

THE IMPACT OF WAGNER GROUP'S ACTIVITIES ON AFRICAN STATES: IMPLICATIONS FOR UKRAINE

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In recent years, the Russian Federation has been using the private military corporation Wagner, an illegal armed formation created by Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitry Utkin in 2013, to achieve its own interests in two aspects.

The first is to gain control over African regimes, and the Wagnerites become part of Russia's foreign policy aimed at making African countries dependent on it and exploiting natural resources. Second, their activities expand Moscow's zone of political influence and weaken the positions of European states and the United States in Africa. Thirdly, Russia is trying to undermine and destabilize different parts of the continent, which should distract the West's attention from containing Russia in Central and Eastern Europe.

*In general, Russia's policy in the region is formed of three key elements: **information propaganda and political, economic, and military strengthening**. PMC Wagner focuses on the military and partly economic element, but operates in close coordination with other Russian institutions.*

In our study, we have briefly characterized the presence of PMC Wagner in African states—the Central African Republic, Libya, Sudan, Chad, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Mali and Burkina Faso. For Wagner PMC, military support is not always the main reason for entering a country. More important are its mineral resources. We have already seen many examples: Libya, the Central African Republic, Sudan. A weak central government that is unable to control the entire territory of the country can help them in this. Then Wagner Group enters into alliances with local leaders whose lands contain mineral reserves. And it starts “protecting” them in exchange for mining and exports.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROBLEM

Central African Republic

The war in the country has been going on intermittently since 2012. The main confrontation is between the Muslim North (the Seleka rebel alliance) and the Christian South, which retains control of the capital Bangui and supports the central government.

The Wagner mercenaries have been present in the country since 2016, at that time under the command of Valery Zakharov. By the time the conflict in Libya broke out, the CAR had already become the main base of the Wagner PMC on the continent.

Over time, the Russians essentially took over the regime, even funding cultural events. And at the end of May 2019, a representative office of the Russian Ministry of Defense was established under the government in Bangui, and arms supplies were stepped up. In return, Wagner seized control of gold and diamond deposits.

Russian mercenaries became the main bodyguard of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. In early 2021, they saved the regime by defeating the attempts of the Coalition of Patriots for Change. Individual mercenaries are regularly killed in clashes.

The Russians frequently commit war crimes. On January 16 and 17, 2022, they killed at least 65 civilians in the villages of Aïgbado and Yanga.

Russian instructors train the government army and actively supply weapons and armored vehicles. There is evidence of the Russian elite's jewelry and currency reserves being stored in the country. The Wagner Group operatives also recruit locals for the war in Ukraine from local prisons.

Increased Russian activity in the region peaked in 2021-22. Through the Central African Republic, the military presence is being exported to Mali and Burkina Faso, where Russia has supported armed coups. Also, there may be escalations on the country's borders, particularly with Chad, where the situation has deteriorated after the death of President Idriss Déby.

Libya

Libya is the second main base of the Wagner PMC in Africa, they have been operating there since 2018-19 and took an active part in the last major offensive of the Libyan National Army (LNA), when Haftar's troops reached the southern outskirts of Tripoli. Russia's non-combat involvement dates back to 2014, during the first civil war in Libya.

The Wagner operatives openly stand by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and his eastern government, protecting him and acting as military and political advisors.

After the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, approximately 1,300 Wagner fighters were transferred to our territory from Libya.

However, this does not mean that the PMC’s operations in this North African country have decreased or stopped. Quite the contrary, they are expanding. The political, economic and security situation in Libya remains unstable. Some sources say that fighters in Libya have not been paid for 10 months.

The main activities of the Wagner PMC in Libya include combat offensive operations (until 2022), training and provision of equipment for the LNA, ensuring personal security of Khalifa Haftar, participation in negotiations, and extraction of natural resources.

In Libya, the Wagnerites are known for their crimes and involvement in oil exports and are located around oil fields and military bases controlled by Haftar and his LNA (Libyan National Army).

These include the Al-Khadim air base, the cities of Sirte and Al-Jufra in the center of the country. It is in these locations that advanced units with combat aircraft and air defense are located. As for oil, there is always a risk that “presence control” will turn into “access control” or even the destruction of infrastructure in retaliation for Western sanctions. And this would put the energy security of Europe, particularly in the South, at significant risk.

Sudan

Wagner was invited to Sudan by the previous government of Omar al-Bashir in 2017 after a meeting with Putin in Moscow. It was a logical step after the mercenaries established their position in Libya. Although Prigozhin now denies that his fighters are present in the country, this is most likely untrue.

Wagner Group, initially numbering up to 100 people, has been training the Sudanese army since 2018. But they have also been assisting General Hemedti’s Rapid Support Forces (RSF) since about 2021. According to Sudanese media, the number has grown to 500 mercenaries stationed near the border with the Central African Republic.

Similar to the way Wagner’s structures control oil in Libya, they process gold in factories in Sudan. According to media reports, the price for a truckload of unprocessed gold can reach \$4000. At the same time, they are protected by both Hemedti’s forces and Wagner operatives. The two armed groups have been working together for more than four years.

There is evidence that the head of the RSF has agreed with the Kremlin that billions of dollars from gold exports will not go to the budget, but will be exchanged for political and security support from Russia.

Since mid-April 2023, Sudan has plunged into chaos due to a conflict between two generals who had previously ruled the country together. The Wagner PMC is formally on the side of Hemedti (aka Mohamed Dagalo), but also maintains ties with the ruling Al-Burhan regime.

Unlike Libya, Wagner's direct intervention in the Sudanese conflict has so far been limited. But it cannot be ruled out that it will increase in the near future (especially given the defeats of the RSF directly on the battlefield).

The biggest challenge for Prigozhin's PMC should now be protecting the mines and factories where Sudanese gold is mined and processed; and preventing the conflict from spreading to the border with the CAR.

Chad

Chad has so far avoided direct intervention by the Wagner PMC, but the country is seen **as the next potential target** of the Russians.

The main role here is played by cooperation with rebel groups on the border between Libya, Sudan, Niger and the Central African Republic. The Russians even wanted to set up a camp for 300 Chadian rebels in the Central African region. It is known that "many young people from Chad" have departed to join the Wagner Group in the CAR.

The "Wagnerites" may be planning to overthrow the current government in Chad by "surrounding" the country with others where they are already present. The motive is clear: abundant mineral resources, and in particular oil.

Western officials are now seriously concerned that the stability of one of the main U.S. allies in Africa could be disrupted. Leaked U.S. intelligence documents show that Chad is part of the so-called "Prigozhin's "confederation of states": Eritrea, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Mali, Niger, and Sudan are also supposed to be there.

It is not yet known what specific actions the Wagner PMC will take against Chad, but they are quite possible in the near future.

Cameroon

The state has long tried to maintain general neutrality. Yet in 2021, Cameroon received Russian Sputnik V vaccines. In April 2022, Cameroon signed an agreement with Russia on military cooperation for 5 years.

France condemned this decision, and President Macron criticized such actions during his visit to the Cameroonian capital Yaoundé, drawing attention to the use of the food crisis as a weapon by Russia. However, during 2022, there is a general decrease in France's military presence in the region.

In December 2022, the Cameroonian television company Afrique Media announced the start of cooperation with Russia Today. On the channel with a French-speaking audience of millions, experts regularly support Russian policy and justify the invasion of Ukraine.

According to an investigation by The Africa Report, Cameroon, along with the neighboring Central African Republic, has become the center of Wagner Group's economic activities. In particular, we are talking about the Ndassima gold mine in the Central African Republic, gold bars from which are secretly sent to Russia through the Cameroonian port of Douala.

In particular, we are talking about the International Global Logistic (IGL) company, founded by the Central African Anur Majido, who probably works in contact with Roman and Vitaly Perfiliev in the CAR. Cheap Nigerian alcohol is also imported to the CAR through this route. Accordingly, increased activity to combat opposition groups in the CAR is being carried out along the highway from Douala to Bangui (in early April 2023, a clash between Wagnerites and fighters of the Coalition of Patriots for Change was recorded in the prefecture of Ouham-Pendé).

Nevertheless, Russian influence encountered problems at the end of 2022. President Paul Biya is intensifying contacts with the United States. This may be due to the intentions of separatists in the west of the country (in the Ambazonia region) to attract Wagner fighters to help. This is evidenced by the sources of local journalist Remy Ngonou.

The conflict in Ambazonia has been going on for years as a long-standing inter-communal confrontation based on linguistics (between French and Anglophones). The country's territory was once divided between Britain and France. The central government still controls the main cities, while the other side controls parts of the countryside, especially on the border with Nigeria.

The presence in western Cameroon (in case of support for the Ambazonia separatists) will allow the Wagnerites to influence neighboring Nigeria and Chad.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

After President Félix Tshisekedi came to power in 2019, the influence of Russia and China seemed to have diminished compared to the previous leader. Joseph Kabila, president of the DR Congo in 2001–2019, was a student of Marxist dialectics and the theory of leadership of the anti-imperialist guerrilla movement in Nanjing and, naturally, a longtime friend of China.

Over time, however, Moscow has begun to regain ground, especially since 2020, when supplies of the Russian Sputnik V vaccine began to arrive in the DR Congo.

The failure of Western assistance in the fight against insurgents in the east of the country, despite the UN stabilization mission, is prompting the country to seek contacts with Moscow and Beijing.

Top-level politicians are actively interacting with representatives of Moscow. The Speaker of the Senate (the upper house of parliament), Professor Modeste Bahati, attended the International Economic Forum, organized from June 15 to 18, 2022, in St. Petersburg. On December 19-20, a delegation of Russian deputies visited Kinshasa and met with the President of the National Assembly (the lower house of parliament), Christophe Mboso, the First Deputy President of the Senate and a representative of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Francine Furaha Muyumba. Christophe Mboso was also invited to an international parliamentary conference in Moscow in March 2023.

Media and cultural influence is equally important. In particular, we should mention the Congolese Press Agency (CPA), which in October 2021 began a partnership with the Russian press agency Sputnik. In November 2022, Kinshasa hosted the Russian Film Week. On December 13, the Russian Embassy opened an exhibition at the Free University of Kinshasa (ULK) organized on the occasion of the 350th anniversary of the birth of Peter the Great.

In June, demonstrations in support of Putin and Russia's presence in the region are organized in Goma (North Kivu Province). The demonstrations were directed against the presence of UN forces, primarily Western representatives, under slogans such as "We are against hypocritical allies, Putin will come to our aid".

In August 2022, Moscow approved agreements on the supply of modern military equipment from the Russian Federation to the DR Congo. The key person involved is DR Congo's Defense Minister Gilbert Kabanda Kurhenga.

Kabanda flew to Russia, where he met with Deputy Defense Minister Alexander Fomin on the sidelines of the 10th International Security Conference, which took place from August 15–18. Later, Minister Gilbert Kabanda confirmed that they discussed the agreement ratified in 2018 on the purchase of weapons by the DRC army from Russia to equip the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) with the necessary means to ensure the security of its national territory.

After Gilbert Kabanda's August visit to Moscow, Western diplomats working in Africa expressed concern about the possible deployment of Wagner PMC forces in the Congo. However, in October, President Félix Tshisekedi ruled out the possibility of Russian mercenaries being used to suppress the conflict. Also, the Russian Embassy in Kinshasa separately denied Western publications about the possibility of PMC Wagner's involvement.

However, in early January 2023, representatives of the M23 rebel movement stated that Wagner PMC mercenaries were already present in the eastern province of North Kivu. The country's official authorities denied the allegations.

Similar information was provided earlier, in December, by sources in neighboring Rwanda, where the Kinshasa authorities were accused of inviting mercenaries. White mercenaries with allegedly Romanian passports were spotted in the vicinity of Goma. There is evidence that the Wagner mercenaries arrived in Goma on December 22, 2022, and stayed at the Mbiza Hotel, which also housed 103 former French legionnaires who had flown in from Bucharest. The hotel is guarded by the Republican Guard, controlled by President Tshisekedi.

However, the deterioration of relations with neighboring Rwanda, which supports the rebels (to the point of violating military aircraft's airspace) and the inability of UN forces to provide adequate assistance, forces them to ask for weapons from Russia and support the deployment of mercenaries.

Russia benefits from growing instability, which encourages local elites to seek new external allies. It also creates opportunities to discredit UN peacekeeping initiatives.

The geographical location of the DR Congo directly borders the Central African Republic, where Russian military and mercenaries from the Wagner PMC are present. Influence on the DR Congo allows for the formation of a territorial strip from the Sudan to the Atlantic Ocean, which will weaken the West's position and force even neighboring states to take Russia into account, in particular during UN votes.

Mozambique

Wagner Group mercenaries were deployed to Mozambique at the invitation of the government to fight the Islamic State's Central Africa Province (IS-CAP) terrorists in the northern, gas-rich province of Cabo Delgado and protect strategic infrastructure in the mining industry.

The government had previously considered hiring companies from other countries, including the United States, but chose Wagner PMC because of the lower cost of their services. Not least, the fact that the USSR supported Frelimo (the current ruling party) in the struggle for Mozambique's independence from Portugal played a role in the decision. Also, the day before, Russia had written off 90% of Mozambique's debt.

The Wagner PMC began operations in the country in September 2019. Along with this, Russia's position in the country has strengthened—Mozambique and Russia signed an agreement on liquefied gas production, cooperation in the energy and military sectors.

In the future, the economic agreement was to be expanded to include the construction of new pipelines through South Africa.

The Wagner PMCs proved ineffective in the fight against terrorists, suffered personnel losses and ceased their activities in Mozambique. The reasons for their failure included a lack of understanding of the situation in the country, and a non-cooperation with the Mozambican armed forces.

Despite the fact that Russian mercenaries are no longer operating in the country, Russia's influence persists: Mozambique refrains from condemning Russia's actions in Ukraine, continues economic cooperation with Moscow, and even plans to expand trade.

The country's ruling political party, Frelimo, is friendly to Russia. Some of the top representatives of this political force have contacts with Russian businessmen involved in the extraction of gemstones. Accordingly, Russia's clout will grow with the extension of cooperation, while support for Ukraine will be limited.

Mali

Opportunities for the Wagner PMC in Mali arose after the coups of 2020 and 2021 and the rise to power of a military junta linked to Russia. The security operations in the region were carried out by France as part of Operation Barkhane until 2021, when it was terminated. It was curtailed due to criticism from Mali, high costs, and a number of other factors.

In December 2021, Wagner PMC began operating in Mali at the invitation of the country's leaders to combat the terrorist threat in the northern province. The invitation of mercenaries was the next step in the gradual increase in security cooperation between Mali and Russia: previously, an agreement on security and defense cooperation was signed and Russian weapons were transferred to Mali.

The Wagnerites in Mali are accused of violence and killing of civilians (over 500 people), which is being investigated by international organizations.

The involvement of the Wagner PMC in Mali carries risks of increasing Russia's influence and its potential control over illegal migration and drug trafficking routes through the Sahel region, access to uranium, diamonds and gold deposits.

This also poses risks to the security situation in Mali, as Russian mercenaries have previously demonstrated their ineffectiveness in the fight against terrorists in Mozambique. At the same time, the successful fulfillment of their tasks will lead to an increase in the number of African countries willing to hire them, which in turn will lead to an increase in Russia's role on the African continent as a whole.

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso is a country that has been steadily gravitating toward Russia since the coups that took place in 2022.

In January 2023, Burkina Faso expelled French special forces involved in anti-terrorist operations. Some suspect that Wagnerites are already operating in the country, but the Burkina Faso leadership denies this. At the same time, the country's leader, Ibrahim Traoré, calls Russia a key strategic security partner in his statements.

Burkina Faso may be attractive to Russia because of its position in the Sahel region, a region where Russia seeks to dominate, as well as its gold deposits.

Several pro-Russian information campaigns have already been implemented in the country: people with Russian flags and slogans were seen during protests (similar things happened in Mali before the Wagnerites were invited to the country). Also, a Russian company has recently received permission to develop gold deposits in Burkina Faso.

Given the continuing terrorist threat in the country and need for forces to combat it, and the constant increase in cooperation with Russia, it is likely that Wagner PMC mercenaries may appear in the country, which will have negative consequences for the security of the region and will contribute to the strengthening of Russia's leverage.

CONCLUSIONS

The general preconditions for the Wagner PMC to enter a particular country are unstable security situation and a political regime that has friendly relations with Russia or a dictatorial regime that tries to use mercenaries to crack down on the opposition, rallies, etc.

Local recruitment from countries such as Mali, Chad, and Sudan continues. The use of Libya as a forward base allows the Wagner PMC to exert pressure on Chad and Niger, which often turns into border clashes (sometimes with significant losses for the Russians). In general, this weakens the security and peace of the entire Sahel region, given the end of France's Operation Barkhane and the little desire of other parties to actively influence the situation.

North Africa and the Sahel region experience continuous social, economic, and security instability. This creates excellent conditions for the deployment of Wagner units in these countries. This is especially the case if the regime needs to retain power or support one of the parties in a civil conflict. As a result, this affects the entire region, leading to even greater fluctuations, coups, and wars.

Risks posed by the expansion of the Wagner PMC's geographical scope in Africa are the following:

- for Africa, this is a weakening of the security situation, as they are not as effective as the European or American military, resulting in increased regional instability and a refugee crisis;
- for Ukraine that means growing Russian influence in Africa, Moscow's access to mineral resources, spreading propaganda and expanding economic cooperation with the countries of the continent, which can partially block the impact of sanctions and continue to sponsor the war;
- for the world, this is the strengthening of the Russian-Chinese bloc, weakening of Washington's and Europe's positions in Africa. Also, due to the destabilization in the Sahel region, there is a threat of increased migration to Europe, diverting attention from the Russian-Ukrainian war.

Potential countries where the Wagner PMC may appear are listed below:

Madagascar is gravitating towards the Russian orbit: there are known cases of elections in 2019 when Russia tried to bribe presidential candidates and interfered in the electoral process in every possible way. South Sudan, which is also quite sympathetic to Russia, is also at risk due to the unresolved conflict within the country.

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