant contact not only with those African countries that want to cooperate with the West, but also with those that currently have a closer relationship with Moscow (or Russian mercenaries). Explaining and describing the pernicious influence of the Wagnerists and the Kremlin's false promises should be part of the EU's permanent narrative. At the same time, African countries need to be offered alternative cooperation with EU partners.

Another element, also important for security, is the provision of military training (mainly counter-terrorism) to combat terrorism in Africa. In the author's opinion, limiting this phenomenon in this continent will allow to reduce the terrorist threats that have already been identified in the EU⁷⁹. The last aspect is the low efficiency and effectiveness of the Wagner Group in terms of actually fighting terrorism and maintaining security in African countries. Exposing the errors of Russian doctrine in Africa – which is also dealt with in this article – should be part of the information policy of Western countries. Efforts should be made to develop cooperation with the African continent and to minimise (as much as possible) the spread of conflicts, the effects of coups and terrorist attacks on several African countries. Indirectly, this will affect the security of Europe, the Middle East and Asia. The rivalry with the Russian Federation is now global and this is worth bearing in mind.

The international activities of the Wagner Group are also relevant for Poland. This is due not only to Poland's growing involvement in Africa, but also to the Russian aggression against Ukraine and harmful actions on the EU and NATO borders. Consequently, the planned development of Poland's diplomatic, political, economic, humanitarian, missionary and also military presence will depend on the operations carried out on the African continent by Russian mercenaries. The Polish authorities are reviewing where activity needs to be increased, bearing in mind the threats to Poland's interests. Civil war broke out in Sudan and Polish diplomatic personnel were withdrawn, but at the same time an outpost was opened in Rwanda and more than a dozen large economic projects were

⁷⁹ D. Szlachter, *Walka z terroryzmem w Unii Europejskiej – nowy impuls* (Eng. The fight against terrorism in the European Union – new impulse), Toruń 2006.

implemented on the African continent. Although challenges in Eastern Europe are currently a priority for Polish diplomacy, efforts to maintain regular contacts with African countries are simultaneous. In both cases, the Wagnerists represent a threat that must be taken into account. Russian mercenaries (PMC more broadly) can be used to control selected territories, being a kind of part of the Russian army.

It must be emphasised that the Wagner Group will grow. The Russian Federation and military mercenaries are connected and cooperative entities. There are more than 20 somewhat similar, less well-known, semi-state foreign private military companies in Russia. Chechen warlord Ramzan Kadyrov created the Akhmat group, there is also the Redut organisation (very active in the CAR), and Gazprom and Roskosmos have their investments in PMC. Russia will continue its expansion, using the Wagnerists for this purpose. It will certainly attempt to interfere in more countries – those where the rulers want to ‘maintain’ their power.

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