

# Russian Private Military Contractors in Sub-Saharan Africa

## Strengths, Limitations and Implications



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# ***Russie.Nei.Visions***

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# Summary

Since 2014, Russia has notably intensified its policies in Africa, joining the race for local markets and opportunities presented by the rapidly growing and transforming continent. In pursuit of its geo-economic/political objectives in Africa, Russia relies on military-technical cooperation and “security export” mechanisms as its main competitive advantages. Aside from legal tools, such as arms/weaponry deals, training and consulting, the Russian side also relies on illegal tools that include private military companies, entities that are *de jure* prohibited in Russia, and have been (since 2014) involved in conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and Libya. This paper argues that, despite their image of strength and efficiency gained in Ukraine and partly in Syria, their use will have limited strategic effect in sub-Saharan Africa and is unlikely to yield sustainable long-term benefits for Russia.

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# Introduction

The Russia-Africa Summit, the first in history, held on 23-24 October 2019 in Sochi was meant to signify Russia's comeback to Africa after years of oblivion that followed the dissolution of the USSR.<sup>1</sup> After 2014, and the crisis with the West, Africa—which used to play a very important role in Soviet foreign policy—started to regain elements of its former importance for Russian foreign policy. In its African policy, Moscow highlights adherence to the principles of justice, international law, commitment to human rights, and respect for the sovereignty of African nations, which, in the Russian narrative, contrasts with the “utilitarian stance” of the West (seeking resources and pursuing a “sphere-of-influence” approach).<sup>2</sup> This paper argues that, in pursuit of its geo-economic and political objectives in sub-Saharan Africa,<sup>3</sup> Russia will use a combination of legitimate and illegitimate facets of military-technical cooperation (*voenno-tekhnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo*)—one of very few advantages that Moscow can rely on in Africa. This approach, however, has multiple flaws and cannot be equated to a strategy, as will be argued through three selected cases: the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan and Mozambique. The paper seeks to find answers to four main questions. What are Russian strategic interests in sub-Saharan Africa, and by what means are those interests pursued? What are Russian private military companies (PMCs) and what is their purpose? What is the correlation between Russian interests in Africa and the use of PMCs? What have been the results of using PMCs in Africa so far?

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1. “Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum”, Roscongress Foundation, accessed 1 May 2020, [www.summitafrica.ru](http://www.summitafrica.ru).

2. “Vladimir Putin: Rossiia gotova k konkurentsii za sotrudnichestvo s Afrikoj” [Vladimir Putin: Russia is ready to compete for cooperation with Africa], TASS, 20 October 2019, [www.tass.ru](http://www.tass.ru).

3. Countries from North Africa are excluded from the ambit of this research. Sudan—classified as a part of Northern Africa—will be considered a part of sub-Saharan Africa due to its historical-civilizational background.

# Strategic Interests Without a Strategy: Russia in sub-Saharan Africa

Unlike other great powers, the Russian empire never seriously considered colonial expansion in Africa. The Soviets also initially allocated a marginal role to Africa. Change came with Nikita Khrushchev (1958-1964) and Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982), when Soviet policy in Africa reached its zenith. The Soviet leadership perceived decolonization, accompanied by violence, as a perfect chance to export Soviet ideology.<sup>4</sup> Justifying its involvement in Africa by principles of internationalism and solidarity, the USSR allocated enormous resources, reflected in:<sup>5</sup>

- *Military-technical cooperation* (arms/weaponry delivery; training; (re)organizing local armed forces)
- *Direct economic support* (loans and credit; delivery of food and strategic commodities; assistance in large infrastructural projects)
- *Indirect economic assistance* (training of African civilian experts/specialists<sup>6</sup>)

Consequently, the USSR managed to dramatically increase its military presence in the Indian and Atlantic oceans, and established military bases in Guinea, Angola, Somali, and Ethiopia,<sup>7</sup> which, however, came at an enormous economic cost and unclear economic benefits. Following the collapse of the USSR, Africa *de facto* faded from Russia's foreign policy

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4. S. Sukhankin, "Russia's Hired Guns in Africa", European Council on Foreign Relations, 12 November 2018, [www.ecfr.eu](http://www.ecfr.eu).

5. S. Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa", The Jamestown Foundation, 10 January 2020, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

6. Prior to 1991, approximately 60,000 Africans were educated in the USSR, whereas more than 240,000 experts were trained in Africa: A. Baklanov, "RF-Afrika: slozhenie potentsialov usilit vliianie v mire" [RF-Africa: addition of potentials will increase influence in the world], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 16 June 2019, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

7. Given opaqueness and an extremely high level of secrecy, exact information about the Soviet military presence in Africa during the Cold War is still classified. Based on some estimates, it could be argued that, in Angola alone between 1975 and 1994, the total number of Soviet/Russian military personnel may have reached up to 11,000. For more information, see: S. Kolomnin, "Russkij spetsnaz v Afrike" [Russian spetsnaz in Africa], *Soiuz Veteranov Angoly*, accessed 1 June 2020, [www.veteranangola.ru](http://www.veteranangola.ru).

orbit.<sup>8</sup> This trend started to slowly change in 2006, after Putin's visit to the Republic of South Africa (RSA), which was premised on a combination of geo-economic and geo-political (BRICS) calculations; yet very few concrete steps ensued. Arguably, this would have continued had it not been for the Ukrainian crisis. After 2014, Russia took steps to break the isolation imposed by Western countries, including intensification of contacts with African nations. Despite some visible progress achieved since then, Russia's capabilities on the continent are constrained by a number of factors, including Russian economic unattractiveness and a very low level of trade balance—it is by no means clear how this might be changed<sup>9</sup>—with sub-Saharan countries.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, Russia's soft power on the continent is very limited: according to Afrobarometer, the US (30 percent) and China (24 percent) are regarded by Africans as the most desirable political models.<sup>11</sup> Russia's fundamental error is a continuing reference to the Soviet role in decolonization and liberation of African nations, which, among other aspects, include spreading anti-Western—and specifically, anti-French—narratives.<sup>12</sup>

This message, though to some extent damaging to France, is not attuned to the rapidly changing sociocultural, political and ethno-religious landscape in Africa, and therefore not exactly beneficial for Russia.<sup>13</sup> Thus, activation of Soviet-style rhetoric<sup>14</sup> could not dramatically increase Russia's regional soft power. Another serious history-rooted mistake is a tradition of personification of foreign policy. The flawed nature of this approach was evident both during Soviet times (Gamal Abdel Nasser, Hafez al-Assad and other examples) and, after 1991, including Jacob Zuma, Muammar Gaddafi, and Omar al-Bashir (to be discussed later in the paper). Importantly, despite the seemingly huge control wielded by the Soviets in Africa during the Cold War, the results turned out to be disappointing. The

8. A. Baklanov, "Rossiia-Afrika: srednesrochnij plan dejstvii" [Russia-Africa: medium-term action plan], *Russia in Global Affairs*, 10 August 2018, [www.globalaffairs.ru](http://www.globalaffairs.ru).

9. P. Stronski, "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 October 2019, [www.carnegieendowment.org](http://www.carnegieendowment.org).

10. "Rossiia-Africa: raskryvaia potentsial sotrudnichestva" [Russia-Africa: uncovering the potential of cooperation], Roscongress Foundation, 23 October 2019, [www.roscongress.org](http://www.roscongress.org).

11. S. Paduano, "Putin Lost His African Great Game before He Started", *Foreign Policy*, 31 October 2019, [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com).

12. K. Limonier, "The Dissemination of Russian-Sourced News in Africa: A Preliminary General Map", IRSEM, 29 January 2019.

13. I. Loshkarev, "Politika Rossii v meniaushchejsia Afrike: v poiskakh strategii" [Russia's Policy in a Dynamic Africa: Searching for a Strategy], Russian International Affairs Council, 9 October 2019, [www.russiancouncil.ru](http://www.russiancouncil.ru).

14. S. Sukhankin, "The Russia-Africa Summit: Soviet Mistakes and Fresh Challenges", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 149, The Jamestown Foundation, 28 October 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).



Soviet example vividly demonstrated that the lack of a progressive strategy—not the desire to promote ideology and challenge other actors—is a dead end. In this juncture, it would be fair to assume that Russia’s comeback to Africa, particularly stressed after 2014, should be viewed as a reactive move, rather than a comprehensive forward-looking strategy.

# Russia's Competitive Advantages in Africa

The pessimistic picture outlined in the previous section needs to be balanced by facts showing that Russia's policies in Africa, despite limitations, are yielding some positive results. Despite the exclusion of Africa from key documents and doctrines, Russia has formulated its main geopolitical/economic objectives on the continent.<sup>15</sup> Here, the role of two figures should be highlighted: that of Russian presidential envoy for the Middle East and Africa and Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov,<sup>16</sup> who visited the continent over 50 times between 2014 and 2019, officially representing the Russian side and its interests; and that of Yevgeny Prigozhin<sup>17</sup> (personally close to President Putin<sup>18</sup>), a Russian businessman from St Petersburg and an alleged sponsor of the Wagner Group PMC,<sup>19</sup> representing the “shadow side” of Russia's African policy. While the positive and negative sides of this approach will be discussed later, it is also important to underscore some of Russia's strengths and competitive advantages in Africa. Arguably, the most important achievement of the Russian side, so far, has been the ability to avoid the main Soviet blunder: wasting huge economic means for illusory goals. The lack of economic resources and clear rejection of pursuing the role of first fiddle have enabled Russia to employ the principle of “asymmetry” (*assimetrichnost*),

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15. O. Kulkova, “Povorot Rossii k Afrike: kakovy perspektivy?” [Russia's turn to Africa: what are the prospects?], Valdai Club, 5 March 2018, [www.ru.valdaiclub.com](http://www.ru.valdaiclub.com).

16. Among other missions, Bogdanov played an instrumental role in preparing the Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum (October 2019). For example, see: O. Adeniyi, “Russia-Africa: Who Are The Master Forces Behind The Sochi Summit?”, *Naija News*, 13 August 2019, [www.naijanews.com](http://www.naijanews.com).

17. It is essential to underscore Prigozhin's role in the generation and spreading of anti-Western disinformation through the so-called “Troll Factory” and similar disinformation outlets. Particularly important is the involvement of Prigozhin-related agents (so-called political technologists) in Africa, where these agents were (unsuccessfully) used to influence elections in some countries (including Madagascar). For more, see: I. Rozhdestvensky, R. Badanin, “Master and Chef. How Evgeny Prigozhin Led the Russian Offensive in Africa”, *Proekt*, 14 March 2019, [www.proekt.media](http://www.proekt.media).

18. Even though it is difficult to ascertain the exact degree of connectivity between the two, many reputable sources have argued that these links exist. See: “Evgeny Prigozhin's Right to Be Forgotten: What Does Vladimir Putin's Favorite Chef Want to Hide From the Internet?”, *Meduza*, 13 June 2016, [www.meduza.io](http://www.meduza.io).

19. “Peskov Podtverdil Prisutstvie Vagnera Na Prieme V Kremle” [Peskov confirmed the presence of Wagner at a Kremlin reception], *Fontanka.ru*, 15 December 2016, [www.m.fontanka.ru](http://www.m.fontanka.ru).

keeping a low profile, and sometimes acting as a spoiler, being perfectly aware of the fact that for some Western countries—France in particular<sup>20</sup>—parts of sub-Saharan Africa remain a matter of great national security-related concern, and not a marginal aspect of foreign policy.

This said, the main competitive advantage that Russia can use in Africa is military-technical cooperation and the “security export” (*eksport bezopasnosti*) mechanism. As noted in one Russian study, “[Co]operation in the realm of security is one [of the] historically strongest elements of collaboration between Russia and African countries”.<sup>21</sup> Between 2014 and 2019, Russia signed 19 agreements with African countries in the realm of military-technical cooperation.<sup>22</sup> Of particular concern to the West are military-technical agreements concluded by Russia with Angola, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, on, among other things, “leveraging or seeking to leverage military aid in return for mining rights and energy partnerships”.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the African demand for weaponry will be growing due to security-related factors (terrorism and insurgencies) and regional tensions that increase local conflict potential. Another crucial factor concerns the Russia-postulated “security export” concept—an idea first voiced in the early 2018<sup>24</sup> and now acquiring instrumental meaning in Russia’s foreign policy thinking. As noted by a prominent conservative thinker, Sergey Karaganov, “[O]ne of the fundamental ideas of our [Russia’s] foreign policy is the fact that Russia is the main provider of international security both for the world and for itself”.<sup>25</sup>

Gained in North Caucasus and profoundly fortified in Syria, Russia’s international image of a power capable of dealing with terrorism is very strong. This quality is particularly appreciated in Africa, where many countries are suffering from terrorism spread by at least 43 known mid-to-large terrorist groups. According to the Global Terrorism Database, between 2007 and 2017 the number of terrorist attacks in Africa rose from

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20. S. Sukhankin, “France to Lead Joint Effort in War on Terrorism in Sahel Region”, The Jamestown Foundation, 15 May 2020, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

21. “‘Russia-Africa’ Analytical Materials”, International forum “Development of parliamentarism”, [www.duma.gov.ru](http://www.duma.gov.ru).

22. A. Ross, “Factbox: Russian Military Cooperation Deals with African Countries”, *Reuters*, 17 October 2018, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

23. N. Turse, “U.S. Generals Worry about Rising Russian and Chinese Influence in Africa, Documents Show”, *The Intercept*, 13 August 2019, [theintercept.com](http://theintercept.com).

24. A. Sushchentsov, “‘Mezhdunarodnye ugrozy—2018’. Ezhegodnyj prognoz analiticheskogo agentstva ‘Vneshniaia politika’” [“International Threats—2018”. the Annual Forecast of the Analytical Agency “Foreign Policy”], Valdai Club, 12 January 2018, [www.ru.valdaiclub.com](http://www.ru.valdaiclub.com).

25. S. Karaganov, “Novoi Missiei Rossii mozhets stat’ zashchita vsego mira” [The protection of the whole world may become a new mission of Russia], *Russia in Global Affairs*, 15 October 2019, [www.globalaffairs.ru](http://www.globalaffairs.ru).

114 to 2051 (with a sixfold increase in the number of lethal casualties).<sup>26</sup> Given Russia's image and the general unpreparedness of African armies to effectively deal with guerilla-type irregular forces, Russia's services might indeed be in demand. Aside from already known examples, Russia is trying to exploit the threat of terrorism in G5 Sahel (Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger) to increase its involvement in this resource-rich and geopolitically/strategically pivotal yet highly unstable region. Indeed, between 2017 and 2019, several African countries—among them Nigeria, Africa's largest economy (GDP \$376.3 billion)<sup>27</sup>—have expressed profound interest in using Russia's military-consultancy services to train domestic armed forces to fight terrorist groups and insurgents.<sup>28</sup> In Africa, Russia will rely on a collaborative pattern tested in Syria (*"concessions—for protection"*),<sup>29</sup> which will secure (currently its economic gains on the continent are comparatively meagre) Russia's economic and geopolitical interests in exchange for certain security-related services rendered by both legal advisors and illegal military contractors.

## ***"A black cat in the dark room":<sup>30</sup>*** **What are Russian PMCs?**

Russia has had a long history of using non-state actors in pursuit of its economic and political goals. In the pre-1917 period, these forces primarily consisted of Cossacks and non-Russian peoples who served in various capacities, ranging from border protection to anti-riot missions and personal protection of the Russian monarch; whereas, during the Cold War, so-called "military instructors" (military on active duty) became an integral part of Soviet military-technical cooperation with developing (and independence-seeking) countries. After 1991, the Russian state unsuccessfully employed poorly organized mercenary forces.<sup>31</sup> The history of private military companies (PMCs) in post-1991 Russia has been very complex and opaque: the formation of these entities has never been

26. S. Feldstein, "Do Terrorist Trends in Africa Justify the U.S. Military's Expansion?", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 9 February 2018, [www.carnegie.ru](http://www.carnegie.ru).

27. Top 20 Largest Economies in Africa 2020, <https://naijaquest.com>.

28. T. Balmforth, "Nigeria Looks to Sign Military Cooperation Deal with Russia This Month", Reuters, 11 October 2019, [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com).

29. S. Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in the Syrian Civil War: From Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and Beyond", The Jamestown Foundation, 18 December 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

30. This phrase is taken from: "Shojgu: soobshcheniia o spetsnaze iz RF na Ukraine—paranoia" [Shoygu: reports of special forces from the Russian Federation in Ukraine—paranoia], *BBC News*, 17 April 2014, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

31. To study the history of the phenomenon, see: S. Sukhankin, "The Russian State's Use of Irregular Forces and Private Military Groups: From Ivan the Terrible to the Soviet Period", The Jamestown Foundation, 12 April 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

legalized, and they have neither a single point of departure, nor an organization/agency to which their roots can be traced. Rather, their emergence and development should be attributed to a combination of contributing, frequently interrelated factors and events. First, the regional conflicts on the debris of the USSR (South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Transnistria, Tajikistan, Chechnya) and the Balkans (Bosnia)<sup>32</sup> created a pool of war-hardened (nationalist) fighters, some of whom would later appear in other conflicts, including the Ukrainian Southeast (2014).<sup>33</sup> Second, after 1990 the criminalization of Russian society was reflected in the emergence of “private armies” serving the interests of the nascent oligarchy.<sup>34</sup> Some of those ties led to Viktor Zolotov (the current director of the National Guard of Russia and a member of the Security Council) and former mayor of St Petersburg Anatoly Sobchak; and, indirectly, to Vladimir Putin (at the time First Deputy Chairman of the Government of St Petersburg).<sup>35</sup> Third, the privatization of security was accompanied by the emergence and mushrooming of quasi-private security companies (PSCs)—including Antiterror-Orel, Antiterror, Redut-Antiterror—organized by and composed of highly qualified military professionals. One of these entities, Moran Security Group, stood behind the Slavonic Corps Limited PMC (2013), which in turn is considered to be a predecessor of the Wagner Group.<sup>36</sup> Fourth, in the Arab Spring and patterns of confrontation observed in Syria and Libya, according to Russian experts, “foreign instructors” and PMCs played an important role in challenging incumbent political regimes.<sup>37</sup>

Even though the idea of creating PMCs under the umbrella of the Russian armed forces was first expressed at a serious level in 2010, the actual birthplace was post-2014 Ukraine (Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts),

32. S. Sukhankin, “From ‘Volunteers’ to Quasi-PMCs: Retracing the Footprints of Russian Irregulars in the Yugoslav Wars and Post-Soviet Conflicts”, The Jamestown Foundation, 25 June 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

33. I. Strelkov, “Kontrudar” [Counterattack], *Zavtra*, 6 January 1998, [www.zavtra.ru](http://www.zavtra.ru).

34. “U ohrannikov ‘Mosta’ otobrali oruzhye” [The weapons were taken away from guards of the “Most”], *TLT.ru*, 19 May 2000, [www.tlt.ru](http://www.tlt.ru); I. Nadezhdin, “Sam sebe terrorist: za chto pojmal podruchnogo Berezovskogo” [Terrorist for himself: why was Berezovsky’s assistant caught], *Lenta.ru*, 17 January 2018, [www.lenta.ru](http://www.lenta.ru); “Kratkaia istoriia chastnoj okhrany RF” [A brief history of private security of the Russian Federation], *NAST*, 2 June 2012, [www.nastrussia.ru](http://www.nastrussia.ru).

35. C. Gurin, “Roman Tsepov, R.I.P.”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 1, No. 93, The Jamestown Foundation, 27 September 2004, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

36. D. Korotkov, “Brodiaga, Sedoj, Wagner i Ratibor okruzhyli prezidenta” [Brodiaga, Sedov, Wagner and Ratibor surrounded the president], *Fontanka.ru*, 21 August 2017, [www.fontanka.ru](http://www.fontanka.ru).

37. V. Gerasimov, “Po opytu Sirii: Gibridnaia vojna trebuuet vysokotekhnologichnogo oruzhiia i nauchnogo obosnovaniia” [According to experience in Syria: hybrid war requires high-tech weaponry and scientific reasoning], *Voenno-Promyshlennij Kur’ier*, No. 9, 2016, [www.vpk-news.ru](http://www.vpk-news.ru).

where the Wagner Group (started with approximately 250 men, it has swollen to, reportedly, more than 2,500 militants<sup>38</sup>) played an important role in violent clashes (the Battle of Luhansk Airport; the Il-76 shoot-down; the Battle of Debaltsevo) with the Ukrainian army, and performed some auxiliary missions.<sup>39</sup> By 2015, having demonstrated their potential, many of the Russian private military contractors (although figures vary, the most realistic number was close to 1,200 fighters) were sent to Syria to fight against Bashar al-Assad's opponents, at the same time closely collaborating with the Russian regular army (the Special Operations Forces and the VKS {Russian Aerospace Forces}) as well as the pro-Iranian Shia militia.<sup>40</sup>

The post-2015 chapter of the Wagner Group history demonstrated several important aspects. While effective in (para)military operations against relatively weak and poorly trained opponents, they turned out to be next to useless confronting technologically superior actors. This was vividly demonstrated during the battle near Deir ez-Zor (2018)<sup>41</sup> and, later, in the outskirts of Tripoli (2019). Despite setbacks, Russian PMCs did showcase some advantages, with “plausible deniability”<sup>42</sup> becoming the main one: employment of non-state actors has enabled the Russian state to avoid responsibility for military failures or involvement in regional conflicts beyond Russian state borders. This benefit is secured by the fact that, as stated earlier, Russia *de jure* does not have PMCs. Despite heated debates on the subject, these entities were never legalized. As a result, while connection of the Wagner Group to the Russian state has been proven and its existence openly admitted by Vladimir Putin,<sup>43</sup> it is very hard (if at all feasible) to directly link their actions to the Russian government or state agencies. At the same time, unlike their Western counterparts (mainly

38. “SBU ustanovila lichnosti vovavshykh v Donbasse chlenov ChVKa Wagnera” [The SSU has ascertained the names of Wagner PMC members who fought in Donbass], *Radio Svoboda*, 7 October 2017, [www.svoboda.org](http://www.svoboda.org).

39. S. Sukhankin, “Unleashing the PMCs and Irregulars in Ukraine: Crimea and Donbas”, The Jamestown Foundation, 3 September 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

40. S. Sukhankin, “‘A Black Cat in the Dark Room’: Russian Quasi-Private Military and Security Companies (PMSCs)—‘Non-existent’, but Deadly and Useful”, *Canadian Military Journal*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Autumn 2019, pp. 43–53.

41. During the battle, a part of the Wagner Group (acting together with a patchwork of pro-Assad forces) was destroyed by the US-led airstrike, which claimed the lives of at least 35 Russian mercenaries (although different sources provide varying estimates).

42. “Plausible deniability” is usually understood as the ability of people to deny knowledge of or responsibility for any condemnable actions committed by others because of a lack of evidence that can confirm their participation, even if they were personally involved in or at least willfully ignorant of the actions. In this regard, by employing PMCs, the Russian side retains its ability to participate in regional conflicts, at the same time avoiding any legal responsibility for its actions.

43. “‘Oni mogut prodavlivat’ svoj biznes-interesy v liuboj tochke planety.’ Putin—o ChVKa ‘Wagner’” [They can push their interests in any place of the world. Putin about the Wagner PMC], *Meduza*, 20 December 2018, [www.meduza.io](http://www.meduza.io).

engaged in training and consultancy), Russian PMCs are directly used in military operations as shockwave troops, thus assuming some of the tasks typically performed by regular armed forces, and avoiding the kind of embarrassment that arose with the Afghan and the first Chechen wars.<sup>44</sup> Based on various evidence, Russian PMCs are connected to the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD). This was additionally corroborated after 2018, in Russia's covert involvement in the Libyan civil war on the side of the renegade military commander Khalifa Haftar, within the scope of the Operation Flood of Dignity (الكرامة طوفان عملية) against the internationally recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) based in Tripoli, where the Wagner group has been used as a tool to promote Russia's interests and as leverage against other parties.<sup>45</sup>

Aside from in Ukraine, Syria and Libya,<sup>46</sup> the Wagner Group has appeared in countries of Sub-Saharan Africa as a "shadow facet" of the military-technical cooperation between Russia and local states.

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44. S. Sukhankin, "War, Business and Ideology: How Russian Private Military Contractors Pursue Moscow's Interests", The Jamestown Foundation, 20 March 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

45. For more, see: Webinar—"The Battle for Libya: Russia's and Turkey's Interventions, Haftar's Retreat, and the Prospects for Peace", The Jamestown Foundation, 11 June 2020, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

46. S. Sukhankin, "Mercenaries in the Desert: The Kremlin's Libya Game", *Fair Observer*, 16 October 2019, [www.fairobserver.com](http://www.fairobserver.com).

## Selected Cases: the CAR, Sudan, Mozambique

The history of Russian military advisors in Africa dates back to the 1950s,<sup>47</sup> culminating in the 1960s-1980s with Angola becoming the focal point of the Soviet struggle for influence on the continent.<sup>48</sup> At the end of the 1980s, Soviet military instructors deployed in Libya took part in the so-called “border war”, a series of conflicts waged by Gaddafi against his neighbors.<sup>49</sup> After 1991, many of them remained in the country (due to lucrative economic conditions) and became private military contractors. In the 1990s to the late 2000s, Russian military contractors in Africa operated in an uncoordinated and decentralized way, which culminated in the infamous “Myre Seadiver affair” (2012), when a Russian vessel was arrested in Nigeria on charges of arms smuggling.<sup>50</sup> This episode strikingly demonstrated that—as perceptively noted by Boris Chikin (one of the founders of the Moran Security Group, an opaque security company that primarily deals with naval security)—the success of Russian contractors in Africa was doomed to fail without the support of the state.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, after 2014, the role of the Russian state in managing private military contractors in Africa became much more pronounced. To understand the intermediary results of this of this approach, three cases will be analyzed.

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47. “Sergej Eledinov: ‘Nashy voennye nakhodiatsia v Afrike s 1950-h godov’” [Sergey Yeledinov: “Our military has been in Africa since the 1950s”], *Novye Izvestiia*, 11 January 2019, [www.newizv.ru](http://www.newizv.ru).

48. S. Kolomnin, “Russkij spetsnaz v Afrike” [Russian spetsnaz in Africa], *Soiuz Veteranov Angoly*, accessed 1 May 2020, [www.veteranangola.ru](http://www.veteranangola.ru).

49. “Border wars” were a series of conflicts between Libya and its neighbors, including Chad, Niger and Egypt, that took place in the 1970s-1980s.

50. D. Korotkov, “Zalozhniki Nigerii zhdut komandos ot presidenta” [Nigeria’s hostages are waiting for commandos from president], *Fontanka.ru*, 25 February 2013, [www.fontanka.ru](http://www.fontanka.ru).

51. S. Sukhankin, “The ‘Hybrid’ Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs and Irregulars in Moscow’s Scramble for Africa”, The Jamestown Foundation, 10 January 2020, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).



## The Central African Republic (CAR)

Before 2017, the Central African Republic (CAR)—one of the world's poorest and politically most unstable countries<sup>52</sup>—did not play an essential role in the Soviet or Russian outlook. Since 2012, the country has been experiencing an active phase of intense civil war, with an ethno-religious dimension. Among policymakers, the country is frequently viewed as a near failed state.<sup>53</sup> This, however, did not discourage Russia from forging cooperation with President Faustin-Archange Touadéra (elected in 2016). During the St Petersburg Economic Forum (June 2017), Putin met Touadéra and discussed boosting bilateral ties, including military cooperation.<sup>54</sup> This theme was continued during Touadéra's visit to Sochi (October 2017), when he asked the Russians for support in lifting and softening an international embargo on weaponry deals with the CAR.<sup>55</sup> Thanks to Russian advocacy, in December 2017 the UN Security Council allowed Russia (Resolution 2127) to send arms and military instructors to the CAR, which arrived in the country in late January 2018. According to the Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department, Artyom Kozhin, "Russia decided to provide Bangui with free military-technical assistance" and at the same time started "exploring the possibilities of the mutually beneficial development of Central African natural resources". As part of this agreement, five military and 170 civilian instructors were sent to train local military personnel.<sup>56</sup> Russia's military presence in the CAR was profoundly boosted after Valery Zakharov (a former Russian intelligence official, who later started working for Prigozhin<sup>57</sup>) officially became Touadéra's advisor on national security and head of the Russian military instructors. An intermediary peak of political cooperation between Moscow and Bangui was reached in January 2019, when the Minister of

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52. "Central African Republic", United Nations Development Programme, accessed 4 May 2020, [www.hdr.undp.org](http://www.hdr.undp.org).

53. N. Haque, "Central African Republic: A crisis forgotten by everyone, except Russia", *Aljazeera*, 14 November 2018, [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

54. "Meeting with President of Central African Republic Faustin Archange Touadéra", President of Russia, 23 May 2018, [www.en.kremlin.ru](http://www.en.kremlin.ru).

55. E. Krutikov, "Rossijskij desant vysadilsia v tsentre Afriki" [Russian forces landed in the center of Africa], *Vzgliad*, 27 April 2018, [www.vz.ru](http://www.vz.ru).

56. "Otvet zamestitelia direktora Departamenta informatsii i pechati MID Rossii A. A. Kozhyna na vopros SMI o razvitii sotrudnichestva mezhdru Rossijskoj Federatsiej i Tsentralnoafrikanskoj Respublikoj" [Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department Artyom Kozhin's answer to a media question on cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Central African Republic], The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 22 March 2018.

57. "U nochii net glaz" [The night has no eyes], *Fontanka.ru*, accessed 4 May 2020, [www.fontanka.ru](http://www.fontanka.ru).

National Defense Marie-Noëlle Koyara accepted the possibility of a Russian military base being established in the country.<sup>58</sup>

This *de jure* transparent cooperation has been tainted by dark spots, revealing the double-deck nature of these relationships. A debate on the presence of Russian mercenaries in the CAR was sparked after Lobaye Invest Ltd—part of the St Petersburg-based M-Invest Group, closely associated with the Prigozhin Evro Polis company—received concessions for gold extraction near Ndassima, an area controlled by Muslim rebels, known as Séléka.<sup>59</sup> Upon their eviction from Bangui (2014), Séléka members “regrouped in the north” and continued the struggle.<sup>60</sup>

Also, investigative journalists traced (in May 2018) a number of armored Ural-375 trucks entering the country (from Sudan), reportedly carrying members of the Wagner Group.<sup>61</sup> To investigate those facts or rumors, three Russian journalists, Orhan Dzhemal, Alexander Rastorguyev and Kirill Radchenko, travelled to the CAR, but were murdered near the town of Sibut on 31 July 2018 (about 200km northeast of Bangui). Coupled with other deadly “incidents” (and imprisonments) of Russian investigative journalists and experts working on the subject, this tragic occurrence was perceived not as a mere “incident” but as premeditated murder.<sup>62</sup> Another interesting detail was spotted by the Conflict Intelligence Team (CIT) investigative platform: during a TV show (which was meant to prove the absence of the Wagner Group) anchored by Russia’s chief propagandist Dmitry Kiselyov, the camera caught sight of a document circulated among Russian military advisors in the CAR that bore the watermarks of the medals given to members of the Wagner Group in Syria.<sup>63</sup> The official Russian side, however, denied the involvement of its private military contractors in the CAR. Indeed, proving the presence and exact nature of

58. “V TsAR ne iskluchili razmeshcheniia rossijskoj bazy” [In the Central African Republic the creation of a military Russian base was not excluded], *RIA Novosti*, 10 January, 2019, [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru).

59. A. Baev & M. Maglov, “Kontrakt ot prezidenta: chto poluchila v TsAR kompaniia, kotoruiu sviazyvaiut s Prigozhynym” [Contract from the president: what the company associated with Prigozhin received in the Central African Republic], *The Bell*, 31 August 2018, [www.thebell.io](http://www.thebell.io).

60. E. Mellgard, “What Is the Seleka? The Tony Blair Institute for Global Change”, 29 January 2015, <https://institute.global>.

61. K. Kasymbekov, “NV: Sledy kyrgyzstantsa sredi rossijskikh naiomnikov v Afrike” [NV: Traces of a Kyrgyz citizen among Russian mercenaries in Africa], *Radio Azattyk*, 27 February 2019, [www.rus.azattyk.org](http://www.rus.azattyk.org).

62. I. Martynenko, “Tsentr ‘Dos’e’: k ubijstvu zhurnalistov v TsAR prichastna ChVKa ‘povara Putina’” [Center “Dossier”: the PMC of ‘Putin’s cook’ is involved in the murder of journalists in the Central African Republic], *Radio Svoboda*, 10 January 2019, [www.svoboda.org](http://www.svoboda.org).

63. “V siuzhete ‘Vestey nedeli’ o tom, chto v TsAR net bojtsov ChVKa Wagnera, zametili ikh nagradu” [In the “Vesti nedeli” story about the absence of fighters from PMC Wagner, zametili ikh nagradu] [In the “Vesti nedeli” story about the absence of fighters from PMC Wagner in the Central African Republic, their award was noticed], *Rambler*, 1 October 2019, [www.news.rambler.ru](http://www.news.rambler.ru).

the activities of Russian mercenaries (as distinguished from official military instructors) in the CAR has become an extremely difficult task, for three main reasons. First, unlike in Syria and Ukraine, they are not involved in military operations, which profoundly decreases the chance of combat fatalities. Second, full cooperation between Russia and the local authorities creates an atmosphere of secrecy and informational opaqueness, which is very difficult to breach. Third, the UN resolution provided the legitimacy needed for Russian military personnel (mixed with private military contractors) to be in the country in the first place.

Russia's involvement in the CAR, frequently looked at through the lens of geo-economics, might, in fact, be driven by other calculations. A deeper insight into the local mining industry shows that the extent of local gold and diamond deposits may have been overrated. More likely, Russia's penetration in the country is a façade for actions of much greater scope and outreach. Given its location, the CAR could be viewed as a bridge to other, economically more attractive parts of Africa.<sup>64</sup> This idea was corroborated by one senior United Nations security official, who said: "[T]he Russians want to implant themselves in the Central African Republic so they have an axis of influence through Sudan in the north and southwards into Angola".<sup>65</sup> Thus, Russia's choice of the CAR may have been motivated by geopolitical objectives, including that of challenging France, which in the Russian view is losing its grip in Africa.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, diverging French and Russian approaches on the matter deserve attention. While French Minister of the Armed Forces Florence Parly has positively assessed Russia's efforts (although other prominent French politicians, including Jean-Yves Le Drian, assumed a less positive stance),<sup>67</sup> Russian conservative experts, including Duma Defense committee member Viacheslav Tetekin, have argued that "Russia has *de facto* excluded France from the Central African game [...] Now it is Russia and China that are playing first fiddle".<sup>68</sup> The case of the CAR has also demonstrated that PMCs will be used by the Russians as an element of a "security export"

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64. S. Sukhankin, "The Kremlin's Game in the CAR: What Does the Façade Conceal?", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 7, The Jamestown Foundation, 23 January 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

65. J. Losh & O. Mathews, "Battle for Africa': Russia Pushes Into 'Free Country for the Taking' in Attempt to Rival the West", *Newsweek*, 9 August 2018, [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com).

66. V. Goncharov, "Frantsiia i Afrika: vchera i segodnia" [France and Africa: yesterday and today], *The International Affairs Magazine*, 30 September 2019, [www.interaffairs.ru](http://www.interaffairs.ru).

67. "Centrafrique: Parly évoque 'la contribution positive' de Moscou" [Central African Republic: Parly talks about Moscow's "positive contribution"], *Le Figaro*, 11 December 2018, [www.lefigaro.fr](http://www.lefigaro.fr).

68. V. Tetekin, "TSARskata Okhota: Afrika zhdet Rossiia s voennimi bazami" [A CRA hunt: Africa is waiting for Russia with military bases], *Voenna-Promyshlennyy Kur'er*, 16 January 2019, [www.vpk-news.ru](http://www.vpk-news.ru).

mechanism in sub-Saharan African countries, particularly those facing a terrorist and extremist threat and plagued by instability.

## The Republic of the Sudan (Sudan)

During the Cold War, the USSR was an important stakeholder in Sudan, having taken part (primarily through arms and weaponry delivery) in both the First (1955-1972)<sup>69</sup> and part of the Second (1983-2005) Sudanese civil wars. Yet, after 1991, official contacts between Russia and Sudan were kept at a low profile, although this did not hinder the development of “unofficial” ties. In 2007-2008, multiple reports accused Russia of violating the UN arms embargo on Darfur.<sup>70</sup> Russia was also accused of providing with mercenaries<sup>71</sup> the government of Omar al-Bashir, which was internationally ostracized for harboring Islamic radicals (including Osama bin Laden) and violating human rights. Sudan’s leaning close to Russia was motivated by the strong desire of its political leadership to break the international isolation. The first official step in this direction was made in 2008, when Sudan took a pro-Kremlin stance in the Russo-Georgian conflict; then, in 2014, Sudan voted at the UN in favor of Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Relations between Sudan and Russia stepped onto a qualitatively new level in 2017, when, during his visit to Russia (November 23-25) Al-Bashir met with Putin, Dmitry Medvedev and Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu.<sup>72</sup> In the process, the Sudanese leader invited Russia to build a naval base on Sudanese territory, reiterating the offer in 2018. Despite Sudan’s strategic geographic location—aside from access to the Red Sea, the country borders Libya and Egypt (where Moscow has been trying to boost its stance and project power) as well as the CAR—the Russian political leadership reacted cautiously (*de facto* turning the offer down), since this would have resulted in large expenditures without clear benefits, and in a potential conflict of interest with China (which acquired enormous influence in the local oil

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69. Over the course of the conflict, the USSR, primarily using Egypt as a proxy, delivered to the country arms and weaponry worth approximately \$150 million. For more information, see: “Sudan—First Civil War”, *Global Security*, accessed 3 June 2020, [www.globalsecurity.org](http://www.globalsecurity.org).

70. For more information, see: “China, Russia Deny Weapons Breach”, *BBC News*, 8 May 2007, [www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk).

71. J. Dunnigan, “Russian Mercenaries Over Africa”, *Strategy Page*, 21 June 2008, [www.strategypage.com](http://www.strategypage.com); W. Ali, “Radio Station Says Russian Pilot Killed in Sudan During Rebel Assault”, *Sudan Tribune*, 28 May 2008, [www.sudantribune.com](http://www.sudantribune.com).

72. “Putin i Shoygu obsudili s al-Bashyrom sozdanie voennoj bazy v Sudane” [Putin and Shojgu discussed the creation of a military base in Sudan with al-Bashir], *Vesti*, 25 November 2017, [www.vesti.ru](http://www.vesti.ru).

industry)<sup>73</sup>, Turkey and other actors. Instead, economic ties were activated first. During al-Bashir's stay in Russia, among other documents, a concessional agreement between the already mentioned Prigozhin-related M-Invest Group and the Ministry of Mineral Resources of Sudan was signed.<sup>74</sup>

Following the reported inception of the exploration works in Sudan, multiple Russian<sup>75</sup> and Western sources claimed that Russian private military contractors with fighting experience in Ukraine and Syria had reportedly poured into the country to protect Russian business interests. Incidentally, the first person to state this, in late 2017, was former Minister of Defense of the Donetsk People's Republic Igor Strelkov/Girkin.<sup>76</sup> Later, the BBC, referring to the head of the Russian RSB Group PMC (which worked in Libya and parts of Africa) Oleg Krinitsin, reported that members of one Russian PMC (allegedly, the Wagner Group) were indeed present in Sudan.<sup>77</sup> Similar information came from the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU), which stated that (by 2018) approximately 300 members of the Wagner Group had been involved in activities in Sudan, where they were training local armed forces.<sup>78</sup> Yet, some reputable Western sources, including *The Times*, claimed that these functions were not their only "responsibilities"; it was argued that the mercenaries had taken part in violent suppression of anti-regime uprisings (caused by terrible living conditions) that started at the end of 2018.<sup>79</sup> Subsequently, the SBU managed to ascertain the names of 149 members of the Wagner PMC that had participated in alleged suppressing of public protests. The report stated that all necessary documents for the mercenaries—also including citizens of Belarus, Moldova, Crimea and the self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics—had been prepared in Moscow under the roof

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73. J. Hammond, "Sudan: China's Original Foothold in Africa", *The Diplomat*, 14 June 2017, [www.thediplomat.com](http://www.thediplomat.com).

74. "Vstrecha Dmitriia Medvedeva s Prezidentom Sudana Omarom Bashyrom" [Dmitry Medvedev's meeting with the President of Sudan Omar Bashir], The Government of the Russian Federation, 24 November 2017, [www.government.ru](http://www.government.ru).

75. A. Iakoreva, "Zoloto v obmen na naemnikov: kak 'povar Putina' dobyvaet dlia Rossii 'kliuch ot Afriki'" [Gold in exchange for mercenaries: how "Putin's cook" extracts "the key to Africa" for Russia], *The Bell*, 4 June 2018, [www.thebell.io](http://www.thebell.io).

76. I. Strelkov, "Sleduiushchaia ostanovka—Sudan" [The next stop is Sudan], *Khronika 'Russkoj vesny'*, 27 November 2017, [www.istrelkov.ru](http://www.istrelkov.ru).

77. "Posle Sirii rossijskie ChVKa gotovy vysaditsia v Sudane" [Russian PMCs are ready to land in Sudan after Syria], *BBC News*, 4 December 2017, [www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com).

78. "Holova SBU Vasyl Hrytsak: pidrozdily rossijskoj vijskovoij rozvidky rozganiaiut demokratychnyj protesty v Sudani" [SBU chairman Vasyl Hrytsak: Russian military intelligence units disperse democratic protests in Sudan], Security Service of Ukraine, 25 January 2019, [www.ssu.gov.ua](http://www.ssu.gov.ua).

79. J. Flanagan, "Russian Mercenaries Help Put Down Sudan Protests", *The Times*, 10 January 2019, [www.thetimes.co.uk](http://www.thetimes.co.uk).

of the Federal Migration Service.<sup>80</sup> Given the state of political relations between Russia and Ukraine, this information should not be accepted as true, as a last resort. Yet, the fact of the presence of Russian paramilitary personnel in Sudan is beyond any doubt; this was officially confirmed (though initially vehemently denied) by Russian officials, including Director of the Information and Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Maria Zakharova<sup>81</sup> and Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov.<sup>82</sup> Local Sudanese sources provided images of reported Wagner mercenaries in the country, stating that the mercenaries were located in Khartoum and were training the special operations forces of the National Intelligence and Security Services (NISS).<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, from a geostrategic and political point of view, Sudan can be viewed as an attractive destination for Russia, for bolstering its position in the country by using mercenaries and furthering military-technical cooperation. Yet, the local political landscape was transformed after a coup by the Sudanese military on 11 April 2019 that toppled al-Bashir. At the time of writing (June 2020) no further information about the presence or prospects of the Wagner members in Sudan has emerged. Moreover, it remains unclear how relationships between Sudan and Russia will develop: in the final analysis much depends on who will assume power. If undemocratic tendencies prevail—which would meet the interests of the main stakeholders, including Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, China, Turkey and Russia (although these players do not necessarily share a common outlook on Sudan’s future in each and every aspect)—Moscow is likely to remain an active player in the country.

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80. “Vasyl Hrytsak: dokumenty najmantsiv ‘PVK Wagera’ pidtverdzhuiut’—tse taemnij zagin GU GSh ZS RF” [Wagner PMC is secret detachment of Russia’s General Staff of Armed Forces—confirmed by mercenaries’ ID papers, says SBU Head Vasyl Hrytsak], Security Service of Ukraine, 28 January 2019, [www.ssu.gov.ua](http://www.ssu.gov.ua).

81. “V MID podtverdili rabotu rossijskikh chastnykh okhrannykh firm v Sudane” [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed that Russian private security companies are working in Sudan], *RIA Novosti*, 23 January 2019, [www.ria.ru](http://www.ria.ru).

82. Peskov: rossijskie instruktory rabotaiut v Sudane ‘znachitelnoe vremia’ [Peskov: Russian instructors are working in Sudan during “significant time”], *Mediazona*, 28 January 2019, [www.zona.media](http://www.zona.media).

83. “Russian Military Firm Working With Sudan Security Service: Sources”, *Sudan Tribune*, 8 January 2019, [www.sudantribune.com](http://www.sudantribune.com).



## The Republic of Mozambique

Arguably, among the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, Mozambique has had the strongest ties (aside from Angola) with the USSR and Russia<sup>84</sup>. Following the period of withdrawal after 1991, Moscow seems to have found inroads to this country only in 2015, when an agreement on technical-military cooperation was signed.<sup>85</sup> The next essential milestone was reached on 21 August 2019 when the re-elected President Filipe Jacinto Nyusi paid an official visit to Moscow, urging Russian businesses to make the most out of opportunities offered by the country. Intensified cooperation between the two countries (primarily initiated by Mozambique) is premised on two interrelated pillars. The first is the sense of dissatisfaction felt by local political and business elites over purportedly “unfair” energy deals concluded with Western energy corporations. To diversify the developers of hydrocarbons—or, rather, to alarm Western companies—Mozambique (via the Empresa Nacional de Hidrocarbonetos) signed an agreement with Rosneft (22 August 2019) on partnership and cooperation.<sup>86</sup> The second pillar is the inability of the local armed forces to effectively deal with terrorism and Islamic radicals in the northern province of Cabo Delgado, which is handsomely endowed with deposits of natural gas.<sup>87</sup> To effectively deal with the issue of insurgency, the Mozambique leadership seems to have chosen Russia because of its reputation in counter-terrorist operations, and the affordability of its services. The issue of Russian military advisors was first raised by Mozambican Defense Minister Atanasio M’tumuke in 2017 (the year when the Islamic rebellion erupted in Cabo Delgado) during his visit to Moscow,<sup>88</sup> while the first concrete step in this direction was made on 4 April 2019 when an agreement simplifying the visits of Russian military vessels to Mozambique ports was concluded.

Following the energy and military agreements, information about Russian private military contractors sent to Mozambique started to

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84. For more information on the subject, see: T. Coloma, “La stratégie économico-sécuritaire russe au Mozambique” [Russia’s economic-security strategy on Mozambique], *Notes de l’Ifri*, Ifri, mai 2020, [www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org).

85. S. Sukhankin, “Russia Prepares a Foothold in Mozambique: Risks and Opportunities”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 142, The Jamestown Foundation, 15 October 2019, [jamestown.org](http://jamestown.org).

86. “Rosneft’, INP i ENH rasshyriaiut sotrudnichestvo v Mozambike” [Rosneft, INP and ENH are expanding cooperation in Mozambique], *Rosneft*, 22 August 2019, [www.rosneft.ru](http://www.rosneft.ru).

87. C. Weiss, “Islamic State claims first attack in Mozambique”, *FDD’s Long War Journal*, 4 June 2019, [www.longwarjournal.org](http://www.longwarjournal.org).

88. “Mozambik zaiavil o zhelanii priniat’ u sebia rossijskikh voennykh sovetnikov” [Mozambique has expressed a willingness to host Russian military advisers], *Nation News*, 4 April 2018, [www.nation-news.ru](http://www.nation-news.ru).

emerge. The first person to divulge the information was a well-known Portuguese military journalist, Nuno Felix. On 8 September 2019, he announced that a group of Russian military personnel had landed at Nacala Airport.<sup>89</sup> Another Portuguese journalist, José Milhazes, went even further, claiming that Russia's ultimate aim in Mozambique was "to create a mobile G.U. [military intelligence] base and a permanent naval military base".<sup>90</sup> This information was (partly) corroborated by other Western sources<sup>91</sup> and tacitly acknowledged in Russia, although Russian officials denied any military presence in this country. Leading Russian media hailed the reported arrival of Russian contractors to Mozambique for two main reasons: on the one hand, as a sign of Russia's comeback to Africa; on the other, because in this endeavor Russia managed to beat other foreign bidders. Yet, as warned by some foreign experts specializing in counter-insurgency operations and PMCs in Africa—including Dolf Dorfling (the founder of the Black Hawk PMC) and John Gartner (head of the OAM PMC)—the path of Russian contractors in Mozambique was not going to be an easy one.<sup>92</sup> The main reason for pessimism was premised on the lack of knowledge of local customs, traditions and environment—instrumental elements when it comes to military operations on unfamiliar terrain—as well as the fact that anti-insurgency campaigns in Mozambique are very different from other theaters due to the landscape and tactics used by local rebels.

Indeed, those predictions turned out to be correct: Russian contractors encountered serious difficulties from the start. Specifically, *Carta de Moçambique* reported losses suffered by the Wagner Group (five killed);<sup>93</sup> later, the deaths of two more Russian mercenaries in yet another engagement were reported, totaling seven deaths (along with those of more than twenty local pro-governmental soldiers) over this brief period. Reacting to these developments, the deputy editor-in-chief of the Russian academic journal *Asia and Africa Today*, Oleg Teterin, compared Russian

89. F. Nuno (@Felix\_Nuno), "From the Ground: Russian Military Personnel Have Just Landed in Mozambique", Twitter, 8 September 2019, [twitter.com](https://twitter.com/Felix_Nuno).

90. In: S. Sukhankin, "Russia Prepares a Foothold in Mozambique: Risks and Opportunities", *op. cit.*, [jamestown.org](https://jamestown.org).

91. J. Flanagan, "Mozambique Calls on Russian Firepower", *The Times*, 2 October 2019, [www.thetimes.co.uk](https://www.thetimes.co.uk).

92. P. Sauer, "In Push for Africa, Russia's Wagner Mercenaries Are 'Out of Their Depth' in Mozambique", *The Moscow Times*, 19 November 2019, [www.themoscowtimes.com](https://www.themoscowtimes.com); "Inostrannye ChVKa pozhalovalis' na porazhenie v konkurentsii s rossiianami" [Foreign PMCs complained of defeat in competition with the Russians], *Vzgliad*, 19 November 2019, [www.vz.ru](https://www.vz.ru).

93. "Insurgentes emboscaram e mataram 20 membros das FDS e cinco russos" [Insurgents ambush and kill 20 SDS members and five Russians], *Carta de Mocambique*, 29 October 2019, [www.cartamz.com](https://www.cartamz.com).



PMCs in Africa (the CAR and Mozambique) with the Irish *Wild Geese*,<sup>94</sup> urging Russia not to meddle in the domestic affairs of African nations.<sup>95</sup>

According to some information agencies, the above-mentioned lack of success led to the withdrawal of Russian mercenaries from Cabo Delgado in late November.<sup>96</sup> While this information was challenged by some local sources,<sup>97</sup> it appears that the “Mozambican voyage” of Russian private military contractors has become more of a failure than a success. This stems from two facts. First, according to Mozambican sources, local authorities became unhappy with the performance of the Wagner Group. This led to them establishing ties (and even performing a joint anti-terrorist operation) with the South African Dyck Advisory Group PMC (DAG)<sup>98</sup>—a company better positioned in the region and wielding better counter-terrorism experience. Second, some sources have claimed that the unsuccess of Russian military advisors stemmed from their inability to find a common language with local armed forces, which derailed any potential for cooperating with the locals,<sup>99</sup> and thus, to some extent replicating the mistakes of the Soviet side during the Cold War, when cultural differences became one of the key barriers between local and Soviet advisors.

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94. A term that originally referred to Irish soldiers who left Ireland to serve in continental European armies between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Later it was applied to mercenaries fighting in Africa.

95. V. Skosyrev, “Amerikantsy obnaruzhyli rossijskikh naemnikov v Mozambike” [Americans discovered Russian mercenaries in Mozambique], *Nezavisimaia Gazeta*, 1 December 2019, [www.ng.ru](http://www.ng.ru).

96. “Naemniki ChVKA ‘Wagner’ s poteriami pokinuli odin iz raionov Mozambika” [Mercenaries of PMC “Wagner” left one of the areas of Mozambique with losses], *Informatsionnoe Soprotivlenie*, 25 November 2019, [www.sprotyv.info](http://www.sprotyv.info).

97. “Mais mercenários russos para combater o terrorismo em Cabo Delgado” [More Russian mercenaries are to fight terrorism in Cabo Delgado], *Carta de Mocambique*, 12 March 2020, [www.cartamz.com](http://www.cartamz.com).

98. “Cabo Delgado: Militares privados sul africanos e Força Aérea moçambicana realizam ataques aéreos contra terroristas em Cabo Delgado” [Cabo Delgado: South African private militaries and Mozambican Air Force carried out an aerial strike against terrorists in Cabo Delgado], *Carta de Mocambique*, 10 April 2020, [www.cartamz.com](http://www.cartamz.com).

99. “A Dirty Little War in Mozambique”, *Air War Analysis*, May 2020, <https://macua.blogs.com>.

# Outlook

Since the reactivation (mid-2000s) and the intensification (2014) of the African vector of its foreign policy, Russia has been able to achieve some notable intermediary results. One of the main factors that has secured this relative success is military-technical cooperation composed of two facets: the legal one, which includes officially concluded arms deals, training of local military and security personnel, and physical protection of critical infrastructure; and the illegal facet, which is premised on “shady” operations, including, among others, Russian PMCs. Many African countries suffering from a terrorist threat have vested hopes in Russia, believing that battle-hardened Russian private security contractors would be able to solve this problem in a cost-effective and efficient manner. The advent of Russian mercenaries has alarmed Western experts and observers, drawing on the experience of the USSR, when Moscow, using its military instructors (as a part of military-technical cooperation), was able to challenge the West on the African continent. Those concerns may have been overrated, for four main reasons.

First, Russian PMCs are unlikely to achieve a decisive military success and break the back of insurgency in sub-Saharan Africa. The solution of the issue lies in a broad spectrum of integrated socio-economic, political and security-related actions based on the elimination of the core factors that breed radicalism.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, as demonstrated in Mozambique, Russian contractors are outsiders in Africa, unfamiliar with local customs, traditions and principles of warfare, and will be viewed accordingly by local people. It needs to be underscored that the decision to bring in Russian mercenaries taken by some African governments is based on two elements: disgruntlement with West-led peace missions/anti-terrorist campaigns (which comply with the main principles of international law, yet fail to deliver results) and a belief, based on their involvement in other regions, in the ability of Russians to rapidly and cost-effectively deal with terrorist threats. As stated before, both assumptions have been challenged and are credible only in part.

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100. S. Sukhankin, “Russian PMCs in Sub-Saharan Africa: Mission (Im)Possible?”, *Riddle*, 12 June 2020, [www.ridl.io](http://www.ridl.io).

Second, Russia does not have a comprehensive African strategy (Russia primarily relies on opportunities emerging in particular countries), meaning that in the long run it will not be able to make a decisive advance on the continent. In Africa, Russia still follows the Soviet one-sided collaborative pattern, based on military-technical cooperation—an approach that (even though effective in the short run and at a tactical level) showed its flawed nature before 1991.

Third, a purported tilt of African leaders toward Russia is a way of pressuring Western countries and creating an image of diversification of foreign policy, not a long-term definitive trend. As demonstrated in Sudan<sup>101</sup>—despite optimistic rhetoric expressed by the Special Presidential envoy for the Middle East and Africa<sup>102</sup>—the country prioritizes its ties with larger, economically more attractive (China), politically influential (the US)<sup>103</sup> and culturally and religiously proximate (Turkey, the UAE)<sup>104</sup> actors. In a best-case scenario, Russia will be able to retain a position of just one among other players in Sudan, where it will have to face and compete with very economically powerful, geographically, and culturally proximate and ambitious players.<sup>105</sup>

Fourth, Russian penetration in sub-Saharan Africa—if continued via military-technical cooperation—will most likely result in growing tensions with other regional players, which has been showcased in Mozambique.<sup>106</sup>

This said, the prospect of the emergence of Russian mercenaries in other regions in sub-Saharan Africa must not be ruled out completely. One of the likeliest destinations is the G5 Sahel region, which is ravaged by the activities of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Movement for Unity and Jihad in West Africa (MUJWA), al-Mourabitoun, Boko Haram and others. This prospect might materialize if the recently initiated France-

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101. To understand this trend, a more comprehensive approach—which includes both Soviet lessons in Africa and the Middle East, as well as the current situation in Syria and Libya—should be assumed.

102. “Zamglavy MID Rossii vstretilsia s novym rukovodstvom Sudana” [Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Meets with Sudan’s New Leadership], *Gazeta.ru*, 17 April 2019, [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru).

103. Despite the rhetoric, Sudan has appointed an ambassador to the United States. See: “Sudan Appoints First Ambassador to the US in More Than 20 Years”, *Aljazeera*, 5 May 2020, [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

104. “UAE Taking Steps to Gain Control of Sudan’s Main Port”, *Aljazeera*, 25 April 2020, [www.aljazeera.com](http://www.aljazeera.com).

105. M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Arab Spring and Geopolitics of Sudan”, *Oriental Review*, 17 April 2019, [www.orientalreview.org](http://www.orientalreview.org).

106. S. Sukhankin, “Russia Prepares a Foothold in Mozambique: Risks and Opportunities”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 142, The Jamestown Foundation, 15 October 2019, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

led mission in the region does not yield success.<sup>107</sup> Russia is already (tentatively) seeking inroads to the region through bolstering military-technical partnership with selected countries. Specifically, in 2019, Russia signed an agreement on military-technical cooperation with Mali, while Russian presidential envoy Bogdanov met with representatives of Chad to discuss potential military-technical cooperation.<sup>108</sup> This prospect, however, is quite blurry at this time and will depend on a number of factors and circumstances. In effect—and this is well understood among Sahel G5 members—a withdrawal of France from the region would have detrimental consequences for the regional security architecture and would aggravate already challenging economic conditions.

In the final analysis, it needs to be pointed out that Russian activities in sub-Saharan Africa in general and its PMCs in particular, while perhaps not instrumentally important from a strategic point of view, might bring about serious collateral damage; that is, coupled with the gradual weakening of European players and the US, Russia's actions aimed at challenging or sidelining Western countries, and France in particular, are paving the way for third countries to get a greater hold in the region. There is a prospect—articulated by an influential Congolese opposition leader, Christian Malanga—of a new configuration in Africa emerging, described as “China—the money, Russia—the muscles”,<sup>109</sup> where Russia could become responsible for rendering military-technical services to some African countries in exchange for some economic benefits and concessions. Undoubtedly, this is merely one of several potential scenarios, yet it is worth considering, given the gradual weakening and withdrawal of Western powers on the continent.

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107. S. Sukhankin, “France to Lead Joint Effort in War on Terrorism in Sahel Region”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 18, No. 10, The Jamestown Foundation, 15 May 2020, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

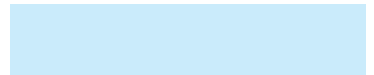
108. S. Sukhankin, “Terrorist Threat as a Pre-Text: Russia Strengthens Ties with G5 Sahel”, *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 18, No. 6, The Jamestown Foundation, 20 March 2020, [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org).

109. L. Misnik, “‘Est’ chto zashchishchat’: Rossijskikh voennykh otraviat v Kongo” [“There is something to protect”: Russian military will be sent to Congo], *Gazeta.ru*, 23 May 2019, [www.gazeta.ru](http://www.gazeta.ru).

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