

The Russian Way of “Diplomacy” – the Wagner Group In Africa

Recently, the Wagner Group has been on the lips of everyone interested in global conflicts. Its infamous brutal nature attracted international attention when Putin began engaging militants from a Kremlin-linked private army in the war in Ukraine. Its presence in Africa became visible on the outbreak of the security crisis in the Sahel, where reports of its presence were followed by accusations of crimes committed against

civilians, violence, abuses and, above all, strengthening political instability. Its successes, however, are based on the fact that it has already put down quite deep roots in many African countries, making deals with local authorities who are interested in alliances with actors alternative to Western ones. In the context of the war in Ukraine, this area is particularly important for Russia, as it allows it to offset the losses incurred by the sanctions imposed on it. Thus, Africa is becoming more and more strategically important in the changing geopolitical order, of which the West is belatedly beginning to realize.

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Private military groups, as one might conclude from the name, in theory are supposed to deal with strictly understood military activity. However, the presence of the Wagner group in Africa goes far beyond this area, expanding its activities into sectors related to propaganda (the group already has extensive experience in disinformation field - among others, it is the one behind the Internet Research Agency, known as the troll factory), mining and raw materials (mainly gold, diamonds, uranium, gas and oil, wood or the production of low quality alcohol), staff training at their own dictation and involvement in the internal and foreign policy of local authorities. In resource-rich areas - because that's what this whole game is about - where the Russians smell an opportunity in shaky political systems and security loopholes, they come up with offers of help in exchange for access to resources on preferential terms (from granting mining concessions to no entry taxes). In order to streamline the entire process, the Wagner also creates facilities in countries with

strategic infrastructure enabling the logistics of operations, such as ports through which raw materials are being transported. In other words - the activity of the Wagner Group complements the official diplomatic channels that the Kremlin runs in parallel to win the sympathy of its African allies in order to gain access to markets and influence on the continent. All its actions lead to pushing out Western companies, which is easier because of the pro-Russian and anti-Western campaigns in social media.

The African countries where the Wagner group has its influence are numerous and can be divided according to the type of these influences: political (South Africa, Equatorial Guinea, Zimbabwe, Democratic Republic of the Congo), economic (Kenya), economic and political (Cameroon, Madagascar), military and political (Libya, Mali) and military-economic-political (as in the case of CAR or Sudan). However, those states are incredibly fluid; the above-mentioned types of dependencies change, complement, and escalate or transfer. Typically, until the group's military activity begins to be seen, the rest remains off the media radar. It is worth mentioning that until 2022, the links between representatives of Russian interests and the founder of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, were informal, and the oligarch himself was not admitting responsibility for the activities of mercenaries. When talking about the activities of the Russians on the continent, the expression “Wagner-linked” groups is used, which best reflects the unclear status of the organization's internal and external links.

The specificity (and success) of this group lies in the fact that it creates networks of dependencies in which it entangles politicians, military and entrepreneurs. Contacts are being established based on contracts and transactions regarding the extraction of raw materials and their protection. This protection is very important in the case of countries where corruption is high and the income from the extraction of raw materials is much lower because both - the raw material and the profits from it - spread illegally in many directions and the government itself has limited control over them. Agreements with mercenaries are beneficial for African political elites in that they do not have to incur any costs or investments, they only need to grant appropriate consents and can pocket the profits, then leave the rest to foreign allies. At the same time, they do not have to worry that the agreements will be conditional on their respect of human rights. The protection aspect also applies to the fact that in areas under Russian control, the activities of fundamentalist militias, which usually deter foreign investment, are limited. In this context, it is convenient for all parties to leave a free hand to the Russians who keep order and, although they use methods that violate many international laws, they remain effective to some extent.

Describing Wagner modus operandi, it can also be mentioned that in order to make it easier for them to blend into local structures, they often establish contacts with local “security companies”

that are familiar with the conditions on the spot (which involves acquiring employees and contacts) and have experience in working in securing mining areas. To complement and secure their actions, the Russians act as advisors to local politicians in order to influence their decisions. Admittedly - however, they do not always show loyalty to their political allies - in many places they make deals with the rebels if it means more benefits to Russian interests. This has a significant impact on regional stability as well as meddling in electoral processes. In the periods preceding elections, in countries where the presence of mercenaries has been noticed, disinformation campaigns are conducted, which translates into results and incitement of social protests, and consequently further weakens the remnants of democratic institutions or attempts to create them. Following the footsteps of the West, Russia is also trying to build its positive image by supplying food and fertilizers to African countries. Thus, it reinforces the narrative that the negative impact of the conflict in Ukraine on African states is the fault of the West and its sanctions, completely ignoring the fact that they are a response to Russian aggression.

Where Wagner Group Operates

The first traces of Wagner activity in Africa can be found in 2017, when the Russians established cooperation (initially unofficially, and since 2018 as Sewa Security Forces) with the president of Central African Republic Faustin-Archange Touadéra to protect his government - weakened by sanctions and lack of legitimacy - from rebels who tried to seize power in the country. In the CAR, the presence of the Wagner spreads over all areas - economic, political, and military, and is usually indicated as an extensive example of Russian activity on the continent. Their main interest is focused on mining gold, diamonds, uranium, exploitation of forests or coffee cultivation, and this is possible thanks to the extensive networks of mining companies - Bois Rouge, Lobaye Invest, Midas Resources, which bind together Russian entrepreneurs, mercenaries, and local elites, who give them concessions. However, the Russians do not limit themselves to officially granted permissions or to specific goods. Carrying with them testimonies of brutal practices used ruthlessly (including torture, murder, and disappearance of people) to remove obstacles in their path, they also run smuggling and dealing with rebels, and their activities cover an increasingly wide area - such as cattle smuggling and security services for shepherds. This way they enter the social fabric more and more and make the local population more dependent. Looking at the CAR case, we could also observe political activities, such as when - linked to Prigozhin - Valery Zakharov, became president's security advisor and then another Russian - Vitali Perfilev - was put in his place. Having influence over the most important decision-makers in the country, the Russians can feel at home, which is clearly visible, for example, when they try to push the UN (MINUSCA mission) and EU presence out of the country. CAR is also a good field to observe the use of Russian soft power in practice - from interference in the media sphere with pro-Russian radio

stations and films, to the organization of popular sports events. To enable the transport of goods from CAR, the Russians established contacts in Cameroon, which has a port through which raw materials are transported. Although there are no official political and military operations conducted by the Russians in the country, Cameroon, due to its strategic importance and the beginnings of a network of contacts, remains exposed to Russia's influence and its potential further involvement.

Following the network of connections, we can then get to South Sudan, neighbor of the CAR, where the Russians cross the border as part of smuggling operations. Weapons transported through strategic points in Kenya also end up there, through the airport in Nairobi, although officially neither the government nor the Kenyan industry have established cooperation with the Wagner-linked representatives. However, the situation is different in Sudan, where the group developed its activities particularly in the area of gold mining (mainly thanks to Meroe Gold/Alsdag Mining and Esnaad Engineering, which is associated with Hemedti's family), to which it gained access by tightening relations with the country's ruling General Hamdan (mentioned before Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo 'Hemedti') and the army subordinated to him, which was trained and armed by the Russians. Interestingly, Sudan is a case of a country where the Russians have maintained - and even strengthened - relations with the authorities, although this has changed since they began their activities in the country. Similarly, to other countries, Wagner transports their military equipment, violence, and disinformation (using the aforementioned Internet Research Agency). It is worth noting that in Sudan, companies associated with the UAE also cooperate with the Russians.

In Madagascar, on the other hand, to secure access to mining licenses, the Wagner financed election campaigns before the 2018 elections by transferring money to not one candidate but many, thanks to which they were supposed to increase the chances that the elected winner would be obliged to do them a favor. This plan was successful, but due to social protests, the mining itself (coordinated by the Russian company Ferrum Mining) was limited. However, this did not prevent it from maintaining a network of political and commercial contacts that have the potential to germinate in the future.

In 2019, the Wagner presence was also visible in Mozambique, in the province of Cabo Delgado, where the fundamentalist group Al-Sunna wa Jama'a (ASWJ) started an armed uprising, but after only 2 months there were internal disagreements with the army and mercenaries withdrew from the conflict. However, this does not change the fact that in the same year Russia signed energy and security agreements with the government of Mozambique. Traces of Wagner activity were noticed in Eritrea as well, which openly supports Russia, and in neighboring Ethiopia, the Russians

reached out to Abiy Ahmed Ali as an ally when his government became involved in the crimes committed during the Tigray conflict and began to be less welcomed in the international political community.

Another country under the influence of Wagner is the politically destabilized Libya, where the militants have been engaged militarily since 2019, although after the events of February 2022 many of them were transferred to the Ukrainian battlefields. Strategically, this is a very important place for Russia, due to the rich sources of key energy resources. By filling the security loopholes opened after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in 2011, Russia - which supports General Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the Libyan National Army - managed to gain access to key Libyan fields (including El Sharara oil fields) and important ports (Es Sider, Zuetina) in the west of the country. In the context of the energy crisis that is currently affecting Europe, this is a big blow, because it limits access to energy sources alternative to Russian and makes it more difficult to become independent, so the costs of sanctions on the western side increase. In addition to access to raw materials, Libya is also important due to its location - Libyan bases (such as Khadim) allow Russia to move personnel and arms to Mali and potentially to other countries in the Sahel.

This brings us to the most recent and loudest crisis in African security, which is the Sahel, where Russia was invited under the pretext of fighting terrorism. The story there begins with Mali, which has been destabilized since 2012 when a Tuareg rebellion broke out there attracting armed fundamentalists. As part of the attempts to maintain order and influence, France stepped in as part of Operation Barkhane, which ended (not very gloriously) in November 2022, leaving a security void behind. Even before this happened, the presence of the Russians in the country, torn by anti-Western sentiments and military coups (in 2020 and 2021 respectively), was much felt. The official rhetoric still uses the term "instructors" that help the government deal with extremists, but there are many testimonies of direct involvement in the fighting and crimes of the mercenaries themselves helping the Malian army. Mali is a special case in that the government officially prefers to pay the Wagner for security and instructor services rather than grant them concessions out of fear of making a key sector of the economy dependent on outside influences. However, this situation may change due to high costs and exhausting measures. In the neighboring country, Burkina Faso, also rich in military coups (recent in January and September 2022), the presence of the Wagner is more alleged than confirmed, although neighboring Ghana has already raised concerns about the activities of mercenaries in the area of mining. Due to the fact that France - both in the form of the armed forces (operation Sabre) and the ambassador himself - was recently (January 2023) asked to leave Burkina Faso, as well as previously Mali, it is suspected that only a matter of time before the Russians take advantage of this situation.

Considering that about 40% of the country is out of the control of the government, it can be assumed that the country leaders will want to reach for external help.

Chad is also in the crosshairs. The country is currently ruled by the general Mahamat Déby Itno, who has no social legitimacy but is supported by France, and who took power in the country after the death of his father. According to information from U.S. Intelligence, Russian mercenaries support rebels planning an attack on the current Chadian authorities. One can feel the perversity of fate here if we consider that the strong base of the Wagner Group in the CAR is currently used to support the overthrow of Chadian rule. In 2013, the president of the CAR, François Bozizé, was overthrown with the help of France, which he offended by blocking the possibility of uranium mining. It was then that Chad, considered by France as a regional ally, served France as a help throughout the operation.

Feeding on Institutional Weakness

Wagner appears where corrupt elites need protection for themselves, their profits and their power. We are talking about places that, while being mineral rich, also have weak institutions. These are also the places where, in the post-colonial history, Western metropolises were unable to prevent the formation of political dysfunctions, and even often contributed to their development by maintaining neo-colonial relations leading to the weakening of the autonomy of young democracies. In these areas, we can note huge corruption, nepotism, non-democratic takeover of power, strong military position, high unemployment (mainly among young people who, deprived of prospects, become susceptible to the ideas of fundamentalism or susceptible to proposals for cooperation from the Russians) - just to name a few. These are phenomena that enable mercenaries to blend in with their surroundings and reap the benefits. At the same time, their actions reinforce all these practices, expanding the gray zone. This symbiosis makes it very difficult to get rid of mercenaries and their nets. Without doubt, it will require action that goes beyond military struggle. First of all, the will of Africans themselves must appear on two levels - society and political elites. It can be assumed that the first one will precede the second, because it is ordinary people who will feel the brutal violence, not the corrupt elites who build their fortunes on contacts with Wagner.

The world public has already realized that many losses follow the actions of mercenaries. However, there is still little talk about the effects in the long run - the contacts of regional elites with the Wagner deepens the distance between the political leaders and citizens, in fact constituting a protective wall of power (very often gained in an undemocratic or quasi-democratic way) from their own citizens. For the West, the moment when Africans will discover that their Russian friends are not friends at all should not be a moment of "I told you so" quiet satisfaction,

because for Africans it will be a moment of another disappointment, which leads to frustration, feeling used and disadvantaged. In this way, a vicious circle of radicalization and distrust of any authority is reproduced, which can lead to disastrous consequences. Experience has shown many times that when it comes to post-colonial African countries, stability is not given once and for all, and sometimes little is needed to trigger dormant resentment and the collapse of the security structure. Even if countries seem to be relatively stable, these are often appearances that cover systemic weaknesses that need time and wise leaders not to turn into another failed state. Looking ahead, policy makers should keep all scenarios in mind. Even in the best of them - i.e. a significant weakening of Russia or its complete military collapse - threats lurk. It should not be forgotten that even a possible desired withdrawal of the Russians from Africa will leave problems that its presence only exacerbates. If they are not addressed, the continent will be in constant danger and vulnerable to the influence of actors like Wagner.

Sanctions - and What's Next?

In late January, the Wagner Group was designated by the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) as an international criminal organization. This is probably the basis for starting the process of holding the appropriate people accountable and, above all, a warning for the countries cooperating with Wagner, but the real effectiveness is still questionable. So far, despite reports of heavy Russian losses in Ukraine, including among the mercenaries fighting there, there is no indication that Russian influence in Africa is weakening. On the contrary, even if the Russians are forced to partially withdraw fighters, the presence of civilian personnel, such as engineers who work on developing new ways of obtaining and processing raw materials, continues to increase and strengthen. The networks of contacts with local entrepreneurs, politicians and “security companies” also seem to be getting closer.

Considering that the Libyan government in Tripoli is trying to hold elections, it should be assumed that Wagner, despite withdrawing some fighters to Ukraine, will try to influence their course and outcome. Although the group in Libya is perceived as an external actor and does not enjoy much support among local tribes, its strong ties to the Haftar government and evident interests reinforce the bilateral threat - Russia's influence on deepening internal destabilization and the influence of destabilization on Russia's strengthening. Also, in Madagascar in 2023, elections are to be held, which - given the history - may provide an opportunity to strengthen Wagner. As I wrote earlier, Burkina Faso and Chad should also be kept in mind.

So what can and should be done to offset losses and limit Russia's influence? One of the activities is documentation of criminal activity, which will make it possible to hold the right people accountable. However, the crimes committed by the mercenaries are so far poorly documented

because their activities are mostly hidden from public view (access to the mining sites is strictly guarded), and only a few journalists risk their lives to report on them. In addition, in order to limit the enrichment of Russia at the expense of African countries, Western countries should increase their efforts to monitor financial flows on the global market and try to exert influence on countries that participate in the process at various stages. Among them are the Gulf countries, where financial operations are carried out that allow Russia to monetize the profits from extraction.

Apart from such - after all, more technical solutions - one should look at this phenomenon more broadly, in the context of reevaluation on the international political scene. The Americans seem to be aware of the seriousness of the situation because they have recently increased their presence in Africa, sending high-ranking diplomats and politicians to the continent. It also seems that their efforts (including financial aid) are met with a better reception than those of France, whose assurances of a new partnership approach are not taken seriously by African politicians and public opinion. However, neither of them currently have a narrative advantage over Russia. In Africa, the prevailing view is that the pressure from the West to completely cut off from Russia's influence is an expression of the neo-colonial imposition of its own interests and treating it as a space to wage proxy wars, the consequences of which will affect only Africa, while the ringleaders will not be held accountable. There are also voices that if it wasn't about Russia, but about another state allied with the West, the topic would be passed over in silence. It should be admitted at this point that neither private armies nor economic and diplomatic networks of influence on local politics are a new or only Russian specialty, which Africans are more aware of than Western public opinion. Awareness of this is important when we want to fight one of the strongest weapons that Russia uses - storytelling. In places such as Mozambique, for example, where Western investment has led to political instability and harm to many, another involvement of external actors does not shock anyone.

Narration, the Achilles heel of many Western countries, is, however, a great asset of Poland itself, which not only does not have a colonial past (although, to be fair, it also had such ambitions at the time), it can play the card of a community of understanding of countries that suffered the harm caused by the interventions of foreign states. And this is what Poland does, which was clearly heard during the 5th UN Conference on Least Developed Countries (LDC5) in Qatar at the beginning of March this year, when President Andrzej Duda spoke about the threats posed by Russia not only to Europe, but also to Africa, trying to indicate the actual causes of the food crisis besetting the continent. In all its misfortune, the current situation is therefore an opportunity to develop Polish-African relations. However, before we undertake them, we should carefully analyze the mistakes made by other transatlantic states in order to learn from them.

Conclusions

1. Wagner's activities complement the Kremlin's official diplomatic channels. It is based on economic relations - formal and informal, political advisory and military activity, from the supply of weapons and equipment to direct involvement in combat, which, however, is usually presented as only the help of "instructors".

2. Russia, using stagnant resentment, managed to win a lot of public sympathy in African countries with the use of its soft power. This is not only because of media agencies spreading pro-Russian propaganda and supporting anti-Western protests, but also broadly understood activities for the benefit of the African population, such as sports events financed by Russian mining companies.

3. The goal of Wagner-linked groups is primarily to gain access to African resources, which strengthens the Russian economy, weakened by sanctions, and limits the West's access to energy resources alternative to Russian. The more sanctions against Russia, the more likely it will intensify its activities on the African continent.

4. Wagnerians cooperate both with official (although often devoid of democratic legitimacy) governments and with rebels, depending on who is better able to guarantee the security of their interests.

5. The Russians have adopted the method of managing strategic areas for gaining profits from raw materials and political influence, surrounded by the chaos of political destabilization. It acts as a smoke and mirrors, thanks to which their activities are less noticeable. On the one hand, in the areas where they operate, they try to maintain order with a strong and brutal hand that allows their operations, on the other hand, completely defeating the rebels or extremists is not in the interest of the mercenaries, because it depreciates the reasons for their involvement. Political and military stability and strong institutions are not their allies, as they specialize in activities ranging from quasi-legal to illegal.

6. The reason why the Russians are supposedly helping the governments in the Sahel militarily, i.e., the fight against terrorism, is still valid, because the presence of the extremists persists. Ultimately, with the defeat of the terrorists, the reasons for the presence of mercenaries will weaken, so their ineffectiveness strengthens their bargaining chip in talks with governments fearing a threat to their power.

7. Mercenaries fuel social conflicts, usually working in favor of local governments lacking social legitimacy. When, during the decolonization period, a large part of the African communities that fought for independence was removed from power in favor of leaders supported by former metropolises, one of the foundations of democracy - trust in authority and the feeling that it

represents the interests of the people, was negated. Wagner's current activity, reinforcing corrupt practices and widening the gap between the elites (whether political or military) and civilians, is one of the greatest threats as it leads to the collapse of the legitimacy of already shaky systems.

8. In the emerging new global security architecture, in order to counteract the activities of Wagner and groups like it, one should reach for systemic sources of political destabilization and solutions that, although they have a chance to bring results only in the long run (and each of the actors would like to reap profits as soon as possible) are the best a chance to defeat, which would otherwise return with every military-political upheaval.

9. Just imposing sanctions on mercenaries will not change much if it is not accompanied by other actions. Holding the group itself accountable can be difficult, not only because Wagner creates networks of complex connections that make it difficult to track, but also because at the heart of solving problems lies the need to listen to the problems that Africans themselves communicate.

10. The international community is beginning to realize Africa's strategic importance in a changing world, but Africans are opposing being treated as a subject in the next cold war. In this perspective, there is an opportunity for countries such as Poland, which do not have a colonial past, to establish closer relations and offer assistance not based on a paternalistic and imperial approach.

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