Russia's Africa Strategy

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RUSSIA'S AFRICA STRATEGY

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ANALYSIS

For Russia, the Sahel Is the New Cold War Front

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Abstract

Russia has exploited the exit of France and Europe from the Sahel to become the main new partner of military-run Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Officially, Moscow sends mercenaries and weapons to help the embattled Sahel countries fight jihadists. But Russia is also, with the help of massive disinformation, undermining Western interests and pushing its narrative on the invasion of Ukraine, while triggering new migrant flows to Europe. For Moscow, the Sahel is the new Cold War front.

Geopolitics are changing in the Sahel, a massively underdeveloped region linking North Africa with sub-Saharan Africa, which has been grappling for over a decade with jihadists taking over parts of their territory, repeated military coups, state failure, massive corruption, poverty, and climate change, as well as extraordinary rates of population growth. The Sahel used to be firmly allied to Europe and France but is now working closely with Russia, whose mercenaries have stirred up more migration to the European Union (EU).

Russian military transport planes used to land at African airports such as Bamako in the middle of the night, as Moscow long claimed it had nothing to do with the shadowy Wagner Group. Only since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the death of Wagner co-founder Yevgeny Prigozhin the following year has Moscow acknowledged the presence of mercenaries and incorporated them into the state as part of a new force called the Africa Corps. Officially tasked with helping the West African country of Mali fight jihadists, they have in fact only worsened the security situation, as their brutality against civilians has been a recruitment program for jihadists offering protection for villagers.

Europe's Southern Shore

How did we get here? After all, France in 2013 sent soldiers to liberate the north of Mali from jihadists who had set up there a caliphate-linked entity implementing corporal punishments such as cutting off hands of thieves. Yet the jihadists were not defeated. They just fled to the mountains in the desert in the north, then quickly returned to exploit Mali's failure to offer to citizens public services and a way out of poverty—the core reasons why jihadists, with their extreme views, have been thriving by setting up parallel state authorities such as schools or courts in the countryside, where the Malian state is absent.

The Sahel is one of the world's poorest regions, with Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso among the ten least developed countries globally. Since independence from France in 1960, governments across the region have failed their citizens by not developing the countryside and concentrating wealth and power in their capitals, where corruption is rife. Since elections have mostly produced corrupt and incompetent governments, the region has also been rife with military coups, with officers taking power in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso since 2020.

The three countries also boast some of the highest population growth rates worldwide, with women in Niger having seven children on average. To make matters even worse, the Sahel region has been disproportionately affected by climate change, with farmers facing either no rain or extreme floods (like those that occurred last year) that destroy their crops. These demographic and climatic pressures have increased competition between farmers and cattle herders over access to water and land, with the losers—in the absence of a state—joining jihadists offering justice. That has helped jihadists linked to al-Qaeda or Islamic State to take over large swaths of Mali and Burkina Faso (as well as, to a lesser extent, Niger). To Europeans, their punishments under Islamic law sound draconian, but many in the region prefer going to an Islamic court to settle differences because—unlike in state courtrooms—rulings are not determined by who has more money to bribe the judge.

Why does this matter for the European Union? The Sahel is Europe's southern shore, with two main migration routes from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe passing through it: one from Niger on the land route through the desert to Libya (to take a boat to Italy) and the other from Mauritania by boat via the Western Atlantic to Spain's Canary Islands. That makes Europe very vulnerable. The Sahel countries may be some of the world's poorest, but they can influence a toxic migration debate in Europe and give a boost to the far right by allowing more migrants to pass through their territories. This is the reason that Russia has been so keen to gain a foothold in the region, which is often neglected by EU policymakers.

There has been a misconception that Wagner and Russia have come to the Sahel to extract gold and make huge profits. Yes, companies linked to Wagner have exported gold, diamonds, and other resources from the Central African Republic, yet another impoverished African nation mired in conflict. But Russia's engagement in the Sahel is not about making money. Moscow wants to make friends in Europe's underbelly to shape its narrative, overcome the isolation caused by the Ukraine war, and—most importantly—undermine the EU by triggering new migration flows. Russia has no gold mine in Mali. Moscow sees the Sahel as a strategic investment to harm the EU in a new Cold War front.

France's Exit

How has Russia been able to make inroads in the Sahel? Traditionally, the Sahel countries have been close to Europe and especially former colonial power France. But long before the current security crisis began, there was strong anti-French sentiment across the Sahel, Paris' 2013 military intervention to reconquer northern Mali notwithstanding. In the eyes of many locals, France had for too long sought to maintain its influence in the Sahel and its other former colonies in Africa, treating them as a backyard where Paris could intervene in domestic policies seemingly at will. Sahelians did not want to break completely with France, they just sought to diversify partnerships, but this was often unacceptable to French policymakers. Hence, an adjustment of the relationship was overdue.

Russia has been very skilled at exploiting the wish of people and governments in the region to depend less on France. Several years before the first Wagner mercenaries arrived in December 2021, Moscow set up a sophisticated disinformation campaign, working with local "influencers" on social media to whip up sentiment against the West and present Russia as an allegedly credible alternative without a colonial past in Africa. European policymakers dismissed the absurd claims made by pro-Russian social media "influencers"—such as that Paris was arming jihadists—but, given widespread anti-French sentiment, many people in the region believed them.

With relations between France and Mali souring after a second military coup in 2021 and the West's abrupt departure from Afghanistan the same year, Bamako feared that French and European troops would also quit, leaving the country exposed to the jihadist threat. Russia was quick to offer Wagner mercenaries to fight jihadists and give political backing to Mali's military government to downgrade ties with France and Europe. It looked like a win-win: for its part, Russia used the Mali connection to expand to neighbors Niger and Burkina Faso, where military leaders were equally willing to work with Moscow in exchange for military support and cut relations with their traditional partners in Europe.

Beyond the military cooperation, Russia also helped with the birth of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), which brings the three military-run countries together in a defense alliance modeled on NATO. The Africa Corps has been deployed to Niger and Burkina Faso to train and equip local forces with a much smaller footprint than Wagner in Mali. The Corps, which belongs to the defense ministry, was formed after Wagner founder Prigozhin fell out in 2023 with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin initially left Wagner operations in Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR) in place since they were based on Prigozhin's personal relations. Only in June 2025 did the Africa Corps take over Wagner operations in Mali; a similar change is now planned in CAR.

Migration

Predictably, Russia's promise of improving security in Mali and the Sahel has not come to fruition. Sheer numbers mean that this is no surprise: at its peak, Wagner had around 1,500 mercenaries on the ground in Mali, a third of what France sent to the Sahel as its anti-terrorism force. Wagner's brutality against civilians, who are often labeled as "terrorism supporters," has made the conflict worse by increasing civilian deaths, pushing survivors of massacres to join jihadists to seek protection from an abusive state and its Russian allies.

From the start, Western diplomats suspected that Russia was seeking with its Sahel engagement to stir up more poverty-migration towards Europe and thereby help right-wing allies such as the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD): the more migrants come, the more votes they tend to get. These fears have been confirmed. After a coup in Niger in 2023, the government signed a memorandum of understanding with Russia to boost military cooperation. A day later, the junta reopened a major migration route to Libya (from whence migrants can continue by boat to Italy), which had been effectively closed under a deal with the EU in 2015. The new government clearly felt emboldened to break with Europe given the promised support from Russia.

Whereas in Niger Russian influence on rising migration was indirect, it is much more obvious on the second migration route, from Mali to Mauritania (and from there by boat to the Canary Islands.) Last year, Malians were among the top three nationalities arriving by boat to the Spanish islands. Numbers are low compared to people arriving on the Balkan route, but there is the potential for huge rises in the near future. More than 110,000 Malians fled last year to Mauritania, languishing in and around a major UN camp on the Mauritan-

ian side of the border.[1] An additional 6,000 refugees have been arriving there every month this year.[2] The author met several refugees from northern Mali during a field visit in April 2025, all of whom cited atrocities perpetrated by Wagner as the reason for their flight. The Russians officially fight jihadists but do not distinguish between civilians and fighters. "They burn down villages, steal cattle, and rape women, accusing us of supporting terrorists," said one refugee. Most Malian refugees do not want to go to Europe, given the dangers of passage via the stormy West Atlantic coast, but some might be forced to do so in the future for lack of alternatives. They cannot go home due to insecurity, but it is unclear that the UN will be able to continue its aid operation for the refugees due to cuts by the Trump administration. The US financed up to half of humanitarian aid operations or more there and in other conflict zones in the Sahel.

Russia's Engagement Has Peaked

Despite the success, from the Russian perspective, of stirring up more migration towards Europe, there are signs that its engagement in the Sahel has peaked and will be reduced. For a start, Moscow has been facing logistical challenges with supplying mercenaries, rotating troops, and moving equipment since the fall of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad in December 2024. Russia was a major backer of Assad and had helped with a military intervention in 2015 to save his regime, setting up a large operation on the ground that was also used to supply its mercenary operations in Africa, from Sudan to Mali. Under Assad's father, Syria in the 1970s granted the Soviet Union a naval base in Tartus on the Mediterranean coast. In 2015, his son allowed Russia to take over and expand the Khmeimim air base, which was turned into a logistical hub for its Syria and Africa operations. Without the airfield, Moscow would never have been able to expand on the continent. The flight distance from southern Russia to sub-Saharan Africa is too far for transport planes, so when Russia set up the Wagner operations in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Sudan, planes stopped at Khmeimim to refuel and load personnel as well as ammunition. Russia also shipped military goods to its naval base in Tartus that were then sent on to Wagner operations in Libya and elsewhere, using civilian ships to circumvent limits on military vessels on the Bosphorus Strait.

Setting up a mercenary operation in Africa was always a cheap byproduct of the existing military operation in Syria to support the government forces that had been battling rebels since 2011. Since Assad's fall, Russia has gone to great lengths to reach out to the new rulers—including by sending fuel and offering financial support—to preserve its two Syria bases, but their future is unclear. Even if Russia can keep them, they will be less efficient than before, as the large Syria military operation, from fuel to arms storage, is gone. Much of the materiel there was shipped to eastern Libya, where Russia has been courting military ruler Khalifa Haftar.

Since 2019, Wagner has been active in eastern Libya backing Haftar. In that time, Russia has used four air bases in eastern Libya to support its Africa operations, even if Syria was more important given the Russian military presence there. In recent months, Russia has been building up a new hub at a remote air base in southern Libya but needs to invest in infrastructure. There have also been some flights from Khmeimim to Africa, but the main transit hub is now Libya. Yet the switch to the North African country carries risks as Haftar is 81 years old and controls only half of the territory of this fragmented country, which has been mired in conflict since the toppling of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Russia is in Libya also much more visible than it was in Syria, which was under Assad a black box for Westerners. In addition, Haftar has ties to Western countries and enjoys a reputation for swapping alliances, so Russia's position in Libya is less secure than it was in Syria under Assad.

Wakeup Call for Europe

Moscow has for years been in talks with the Sudanese government to set up a naval base in Port Sudan on the Red Sea that would give it more logistical options for its Africa operations. It is unlikely that Sudan will grant this request anytime soon, and it also would be difficult to set up a base in the middle of a civil war. But army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan has been using the prospect of a naval base to extract more weapons from Russia, helping him to regain the capital, Khartoum, from the Rapid Support Force opposing him. That has given Russia the opportunity to expand its engagement in another African conflict zone that poses a threat to Europe of more migration. More than four million Sudanese have fled the civil war in Sudan, some of them trying to get to Libya and Europe, as there is no hope of going back.[3]

The second reason why Russia's engagement in Africa has peaked is the Russia Corps' takeover of Wagner's operations. The Corps is an umbrella belonging to the defense ministry, which manages all mercenary operations. Its wheelhouse is training and protection

1 Statement by the UN refugee agency UNHCR on its website: UNHCR. n.d. "Mauritanie." Accessed September 2, 2025. https://www.unhcr.org/fr/ou-nous-travaillons/pays/mauritanie.

2 UNHCR officials gave the author this figure during a field visit in April.

3 UNHCR. 2023. "Health Conditions Worsen as Displacement from Sudan Conflict Exceeds 4 Million." Accessed September 2, 2025. https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/health-conditions-worsen-displacement-sudan-conflict-exceeds-4-million.

services (such as guarding Libyan oilfields), not fighting jihadists in open combat. The Corps members resemble soldiers, not Rambo-type fighters like Prigozhin's Wagner fighters. With the Africa Corps now officially in charge, it is no longer possible for Moscow to deny what Russians are doing in Mali and the Sahel—it is a Russian military operation. Therefore, the Corps will be taking fewer risks, such as fighting (and risking casualties), and doing more mundane tasks such as training or flying helicopters that require fewer personnel on the ground. But by focusing on training, Russia has opened itself up to tough competition from other countries such as Turkey, which has better arms for African guerilla warfare, such as drones. Russia recently shipped tanks from 1972, highlighting the strain that the war in Ukraine is placing on its ability to send more modern weapons.

From a Russian perspective, scaling back its Africa activities does not signal defeat—Moscow has accomplished its goals in the Sahel. Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and even Chad, another Sahel country once close to France, have ended military cooperation with the former colonial power and cut ties to Europe and the US. Russia's disinformation and soft power campaign have been very successful in the first three countries, where the overwhelmingly young population gets its news from social media playing on anti-French feelings: many people in the Sahel have a positive image of Russia, a country they do not know anything about and which has not provided development or humanitarian aid like Europe, which is still financing foreign assistance for free. In contrast, Russia asks for payment for its military cooperation. The Kremlin has gotten all it wanted from the Sahel and can reduce its engagement.

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Ulf Laessing has run the Konrad-Adenauer-Foundation's regional Sahel program in Mali since December 2021. He previously worked for 13 years as correspondent and bureau chief for Reuters news agency in the Middle East and Africa, focusing on the Arab Spring, conflicts and military missions, political transformations, terrorism and Jihadists, as well as migration, business, and climate change. Laessing has written a book on the conflict in Libya and studied history, Islamic Studies, and economics in Hamburg, Leipzig, and Kuwait.

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ANALYSIS

Russian Colonial Practices in Africa

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Abstract
Russia frames its African policies through the history and current practice of anti-colonialism. Nonetheless, looking at its approach to countries of the Sahel and central Africa, it is clear that its policies are in fact neocolonial and contradict the officially stressed focus on the sovereignty of African countries.

Russian activities in Africa are framed by Moscow as a struggle to help the African states gain sovereignty against the postcolonial practices of Western countries (Ramani 2023). This anti-colonial narrative mainly flooded the former French colonies, some of which—such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—had recently experienced coups. Their leaders shifted their foreign policy away from dependence on Paris, as in Chad or Ivory Coast, or underwent elections that brought to power elites more skeptical of the French influence, as observed in Senegal. While discontent with French-supported governments is to a large degree understandable, the Russian anti-colonial presence needs to be scrutinized.

Russia holds a very militarized posture on the continent. It is a marginal economic partner to the African countries but is tied to numerous political parties and

uses its paramilitary forces to benefit from instability in several conflict zones. The combination of historical narratives, personal ties and sympathies, and paramilitary presence gives Moscow an outsize presence in several African countries (Kanet and Moulioukova 2022; Juurvee et al. 2020). Despite its self-positioning as a champion of anti-colonialism, Moscow's ties are reminiscent of the kind of colonial exploitation with Russian specifics that has been familiar to numerous peoples of Eurasia for decades.

Colonialism and the Information Sphere

Their colonial heritage continues to impact the relations of African states and institutions with the outside world to this day. Relations with European actors are still, to a degree, affected by the era of exploitation, and the colonial narrative is used to highlight structural issues as well as mask domestic failures. While colonial possessions in the traditional sense no longer exist, many actors use terms like "postcolonialism" and "neocolonialism" to indicate strategies that further entrench dependencies, whether based on former colonial ties or new means (like the so-called "debt-trap diplomacy").

While these dependencies are often substantial and the debate over their nature is extremely important, the term "colonialism" also includes another, less visible side. The word itself constitutes a powerful information tool that, in combination with the misrepresentation of history, supports the Russian presence in Africa (Marten 2019). Colonial, postcolonial and neocolonial practices have very clear conceptual meanings. They establish unequal relations between states that the colonizing entity uses to extract resources from the colonized territories. This is supported by keeping in power an inherently illegitimate government that is responsible not to its population but to the needs of external powers.

Postcolonialism highlights that despite formal decolonization, these links are maintained via more subtle means. External actors are helping autocratic leaders to stay in place, securing their position against opposition, and controlling national economies. In turn, these actors are allowed to occupy a preferential position in the country's market or to maintain a military presence on their territory, tying the interests of the state to its benefactor. Neocolonialism highlights how a new set of policies is established to develop unequal ties that, in the end, have very similar goals: the extraction of resources and the support of friendly political elites in power, irrespective of the wishes of the local populations.

Ever since the reign of Nikita Khrushchev, Moscow has utilized anti-colonial narratives as a primary information tool vis-à-vis African actors (Donaldson and Nadkarni 2019). It juxtaposes its policies to the colonialism not only of Europeans, but also of the US. Accordingly, Moscow positions itself as an actor that almost unilaterally supported the liberation efforts. This, however, was never the case. Moscow did not necessarily play a major role in the numerous liberation movements. Moreover, it was far from the only—and usually not the main—actor supporting these efforts. Nor did the US and European countries necessarily oppose these efforts themselves. Like the USSR, the US was formally an anti-colonial power. Following the Second World War, both states opposed the persistence of European colonial empires in Africa and around the world. They also supported the decolonization process.

Thus, we can already see reality diverging from Russian information operations. Moscow's relationship to the liberation movements was not always friendly nor affectionate; the Western powers were not always opposed to decolonisation, nor did they establish postcolonial dependencies all over the continent. History teaches us to distinguish between perceptions and reality.

Russian Colonial Practices in Africa

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow lost its position in African politics and economy. Russia made something of a return to the continent as part of the reinvigoration of Russian foreign policy under Putin, which coincided with the increase in the prices of hydrocarbons on the global market. But it was the imposition of the sanctions regime against Russia following its incursion into eastern Ukraine and illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 that motivated Moscow to truly strengthen its African policies. The bolstering of the sanctions against Russia, with the goal of isolating Moscow following the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, only reinforced this trajectory (Kanet and Moulioukova 2022, Ramani 2023).

Moscow focuses primarily on two goals. The first is the provision of support to those elites who support the Russian position on various issues. A permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, Russia can use its veto power to provide diplomatic cover. Additionally, it offers its paramilitary forces, like the Wagner Group or Africa Corps, as part of regime protection packages that allow regimes to survive and maintain control over their respective capitals even amid a deteriorating security situation. This allows Russia to seemingly break the isolation brought on by the sanctions; establish a military presence in areas of potential geostrategic importance; and destabilize areas on the European southern flank, thereby distracting from the war in Ukraine (Kachur 2022).

The second goal is economic. Russian protection packages include not only the capital and the government, but also key economic sites, mainly mineral extraction areas. Such protection is provided both to governments, as in the Central African Republic or Mali, and

to anti-governmental forces, such as the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, which are in control of gold-mining sites in Darfur. Access to these locations enables the Russian state to circumvent economic sanctions and oligarchs supporting Putin's rule to generate additional income (Berlin et al. 2023).

Such behavior largely follows the colonial blueprint (Pokalova; Doboš and Purton 2023). Russian forces support autocratic leaders based on their affinity to Moscow and willingness to allow its access to mineral extraction. The security situation in countries influenced by Moscow has massively deteriorated, and the economic benefits favor only a limited Russian-supported political elite. The fate of the country is not important; the protection of the center and the extraction and export of resources are. While the information sphere is flooded by anti-colonial and pro-Russian messages and the seeming achievements of leaders like Burkinabe president Ibrahima Traore, the population outside the capital is forced to work in slave-like conditions; faces massive brutality and violence (Maillard 2025); and is provided with minimal, if any, services by the state. The Central African Republic and Mali are the most visible examples of the consequences of this approach; Burkina Faso is also notable for having become a hotspot of terrorism under this governance, surpassing Iraq and Afghanistan as the site of the most terrorist attacks in 2024.

The Practice of Regime Protection

Russia's regime-protection package was pioneered in the Central African Republic. Shielding the government of Faustin-Archange Touadéra from rebel advances, the Wagner Group began to dominate the country and entrenched itself as a key political actor. The state's decision-making has been heavily affected by the critical importance of the Russian advisor to the president since the introduction of Russian paramilitaries. Given the departure of the majority of non-Russian military personnel from the country, the physical security of the government is also fully dependent on Russian paramilitaries (Pokalova 2023; Doboš and Purton 2023; Eguegu 2022, 454).

The Wagner Group, on the one hand, protects the capital of Bangui. On the other hand, it maintains brutal strategies in the rest of the country. Where it cannot negotiate ceasefires with rebel groups, levels of violence are high. The Russian forces maintain effective control mainly over the mining areas, where the local population is mistreated and forced to work in extremely harsh conditions. The economic benefits are exported outside of the country and to Russian actors. The Wagner Group has thus followed the blueprint of the East India Company. The latter was originally also a largely autonomous actor, who went too rogue for the liking of the government and was consequently connected more tightly to state power. The utilization of semi-autonomous armed actors to develop critical dependencies involving the exploitation of the local population and its resources constitutes traditional colonial practice (Doboš and Purton 2023). The situation is so dire that in 2022, it was estimated that the country lost about 5.6% of its total population annually (Columbia University 2023).

A second key case study is Mali. The Malian government has collaborated with Russian forces more substantially since the coup in 2021. Russian paramilitaries have taken over the positions of the European and UN forces in the country, blaming them for colonial and exploitative policies. The Russian arrival has resulted in a massive deterioration of the security situation. The number of casualties from the insurgency has multiplied. The Russian-backed armed forces are extremely violent, following the pattern of Russian counterinsurgency that was observable in Chechnya and Syria. The ability of the government to control its territory is declining, leading to an increase in the size of areas under the control of insurgent groups (Mensah and Aning 2022; Horák et al. 2024; Eguegu 2022). The Russian troops are, furthermore, extremely violent and racist (Maillard 2025). This mimics the Russian colonial practices in its "Near Abroad," most visibly presented in its genocidal campaign in Ukraine since 2022. Russian entities are entrenching themselves in the Malian mining business without providing benefits to the population outside the capital, Bamako. Thus, once again, the approach is clearly colonial, propping up a weak government entirely dependent on external power while exploiting both Malian natural resources and the country's population.

It's the Information, Stupid

The Russian anti-colonial narrative that furthers the Kremlin's activities in Africa and enables Moscow to collaborate with numerous political actors is clearly not followed in practice. While the continent definitely faces issues with the establishment of unequal dependencies that are often rooted in postcolonial ties, Moscow does not provide any meaningful solution. It uses information tools to misinform and disinform the wider populations about the nature of the postcolonial ties and the activities of other external actors in Africa and promotes its own activities as an antidote that will bring the locals prosperity, security and, above all, sovereignty.

In doing so, however, the Russian troops are developing traditional colonial ties with Russian specifics. The basic modus operandi is very similar to the European colonial presence known from the 19th century. Moscow identifies potential political allies and supports their role in the center of power. It offers them physical protection and well-being, creating ultimate dependencies.

Such dependencies allow Russian actors to exploit the mineral wealth of the affected countries, leaving their territories ungoverned or ungovernable and the population without any protection—or, worse, directly targeted and put in a slave-like position by the Russian-backed governmental forces. Moscow even for a while experimented with another traditional colonial tool: privatizing the administration of distant territories. In Africa, the Wagner Group played a role similar to that played by the East Indian Company for the British.

Insofar as Russian activities are unique, their specificities are well-known to the inhabitants of large parts of Eurasia: massive brutality. The systematic use of large-scale violence and torture, combined with high levels of racism, puts the information campaigns in even starker contrast to reality.

Nonetheless, as long as Russia manages to spread its message around, its anti-colonial posture will not be effectively challenged by its colonial practices and will remain accepted by a significant number of populations.

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ANALYSIS

Russia's African Gambit: Anti-Colonial Rhetoric and the "World Majority"

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Abstract

Russia's African strategy has entailed mobilizing anti-colonial rhetoric to position itself as champion of the "world majority" in the face of Western hegemony. Despite diplomatic success in states like Mali and the Central African Republic, contradictions between Russia's anti-imperial messaging and its actions in Ukraine, combined with its limited economic capacity, constrain Moscow's transformative potential on the continent.

Russian policies toward Africa have changed radically since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. What began in the mid-2010s as a gradual return to the continent has become a strategic campaign to project Moscow as a champion of the Global South—the "world majority," in Russian phrasing—while simultaneously challenging Western hegemony. The strategic importance of Africa in Russian policies is evident in Russian discourse. Africa's 54 states constitute the largest voting bloc at the United Nations (UN), representing over 25% of total membership despite its limited influence in key decisions. When combined with the continent's projected growth to 2.5 billion people by 2050, Africa represents for Russia an important centre in its multipolarity approach, an emerging majority against the "collective West's" declining influence (Lavrov 2023). The term "world majority" has become central to Putin's vision of a multipolar order, framed in the bigger struggle against the imperial West. When referring to Africa, this wording seeks to legitimize Russian interests; counter Western narratives on Russia's isolation; and present Russia as defending a development agenda, traditional values, and allied political regimes (Putin, 2023).

Through a carefully crafted anti-colonial narrative, Russia has positioned itself as a natural ally of African states seeking to escape "western neo-colonial domination" by "intensify[ing] the struggle for true freedom and justice, for progress for all nations, and for the establishment of a democratic multipolar world order" (Pantserev 2025). This framing allows the Kremlin to claim moral authority over the decolonization process, sustained by historical continuities and shared anti-colonial memory. The narrative taps into historical grievances about unequal development and Western interventionism (Audinet 2025) that resonate deeply across most of Africa and elsewhere. In parallel, Russia has been actively criticizing the West, dismissing as false the latter's purported anti-Russian campaign, whereby the West is claimed to allege that Russia is stuck in the past, other "development partners" contribute more than Russia, and Moscow does not engage with new humanitarian cooperation projects (Degterev 2025). This positioning serves multiple strategic objectives.

Anti-Colonial and Anti-Hegemonic: Russia's Narrative Framing

The anti-colonial narrative allows the Kremlin to distance itself from its own imperial history while claiming the moral authority of the Soviet Union's support for liberation movements. Russia presents itself as the heir of Soviet anti-imperialism while conveniently overlooking the contradictions inherent in its own colonial expansion and current territorial ambitions. This selective historical memory enables Moscow to present itself as a legitimate defender of sovereignty against Western interventionism. Even more, this anti-colonial narrative feeds Russian self-interested political goals as part of what Dmitry Medvedev has termed a "global struggle" for a more equitable and multipolar world order (Komin 2024). Russia seeks in this way to be at the "vanguard of the global majority," leading the process of creating a more just order (Young 2024).

Russia's war in Ukraine, along with interference in Eastern European elections, is reframed as legitimate defense of sovereignty and stability rather than imperial aggression. The Atlantic Alliance enlargement and Western support for Ukraine are forms of neo-colonial domination that justify Russian intervention. This framing seeks to transform aggression into liberation struggle comparable to African independence movements. The claim that "Russia has never been a colonizer anywhere," as Putin stated at the September 2023 Vladivostok Forum (Kuzio 2023), directly contradicts Russia's centuries of imperial expansion across Eurasia and its current territorial control strategy in Ukraine. This rhetorical transformation is central to Russia's broader strategy of moral and ideological competition with the West.

This course has been pursued through an active diplomatic offensive in Africa, with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's African tours since February 2022 showing an isolation-breaking strategy in both their scope and strategic targeting. The first countries Lavrov visited after

February 2022—Egypt, Republic of Congo, Uganda and Ethiopia—were clearly calculated. The visit to Egypt, the largest wheat importer dependent on Russian and Ukrainian production, represented an opportunity to blame the West for food insecurity while positioning Russia as a willing supplier. Both Congo and Uganda, which abstained from voting on UN General Assembly resolutions condemning Russia's aggression, welcomed the anti-Western narrative. Ethiopia, facing Western criticism of its own over the Tigray conflict, became a natural partner seeking alternatives to traditional Western alliances. The following year, Lavrov traveled to South Africa, Angola, Eritrea, Mali, Mauritania, and Sudan, visiting a dozen countries in a short period of time as well as meeting African Union ambassadors in an "impressive diplomatic charm offensive" (Fabricius 2023) designed to counter perceptions of Russian isolation.

Before these visits, local newspapers published articles by Lavrov that praised Africa's resistance to Western "hegemony" while accusing the West of causing food crises through sanctions (MFA Russia 2022), thereby positioning Russia as a problem-solver rather than problem-creator. By 2023, the messaging became more geopolitical. During the visit to South Africa, discussions centred on joint naval exercises with China involving hypersonic missile tests, showing military capacity despite the sanctions. In Angola, Lavrov highlighted space cooperation through the Russian-launched Angosat-2 satellite, while in Eritrea and Mali the focus was on military-security cooperation, with talks to potentially establish a Russian Red Sea naval base in Eritrea and the continuation of counterterrorism cooperation in Mali (Zaytsev 2023). These brief examples show the drive for power projection in the Russian approach to Africa.

Africa as Part of Russia's Isolation-Breaking Strategy

Russia-Africa summits represent a significant institutional expression of Russia's isolation-breaking strategy. The 2019 inaugural summit involved 43 heads of states, demonstrating African interest in diversifying international partnerships. While the 2023 summit saw reduced attendance, with only 17 heads of state present, the Kremlin successfully framed this decline as evidence of "outrageous" Western pressure rather than diminished Russian appeal (AP 2023). In St. Petersburg, at the second Russia-Africa summit in 2023, which followed U.S. President Biden's December 2022 Africa Summit, Putin—positioning Russian engagement as an alternative to Western approaches—hailed Africa's role in the emerging "multipolar world order." In Putin's words, "Russia and Africa are united by an innate desire to defend true sovereignty and the right to their own distinctive path of development," employing a language of resistance to "Western hegemony." The commitment to concrete assistance, such as Putin's promise of free grain to ensure food security, underlines Russia's willingness to be recognized as a committed partner.

In this way, Russia combines anti-hegemonic narratives with concrete economic incentives to sustain its African engagement. This approach is complemented by its security engagement, with the signature of around twenty military cooperation agreements with African countries. The Central African Republic (CAR) is probably one of the best examples of Russia's comprehensive engagement. Russian involvement began with military training that quickly expanded to encompass political mediation and resource extraction. Russia played a crucial role in mediating peace agreements between the government and various armed groups, demonstrating its capacity for both military and diplomatic action. Wagner Group, now Africa Corps, activities in CAR illustrate the fusion of military and economic objectives that characterizes Russian policy. Security support is provided in exchange for access to diamonds, gold, and other valuable resources (Duursma and Masuhr 2022).

While not all African countries side with Russia—among them South Africa, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Ghana—some African leaders have been vocal in their support of Russian engagement both in their countries and on the continent more broadly. Mali's Foreign Minister, Abdoulaye Diop, clearly articulated the contrast between what he describes as the Kremlin's sincerity and the Western neo-colonial posture, while Burkina Faso's Foreign Minister, Karamoko Jean-Marie Traoré, views Russia as a more suitable and reliable partner than the former colonial power, France (Ross 2024). CAR's President, Faustin Archange Touadera, commented that Russia supported the country's democracy, thanking Russia "for helping us to oppose foreign hegemony" (Aljazeera 2023). Views like these support Russia's self-positioning as the leader of the "world majority," with a clear role to play in Africa as an alternative to the former imperial powers. In the words of Lavrov, "Our future is being shaped by a struggle, a struggle between the global majority in favor of a fairer distribution of global benefits and civilized diversity and between the few who wield neo-colonial methods of subjugation in order to maintain their domination which is slipping through their hands" (France 24 2023).

Contradictions and Limitations: The Disconnect Between Discourse and Action

Nevertheless, Russia's "world majority" strategy in Africa faces several constraints. In economic terms, Russia's limited development assistance and investment capacity prevents it from offering a real alternative to Western partnerships. With less than 1% of

Russian foreign direct investment flowing to Africa and trade volumes far below Chinese or Western levels, Russian economic engagement remains largely symbolic. Even if trade almost doubled between 2013 and 2021—from US$9.9 billion to $17.7 billion—and increased to US$27.7 billion in 2024 (Degterev 2025), Africa's trade with China amounts to US$254 billion and with the US $65 billion. This disconnect between rhetorical ambition and practical capacity limits Russian engagement.

Moreover, the contradiction between Russian anti-colonial rhetoric and territorial expansion in Ukraine contributes to credibility challenges. African countries' historical experiences with territorial occupation and liberation struggles make them sensitive to imperial behavior regardless of the rhetorical framing. This tension was visible at UN voting, with more than half of the African countries abstaining from resolutions condemning Russian actions in Ukraine. Despite countries like Burkina Faso and Mali providing direct support for Russian positions in the February 2025 UN General Assembly vote on "a comprehensive, just and lasting peace in Ukraine," revealing growing polarization in African votes, African states have been careful to balance a neutral stance on the conflict with cooperation with the West (Komin 2024). Indeed, most African states maintain diversified international partnerships rather than choosing between Western and Russian alternatives, since economic pragmatism often outweighs ideological considerations in policy decisions.

Russia's "world majority" strategy in Africa reveals both the opportunities and limitations of leveraging anti-colonial discourse for contemporary geopolitical ends. While Moscow has successfully exploited legitimate African grievances about Western hegemony and historical exploitation, creating meaningful partnerships with select states and challenging Western narratives of Russian isolation, the fundamental contradictions between rhetoric and reality constrain the strategy's transformative potential. The disconnect between anti-colonial messaging and imperial actions in Ukraine, combined with Russia's limited economic capacity to provide genuine alternatives to Western partnerships, suggests that Moscow's African engagement represents more of a tactical disruption than a strategic reordering of continental partnerships. The positioning of Africa as an anchor for "world majority" coalition-building—given its demographic growth, economic potential, and increased role in international fora—demonstrates Russian understanding of long-term global trends while revealing the opportunistic nature of Moscow's engagement with decolonization principles. Africa's response to Russian policies reflects not necessarily ideological alignment with Moscow's worldview, but rather a pragmatic pursuit of diversified partnerships that enhance African agency in an increasingly multipolar world.

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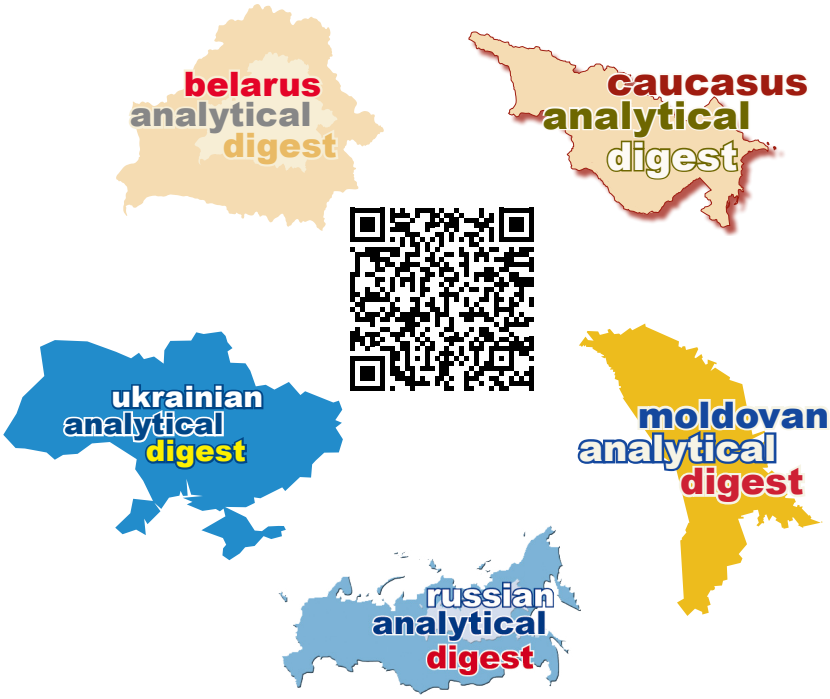

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