

Building the 'Russieafrique': Russian Influence Operations Changing the Geopolitics in the Sahel

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Abstract

This article examines the tools which the Russian Federation, as a master of influencing operations and unconventional political warfare, currently utilises in West Africa to strengthen its political, economic, military, and diplomatic ties with Sahelian countries, thereby altering the geopolitical balance and pushing out the so-called West from its historical sphere of influence. The research focuses on the case of the Republic of Mali, where a few years of efficient implementation of these tools led to the withdrawal



of the Western Bloc, and the re-emergence of the Russian Federation. The article not only explains what happened in Mali and the Sahel that caused the re-emergence of Russia and the ousting of the Western Bloc, but also focuses on the question of how exactly this happened, what means and instruments were utilised by Russia to make these events happen, and discusses possible implications of these events for the Western states. The research findings can be used to detect the indicators of the use of Russian instruments of influence to achieve its political goals in other parts of the Sahel and Africa, as well as in other environments like Ukraine or Europe.

Keywords: Russia, Sahel, Influence operations, Information warfare, Information-psychological warfare, Africa, influence operations, hybrid warfare, geopolitics

1. Introduction

The history of colonialism has led to a longstanding dominance of the Western Bloc, particularly France, in the Sahel and Maghreb regions. West African countries, including those in the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea, are largely and traditionally regarded as part of the Western sphere of influence, characterised by mutual, robust economic and diplomatic ties. In their strategic documents, both France and the United States of America define North and West Africa as strategically important regions, especially in matters of security and stability (The Ministry of Defence of France 2013; Husted et al. 2023; U.S. Department of State 2022; U.S. Department of State 2023).

Following the ‘Arab Spring’ in Algeria (2010-2012) and the subsequent rise in terrorism and instability in North and sub-Saharan Africa, Russia began to deepen its security, economic, and political ties with long-term African partners. Initially focusing on North Africa and the Maghreb, Russia has expanded its engagement in West Africa and the Sahel, aligning with its foreign policy goals of strengthening the peace and stability in the region and ensuring the safety of transport corridors (Zherlitsina 2016). In its foreign policy, the Russian Federation has effectively re-established its influence in traditionally Western-dominated regions of North and West Africa. To achieve this, Russia utilises a vast array of instruments like political, hybrid, and information warfare.

Russia has effectively re-established its influence in traditionally Western-dominated regions of North and West Africa, employing a range of political, hybrid, and information warfare tools. This strategy has proven effective in countries like Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, where the West was unable to react to such a competition

and challenge in the region. Western responses have been inadequate. By changing the geopolitical sphere of influence, Moscow not only benefits from the new economic ties and military contracts with Sahelian countries but also in the domain of global diplomacy. Russia's success in Africa has been particularly visible since the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019 and has been highlighted further during the conflict in Ukraine, where Moscow used its newly-established diplomatic ties with African countries to influence voting in the UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, and other specialised agencies of the UN (Mensah and Aning 2022).

The reasons for the failure of the Western Bloc in the Sahel and the strong leaning of the Sahelian states towards Russia are points of discussion among Western political elites, diplomats, and strategic foreign-policy experts, as well as the question of how to proceed and what to do next in West Africa. This research analyses the instruments of influence employed by the Russian Federation in Mali, and that, in the present or near future, will also include other Sahelian countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso. The results of the research thus help to understand what exactly led to the failure of the Western Bloc in the Sahel, and why the Russian Federation now dominates this region.

1.1 Methodology and limitations

For the purpose of better visualisation and detection of the tools of political warfare and instruments of hybrid and asymmetric warfare utilised by Russia to achieve its foreign-policy goals in the Sahel, this research uses strategic military analysis of PMESII (Political, Military, Economic, Social, Information, Infrastructure) domains, in which the researchers identified the usage of abovementioned instruments defined by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Aday et al. 2019) and (Býrziyš (2014). Information about the usage of specific instruments of influence was gathered from primary and secondary literature, using open sources, as well as through field research or liaisons with local political figures in Mali and other Sahelian countries.

Even though the research generally refers to the utilisation of Russian political warfare and influence operations in the entire Sahel—as Russia focuses its foreign policy goals on most of the countries within the region of Sahel—due to limitations space, the analytical part will be limited to studying the situation in the most significant Sahelian country—the Republic of Mali.

2. Defining the instruments of influence and explaining its importance

The usage of tools of influence and political warfare by Russia in the Sahel has two primary objectives. Firstly, they are intended to change the policies of the Sahelian states in favour of the Russian Federation. It is primarily conducted by strengthening the political, military, and economic ties with Sahelian states, the provision of humanitarian aid, and investments in the local industrial sector. Strengthening the military ties with Sahelian partners is conducted by military cooperation in the military-capabilities building domain, as well as by military assistance in combat with terrorism provided by the Russian private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group (Africa News 2021; RAND 2023; Tuma 2022). Secondly, Russian political warfare and influence operations are intended to create conditions that will lead to a change in Western states' policies in the Sahel, ultimately resulting in a shift in the geopolitical sphere in the region in favour of Russia. To create such a result, Russia employs methods and tools of political warfare and influence the local Sahelian population and political elites, using them as a proxy to create unbearable conditions for the West to continue its policy in the Sahel.

To achieve its foreign-policy goals and geopolitical influence in the Sahel, Moscow utilises various instruments of influence and methods known from concepts of hybrid, asymmetric, and new-generation warfare.¹ These tools are used by Russia to create or strengthen its political, economic, military, or other infrastructure in the target area (Karabulut 2016).

Discussed non-military and non-violent methods, nowadays utilised by various security entities under different definitions and names, are, in essence, the same instruments hidden under the term utilised by George Kennan in the era after the Second World War and before the cold war—political warfare. As Kennan (1948) stated: 'Political warfare is the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives. (. . .) These means and operations are both overt and covert. They range from such overt actions as political alliances, economic measures, and 'white' propaganda to such covert operations as clandestine support of 'friendly' foreign elements, 'black' psychological warfare, and even encouragement of

1 This research will not discuss or distinguish in detail differences between definitions and concepts of hybrid, asymmetrical, irregular or new-generation-warfare, as they are interpreted differently by various authors – but focus more on specific non-violent tools and instruments that are used within these concepts of warfare, in order to achieve desired political goals.

underground resistance in target states.' These means of political warfare is that they are employed in times of peace (Kennan 1948). Russian leadership can therefore reach its political goals and desired political changes in target areas without the use of military power but with the use of non-military means. A notable example of employment of non-military influence tools by the Russian Federation is the operation during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. This influence operation, which primarily occurred within the realms of information space, social media, and traditional media, involved the strategic use of non-military instruments of influence. These tools were utilised to sway the Western population through the internet and social media, exploiting its emotions and struggles to achieve desired political changes in the USA (Corera 2020; Jonsson 2019).

The instruments of influence and non-military means used by Russia are not new phenomena. However, Russia had to adapt to a new operational environment in accordance with the revolution in information and communication technologies. Since the beginning of the 21st century, Russian military theorists have engaged in a debate about 'the new generation of warfare', non-military tools of influence utilised in the 'Colour Revolution', and the efficacy of the non-military means in warfare. Russian elites also realised the importance of information warfare and non-military tools in 1996, after Russia lost its first war in Chechnya mainly due to failures in the information domain. Since then, they have emphasised the importance of the information domain, information warfare, and focused on developing these capabilities.

In this context, February 2013 played an important role when the former Russian Chief of General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, presented his well-known 'Gerasimov Doctrine' (Jonsson 2019). Gerasimov promoted the concept of 'new-generation warfare' in which victory is for those who can utilise non-traditional and non-military means to achieve their desired objectives (Corera 2020). Most of the tools described and analysed within this concept are related to information warfare, information-technical warfare, or information-psychological warfare. As Gerasimov (2016) stated: 'Information resources have become one of the most effective weapons. Their wide use allows in a few days to shake the situation in the country from within.' Former Minister of Defence of the Russian Federation Sergei Ivanov adds, that 'the development of information technology has resulted in information itself turning into a certain kind of weapon (. . .) that allows us to carry out would-be military actions in practically any theatre of war, and most importantly, without using military power' (Jonsson 2019). Historically, Russia (formerly the USSR) has excelled in information-psychological warfare, particularly within the framework of the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB) intelligence operations. Moreover, the

conflicts in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine in 2014 and 2022 underscore the significant emphasis and focus the Russian security apparatus places on the informational domain and information warfare.

In relation to information-psychological warfare, Russia's security apparatus also specialises in cognitive warfare. Cognitive warfare targets the cognitive functions of the adversary, undermining their morale and decision-making processes through manipulation and deception, utilising the information space as a medium. Contemporary Russian information-psychological warfare activities, rooted in the former KGB's concept of active measures and other influence tactics, predominantly employ disinformation, the creation of fake stories, negative propaganda, and emotional exploitation. The objective is to weaken adversaries by fostering distrust among the local population towards traditional leaders, partners, or structures (Corera 2020).

The 2014 conflict in Ukraine highlighted a novel phenomenon: the utilisation of private companies owned by Russian oligarchs to advance the objectives of the Russian political and security apparatus. Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency, a prominent entity established in 2014, aimed to fulfil both Russia's military and political goals. Similar trends were observed with the employment of private military firms, such as the Wagner Group and Redut, among others (Corera 2020; Jonsson 2019). Although the use of private military entities and enterprises to support military operations or influence political outcomes in target areas has historical precedent also in the West (e.g., U.S. PMC Blackwater), this represented a relatively new strategic milestone for Russia.

Table 1: Instruments of influence or political warfare known to be utilized by the Russian Federation to achieve its objectives

| STRATEGIC DOMAIN | SPECIFIC INSTRUMENT OF INFLUENCE/WARFARE |
|------------------|---|
| Political | Targeted diplomacy and support of specific political actors or specific policies Supporting proxies, oligarchs, warlords |
| Military | Military-economic diplomacy, evading and bypassing the sanctions, covert military support, export of military technologies, usage of private military companies and entities (connecting private and military sectors) Usage of covert methods, clandestine operations, and secret services Usage of methods of Information Warfare |

| STRATEGIC DOMAIN | SPECIFIC INSTRUMENT OF INFLUENCE/WARFARE |
|------------------|--|
| Economic | Economic diplomacy, economic leverage Energy diplomacy, energy dependency, and exploitation of energetic and natural resources sector Supporting proxies, bribery, and corruption |
| Social | Exploitation of cultural, ethnic, ethical, or ideological domains Support of civil unrest Exploitation of local religious organisations, NGOs and GONGOs (Non-Governmental Organisations, Government-organized non-governmental organizations) Creating cultural centres and connections to Russia and Russian culture |
| Information | Information-technical warfare activities—cyber operations, usage of Electronic Warfare, and other technologies Information-psychological warfare activities—targeted disinformation campaigns, propaganda and fake news, cognitive warfare, social media manipulation, support of agitation and civil unrest, and exploitation of media |
| Infrastructure | Creating Russian-based infrastructure and installations, leading to economic or other form of dependency |

Source: *Authors, based on instruments of influence, political and hybrid warfare defined in* (Býrziš 2014; Aday et al. 2019; Karabulut et al. 2016).

3. The Russian influence in the Sahel

As mentioned before, Russian involvement in North and West Africa was intensified during the first decade of the 21st century in connection with the deteriorating security situation in Africa, volatility of the local political regimes, and the regional economic and humanitarian crises. These regional events and dynamics, which began to be more visible after the Western military operation in Libya, appeared in the same period as the relations between the West and Russia started to deteriorate again, following the Russia-led wars in Georgia and Ukraine (Smirnova 2019; Zherlitsina 2016).

The Western intervention in Libya, coupled with the security crises in Syria and Afghanistan, catalysed the proliferation of radical Islam and terrorism. This resulted

in the penetration of terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State into the Maghreb and Sahel regions, extending their influence and operations into the border zones of Mali, Mauritania, and Algeria, and later into Burkina Faso and Niger. Local governments and their security forces were unable to control the new spread of terrorism and the security situation, and intensively cooperated with the West, predominantly France, to mitigate this threat. Subsequently, United Nations and European Union missions were established in Mali to assist in training and enhancing the capabilities of local armed forces to combat terrorism.

However, Western missions, led by France, the European Union (EU), and the United Nations (UN), faced significant challenges and strategic failures, including ineffective communication with local regimes, an inability to stabilise a constantly deteriorating security situation, and a lack of understanding of the region's complex challenges. These shortcomings hindered their ability to respond effectively to the threats. The volatile security situation and the expanding influence of terrorist organisations slowly led to the deterioration of the already fragile economic and humanitarian situation, which then, after years of unsuccessful fight against terrorism with Western partners, led to changes on the local political scene (Mensah and Aning 2022).

In the Sahel, the local Armed forces started to question the political elites whether their policies in combating terrorism is effective, and finally these events served as a basis for further coups d'état in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. In all three countries, newly-established military juntas quickly retook the power from traditional pro-Western leaders and started to re-evaluate the situation in the country, its domestic and foreign policies, and its international relations. The democratic West, along with local organisations such as the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), strongly condemned the coups in these countries and imposed economic sanctions. However, these measures exacerbated the already dire socio-economic conditions of the population and further eroded their trust in traditional structures and historical partners (Cassalais 2022). As Zherlitsina (2016) explains, this situation, along with political changes and the reorientation of Russian foreign policy in response to the adverse effects of Western economic sanctions, created new opportunities for the development of political and economic partnerships between Moscow and the aforementioned West African states.

The Russian Federation, closely monitoring the afore-mentioned developments and the West's inability to improve the situation in the Sahel, began to strategically exploit the context to its advantage, initially focusing on Mali and subsequently extending its

influence to Burkina Faso and Niger. Capitalising on the West's failures to manage the security situation, Moscow employed a sophisticated array of instruments of influence and political warfare targeting local populations and regional political stakeholders. This strategy aimed to position Russia as the primary and dominant partner in the region, thereby displacing traditional Western partners and structures. Since 2019, following its successes in North and Central Africa, Moscow has intensified its cooperation with African countries, organising 'Russia-Africa Summits' to further solidify ties between African leaders and the Kremlin. This initiative signalled to the Western Bloc that Africa was increasingly becoming a sphere of influence for Russia and its allies (Mensah and Aning 2022).

4. Russia implementing its instruments of influence in the Republic of Mali

After two coups d'état in 2020 and 2021, Colonel Assimi Goita took power as the leader of the new Malian military junta. Under intense diplomatic and political pressure from the West, predominantly France, to transit power after almost a decade of unsuccessful Western-led missions aimed at eradicating the threat of terrorism and aiding the local population, Colonel Goita received a proposal for assistance as an alternative to the inefficient Western activities from an old but new partner, the Russian Federation (Tũma 2022).

Russia's decision to develop relations with Mali, and establish a base for its influence operations in Bamako was logical. Among all Sahelian countries, Mali historically held the most significant partnership with the USSR. It was the epicentre of all the events described above and the first country in the Sahel where a military junta took over power. In Mali, Russia renewed its policy from the era of the USSR, aiming to assist the local government in eliminating the consequences of colonialism, restoring the national economy, and aiding in the security domain. Similar to the USSR, Russia, guided by ideological imperatives, acted as a donor of economic and military-technical assistance (Zherlitsina 2016). As Tũma (2022) well pointed out, in Mali Russia employed the same playbook and scenario successfully utilised in other African countries (e.g., Central African Republic, Sudan, Mozambique).

4.1. Information domain

Similar to other operational environments in Africa and elsewhere, Russian influence operations in Mali started with information-psychological warfare activities and specifically targeted propaganda and disinformation campaigns. These activities, aimed to influence and change the policy of the Malian leadership, as well as atmospherics and opinions of the local population, primarily focused on three objectives:

1. to subvert the position of France, as the primary and key representative of the Western community in Mali
Russia renewed the idea that France still colonises Mali, portrayed it as a colonialist and imperialist country with paternalistic leadership, and misusing the Malian population for its own benefit. Russia's propaganda thus exploited old tensions and wounds of colonialism and paternalism, proving highly efficient in a country struggling with an unstable economy, poor education, humanitarian and security crises, as well as problems with the Tuareg community in the northern part, leading to challenges with its own national identity.
2. to build a positive image of the Russian Federation as a country that continues historically beneficial relations between the USSR and Mali
Russia also presented itself as a country that brings to Mali humanitarian aid, military-technological aid, as well as various economic and infrastructural projects and investments which would ultimately help to restore the national economy.
3. Supporting the deployment of 'foreign partners and instructors' from the private military company the Wagner Group in Mali to help in the combat against terrorism (Africa News 2021).

During the information-psychological campaign, the internet and social networks were used, as well as local activist groups in terrain. These tactics proved to be highly efficient for several reasons. First, the narratives used during this influence campaign were partially based on the truth. France was indeed assertive in its foreign policy, and it was definitely trying to shape Malian policy and politics in its image after the military junta

regained power. Many Malian political elites stated that French diplomats and politicians were offering them ‘solutions’, influencing decisions on specific government positions or suggesting choices for the Prime Minister and the President. This was exactly the colonialist and paternalistic approach that the Russian propaganda exploited in its information warfare campaign which together with the colonial history between Mali and France caused fury among Malian politicians and later a large part of the society. Secondly, Russian propagandists made promises of cooperation for the restoration of the national economy, the provision of substantial investments in infrastructure such as transportation and industry, and humanitarian aid.

Reports by the *Rossiia Segodnya* suggest that to disseminate the above-mentioned narratives and messages and to win the hearts and minds of Malians, Russian propaganda cooperated with local media such as ORTM, local internet media and radios, as well as social media in various local languages and dialects (*Rossiia Segodnya* Press Office 2023). Furthermore, Moscow utilised local activist groups like Yerewolo to organise rallies in support of the junta, against the France UN mission in Mali (MINUSMA), and in support of the new Russian-Malian partnership. During these rallies, Russian flags were often visible in the streets and media, again a silent cognitive message to demonstrate the new dominant partner in the region (Sangaré 2021; Châtelot 2022; ADF 2021; Whiteman 2023; Kristen and Keita 2023; Le Roux 2022).

Due to efficient informational-psychological instruments, such as disinformation campaigns, fake news and propaganda, support of the local activist groups, cooperation with the local media, as well as covert support to the organisation of the civil activist rallies against France and the UN, in support of the military junta regime and Russian partners, Russia created conditions for the exploitation of other strategic domains and areas, and later also to expand its influence operations to the neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger.

4.2. Social and political domain

The Russian Embassy in Bamako is believed to support the leaders of the Malian activist movement Yerewolo, as well as another youth activist organization GPM (Group of Patriots for Mali)², in order to organize rallies and protests against the UN mission in

2 The Yerewolo movement, as well as GPM, are both Malian youth activist movements unified by the ideology of pan-Africanism, fighting primarily against colonialism and the French influence and supremacy.

Mali, presence of France in the region, as well as numerous rallies in support of Russia. Even though there is no direct evidence to this support, Western diplomats in Bamako claim that the connection between these groups and the Russian Embassy in Bamako is evident. The leader of the Yerewolo, Adam Ben Diarra, was also sanctioned by the EU for instigating anti-Western and pro-Russian rallies (Africa News 2021; Kristen and Keita 2023; Le Roux 2022). The exploitation and utilisation of the local activist groups, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and other local entities in support of desired policy changes are a few of the examples and manifestations of the influence operations.

Russia has also opened and invested in a Russian cultural and language centre in Bamako to promote its culture and to create a positive image among the young generation, as well as to increase student exchange programs between Malian and Russian educational institutions (Rusky Mir 2023; Mironova 2023). This is not a form of direct manipulation or nefarious activity but rather a complementary and typical example of soft power, utilised alongside other methods of political warfare and influence operations.

The political domain is mainly represented by official diplomatic relations between the elites of Mali and the Russian Federation. The Russia-Africa Summits held in the Russian Federation in 2019 and 2023 showcased the warm relations between Presidents Assimi Goita and Vladimir Putin. The Russia-Africa summits have served as strategic platforms for Russia to explicitly articulate its foreign policy objectives in Africa. These events facilitate discussions on cooperation between African states and Russia at the highest levels of political and diplomatic engagement. From a political warfare perspective, these summits represent a key platform for Russia to extend its political influence at the highest echelons of power. The initiation of these summits in 2019 marks an unofficial milestone, signalling an increase in Russia's influence activities in the Sahel region. Numerous diplomatic and other governmental delegations visited Moscow and Bamako during these years, and their intensity is increasing each year, as mutual economic, military, and social cooperation is also being fortified (Kristen and Keita 2023). More interestingly, political influence is also manifested by the current Bamako view on the war in Ukraine, where Mali politically aids Moscow, for example, in the United Nations (Al Jazeera 2023).

Malicious influence in the political domain is also defined as support for regimes favouring oligarchs, various proxies, and other specific entities and individuals, especially those with a negative effect on security and stability. Even though mercenaryism in

Africa is nothing new, in this context the support of the Wagner Group and Yevgeniy Prigozhin and its PMC by both Moscow and Bamako cannot be left unmentioned. By permitting the presence and operations of the PMC Wagner Group on Malian soil to support anti-terrorism efforts, Bamako is indirectly endorsing and funding organisations that are sanctioned by the European Union and the United States for alleged human rights violations and breaches of international law.

One of the most significant aspects of political warfare and influence in this domain in Mali, and generally also in the Sahel, is the support of Moscow to Bamako in combatting traditional regional structures. This instrument of influence is probably one of the least visible, aggressive and direct, yet it has an immense impact on all other domains.

Moscow, through its Embassy in Bamako and mutual diplomatic ties, aids Bamako in breaking up relations with regional pro-Western partners and creating new partnerships with pro-Russian states and regimes. According to unconfirmed reports, Russia helped Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger to create a new regional political, security, and economic organisation called the ‘Alliance des États du Sahel (AES, or Alliance of Sahel States).’ This organisation was established as a regional Sahelian platform to replace old pro-French and pro-Western structures such as ECOWAS (primarily economic but also a political union), and G5 Sahel (primarily a regional security platform), as well as the long-term MINUSMA (United Nations) mission in Mali (Ndounou et al. 2024; Frowd 2023; Nichols 2023; Al Jazeera 2023; Institute for the Study of War 2024). Russia exploited the distrust and dissatisfaction of local political elites to reject anything that was connected to France and supported Mali in creating new structure in the region—the AES.

As a good example, when another coup d’état in neighbouring Niger occurred, and the democratically elected president Bazoum and his family were captured by the local military junta, ECOWAS states discussed possible military action to free the detained president Bazoum and his family and to restore constitutional order in Niger. On these efforts, Moscow warned ECOWAS through its official state channels not to do so, which sharply contrasted with the efforts of the West and ECOWAS to restore power to democratically elected structures (TASS 2023, 13 September).

4.3. Military domain

Since the era of the USSR, Russian intelligence services—namely, the KGB—have

been one of the principal tools of influence in Russian political warfare and influence operations in Africa, with the aim of strengthening ties between Moscow and African countries, creating economically and politically advantageous incentives in favour of Moscow. Covert means of influence and covert operations of secret services are key, however hidden, elements of successful political warfare that create conditions for the implementation of other instruments of influence. In the context of Mali and Sahelian states, the involvement of Russian secret services—namely, the military intelligence service GRU—has been reported primarily in the context of the deployment of private military company the Wagner Group, contracts related to the deliveries of Russian military armament and equipment, as well as with other instruments of influence Seibt 2023, 20 September) and (Seibt 2023, 18 July).

The involvement of Russian intelligence services in influence operations, as well as any other diplomatic, economic, military, and paramilitary deals between Moscow and African states, is a traditional Russian *modus operandi*, due to the close connection between oligarchs and state structures in modern Russia. Drawing from the operational patterns of Russian intelligence, it is likely that many of the identified influence activities are managed through the Russian Embassy in Bamako and coordinated with both local and Russian intelligence services (Corera 2020; Jonsson 2019).

Since 2021, personnel from the Russian PMC Wagner Group have been deployed to Mali under an agreement to provide military assistance to the Malian Armed Forces. Approximately 1 000 ‘Russian instructors’, as locals call them, specifically combat units as well as air-force technicians and pilots belonging to the private military company owned by the now-deceased Russian oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin, have been deployed to Mali. The essence and, at the same time, the perfection of ‘hybrid warfare’ is simple—the Wagner Group in Mali is not an official contingent of Russian military combatants and regular forces and does not have to comply with international humanitarian laws, laws of war, or any other international legal regulations in connection with armed conflict. The presence of PMC Wagner in Mali is officially denied, and their deployment is not publicly acknowledged.

The deployment of the Wagner Group in Mali is associated with three main objectives: (1) combatting terrorism alongside the Malian Armed Forces; (2) protecting the military regime; and (3) acting as military instructors and developing the military capabilities of the Malian Armed Forces in connection with large military contracts between the Russian and Malian Ministries of Defence. The Malian Armed Forces have purchased significant amounts of military armament, technology, and equipment

from Russia, and the Wagner Group is the entity which assists the local armed forces in developing capabilities to operate this equipment (Tũma 2022; Olszewski 2022; Stronski 2023; RAND 2023). The deployment of irregular forces through covert means under deniability, is a significant tool of hybrid, asymmetric, and political warfare that Russia utilised in Mali to achieve its political goals and objectives.

However, even nowadays, Malian authorities deny that the Wagner Group is on Malian soil, referring to official Russian military assistance. The Wagner Group is efficient because it helps the military junta to get the job done without the restrictions that standard military operations entail (such as rules of engagement, law of war, legislation related to prisoners of war and detainees, international humanitarian law, etc.).

Russia also typically spreads its global influence in the military-economy domain, in which it traditionally excels. The Russian state-controlled military-industrial complex, connected through various oligarchs to state structures, provides a solution for various state actors to secure their objectives using a trustworthy partner. In Mali, Russia signed a contract with the government of Bamako regarding the delivery of various armaments and military systems, as well as assistance in military capability building provided by the Wagner Group. For example, since 2021, the Malian Ministry of Defence has bought from Russia various types of Mi-type helicopters (traditionally Russia sells Mi-24), military radars, various types of small personal arms for infantry, as well as heavy weapons for the artillery. Most significantly, Mali, together with Russia focused on capabilities-building in the air domain, obtaining L-39 and Sukhoi jets, as well as various types of transport and attack helicopters for the Malian Armed Forces. This interconnection between the state sector (armament and military technologies delivery) and private oligarch 'grey zone' (private military company Wagner Group) proved to be a very effective solution. For both services, the Malian authorities have to pay a significant amount of funds from the state budget—U.S. official bodies estimate the amount to be around \$10 million per month—as well as the concessional rights for gold mining in Mali. The mentioned amount that Mali pays to Wagner is just for military assistance—Mali also has to pay for the mentioned contract regarding the delivery of Russian military armament and technologies (Tekingunduz 2023; Hanspal 2022; Oluwole 2023).

The military and security domains are the most visible spheres in which Russia highly efficiently pushed out traditional Western providers and offered seemingly better options for Mali. Russia exploited the needs of the Malian Armed Forces and

the military junta, providing a full package of military equipment and technologies officially delivered from Russia, together with military assistance, military instructors, and capabilities-building service provided by the private military sector. Using other means and domains of influence—predominantly information and political—Russia ousted the traditional provider France, which led to the end of French-led military operations against terrorism. In 2023, other Western missions like EUTM (European Union Training Mission to Mali) and MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali) were also shut down. Russia became the primary security provider to Mali, and Western military presence in the Sahel's biggest country vanished.

4.4. Economic and infrastructure domain

In the economic and infrastructure domain, Russia has formally signed various memorandums with Malian ministries, promising future investments and economic cooperation between the two countries. Most recently, Russia invested in the Malian mining sector by contributing to a new refinery for gold, which is the primary and most important source of income for the Malian state budget, as well as allegedly a principal source of funding for the deliveries of the Russian military equipment and the assistance and operations of the PMC Wagner Group. Over the past few years, the Malian state and its Ministry of Mining adopted various legislative acts (most recently in January 2024) that strengthen the state's control in this currently relatively privatised industry, where many Western companies have their companies and licences (concession rights). With the help of Russia, Mali has strengthened control over the gold mining sector, including artisanal gold mining sites, in order to maximise income from this crucial state resource. Building a joint refinery with Russian experts, where all Malian raw gold has to be sent to be refined, is the last step for Mali in absolute control of gold in the country, as well as control of its amount and export abroad. According to official sources, the planned refinery will have the capacity to refine up to 200 tons of gold per year (Akhtar 2023; Fasanotti 2022; Africa News 2024; Diallo 2023) and (TASS 2023, 29 July).

In addition to its substantial investments in the mining industry, Russia has significantly expanded its investments in Mali across various sectors. These include security (as mentioned above by the delivery of military equipment), education, transportation, energy, food production, and agriculture.

5. Conclusion and implications of Russia retaking the sphere of influence in the Sahel for security in the West

The analysis of Russian influence in the case of the Republic of Mali demonstrates that the Russian Federation has exploited all strategic domains to achieve its political goals in the Sahel and to engage in political warfare with Western powers. In recent years, Russia has employed a highly effective combination of both overt and covert political warfare means against Sahelian countries to strengthen its ties with African states and to challenge the influence of Western countries, particularly France, in the region. To this end, Russian state and non-state actors have utilised over 90% of the tools identified in the literature as instruments of hybrid, political, or asymmetric warfare.

As Mensah and Aning (2022) explained, ‘the expansion of Russian military influence in West Africa and the Sahel will result in a setback for other global actors. The evident resentment for France in countries like Mali, Chad, and Burkina-Faso through mass protests calling for the exit of France will not only affect France’s influence in these countries but the general influence of the European Union, the US, and other world powers.’

In the Sahel, Russia primarily focuses its influence on operations in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—states forming the new Alliance of the Sahelian States. Changing the traditional Western sphere of influence in the region leads to the following challenges for the Western Bloc:

5.1. Minimal control of the threat of the terrorism

In the last ten years, AQMI (Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb), JNIM (Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin) and the Islamic State have spread their control and influence in the Sahel, primarily in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Nigeria, south of Mauritania, and Algeria. The zones of operations and influence of these mentioned terrorist armed groups are enlarging year-by-year, and Sahelian state authorities are unable to control this threat. Together with a slow increase in group capabilities, this poses a significant threat to Western countries, especially considering the fact that Sahel is one of the key regions for the migration route towards the European Union through Italy, France, and Spain.

Historical military and peacekeeping operations by France, Western countries, as well as the UN were primarily conducted to conceal and neutralise this threat. Since the West has ended military missions in 2022 (Task Force Takuba) and peacekeeping

missions in 2023 (MINIUSMA), the West lost control and situational awareness over the security situation in the Sahel region. The situation of terrorist armed groups in the Sahel creates a significant threat to the EU and the West, as well as a large intelligence and security gap for Western security apparatus.

5.2. Minimal control over the migration routes and smuggling routes towards Europe

Due to the lack of control by security entities and the unstable security situation, coupled with specific local tribal and ethnic structures, Sahelian states are traditionally used as key smuggling routes for weapons, narcotics, drugs, and persons to North Africa and then Europe.

The principal migration route which African immigrants use to reach the EU passes through Sahelian states. The lack of control in these regions, as well as the absence of information from the above-mentioned areas, creates an information vacuum, which can pose a significant security problem for Europe in relation to migrants, especially in connection to the current spread of terrorism in the Sahel. Similar to migration waves from Syria and the Middle East, after the wars on terrorism, individuals with connections or a history of interaction with terrorist armed groups pose a significant security challenge for Western societies. The lack of presence and reliable information from these regions leads to an inability to effectively assess the risk of immigrants coming to the EU and the West.

5.3. Humanitarian crisis

The spread of terrorism, combined with the poor economic situation in the region, which is inhospitable to crop cultivation, has led to a large-scale humanitarian crisis in countries of the Sahel over the last decade. That often forces local inhabitants to cooperate with terrorist groups to earn money for a living and to feed their families or to directly join these groups. This crisis also leads to an increase in the number of immigrants trying to flee to urbanized areas or head north towards the European Union.

As the first responder supposed to help, the MINUSMA mission invested large amounts of funds in regional projects to mitigate this threat. After it was ended in 2023 by the decision of local military authorities, the humanitarian situation in the region

deteriorated, especially in northern Mali and rural areas of the Sahel. Along with the worsening of the humanitarian crisis, the West has also lost control over the situation in the region.

5.4. Diplomatic isolation of Sahel and deterioration of mutual relations with the West

All the above-mentioned factors have led to the diplomatic isolation of Sahelian states from their Western partners, as well as a deterioration of mutual, long-term beneficial relations. This affects all strategic domains and creates a problem in matters of security due to the lack of communication between the official Sahelian countries' state entities and their Western partners.

5.5. West lost the economic and investment possibilities in Sahel

Being replaced by the Russian Federation, Western countries have lost a vast amount of economic and investment possibilities in the region. Russia replacing Western companies in the mining sector, infrastructure, and industry development sector, as well as in the military-technology sector, causes significant economic losses for Western private and state entities for the next decades.

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