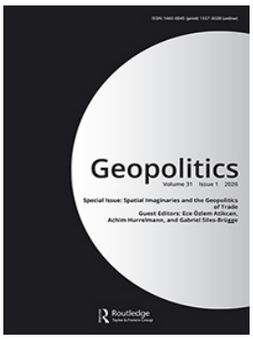

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Borders Ending Nowhere: The Geopolitical Imaginaries and Practices of Russia's Spheres of Interest in Africa

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ABSTRACT

Russia has been involved in Africa since Tsarist times, but its involvement has ebbed and flowed. Nonetheless, the idea of Africa as an open political landscape in which Russia could act as a great power has been relatively persistent, often in connection with the domestic resurfacing of civilisational discourses on Russian exceptionalism. Recently, there has been much concern in the West about the expansion of Russian projection in Africa, with some suggesting that Moscow is establishing a sphere of influence. Our analysis of Russia's geopolitical imagination and its subsequent practices does not lead us to conclude that a deliberate attempt to establish a genuine sphere of influence is underway. Instead, we see an opportunistic endeavour to assert and shape a geographically continuous sphere of interest (Russian: *sfera interesov*), negotiating with local partners forms of collaboration that reflect and prompt change in the international system.

> Russia has always been, is, and will be a great power
> (Yevgeny Primakov, Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation, 1996)

Introduction

Throughout history, Russian conceptions of Africa and their representational repertoires have fluctuated, while the tools these repertoires offer have evolved alongside changing circumstances. Nonetheless, the idea of Africa as an 'open geopolitical landscape', where Russia can play 'the Great Game' as a great power competing for influence with other world powers, has remained consistent. The antecedents of Russian imperial involvement in Africa during the 19th century can be taken as a starting point and situated within the wider narrative of Russia becoming a great power by reaching the warm seas. Traumatically defeated by a non-European power (Japan) in 1905 and partly eclipsed in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, Moscow

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returned in full force to the continent after the end of the Second World War, when the Soviet Union fought several proxy wars in Africa with the United States and the West.

The Soviet legacy as a staunch ally of anti-colonial movements has created a legacy for Russia that Moscow today exploits with apparent success in its quest for access and influence. Russia's argument that the world order it seeks to advance defends the right of different civilisations to determine their own political systems may be appealing to countries with vivid memories of Western colonialism (see Robinson 2025), especially those experiencing a patriotic awakening among their youth, such as the countries of the Sahel (see Bøås and Haavik 2025).

Seen through the lens of empire, the African 'countries of socialist orientation', led by often unstable Marxist-Leninist regimes, became frontier outposts during the Cold War: a group of countries whose composition was changing and which, unlike those European states that were integrated into the Warsaw Pact and COMECON, were not included as a part of Moscow's sphere of influence (in Russian, *sfera vliyaniya*).

Immediately after the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the Soviet Union, Russia once more almost vanished from Africa, preoccupied with its own internal transition and turmoil. Following the defeat of the so-called Westernisers, during the second half of the 1990s the Kremlin started rethinking its place in a unipolar world. Yevgeny Primakov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs (1996–98) led the efforts to redirect the foreign policy of Russia towards counterbalancing US hegemony through expanding influence via low-cost mediation (e.g., the Middle East) and by forming a 'strategic triangle' with China and India (a configuration *de facto* envisioning the future BRICS). As Vladimir Putin came to power with a more assertive approach to challenge the international liberal order, interest in Africa steadily increased over time: this process culminated in the aftermath of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, as Russia sought a combination of new alliances, resource mobilisation and strategic misinformation to disrupt European initiatives where they appeared most vulnerable, thus contributing to Europe's misalignment with its southern neighbourhood, that includes North Africa and the Sahel (Baldaro and Strazzari 2023; Bøås 2025).

We argue that, in pursuing a new quest for influence and recognition, Russia has sought to advance a narrative that leverages its strengths while downplaying its weaknesses: the Kremlin is aware of Russia's lack of economic resources needed to engage with Africa as a humanitarian, development or trade partner. However, Russia has demonstrated its ability to combine operating in niche security markets with deploying ingeniously conceived information warfare campaigns designed to serve its own interests and those of its allies – both established allies, such as in the Central African Republic (CAR), and emerging allies, such as the military regimes in the 'Sahelian triangle' of

Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger (Bøås 2025). Together, these factors contribute to the narrative of an alternative great power that can assist regimes in need by addressing issues that previous allies, such as France, could or would not address.

We aim to show how this is practiced through a flexible and pragmatic strategy that pursues Russia's interests at a relatively low cost, through security market operations by entrepreneurial outfits and hybrid information warfare campaigns. While the latter are not very costly to implement, the former can even prove to be profitable. Before we examine Russia's activities in the continent, we reconstruct how the Russian encounter with Africa has developed historically, from initial adventurist entrepreneurial activities in Tsarist times, to a control-and-command model in the Soviet era, then back to an entrepreneurial approach (via the Wagner Group), and – finally – into a new attempt to gain command and control (via the Africa Corps and the Africa Initiative). We highlight how all these approaches are based on Russian ideas about African territory and geography as open landscapes where Russia can advance at low cost, whether as a colonising force under the Tsar or as the promoter of an alternative, multipolar world order as it does currently.

These imaginaries are endlessly (re)formulated, often through the selective co-optation of narratives, by elites that 'define and articulate the importance of a particular geographical region for their foreign policy' (Svarin 2016, 129). While Russia's geopolitical projection in its border regions – the 'Near Abroad' whose existence is postulated by the Kremlin as an objective fact – has sparked much research and reflection, the imagery, narratives and practices that underpin how Africa has come into Russia's focus remain under-researched. Thus, in our exploration of Russia's geopolitical imagery and the Kremlin's thinking about Africa we also aim to contribute to the debate on 'Russia and the return of spheres of influence' that the journal *Geopolitics* launched by hosting a special issue guest edited by Iain Ferguson and Susann Hast in 2018.[1] To do this, we offer a genealogical account of the evolution of Russian self-perceptions and geopolitics concerning the Global South, and Africa more specifically. Our specific aim is to explore the geopolitical imaginary that underlies Russa's current intervention in the broader Sahel region and provide a critical account of how Russia's geopolitical narratives are reverberated in its pivotal initiatives in this region. To do so, we first review the Russian historical record in Africa, then – given the peculiarity of Russia's civilisational discourse – we delve into debates among intellectuals and ruling elites about the distinctive nature of Russia and how this nature affects its foreign projection. Finally, we examine the key areas of Russian activity in the Sahel to determine whether these activities are the practical outcome of internal discussions and ideas about Africa and what Russia can currently achieve. This reconstruction adopts a mixed methods approach: an analysis

of primary and secondary sources concerning Russian global strategy and foreign policy in Africa, integrated with our observations from ethnographic field missions that were conducted in the period between 2013 and 2023 in the Sahel, where we met and talked to numerous international officers, diplomats, local politicians and experts, but also several local farmers, traders, former combatants, and underemployed youths.[2]

We contend that a sober assessment of Russian projection in Africa is in order: our analysis of how Russia's geopolitical imaginary and subsequent practices relates to its initiatives on the grounds does not lead to conclude that a deliberate attempt to construct a genuine sphere of influence is underway, while it stresses the limits of these initiatives in achieving success. Rather, what we see is an opportunistic endeavour to assert and shape a geographically continuous *sphere of interest* (in Russian, *sfera interesov*), negotiating collaboration with local partners.

Spheres of Influence and Spheres of Interest

Multiple indications of Russia's growing footprint in Africa's Sahel have raised questions about a sphere of influence under construction, and the way in which this could be seen as a threat in an international order increasingly characterised by geopolitical tensions (D'Amato and Baldaro 2024; Stronski 2023; Van Dam 2024).

The concept of sphere of influence, however, lacks solid theoretical grounding or – better said – remains essentially contested in the literature. Costa Buranelli (2018), 381–82) investigates its unstable meaning, oscillating between territorial arrangement (projection of influence and control), geographical space, policy tool/practice regarding relations between major and small powers, and strategic doctrine. He concludes, in agreement with Keal (1983), that a sphere of influence can be best described as 'a determinate region within which a single external power exerts a predominant influence, which limits the independence or freedom of action of political entities within it' (1983, 15). More specifically, a sphere of influence can be seen as a zone of strategic predominance unchallenged by any other great powers (Roberts 1999, 655; see also Kaufman 1976, 11).

The concept has its historical roots. Even before the Yalta Conference of 1945, when it was enshrined as a foreign policy doctrine, the concept was already a fixture in the political and diplomatic discourse of 18th-century expansionism and imperialism. One notable example is the 'Great Game' (in Russian *Bolshaya Igra*) of rivalry and conflict between the British and Russian empires in Central Asia. In the correspondence of the period, the concept of sphere of influence is defined as an intermediate form of control, situated between a formal protectorate and a simple 'sphere of interest': a type of

control that is inferior to that of an occupying or colonising power, but superior to that of a coalition leader.

In a sphere of influence, formal state sovereignty is typically maintained (and indeed affirmed), while commercial exploitation and political influence are the prerogatives of a Great Power. Reading international affairs in terms of spheres of influence is typically driven by materialist understanding of power and control. Reinforced through tacit understandings, their establishment may contribute to war avoidance among competing great powers: the emphasis is laid on the idea of exclusion of other powers and of subjugation of local client states. In contrast, the notion of *sphere of interest* appears to be less ideologically driven and less binding.

In post-Soviet Russia the distinction between influence and interest became explicit in 2008, when the Kremlin moved its army to invade a neighbour for the first time, during the eight-day war in Georgia. On this occasion and even more so in 2014, with the seizure of Crimea and portions of Western Ukraine, Western political leaders such as Angela Merkel, David Cameron, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, accused Russia of attempting to reinstate spheres of influence near its borders in the post-Soviet space. Yet, as Ferguson and Hast (2018, 278) claim, 'the most revealing aspect of this discourse' was 'not what it has to say about Russia itself, but rather the Western geopolitical imagination of the role Russia plays in world politics' – i.e., the role of the villain in what Mark Galeotti (2018) has defined the Kremlin's 'dark power', with Putin represented as the dark prince of international relations. To put it another way, it is difficult to study Russia's geopolitical imagination without considering how pervasive the Western political imagination of Russia as Europe's constitutive other (Neumann 1998) is, and how dominant the realist-inspired narrative of an eternal 'return to the spheres of influence' is, that are represented as a timeless geopolitical form, regardless of any considerations about what influence may mean in different times and contexts.

Back then, President Medvedev defined it as 'natural' for Russia to regard the former Soviet republics as a key strategic zone of its 'privileged interests',[3] which he defined as corresponding to its historical imperial space (Trenin 2009). Additionally, Medvedev stated that Russia's interests in the world were not limited to the post-Soviet space. Emphasis on Russia's global influence underpinned the aspiration to establish a less Western-centric system and to reclaim the status of a fully-fledged world power in the 21st century.

However, these appeals to a geo-cultural space inherited from the empire and the articulation of the geopolitical ambition, often celebrated in messianic tones, must confront the reality of Russia's economic and demographic weakness. While the necessity for external recognition of a sphere of interest is pivotal to comprehending Russia's emphasis on developing external projection capabilities, an examination of the 30 years of post-Soviet transition reveals that Russia's primary challenge lies in its poor ability to exert influence

and control (Tyushka 2018; Welch Larson and Shevchenko 2014). If one looks beyond some specific cases, Russia is unlikely to become the dominant external partner for African states soon. In the energy sector, for example, Russia faces major competition from Chinese, Indian and Western companies (Kazeeva and Kozyreva 2022). At the same time, Russia still has a potential to serve as an attractive alternative to the West for those seeking a different foreign policy orientation.

Shadows of Empire

While the Tsardom of Russia did not have colonies in Africa, the assertion that it was not involved in the colonial expansion in Africa is historically speaking wrong. Tsarist officials engaged in the active study, admiration and even encouragement of colonial practices, which were perceived in 18th-century Russia as a shared trans-imperial experience (Matusevich 2007).

Russia accorded particular attention to Algeria and the Horn of Africa. In Moscow, an explicit parallel was drawn between the conquest and colonisation of the former by France and Russia's own projection in Transcaucasia and subsequently in Central Asia. Russian imperial society placed a particular emphasis on the perceived similarities of the South Caucasus with Algeria. In 1869, the orientalist Nikolai Khanykov praised France and Russia as the nations engaged in a collaborative endeavour to combat Muslim fanaticism in Algeria and the Caucasus. In 1831, a Russian military journal underlined the contribution of Russia's military experience in the East to the conquest of Algiers the previous year.

This was justified by the usual argument of *mission civilisatrice*: Europe was compelled to intervene to prevent the further rapacity and cruelty of the local barbarians. Among the invaders of Algiers was Colonel Aleksei Filosofov, who had participated in the capture of Yerevan and was dispatched by Tsar Nicholas to North Africa as a military advisor on fortifications. Tsarist Russia generated a specific regime of internal coloniality and construction of colonial differences in Central Asia, in the Caucasus, in the Sub-Arctic region and in Eastern Europe. The Russian war minister, Aleksandr Chernyshov, produced a comprehensive manual on the techniques of 'oriental warfare', encompassing a range of topics from hygiene to logistics. Colonialism was predicated on the principles of learning and sharing among civilised powers, with Russia aspiring to become a full participant and learning about Africa from European colonisers.

Towards the end of the century, a second distinct phase of attention can be identified. In 1889, publications disseminated by the Russian imperial government announced the establishment of a Russian colony in Africa, designated as New Moscow.[4] In the Gulf of Tadjoura (present-day Djibouti), the monk-adventurer Nikolai Ashinov, took possession of an abandoned fort in the

village of Sagallo, which he named *Novaya Moskva*. Apparently, the governor of Nizhny Novgorod – Russia's commercial hub for trade with the Caucasus, Iran and Central Asia – had a role in persuading Emperor Alexander III about the opportunity for resource exploitation and trade with the locals, when he suggested establishing a Russian-African company with its own fleet and garrison (Polianichev 2023). In response to the expedition, the French government demanded an explanation from the Russian ambassador in Paris, thereby attempting to distance the Empire from the operation. Eventually the French sent three gunboats, which opened fire, effectively ending the operation and Russia's attempt to gain a foothold in the Indian Ocean.

After failing in the Red Sea, Russia turned its colonial appetites towards Ethiopia, also due to its Orthodox faith. Today the Kremlin asserts that Russia provided crucial assistance to Ethiopia in its defensive efforts against Italian colonial aggression. This aid can be seen as the origin of Russia's anti-colonial rhetoric. In contrast, archival research by historians has revealed a different account of events. First, Russian Consul Petr Vlasov described Ethiopia as 'an obedient weapon in our hands' that could be used as leverage against other colonial powers in the event of war.[5] Second, it is a fact that in 1894, an exploration expedition was organised by Nikolai Leontiev, who was known in Ethiopia as Count Abai. A landowner and adventurer, Leontiev gained the trust of Negus Menelik II: the plan was to establish a colony for Russia on the caravan route from Harar to the Red Sea in exchange for assisting Ethiopia in repelling the Italians. Ethiopia, however, did not receive any substantial military supplies until the war against Italy was over. Yet in recognition of his contributions, he was appointed Governor-General of the Equatorial Provinces, a territory he himself named so.

Leontiev was preoccupied with the notion of capitalising on the mineral riches of the region. In 1902, he extended an invitation to Nicholas II, proposing that the latter assume control of the aforementioned rights in anticipation of the inevitable partition of Ethiopia. However, the plan to involve the Tsarist Empire on a larger scale through a joint-stock company to extract resources did not receive answers from St. Petersburg, resulting in Leontiev trying to attract French, British and Belgian capital instead. Later, Leontiev made a second attempt with the Tsar: this time, however, Menelik intervened, and expelled him from the country. It should be noted that today, the Russian embassy in Ethiopia portrays Leontiev as the hero of Russian anti-colonialism, celebrating the battle of Adwa, where the Italian were defeated, as 'our common Victory Day'.[6]

Except for the embassy in Addis Ababa, which was inherited from the Tsarist Empire, the Soviet Union had no diplomatic relations with any African countries during the colonial period. From the 1950s onwards, the Soviet Union sought to gain strategic influence in newly independent African states, which it designated as allies, while simultaneously

attempting to redirect the continent's foreign policy orientation away from the West. In general, African leaders were weary of new forms of foreign intervention and interference, which contributed significantly to the development of the Non-Aligned Movement and, above all, vary to being drawn into the geopolitical competition between the superpowers.[7]

Nevertheless, the policy of non-alignment did not impede the struggle against the remaining Portuguese colonies and the white minority regimes in South Africa, Rhodesia and Namibia. This circumstance is significant in understanding the consolidation of narratives in which imperialism in Africa is equated with the West, while Russian involvement is typically perceived as less imperialist than Western involvement (Duursma and Masuhr 2022, 410). For example, the deployment of Russian security personnel to the Central African Republic (CAR) was presented as a mere return to a country with which Russia had already established diplomatic relations, following an invitation extended by President Bokassa in 1964.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, which asserted its status as the successor state, terminated operations at nine embassies and three consulates, and demonstrated minimal or no interest in Africa for the subsequent two decades. Before examining how the debate on Russian foreign policy ambitions and projection in far-abroad Africa took shape in post-Soviet Russia, a caveat is in order. A significant distinction between the approach adopted by the Russian Federation and that of the Soviet Union is that the former, in contrast to the latter, has pursued a strategy of direct engagement, primarily in countries that either the West has overlooked or countries that have actively distanced themselves from the West.

In other words, the current Russia's Africa policy is based on a geopolitical understanding of the African space that is more opportunistic than during the Cold War and at least until Prigozhin's rebellion and fall it was more entrepreneurial in mode than statist control and command operations.

Thinking Through Russia's Difference

For a long time, Africa was largely absent from domestic debates on Russian foreign policy, which focused instead on Eurasia, the Euro-Atlantic, and the Asia-Pacific (Svarin, 2016). Understanding Russian expansionism in Africa requires contextualising it within the broader historical trajectory of Russian expansionism, as a narrative directed towards the domestic audience. This entails examining figures, themes, and imagery that have shaped its intellectual articulation, especially the idea of a geo-cultural space nurturing an exceptional nation destined to project power far afield. In this section we thus explore the foundations of geopolitical thinking among Russian elites,

highlighting the emergence of tropes that are highly pertinent to Russian activity in Africa.

After being dismissed as a 'false ideology' during the Soviet era, geopolitics resurged in post-socialist Russia. Russia now ranks second globally in the number of geopolitical publications – approximately 4,000 in 2018 alone[8] — offering orthodox, revisionist, isolationist, and subaltern empire perspectives (Tyushka 2018). This distinctive geopolitical reasoning deeply influences public debate, saturated with map imagery where judgements are framed as objective and urgent. Popular TV figures (e.g., Vladimir Solovyov) deliver prime-time forecasts of global cartographic change (Cole 2024). In 2022, amidst the war in Ukraine, Moscow billboards invited paratrooper recruits with the slogan 'The borders of Russia end nowhere' (*Granitsi Rossii nigde ne zakanchivautsya*). The phrase originated from a televised 2016 geography event where Vladimir Putin himself quizzed a child on world geography—e.g., 'What is the former name of Burkina Faso?' – and on Russian borders, jokingly formulating the motto that now accompanies Russia's wars of conquest.[9]

It is important to comprehend how this ties into the enduring debate on Russian identity. Historically, Russia, like the African subject in colonial discourse, was marginalised as an orientalised Other of inferior difference. Recognising this ambiguity is essential when discussing the modern construction of 'Russian ethnicity' and the development of its expansionist/imperial visions (Khomyakov 2020; Koplatadze 2019). The global colonial narrative traditionally pivoted on whiteness, Christianity, and progress, positioning Africa as the racialised Other. During the height of colonialism in the 1870s, 'human zoos' featuring 'primitives' became popular in Europe and eventually reached Moscow (Novikova 2013). Though the Moscow Zoo typically showcased indigenous peoples from Russia's far north, from the 1870s onward exhibitions like the Dahomey Amazon shows marked Russia's participation in the broader European racial imaginary, aligning it with the West's vision of Africa as exotic and inferior.[10]

Russia's ongoing identity crisis, especially in times of upheaval, is tightly linked to debates over its internal and external Others and its geopolitical aspirations. This identity search intensified after the Cold War, when Russia experienced deep social and international marginalisation: ideas of Russian exceptionalism regained traction (Oskanian 2021), fuelling revisionist challenges to the liberal international order, especially after the 2008 war with Georgia (Allison 2008; Shevtsova 2015).

These ideas trace back to intellectual traditions, notably the Slavophiles of the 19th and 20th centuries, who rejected liberalism and social contract theory in favour of the idealised rural commune. This anti-Western stance, portraying liberalism as morally bankrupt, resonates with the current critique of the 'decaying West'. Thinkers like Trubetzkoy in 1920 blamed

Europeanisation for colonialism's catastrophes, suggesting Russia evolved organically, unconstrained by the legacy of Roman-Germanic civilisation (Strazzari 2022, 95). This introspective tradition shapes Russia's foreign policy imaginary and its engagement with Africa. During the 1990s, President Yeltsin, despite recently approved constitutional bans on ideology, sought a new unifying national idea. Among those answering this call was Lev Gumilev, whose controversial theories on ethnogenesis and historiosophy reconnected post-Soviet discourse with Slavophile and Eurasianist traditions.[11] Another pivotal figure is Aleksandr Dugin, a former member of the opposition group Pamyat. Dugin gained influence with the publication of *Foundations of Geopolitics* (Dugin 1997) and taught at the Moscow Military Academy. His ideas remain highly visible in contemporary discourse.

The 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, justified by the 'responsibility to protect', yet culminating in regime change, fuelled Russia's narrative about Western destructiveness-one already articulated by Putin in his 2007 Munich speech (Putin 2007). The Libyan crisis provided Russia an opening to reassert influence in North Africa (Delanoë and Hedjazi 2021). Further, the Syrian war and international boycotts of the Sochi Olympics in 2014 reinforced Russia's geopolitical posturing. That year, President Obama described Russia as a 'regional power', grouped with threats like Ebola and terrorism. In response, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov introduced the 'Primakov doctrine' (TASS 2014). Meanwhile, a cultural policy draft in Moscow redefined Russian civilisation as distinct from the West and diverging from liberalism, drawing on Russian intellectuals (e.g., Danilevsky, Gumilev) but also on Huntington and Toynbee.

Putin also recommended ideological readings to United Russia party members, notably works by the anti-Bolshevik exiled aristocrat Nikolai Berdyaev and Ivan Ilyin. The latter's post-war writings, compiled in *Our Tasks* (Ilyin 1956), envisioned Russia's rebirth under a powerful leader. These texts resonated with conservative-nationalist elements in late-Soviet circles (Pomerantsev 2015). This emphasis was no novelty: the so-called 'Pinochet model' of governance – strong leadership through transitional crises – had been debated in Moscow as early as the late 1980s (Sautman 1995). A more recent innovation is 'sovereign democracy', first proposed by Vladislav Surkov, a key figure in the early Putin era,[12] who argued that unmanaged freedom can destabilise both people and state. Sovereignty here is anchored not in law but in state capacity, backed by military power, tradition, and religion. Rights are sidelined in favour of 'people's needs', and economics is seen as situational, echoing Huntington's terminology.[13] Surkov also forecasted a new era of information warfare aimed at destabilising perception rather than defeating enemies. Coherent ideology is abandoned in favour of strategic ambiguity.

Russia's projection into Africa becomes more pronounced in strategic documents during the latter part of the Putin era. The 2015 *National Security Strategy* mentions Africa only in the context of ungoverned conflict zones (NSS 2015), but the 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept* prioritises ties with African states and the AU (FPC 2016). Leaked documents like *African World* (2018) stress support for African self-identity and anti-imperialism (Harding and Burke 2019). Analysts (Kazeeva and Kozyreva 2022; Melkonyan 2023) identify the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit as a turning point, marked by energy sector contracts.

The 2021 and 2023 iterations of Russia's *National Security Strategy* and *Foreign Policy Concept* go further, explicitly opposing the colonial West and framing Russia as a corrective power (NSS 2021). The 2023 document envisions Africa as a vital geopolitical pole and promotes 'accurate' portrayals of Russia's global role (FPC 2023). Ahead of the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, Putin reiterated support for 'African solutions to African problems' and promised to replace Ukrainian grain supplies, both commercially and free of charge (Putin 2023). Foreign policy strategist Sergei Karaganov has advocated for leveraging Russia's Soviet legacy to build ties with the 'world majority', especially Africa. The Karaganov doctrine proposes a multipolar alliance led by Russia and China, grounded in shared 'Mongolian genres' (Larouelle 2024).

In sum, Putin-era Russia consolidates several enduring themes: existential insecurity when unrecognised as a power, the moral critique of the West, and the strategic framing of Africa as a stage to contest Western failures. While traditionalist and authoritarian themes resonate globally, the turn to transversal media strategies and influence operations marks a recent evolution rooted in older ideological blueprints.

From Security Provision to Spheres of Interest

The evolution of Putin's Russia posture in the Sub-Saharan Africa started in CAR in 2018 while its breakthrough moment was in the Sahel in 2020. From providing logistical support for General Haftar in Libya to ensuring regime security in CAR and subsequently undertaking a leapfrogging manoeuvre across the Sahara to reach Mali, Russia appears to have successfully marketed its product as an 'an alternative ally to countries that wants to escape the neocolonialism of Europe' (read France), offering both regime security and boots on the ground to fight jihadi rebellions. From the perspective of the Kremlin, this posture can be regarded as a success. However, while regime security maybe within Russian reach, the results in the battle against the Jihadi insurgencies are not very impressive. Russian forces have taken large casualties in Northern Mali (see Meier and Hoije 2024), and the 17th of September 2024 attack in Bamako where Wagner forces present could not prevent jihadi rebels

from gaining control of the military part of the airport for several hours was a huge blow to the credibility of Russia and Russian agents as security providers (see Lawal 2024).

Thus, while there has been much speculation and anecdotal evidence about Russia and the Wagner Group's activities in Africa (see Bukkvoll and Østensen 2020; Dobos and Purton 2023) viewed soberly their track records as security providers have been mixed at best and at worst a failure. For example, measured against Bamako's military rulers' objective of regaining control over areas where rebels and jihadist insurgents have expanded in recent years, Wagner's mercenaries have been unsuccessful.[14] CAR, the first country targeted by Russia's new African strategy, remains the only case where the Wagner Group can claim with any degree of credibility to have made a difference in the fight against insurgencies.

However, the war effort is not the only reason why regimes in fragile states may hire the services of a company like Wagner. Regime survival and protection against coups and popular uprisings is another plausible motive (Pilster and Böhmelt 2012). To understand Wagner's activities and how the group provided Russia with a foothold in the Sahel therefore require a reading of Wagner's business model and how it is closely linked to the info-war strategy that Surkov himself outlined as new *non-linear form of warfare*.

The Wagner Business Model

Wagner started in Africa as a private security company. It was an entrepreneurial activity by one company and one man – e.g. Yevgeny Prigozhin – although with the blessings and limited support from the Kremlin (see Lechner 2025). In this respect, it was not so different from similar military and security companies from the United States, such as Blackwater, Military Personnel Resources Incorporated (MPRI) or South African based Executive Outcomes that is the contemporary African pioneer under the leadership of Eben Barlow (Singer 2003).

The main difference between Wagner and these other companies is that Wagner's headquarters is in an authoritarian state where there is no free press. What Blackwater did in Iraq was eventually exposed by investigative journalists, leading to Congressional hearings and court cases (Johnston 2009): court cases due to human rights abuses in Africa (Human Rights Watch 2024) is not something that Wagner will have to worry about in Putin's Russia.

Formally, Wagner operates in the Sahel and Africa through government contracts. The only known exception is the deal with General Haftar in Libya. Nonetheless, the contract is only a first step towards achieving something else: what the company really is after are mineral concessions. This goal was achieved in the case of CAR, and it is clearly an ambition in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso (Blood Gold Report 2023). Wagner has its

own department of geologists: our field research indicates that they have been on the ground in Mali, so far with limited success. The easily accessible gold deposits in the southern districts of Mali have already been concessioned to companies from Canada, France and Switzerland. So far, the military government led by Colonel Goïta that invited Wagner to Mali, has introduced a new mining code and higher royalties (UNCTAD Investment Policy Hub 2023), but it neither dared to revoke these concessions nor attempted to nationalise the mines. Russia can help Mali to process the gold domestically. However, the newly discovered gold deposits are alluvial and mined by artisanal miners. They are in areas either under the control of jihadi insurgencies or hardly controlled by anyone (Raineri 2020). This means that if Wagner is to exploit them, the group would have to fight its way to them and be able to hold them. For the time being this appears to be beyond Wagner's capacity in Mali. A similar situation is found in Burkina Faso.

This is significant because it indicates that Wagner's Sahel operations are unlikely to generate the anticipated level of profitability for the group, as initially anticipated when the decision to establish a presence in the region was made. The process has not yet demonstrated a similar operational pattern in Mali and its neighbouring countries as it has in the Central African Republic. Wagner has not managed to construct a similar corporate entity, where revenues from gold and diamond mining have been reinvested in a variety of other business ventures, ranging from timber and agriculture to social media, a brewery and the local production of vodka (see The Sentry 2023). It is at this juncture that the full scope of Prigozhin's vision of a private military company organised as a fully armed trading company becomes evident. This vision resonates with the failed Russian colonial attempts described above and represents a departure from the precedent set by the British East Asia Trade Company. This business model goes far beyond the dreams of Eben Barlow for Executive Outcomes (Hardin 1997), who envisioned a holding company, Plaza 109 Ltd, that would sell various services, but he never imagined that he and his men would themselves hold mineral concessions, run social media factories, or produce beer and hard liquor.

Much speculation about the future of Wagner's Africa operations followed Prigozhin's death on 23 August 2023 (Droin and Dolbaia 2023): would it be taken over by more central figures in the Kremlin, or simply cease to exist? In retrospect, not much has happened. The group is now mostly referred to as the Russian Africa Corps, and an element of more Soviet-style command-and-control measures has been introduced (see Faulkner, Plichta, and Parers 2024). It appears that the scope for a free-spirited entrepreneurial ethos, reminiscent of Prigozhin's era, has diminished in contemporary times. Nevertheless, the operational framework, the business infrastructure, the social media facility in Bangui, and even key personnel, remain intact.

In the aftermath of Prigozhin's death concerns were raised by African leaders who had previously conducted business with Wagner. Some of Wagner's key operatives on the ground in the Sahel region disappeared, either from the region or from sight. Rumours circulated that these operatives had been ordered to report at the frontlines in Ukraine. This period of heightened activity was ephemeral in nature. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov took the initiative to provide reassurance that the prevailing circumstances remained unaltered and that ongoing operations would proceed as scheduled. Wagner operatives began to reappear in Bangui and Bamako, and while there is still some confusion as to how the group should now be called, for all practical purposes it is still Wagner (Lechner and Eledinov 2024). This was very visible in November 2023, when the Malian army entered Kidal, the long-held headquarters of the northern rebels: one of the first images to emerge was of cloth with Wagner symbols on it.

Military leaders worried about coups from domestic opponents and jihadi insurgents will continue to use Wagner's services. The group may therefore still be able to expand its operations in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. That business model was mainly concerned with commercial activity: mineral extraction based on clandestine operations in niche security markets: what Russia has to offer is basically regime protection in exchange for resources extraction.

This dynamic may look to some observers devoid of ideological contours, yet it does also represent a connection to Russian imaginaries of Africa as an open geopolitical landscape, or – better said – the projected imagination of a Russian self in search of warm seas and international status. To better capture this, we need to turn to the sphere of online and social media influence. In line with the aforementioned 'Primakov doctrine' here we see a representation of Russia as vector of change, a superpower facilitating the transition towards a multipolar world order with more limited Western influence. Info-warfare is one of the most cost-effective strategies for a Russia that cannot be a leader in global trade and development, and that even in strictly military terms does not have much to offer, since most of what it has in stock or can produce in new and advanced weapons is needed on the war front in Ukraine. Russia therefore must 'do Africa' on a shoestring budget: while well-executed info-war campaigns can be very effective, they need not cost that much.

Info-Warfare for Great Power Status

Although these campaigns predate Russia's war on Ukraine, they have undoubtedly increased in scope and intensity since February 2022. The utilisation of social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Telegram, X and TikTok has been observed to disseminate content that is designed to

cast doubts on Western operations in Africa and to garner political endorsement for Russia's military actions in Ukraine. These campaigns were initiated as early as July 2013, when the Internet Research Agency (IRA) was established by Prigozhin himself. By creating 'troll factories' for internet manipulation, the IRA disseminated messages intended to provoke hostile reactions against Western countries in Africa, particularly former colonial powers.

This dynamic has been observed in several continent-wide campaigns, as well as other campaigns organised in specific African countries. The latter have primarily focused on Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali and Niger. However, there is also evidence of ongoing campaigns in Chad, Mozambique, South Africa and Sudan (see Snigry 2024). By invoking anti-colonial tropes, these campaigns have proven to be more efficacious in fragile francophone countries such as Mali, where a decade of large-scale misguided international interventions has engendered widespread scepticism and overt hostility towards the West in general and France in particular (Bøås 2025). It is evident that Russian agents, such as the Wagner Group, have sought to amplify popular sentiments that have arisen from misguided international intervention. Nevertheless, the question remains as to the extent of the impact of the Russian-led effort. The question of whether it has had a significant impact on the population, leading to a shift in sentiment towards anti-Western beliefs, remains a subject of debate.

While there is no existing systematic research about this, we would still caution against the prevailing sentiment that Russia and Russian agents have misled Mali, and that manipulation explains the country's shift away from the West. We acknowledge that recent surveys in the Sahel report that young people have a positive perception of the Russian presence in the region, even including Russian private military companies (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2024), but this is not the same as saying that these views are caused by Russian information warfare (see Bøås and Haavik 2025). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that surveys with similar questions conducted in Anglophone Africa show the opposite result. This suggests that Russian infowar campaigns are most effective in fragile, conflict-prone states where the former colonial power (e.g. France) has played an active role in failed international attempts at conflict resolution. In these countries, Russian agents, sometimes under the guise of 'ghost reporters' (Ritzen 2025), have found local allies who wield considerable influence online as they narrate the sins of neocolonialism.

Working with African Influence

The Pan-African Project, initiated by Prigozhin, appears to have operated from December 2017 to July 2019. Its ambition was to establish a network of pan-African activist groups on the continent that were favourable to Russian views. A notable outcome of the project was the sponsorship deal with the

Franco-Beninese social media influencer Kémi Séba. This deal presented a golden opportunity for Prigozhin, given that Séba has around 1.3 million Facebook followers, 307,000 Instagram followers, and 233,000 YouTube subscribers. In December 2017, Séba was invited to Moscow by the Aleksander Dugin for the launch of the Pan-African Project, where a sponsorship deal was agreed whereby Séba would be paid to disseminate pro-Russian social media content (Proekt Team 2019).

Leaked reports suggest that Séba received a total of $444,000 from Prigozhin and his associates (Roger 2023). According to Séba, the deal fell through in July 2019 when Prigozhin demanded that his NGO, Urgences Panafricanista, take violent action – a request Séba refused. Nevertheless, Séba continued his online activities, and in February 2022 he posted a video on Facebook in which he declared his support for the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In the video, he claimed that Moscow was reclaiming Russian territory. The 15-minute clip received 213,000 likes and attracted 47,200 comments, most of which supported his message.

Another example of the close ties between Russian agents and African influencers emerged during the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in October 2019. Here, Nathalie Yamb, also known as the 'Lady of Sochi', was recruited as a key African influencer. Like Séba, Yamb was already a well-known figure on African social media. She has hundreds of thousands of followers on social media and runs a YouTube channel that publishes content in support of the anti-French (and anti-Western) agenda of the military regimes in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. The key messages are to discredit France as a post-colonial villain, support the military regimes' sovereignty claims, and portray the Wagner fighters as saviours.

Launched as a website in September 2023, the Africa Initiative is the most recent of the many platforms created by various Russian agents and entrepreneurs.[15] The website has been a platform for the dissemination of health-related disinformation, in the form of conspiracies targeting Western pharmaceutical companies and Western health programmes in Africa. This has included spreading fake news about the outbreak of a new mosquito-borne viral disease in Africa caused by experiments by Western pharmaceutical companies (U.S. Department of State 2024).

The Africa Initiative has also organised forums for African and Russian media companies, journalists, teachers, public figures and diplomats through the so-called Russian-African Club, which includes the Moscow State University Faculty of Journalism and the Faculty of Global Processes. The African Initiative has organised at least two trips for African bloggers and journalists to Russian-occupied territories in Ukraine. One was to Mariupol in May 2024. The main component of this African delegation was a group of Malian bloggers (BBC Global Disinformation Team 2024). The other tour took place in June 2024 and consisted of a seven-day visit to other areas of

Russian-occupied Ukraine (Ibid). The aim is clearly to sell Russian views to African audiences through young African influencers.

The same can be said of the African Initiative's latest release, an online video game called African Dawn. Inspired by the Hearts of Iron saga, the aim is to create a sovereign Sahel confederation, and players can take on the role of Captain Ibrahim Traoré of Burkina Faso, President Goïta of Mali or even President Putin in their struggle to limit the influence and abuses of neo-colonial powers (Olivier 2024).

The Sahel Triangle and CAR

While pro-Russian influencers and social media campaigns were already present before the military coups in 2020 (Mali), 2022 (Burkina Faso) and 2023 (Niger), their activity intensified after the new juntas came to power.[16] For example, a concerted campaign began in September 2021 to support Mali's turn to Moscow for military support, while at the same time denouncing France and its colonial past. In the months leading up to the September 2022 coup in Burkina Faso that brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power, pro-Moscow media mentions skyrocketed, and the engagement of social media posts mentioning Wagner increased by over 6,000% (Le Roux and Knight 2023).

This trend has intensified further since the launch of the Africa Initiative. Several major events have been organised in Ouagadougou between January and July 2024. In January, the Russia House was officially opened in the capital. Although it offers free Russian language courses, its primary objective is to promote the Russian language and culture. However, it also houses an information centre whose main aim is to disseminate anti-neocolonialist propaganda from Russian and Russian-friendly sources. From 18 to 21 January 2024, the Africa Initiative organised a graffiti festival in Ouagadougou, bringing together invited pan-African artists from Mali, Niger, and Benin to paint murals of leaders from Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, as well as Putin and other Russian 'heroes'. In May, a conference was held in Ouagadougou to build on the online campaign against Western pharmaceuticals and health programmes in Africa. This conference repeated the misleading and false information from the aforementioned online campaign. Another conference was organised in July, this time focusing on 'Youth, education and the fight against terrorism in Burkina Faso'. This conference was accompanied by a photo exhibition entitled '10 Years of War in Donbass', curated by the pro-Moscow Italian propagandist Vittorio Rangeloni.

A similar trend can be observed in Mali and Niger, where social media campaigns are combined with traditional propaganda methods, such as establishing information centres, holding conferences, and creating murals. In Mali, this was evident in the blizzard of campaigns on Facebook and Twitter (now

X) in April 2022. These targeted France and Operation Barkhane, based on allegations that French troops had committed atrocities in central Mali. Posts showed pictures of a mass grave in Gossi, near a French military base that had been handed back to the Malian army after Operation Barkhane ended. However, the mass grave was fake; it was later revealed that Wagner agents had buried the bodies there in order to falsely accuse the departing French forces of leaving a mass grave behind. The intention was evidently to discredit France and Operation Barkhane and pave the way for the arrival of Wagner troops on the ground (Burke 2022). In Niger, a major social media campaign was launched in July 2023 (around the time of the coup). It involved many posts on Telegram, WhatsApp, X and Facebook. This campaign supported the coup, denounced ECOWAS and proclaimed that inviting the Wagner troops was the answer to Niger's security challenges. Content about Niger on Russian Telegram channels linked to either the Russian state or the Wagner group increased by 6,600% in the month after the coup (African Centre for Strategic Studies 2024; Burke 2023).

These illustrations from Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger expose massive, well-planned and orchestrated campaigns. However, two questions remain: Firstly, what impact do they have? While Russia and Russian agents are exacerbating existing anti-French/Western sentiments, it is unclear to what extent these campaigns are amplifying existing emotions and grievances. Secondly, irrespective of the effect of the amplification that Russian agents are attempting to achieve, another and equally important question is: how long will these messages remain credible? Russian forces have been on the ground in Mali for almost four years and in Burkina Faso for about two years. Yet chances of conflict improvement in Mali and Burkina Faso are quite grim. Even if offering regime security may be the key Russian interest, by being on the ground they present themselves as an alternative to France and the West. At some point, the Russian service's credibility is likely to run out, and when that happens the credibility of the media campaigns and the African influencers that it sponsors will also be dealt a blow to its legitimacy. The reasons for this is simply that if the security situation and people's livelihood deterioates even further at some point reality will bit so hard that it also will affect the world that exists online.

While we cannot predict when this will happen, just as the French intervention in Mali was initially very popular, the Russian moment may be equally relatively brief. While one must objectively acknowledge that Russia has played its limited cards strategically, considering the historical patterns we have highlighted thus far, Moscow does not have many other options. It can point to its anti-colonial stance during the Soviet era, offer coup-proofing and a few extra troops, and sponsor African influencers and social media campaigns. However, it cannot compete with other powers when it comes to trade and aid. Russia can mainly offer 'Africa on a shoestring'.

While it has established a strong presence in certain places, such as Bangui and the Central African Republic (CAR), becoming an integral part of the local political economy can also undermine its own commitment. When a local strongman, such as CAR's President Touadéra, hires an organisation like the Wagner Group, it is presumably based on the same logic that led to the formation of the Swiss Papal Guard in 1506: the belief that an external force would provide protection in exchange for payment. However, this may change as the Wagner Group evolves into a powerful and autonomous commercial enterprise. Consequently, over time, the relationship between the projection of Russian force and the local strongman may begin to weaken. We observe that President Touadéra is diversifying his options. He is turning to Kigali for security services while simultaneously making friendly gestures to France (see International Crisis Group 2023; Le Monde 2024). The fact that this is happening in the country where Russia's new military adventurism in Africa began suggests that what we are currently seeing is not the expansion of a sphere of influence, but rather the establishment of a sphere of interest that is more fragile than Moscow would like. This has important ramifications for how we should think about Russia's strategy in Africa in an age of intense geopolitical competition.

Conclusion

Russia's attempts to access, pursue its interests in and exert influence over the African continent have historically fluctuated, often in line with its domestic situation. However, these endeavours have also been shaped by the Tsarist Empire's initial aspiration to attain and maintain the status of a great power. Although the defensive mindset inherited from the early attempts to consolidate the Bolshevik Revolution and the ideological reliance on the worldwide expansion of socialism did not necessarily favour military adventurism (Nation 1992), after World War II the Soviet Union made substantial efforts in Africa that contributed to consolidating its superpower status.

The Putin era can be seen as an attempt to combine the previous two approaches, with an additional focus on restoring the status of a great power and promoting a civilisational identity expected to resonate with the 'Global South'. To minimise costs, Russia seeks to target the 'collective West' in Africa where it appears most vulnerable (e.g. in the Sahel). Russia's current strategy in Africa is therefore based on a realistic assessment of what Moscow can afford (i.e., military protection for regime security and soft power projection) and the means it can deploy (i.e., profit-driven agents and information warfare campaigns). This use of non-state agents evokes an approach to Africa observed during the Tsarist era, while using military means to protect regimes resembles the tactics employed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Attempts to

emphasise a political imagination reflecting themes from Russian domestic debates also hark back to the past. The ambivalent rhetoric promoted by Moscow is imbued with images of strong leaders, 'the needs of the people', sovereign democracy, foreign agents, non-linear warfare, and 'multipolarism'.

At first glance, the contemporary geopolitical landscape resembles that of the Cold War era. However, we caution against employing a 'Cold War 2.0' narrative, as this tends to produce self-fulfilling prophecies and conspiratorial repertoires in which African agency disappears. A more sober analysis is needed: it is inaccurate to describe Russia as a great power in Africa. While its strategy has been executed with considerable skill, its reach remains modest. The Soviet Union could credibly claim a 'sphere of influence' in Africa, but Putin's Russia cannot. In today's international landscape, characterised by a diverse range of partners and providers, Russia's influence is limited to weak 'spheres of interest', where mutual or converging interests have emerged between Moscow and a select group of African leaders. The number of these states is limited, as is the success of Russia's actions. The 'Russian moment' in some Sahelian states may not be permanent. Once leaders have decided to diversify their regime's security options, there is little that Russia and its agents can do. Russia's capabilities do not match its geopolitical ambitions, and these ambitions may be affected by future failures and their consequences. The 17 September 2024 attacks in Bamako, in which jihadi insurgents burned the presidential plane near Wagner operatives, were a significant blow to Russia's credibility in providing security assistance and undermined its Infowars message. Russia had claimed that it could achieve what France had failed to do: restore the territorial integrity and security of Sahelian states.

Notes

1. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 2018.
2. Fieldwork missions were conducted by the authors in Mali (November 2013, March 2014, November 2015, November 2016, November 2017, November 2019, November 2020, March 2021, November 2022 and November 2023), Niger (November 2019 and 2020), Mauritania (May and October 2023), Senegal (November 2023), and Burkina Faso (November 2020).
3. Reflecting on Russian projection in global politics, a key scholar on Sino-Russian relations, Zhao Huasheng (2021) defines Moscow's anchorage to its near abroad as 'not only a strategic resource [...], but under unfavourable circumstances [...] also a burden'.
4. The Russian press wrote about the prospects of having Russia's own coffee, the Russian settlement of Africa, and the spread of Orthodoxy in the African continent.
5. In 1884 the Kingdom of Ethiopia opened a legation in Russia.
6. See the official twitter/X post of the Russian embassy in Addis Ababa, https://x.com/RusEmbEthiopia/status/837199630794436608. (accessed 31 October 2024).
7. For example, Soviet support for Somalia in the 1970s and for Ethiopia after 1974 was clearly the result of an invitation by Somali and Ethiopian leaders.

8. Some 3,500 of these books were language.
9. The tv show can be watched on YouTube (last accessed 31 Jan. 2025). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q7PRO0FzFqA.
10. In the emerging trans-imperial colonial narrative hinged upon whiteness, Christianity, and modern progress that associated Europe with *humanitas* in contrast with radicalised representations of an external African *Anthropos*, distinctions remained possible. For example, Russian anthropologist A.D. Elkind, for instance, laid emphasis on the negative effects of European colonisation in Africa (e.g. alcoholism, diseases) and emphasised the Tsarist empire's superior morality in promoting civilisation by humanising, protecting and 'ennobilising the Negro population'. Elkind, 1912, cit. in Novikova, p. 11.
11. The son of the poet Anna Achmatova, Gumilev gained state support, including from Communist Party official Anatoly Lukyanov, who facilitated the publication of his work in 1989.
12. Surkov is a highly adaptable figure. Born in Chechnya as Aslambek Dudaev (a rather unconventional name, which was later dropped, along with the village of his birth), he is regarded as an expert on the intelligentsia, Western philosophy and rap music. He was fired in 2020, and the reasons remain unknown.
13. For example, as the conflict with Ukraine and the West intensified, one could observe the imposition of mandatory overtime contributions from workers in support of the war effort.
14. The International Crisis Group's conflict tracker shows this this point. See https://www.crisisgroup.org/crisiswatch.
15. See African Initiative, https://afrinz.ru/en.
16. On the ambiguity, the tensions and the contradictions of the socalled 'neo-panafricanists', see Carayol (2024).

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