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Reinventing Wagner: Africa Corps arrives in the Sahel[Visit the WEBSITE](#)[Receive the E-NEWSLETTER](#)*Reinventing Wagner: Africa Corps arrives in the Sahel**Abstract:*

While the matter of the future of the Wagner Group's presence in Africa emerged following Prigozhin's attempted rebellion in June 2023 and subsequent retreat to Belarus, it became an even more pressing one after the August air tragedy. Prigozhin's death was a turning point in Russian-African relations. Wagner's leader had been Russia's point man in Africa since the group began operating on the continent in 2017. The aim is now to take control of Wagner's human resources operating in Africa and place them under the direct command of the Russian Ministry of Defence to prevent another private military company or post-Prigozhin Wagner from gaining sufficient power and autonomy to again become a threat to the Kremlin. To this end, the Africa Corps brand is being promoted, reporting directly to the Ministry of Defence and working on propaganda campaigns to try to attract Wagner's mercenaries and new candidates willing to operate on the African continent.

Key words:

Wagner, Africa Corps, Prigozhin, Russia, Sahel.

***NOTE:** The ideas contained in the **Analysis Papers** are the responsibility of their authors. They do not necessarily reflect the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defence.

Reinventando Wagner: Africa Corps llega al Sahel

Resumen:

Si tras el conato de rebelión de Prigozhin de junio de 2023 y su posterior retirada a Bielorrusia había emergido la cuestión sobre el futuro de la presencia del Grupo Wagner en África, el interrogante se hizo más apremiante tras la tragedia aérea de agosto. La muerte de Prigozhin representaba un punto de inflexión en las relaciones ruso-africanas. El líder de Wagner era el hombre clave de Rusia en África desde que el grupo comenzó a operar en el continente en 2017. El objetivo ahora es hacerse con el control de los recursos humanos de Wagner que operan en África y situarlos bajo el mando directo del Ministerio de Defensa ruso para evitar así que otra empresa militar privada o el Wagner post-Prigozhin puedan acumular el poder y la autonomía suficientes para volver a convertirse en una amenaza contra el Kremlin. Para conseguir este propósito, se está impulsando la marca Africa Corps, que, en dependencia directa del Ministerio de Defensa, trabaja en campañas de propaganda para tratar de atraer a los mercenarios de Wagner y a nuevos candidatos dispuestos a operar en el continente africano.

Palabras clave:

Wagner, Africa Corps, Prigozhin, Rusia, Sahel.

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Introduction

On 23 August, the plane carrying Wagner Group leader Evgeny Prigozhin, his number two, Utkin (said to be Wagner's co-founder), and Valery Chekalov, considered to be in charge of Prigozhin's oil, gas and minerals business in Africa and the Middle East, crashed in the Russian region of Tver.

Prigozhin's death came two months after his uprising against the Kremlin, so the accident was unsurprising. Two days earlier, on 21 August, he had made his last public appearance: a video speech broadcast on his Telegram channel. His message claimed that he was working to expand Russian influence on all continents and to make Africa "freer". Although Prigozhin's location in the video was not confirmed, most observers suggested that it was filmed in Mali¹.



Figure 1. Evgeny Prigozhin two days before his death in Mali.
Source: Reuters.

While the matter of the future of the Wagner Group's presence in Africa emerged following Prigozhin's attempted rebellion and subsequent retreat to Belarus, it became an even more pressing one after the air tragedy. Prigozhin's death was a turning point in Russian-

¹ OPE, Adetayo. "Charismatic leader is gone but Wagner will survive in Africa, analysts say". Al Jazeera, 26 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/8/26/charismatic-leader-is-gone-but-wagner-will-survive-in-africa-analysts-say>

African relations. Wagner's leader had been Russia's point man in Africa since the group began operating on the continent in 2017. He had sensed better than anyone in Moscow the strategic and lucrative opportunities that the politically fragile and resource-rich regions of Africa could offer Russia.

Following Prigozhin's uprising on 23 June, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov argued that mercenaries linked to Wagner would continue to serve as instructors in African countries where they were already present². They were also offered a contract with the Ministry of Defence from the outset.

The aim then, as now, was to manage the post-Prigozhin phase from the Russian Ministry of Defence by taking direct and orderly control of Wagner's personnel, especially those already operating in Africa. However, this objective of taking over Wagner's human resources without Prigozhin's mediation predates, and is largely the origin, of the aforementioned uprising of 23 June. In this regard, on 10 June, the Russian Ministry of Defence passed a decree requesting all volunteer units to sign contracts with the ministry. Prigozhin refused to abide by the resolution³, and the already public rivalry between Wagner's leader and Vladimir Putin-backed Minister for Defence Sergey Shoigu, the latter's rival, consequently worsened. The events that were to take Prigozhin out of the public arena and wrest all his accumulated power from him were precipitated from then on, although as events proved this was no easy task and the Wagner leader had the audacity to defy the Moscow oligarchy, including the president.

Moscow's relations with Wagner have changed over the years. Before calling the group to Ukraine, and partly because of Prigozhin's ongoing disputes with Putin-backed politicians, the Ministry of Defence relied on another private military company (PMC), called Redut. Redut failed during the early days of the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, catapulting Wagner to the forefront of the war effort⁴.

Furthermore, between the June uprising and the August plane crash, the Russia-Africa Summit was held in St Petersburg on 26-27 July. At the meeting, Putin emphasised the

² Interview given by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to RT. Moscow, 26 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.mid.ru/tv/?id=1893510&lang=es>

³ MURPHY, Matt. "Ukraine war: Russia moves to take direct control of Wagner Group". BBC News, 11 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-65871232>

⁴ CLARKE, Collin *et al.* "The Wagner Group's Expanding Global Footprint. Foreign Policy Research Institute, abril de 2023. Available at: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2023/04/the-wagner-groups-expanding-global-footprint/>

historical ties between Moscow and the continent, citing Russia's past support for anti-colonial movements and its current stance against Western neo-colonialism. However, as seemed reasonable, Putin's official speeches made no mention of Russia's presence on the continent through the Wagner Group.



Figure 2. A man removes a Wagner recruitment poster in St. Petersburg, 24 June 2023.
Source: AP / Lehtikuva.

Russian PMCs

Prigozhin and his private Wagner army had turned the PMC phenomenon into a cause for concern for the Kremlin. First, the term *private* is misleading, as companies are nothing more than a way of hiring mercenaries to operate in the interests of the Russian state. Russian PMCs have direct contractual relations with the Ministry of Defence, making

them *de facto* another army unit, only with more discretion in the field and certain organisational advantages⁵.

Despite what happened with Prigozhin and Wagner, Moscow will continue to rely on PMCs for the foreseeable future, but with a system of checks and balances between them and increased control over their actions.

Russian PMCs are very valuable because, despite their diversity, they have a common feature: their most direct benefactors are oligarchs from different social spheres, high-ranking military officers or leaders of different guilds of the Russian industrial structure. This chain of benefactors creates a pyramidal conglomerate of interests, with ultimately the Russian president as the main beneficiary⁶.

Main operational PMCs

<i>Cossacks</i> : Considered the oldest of the Russian PMCs. It has been moving from one war zone to another since 1992, when it took part in the armed conflict in Moldova.
<i>Redut</i> : Its founders were veteran paratroopers. It is made up of Russian military organisations, special forces and airborne and intelligence forces.
<i>Eagle</i> : Its members are reserve military personnel. They are engaged in protecting installations, training military personnel and protecting businessmen.
<i>Patriot</i> : Founded in 2018, its first function was the protection of senior Russian officials. It is attached to the Ministry of Defence and acts under the orders of the minister, Sergey Shoigu. It is a direct competitor of Wagner.
<i>Night Wolves</i> : Since its formation in the 1990s, this group has been a key component of the Kremlin's propaganda machine, propagating extreme nationalism. The group also has members in Eastern Europe and enjoys Putin's support in their actions, earning them the nickname Putin's Angels.

⁵ LASSILA, Jussi and ZAVADSKAYA, Margarita. "Russia after the Wagner mutiny: Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Kremlin's gamble with the monopoly on violence". Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 17 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.fiia.fi/en/publication/russia-after-the-wagner-mutiny>

⁶ GONZÁLEZ, Andrés. "Beyond the Wagner Group: Russian military companies". Lisa Institute, 28 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.lisanews.org/internacional/mas-alla-del-grupo-wagner-las-empresas-militares-privadas-rusas/>

PMC Gazprom: Financed by Gazprom. The gas company announced this group's creation in February 2023 with the aim of protecting the company's facilities.

Convoy: Founded in 2023. In March, Crimean Governor Sergey Valeryevich Aksyonov announced the creation of the group.

Source: GONZÁLEZ, Andrés. "Beyond the Wagner Group: Russian military companies". Lisa Institute, 28 June 2023. Available at: <https://www.lisanews.org/internacional/mas-alla-del-grupo-wagner-las-empresas-militares-privadas-rusas/>

Africa without Prigozhin

Prigozhin's failed uprising and subsequent death created great uncertainty about the future of Wagner's command structure, its ability to pay troops, the mercenaries' loyalty to middle and senior commanders, the organisation's cohesion and the future of the group's presence in Africa. However, Wagner's performance on most, if not all, African stages has continued⁷. Having said that, immediately after Prigozhin's death, there was speculation that Wagner mercenaries had left the group to join Redut, which operated under the control of Russia's foreign military intelligence agency and the Ministry of Defence⁸.

With the Wagner model, Russian influence in Africa has expanded rapidly. This is despite the fact that Moscow invests little in the continent. Most of Wagner's costs are covered by cash and mining concessions provided by the host regimes. In this regard, it is telling that on the day of Prigozhin's plane crash, Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov was in Libya to assure Khalifa Haftar of Russia's continued support. Yevkurov subsequently visited the military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso to convey the same message⁹.

Russia wants its African partners to be assured of its commitment to the continent, and will continue to provide that assurance, thereby seeking to demonstrate that there is no

⁷ WORLDVIEW STRATFORD. "The Wagner Group's "New Path" in Africa. 21 July 2023.

⁸ EMIR SEFKATL, Fuat. "Yevgeny Prigozhin's Death and Wagner's Future in Africa", *Politics Today*, 11 September 2023. Available at: <https://politicstoday.org/yevgeny-prigozhin-death-russia-wagner-in-africa/>

⁹ SIEGLE, Joseph. "Russia in Africa: Prigozhin's death exposes Putin's real motives on the continent", *The Conversation*. 4 September 2023. Available at: <https://theconversation.com/russia-in-africa-prigozhins-death-exposes-putins-real-motives-on-the-continent-212707>

interruption in Wagner's operations during this transitional period and that its influence in Africa will not wane¹⁰.

However, some authors believe that the scope and influence of Wagner's operations in Africa have been exaggerated. At present, the PMC only has a consolidated military presence in three countries: the Central African Republic (about 1,500 troops), Libya (about 2,700 troops) and Mali (about 1,400 troops)¹¹. There are also reports of the presence of a small contingent of Wagner mercenaries in Burkina Faso to support the transitional military government. In Sudan, Wagner has reportedly been supporting the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in their conflict with the Sudanese army by supplying weapons and military advice¹².

The Central African Republic is the only country so far where Wagner has exerted considerable political and economic influence. Its control extends to important parts of the mining economy - especially gold and diamonds - the timber industry, coffee production and brewing, among others. It also helps protect the state against rebel groups and provides, at least in part, personal security for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra¹³. In Libya, a potential energy giant on Europe's doorstep, Wagner provides military assistance to General Khalifa Haftar in his fight in the east of the country against the internationally recognised government based in Tripoli.

A Russian takeover bid for Wagner

The Prigozhin rebellion exposed structural risks in the Russian regime stemming from Wagner's autonomy and the lack of direct oversight by the Ministry of Defence. The demise of their leader means it is now unlikely that other SMEs will be allowed to become a breeding ground for disloyalty¹⁴. Now that Shoigu no longer has a rival to face, what path is he taking to further Russian influence in Africa, particularly militarily? The aim is to take control of Wagner manpower operating in Africa and place it under the direct

¹⁰ MALOBISKY, Jessica. "Prigozhin is gone, but Wagner's power in Africa is only growing", New Lines Institute, 5 October 2023. Available at: <https://newlinesinstitute.org/state-resilience-fragility/prigozhin-is-gone-but-wagners-power-in-africa-is-only-growing/>

¹¹ OXFORD ANALYTICA. "Russia will stay in Africa after Wagner mutiny". 30 June 2023.

¹² WORLDVIEW STRATFORD. *Op. cit.*

¹³ OXFORD ANALYTICA. *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ LASSILA, Jussi and ZAVADSKAYA, Margarita. *Op. cit.*

command of the Russian Defence Ministry to prevent another PMC or post-Prigozhin Wagner from gaining sufficient power and autonomy to again become a threat to the Kremlin.



Figure 3. Wagner Centre
Source: Reuters.

Against this background, it seems unlikely that Wagner will continue to operate in Africa with its current brand and organisational structure in the long term. It is vital for the state to control the group and absorb it. If Russia fails to address Wagner's activity in Africa, among the consequences could be¹⁵:

- A new uprising of the group's charismatic commanders, given the self-sufficiency and independent structure of their units, with independent operational capacity and a constant self-supply of human, material and weapons resources.
- The suspension of supplies to Russia of raw materials such as gold, diamonds, timber, gas, oil, iron, copper and precious stones, which are necessary for the self-financing of the military campaign in Ukraine.

¹⁵ GONZÁLEZ, Andrés. "What Russian military companies could replace the Wagner Group in Africa? Lisa Institute, 13 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.lisanews.org/inteligencia/what-russian-military-companies-could-replace-the-wagner-group-in-africa/>

- Possible indirect alignments or cooperative actions with the West in the fight against jihadist terrorism in the regions where they operate, thereby countering Russian influence on the continent.

To achieve this goal, Shoigou is promoting the Africa Corps brand, which reports directly to the Ministry of Defence, and is working on propaganda campaigns to try to attract Wagner's mercenaries and new candidates willing to operate on the African continent. However, the successful replacement of Wagner's African mission by Africa Corps is not an easy task, and carries with it threats that could undermine Wagner's accumulated achievements on the continent over the past few years.

The transformation of the private militia into a state actor is likely to limit its operational flexibility and tactics. Maintaining the discipline, merit-based hierarchy and mission-based reward system that Prigozhin instituted could also prove difficult. Prigozhin was known to share the spoils of Wagner's African adventures with his men, and this kind of generosity is not usually associated with the Russian Ministry of Defence¹⁶.

There is also the question of operational autonomy. Prigozhin trusted his commanders, delegating decision-making power in field operations to them, a practice the Kremlin has traditionally disapproved of. The Ministry of Defence, now wary of Wagner's independence, is unlikely to adopt Prigozhin's decentralised model, which is one of the key factors in the group's effectiveness in Africa. It also remains to be seen whether the MoD can win the loyalty of the experienced officers who have been operating in Africa with Prigozhin, without whom an important competitive advantage will be lost. Some mercenaries may decide to directly serve African leaders with whom they have established relations, as some have already done in the Central African Republic. Moreover, even if Shoigou manages to take over some or all of Wagner's African posts with Africa Corps, he still lacks the necessary cultural understanding, established relationships and field experience¹⁷.

¹⁶ PATEL, Jaynisha. "What Yevgeny Prigozhin's death means for Africa". Project Syndicate, 05 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/prigozhin-assassination-far-reaching-security-implications-africa-by-jaynisha-patel-2023-09?barrier=accesspaylog>

¹⁷ *Idem.*

From Wagner to Africa Corps

At the end of November, some Russian military-themed Telegram channels started to talk about Africa Corps, an "African corps" of the Russian Army destined to take over from Wagner¹⁸.

On 19 December, all doubts were set at rest: Africa Corps launched its own Telegram channel, making its mission clear from the outset and launching a public recruitment campaign:

"For several months now, messages have been circulating on Telegram channels about recruitment for the African Corps, a new unit of the Russian Ministry of Defence. Yes, that's us!"¹⁹.



¹⁸ RFI. "Russia": Moscou prepares a "corps militaire africain" to take Wagner's suite. 5 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20231205-russie-moscou-pr%C3%A9pare-un-corps-militaire-africain-pour-prendre-la-suite-de-wagner>

¹⁹ Africa Corps Telegram channel. Message of 19 December
[This and the following from the Africa Corps Telegram channel have been translated from Russian using <https://www.deepl.com/translator>].



Figure 4. Recruitment advertisements for Africa Corps. Source: Africa Corps Telegram account.

The following day, on 20 December, the Africa Corps Telegram channel explained its origin, nature, objective and target audience, stressing that former and current members of the Wagner Group would be prioritised for recruitment:

"The decision to create the African Corps within the Russian Ministry of Defence was taken in the summer of 2023 following the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg in July of that year, the aim of which is to expand Russia's military presence on the African continent.

Thanks to the efforts of Russian foreign diplomacy in recent years, Western influence in a number of African countries has been reduced and a window of opportunity has opened for the realisation of our geopolitical interests. The military is responsible for consolidating diplomatic successes.

Priority in recruitment is given to military personnel with combat experience, as well as to former and current employees of PMC Wagner. The corps' command staff consists of experienced combat commanders from elite units of the Russian Armed Forces and PMCs, who have extensive combat experience"²⁰.

Africa Corps describes itself as "the quintessential combat experience of the army and PMCs, under the control of competent commanders who have been through the heat of

²⁰ Africa Corps Telegram channel. Message of 20 December

a special military operation". Moreover, it stresses that "now, when Russia has become strong and is challenging the whole world, it needs professional warriors more than ever. Can't find yourself in "peaceful living"? Then come with us! Our profession is war!"²¹.

Another message stresses that this "new military structure is supervised by Russian Deputy Defence Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov, who has already made two public visits to friendly African countries. During one of them, the leaders of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger formed a politico-military Alliance of Sahel States. Russia has a total of military-technical cooperation agreements with thirty African states, and six more are in the pipeline"²².

In view of the doubts that followers of the Telegram channel have allegedly expressed regarding the relationship between Africa Corps and Wagner, it is hereby clarified that:

"Around half the staff in the African Corps at the moment are former employees of PMC Wagner. Some of the corps commanders are former PMC Wagner commanders. In the selection process, former Wagner fighters have advantages and priority. We respect their service at PMC Wagner and their combat experience. We will not wipe out their past, nor will we ban them from wearing the PMC stripes or other symbols. It will never be forbidden to mention PMC Wagner"²³.

Along with the message are photos of members of the Wagner group:



Photo 5: Members of the Wagner Group
Source: Africa Corps Telegram account.

²¹ *Idem.*

²² *Idem.*

²³ Africa Corps Telegram channel. Message of 21 December

Other messages explain what Africa Corps offers those who join²⁴:

- A contract with the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation and a high salary. It is specified that the pay will depend on the length of service and rank, mentioning that the minimum amount is 110000 roubles (1095 euros).
- If you have previously served in the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation, you will retain your rank.
- Payments are made in foreign currency while abroad.
- Medical care and all social benefits shall be provided.

The specialties of greatest interest are motorised riflemen (assault), gunners (self-propelled, towed, mortars, rockets), tankers (mechanics and gunners), mechanics, communications specialists, air defence force specialists, station operators, engineer troop specialists and unmanned aerial vehicle specialists.



Figure 6. Recruitment announcement for Africa Corps
Source: Africa Corps Telegram account.

²⁴ Africa Corps Telegram channel. Message of 20 December

Africa Corps is also looking for professionals in the following medical specialties: surgeons, traumatologists, anaesthesiologists, infectious disease specialists and surgical nurses. Women can work as nurses and anaesthetists²⁵.

On 24 January, the Telegram channel announced that "the first units of the Russian Ministry of Defence's African Corps have just arrived in Burkina Faso". The message said that it was a 100-member contingent that would provide security for the country's leader, Ibrahim Traoré, and the Burkinabe people against terrorist attacks. "These units will soon be joined by another two hundred Russian military personnel". The message includes photographs of the landing of the first soldiers:

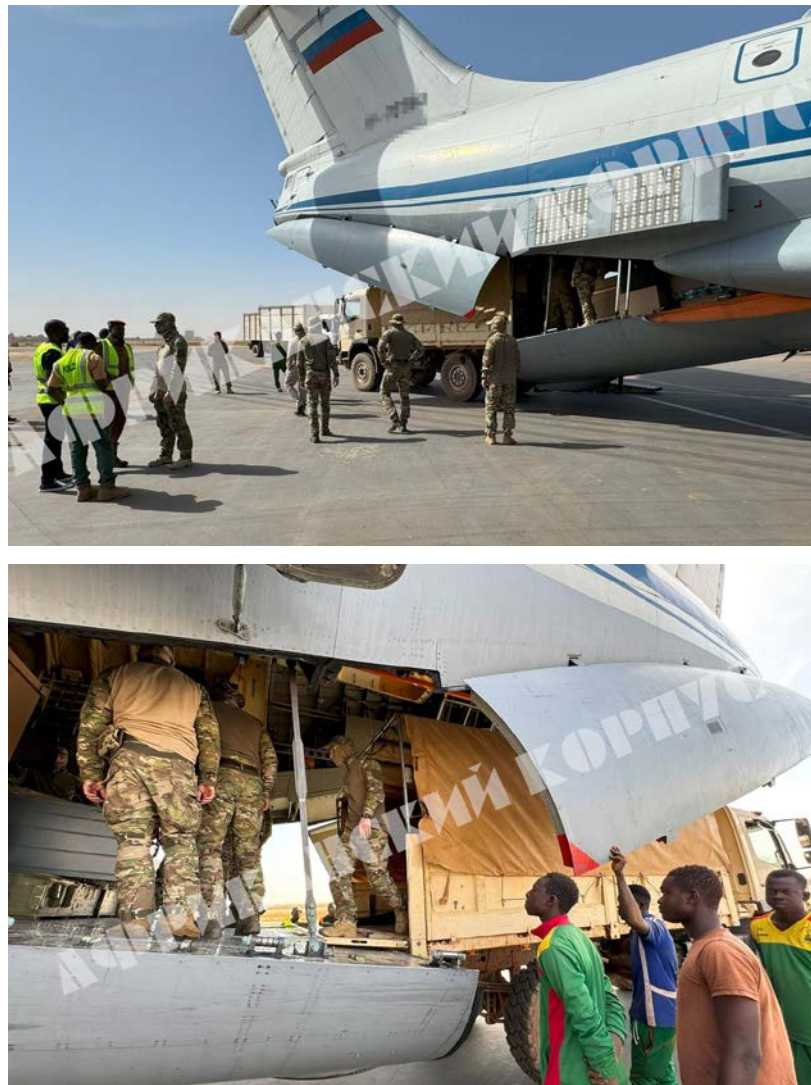


Figure 7. First Africa Corps members arrive in Burkina Faso
Source: Africa Corps Telegram account.

²⁵ Africa Corps Telegram channel. Message of 21 December

In a message on 25 January, it was claimed that after the recent disembarkation in Burkina Faso, the Kremlin would like to extend the Africa Corps presence to Niger and Mali. Furthermore, it was added that talks were taking place between the Russian and Chadian governments to land in N'Djamena²⁶.

In conclusion: Russia's future in the Sahel

The decision by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to leave the G5 Sahel and the subsequent and logical dissolution of the group by Chad and Mauritania in December 2023 have delivered severe blows to the influence and cooperation of Western countries, particularly France, in the Sahel. However, the formation by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger of the Alliance of Sahel States in September 2023, a mutual aid and military cooperation organisation welcomed by Moscow, and their subsequent exit from the Economic Community of West African States, is an important step towards consolidating Russia's pre-eminence in the region.

The question is, what may happen now to the Sahelian clients of Wagner or Africa Corps? The leaders of these regimes have come to power by extra-constitutional means and are isolated internationally. No change in receptiveness to paramilitary or military support from the military juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Sudan is therefore to be expected. Engagement with the leadership of the Central African Republic and Libya's Haftar is also expected to continue.

What remains to be seen is the reaction of other governments on the continent. Some will continue to see advantages in moving closer to Russia, although the country's reach in Africa may already have exceeded its capabilities. Moscow brings little to the continent in terms of investment, trade or job creation. Instead, its deployment of mercenaries, disinformation, political interference and arms-for-resources deals lead to entrenched instability.

²⁶ Africa Corps Telegram channel. Message of 25 December

Despite the media visibility of Russian-African ties, Russia is not a major trading partner for Africa, lagging far behind China, India, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Western European countries.

Factors driving Russian interest in Africa include access to natural resources, mitigation of its international isolation, sanctions evasion, geostrategic competition with Western powers - especially in the Sahel - and diplomatic support in international fora. None of these objectives is about making Africa more prosperous or stable.

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