



Gold/ Diamonds/ Oil/ Information/ Partnerships/

"Welcome to the new East India

Company"*

Russian Influence in Africa

Weapons/

Mercenaries/

Training/

Suppression/

Disinformation/

*Russian Journalist Kirill Romanovsky regarding Russia's blend of political and economic activity in Africa. Dossier Centre, London, 2018.

Summary

Russia's recent invasion of Ukraine has motivated a significant reassessment of Russian influence and money in the West (with a particular focus on London, or "Londongrad"). However, dirty money, or "Cherny obschak" (black cash), is far from the only method the Kremlin utilises to cultivate influence. Nor is the West Russia's only target.

Under President Vladimir Putin, there has been a resurgence of Russian interest and involvement in Africa. The October 2019 Russia–Africa Summit in Sochi was reported as being a key milestone in Russia's return to the African continent. Since that summit, Russia's influence has grown exponentially. This has been due to investment in critical areas and a programme of "elite capture" focused on decision makers, that have given it an oversized influence compared to its input.

During the Russia-Africa Summit, Putin announced "we have much to offer our African partners". Likewise, Africa has a lot to offer Russia in terms of achieving its strategic goals.

Russian strategic aims in Africa

1) Demonstrate Russia's Great Power status

- A continuing obsession of the Kremlin (and Vladimir Putin in particular) is to prove Russia is still a major geopolitical power; both to legitimise the current regime and avenge its perceived humiliation in the aftermath of the Cold War.
- Advancing its interests in Africa demonstrates to international and domestic audiences the extent of Russian power.

2) Gain a foothold in the southern Mediterranean and Red Sea

- Russia's paranoia regarding NATO is well established, leading it to seek ways to reach its weaker southern flank.
- The Red Sea is also a critical route for international trade.
- The Kremlin hopes that gaining footholds in Northern and Eastern Africa will give it greater access to international trade on its own terms and a potential second front against NATO.
- These concerns were among the reasons for Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war (protecting its naval facility at Tartus).

3) Economic gains from access to mineral wealth

- Africa contains some of the most minerally rich countries on the planet. Containing vital minerals ranging from gold and diamonds to Coltan and lithium (critical for batteries and mobile phones).
- Often, Russian assistance comes in exchange for mineral rights.

4) Displace western influence in Africa and undermine international democracy

- Much like China, Russia seeks to present a system of "purposeful autocracy" as a direct alternative to the rules-based democratic system.
- By extending its influence and involvement in Africa, Russia presents itself as a reliable partner in Africa that comes without the "baggage" of democratic and human rights.

To achieve these goals, Russia has extended its influence across three fronts: Economic, Military and information. All of which are tailored to cultivate influence with policy makers.

Economic

Russia has been described as a "minnow" in terms of economic influence in comparison to China and the West. Currently it accounts for just 2% of Africa's trade in goods with the rest of the world. However, it has invested in strategic areas that give it an influence outmatching its input.

Trade and finance

- African countries import \$4 billion worth agricultural products from Russia, 90% of it wheat.
 - Egypt imports nearly 85 percent of its wheat from Russia and Ukraine, and it is Russia's top African trade partner.
- Kremlin-linked firms have formed an Africa-focused trade association.
- A subsidiary of VEB (a Russian bank under sanctions) has shares in Afreximbank, a development bank.
- President Putin has courted key members of the ANC, South Africa's ruling party. During the Zuma presidency, Mr. Putin helped South Africa to become a member of BRICS, a bloc of emerging economies that includes Russia, China, India and Brazil.
- Moscow has routinely forgiven debts owed to it by African states for aid during the Cold War, in exchange for the signing of energy and arms deals.

Mining rights

- Mineral, diamond, and oil contracts are typically negotiated by Russian state-owned companies Rosneft and Lukoil. Bringing technical expertise and financing in exchange for influence and shares.
- Rusal, a Russian aluminium producer with three mines in Guinea, has stopped operations at its refinery in Ukraine, which processes bauxite mined in Guinea. Guinea's junta recently suspended an honorary consul from Ukraine.
- As the junta in Sudan comes under increasing international pressure on sanctions, Russia allegedly buys its smuggled gold through M-Invest, a company owned by Yevgeny Prigozhin. According to an executive at one of the largest Sudanese gold companies, M-Invest has become the largest foreign player in the country's mining sector.
- Russia also has investments in uranium mines in Namibia.

Economic

Energy

- State-owned entities such as Gazprom, Gazpromneft and Rosneft have built up hydrocarbons industry interests in markets around the continent. Most prominently in Algeria, Nigeria, Angola and Mozambique.
- Russia has been pursuing oil contracts as part of its arms deals with the junta in Sudan.
- Russia has also attempted to negotiate nuclear power deals on the continent.
 - In 2020, Russia's State Atomic Energy Corporation, Rosatom, provided a \$25 billion loan to begin construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant.
 - Russia is also at varying stages of negotiation with seventeen African countries and has preliminary nuclear project deals in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Zambia.

Military

Weapons sales

- Between 2015 and 2019, Moscow signed 19 military collaboration agreements with African governments. The collaboration has focused in large part on Russian weapons sales.
- Russia is the largest arms exporter to Africa; accounting for close to half of all weapons imports.
- Most of these are conducted through Rosoboronexport.
- While small arms still make up the bulk of Russia's weapons exports, it has also exported more advanced conventional weapons to the continent.
 - The S-400 (Triumph) long-range surface to air missile system designed to engage both aerial and ballistic targets has been sold to Angola, Egypt, Morocco and Libya.
 - The Yak-130 subsonic two-seat advanced jet trainer and light fighter has been sold to Nigeria and Algeria.
 - The Pantsir-S1 short-range surface-to-air gun and missile system has been sold to Ethiopia, Algeria and Libya, with reported negotiations of sales in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea.

Russian military presence in Africa



Military

Military assistance: training and PMCs

- As well as weapon sales, Russia also provides "boots on the ground" support for African partners.
- This support comes both in an official form of military advisers and technical experts to provide assistance and training, but also in the more ambiguous forms of Private Military Contractors with close ties to the Kremlin who act as an unofficial arm of the state.
- Wagner Group (a.k.a. "the orchestra" and "the musicians") are the most prominent of these PMCs.
 - The group is tied to Yevgenny Prigozhin, a kremlin insider and close-ally of Vladimir Putin who has previously been accused of running the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a troll-farm that spearheaded the Kremlin's disinformation campaign during the 2016 US-presidential election.
 - Wagner has previously been active in the Syrian Civil War, and has been placed in Sudan, the Central African Republic (CAR), Madagascar, Libya, and Mozambique.
 - The group has been accused of rampant human rights abuses and war crimes.
 - Wagner has successfully sidelined French forces in the CAR.
 - There are still an estimated 2,000 Wagner troops still active in the CAR keeping rebels from toppling President Faustin-Archange Touadéra.
 - As relations between French forces and the Mali junta have broken down, the group has turned to Wagner as a peacekeeping force.
 - According to French sources, there are at least 800 to 1000 Wagner troops in Mali.
 - Likewise, since the January coup in Burkina Faso, the government and the population have been calling for an open military alliance with Russia and Wagner against the jihadists.
 - Prigozhin hailed the Burkina Faso coup as a milestone in a "new era of decolonisation."
 - Alexander Ivanov, a close ally of Prigozhin claiming to speak for the "community of Russian officers," publicly suggested that Wagner "instructors" train the armed forces of the new regime.
- Despite its notoriety and activity, it is notable that Wagner has had limited successes in its contracts.
 - Libya remains in stalemate.
 - They were defeated and withdrew from Cabo Delgado in Mozambique.
 - Rebels still threaten President Touadera in the CAR.

Information

Information operations are a key driver of Russia's soft power and influence in Africa.

- Both Russia and certain African states smart at the perceived negativity they face in Western media:
 - Ghana's leader criticised Western press for portraying Africa as nothing more than "civil wars and Ebola".
- Combatting Western narratives in media and public opinion was a key topic at the 2019 Russia–Africa Summit.
- Russia therefore faces a potentially cooperative environment for anti-western messaging that it seeks to exploit through overt and covert means.

Overt

- Russia's state-owned media outlets like Sputnik and RT are central to the Kremlin's strategy and are drivers of its soft power in Africa.
 - Building on anti-imperialist credentials from the Soviet era and positioning itself as an alternative news source, these outlets are able to provide a more balanced image of Russia in Africa, while combatting Western narratives.
 - This appears to have had some success, with as many as 4 000 online news websites in Africa re-publish content from Kremlin-sponsored media.
- Russia uses its media foothold to inflate humanitarian contributions.
 - For example, in 2010, Russia portrayed itself, through official news outlets, as a critical player in the fight against Ebola in West Africa.
 - However, data from the Financial Tracking Service, (a database tracking humanitarian funding flows) shows that of the \$ 62.1 million Russia donated in 2020, only \$ 4 million went to Africa.
- Russian official media (often combined with covert methods) also seeks to boost local dictatorial allies:
 - During the Jan 2019 protests in Sudan, Russian channels spread fake news linking protesters to foreign powers such as Israel and as being a result of foreign influence.
 - When President Condé of Guinea faced widespread domestic opposition to extending his tenure to a third term, Russian Ambassador Alexander Bregadze attempted to provide cover by saying that "constitutions are no dogma, Bible, or Koran... it's constitutions that must adapt to reality, not reality that adapts to constitutions." This message was taken up by multiple bots and sock-puppet accounts.

Information

Covert

- In 2018, Russian information operations were active in Madagascar's presidential election, pushing pro-Russian and anti-western messaging.
- Russian communication specialists were active in Sudan during the January 2019 protests to support Omar al-Bashir.
- Disinformation operations linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin & the IRA have now been identified in Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.
- The IRA has also been active in inflating Wagner's success and stirring up resentment's against France. This originated in the CAR, but has now been replicated in the Sahel.
- Russia has been expanding its methods beyond the traditional Russia-based "troll farm" model:
 - In one case, Russian operatives posing as a fictional news organisation, "Peace Data", to contract unsuspecting journalists in foreign countries to submit content on polarising topics.
 - In South Africa, Russian-sponsored messaging has attempted to inflame racial tensions using bot accounts to inflate local messaging, rather than creating it.
 - Russia has also been accused of outsourcing or training locals in disinformation efforts; creating disinformation "franchises" that can create more realistic content.

Trajectory after Ukraine invasion

Some African states continue to pursue neutrality, others actively support Russia

- Of the states who were either abstained from the vote condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine or voted against the measure, 17/38 were African states:
 - Eritrea voted against
 - Algeria, Angola, Burundi, CAR, Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Madagascar, Mali, Namibia, Senegal, South Africa, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe all abstained.
- All of these states have received military and economic aid from Moscow.

Russia's information penetration is paying dividends

- A black and white image which some people falsely claim shows Russian President Vladimir Putin training liberation movements in southern Africa, has been widely circulated. Often with the caption suggesting that all African states should support Putin as a liberator.
 - The image was also posted on Twitter by Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni's son, Lieutenant-General Muhoozi Kainerugaba (also head of Uganda's armed forces).
 - Mr Putin's profile on the Kremlin website shows that he was studying at the Leningrad State University at the time.
 - Also the man in the picture is military uniform, while Putin worked in intelligence.
 - Lastly, the man depicted is wearing a wristwatch on his left arm, Putin habitually wears his on the right.
- Lieutenant-General Muhoozi Kainerugaba has also parroted other Russian talking points, tweeting:
 - "The majority of mankind (that are non-white) support Russia's stand in Ukraine. Putin is absolutely right!"
 - "When the USSR parked nuclear armed missiles in Cuba in 1962, the West was ready to blow up the world over it. Now when Nato does the same they expect Russia to do differently."
- The Kremlin narratives of bioweapons labs in Ukraine and Ukraine as a neo-nazi state are finding purchase in Africa.

Trajectory after Ukraine invasion

However

- Despite the abstentions in the UN vote, it marks a notable decrease from a similar vote on Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea, in which 26 African states abstained.
 - South African President Cyril Ramaphosa, historically a key Russian ally in the BRICS group, has started to appeal for a “mediation process” to bring the hostilities to an end.
- Africa also imports \$2.9 billion worth of agricultural products from Ukraine. Impacts on food supplies may alienate some states from Russia.
- Around 20 percent of Ukraine’s foreign students are Africans. Moroccans make up the largest group with 8,000 students, Nigerians are second with 4,000 and Egyptians are third with 3,500.
 - In one video viewed over two million times, a crowd of Nigerian students can be seen pleading with armed border guards. Some kneel on the ground shouting, “We are students. We don’t have arms.”
 - At least two foreign students—one from India and another from Algeria—were killed during a Russian bombardment on Sunday of Kharkiv.
 - African governments are coming under increasing pressure as citizens living in Ukraine struggle to escape the war zone that may translate into a forced distancing from Russia.

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