



Research Article

Strategic Competition in Africa and Democratic Backsliding in the Central African Republic

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Abstract: This article focuses on the strategic competition between the West—defined as the European Union and the United States—and Russia, which is currently taking place in Africa, and its implications for security governance in the region. Since 2017, Russia has been increasing its presence in Africa while undermining Western efforts to promote good governance. Multiple military missions and development programs have been halted following recent coups d'état in countries such as Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and the Central African Republic. Since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions have isolated Moscow, prompting Russian leaders to seek new alliances around the globe. Africa has emerged as a key arena in the Kremlin's fight for influence, positioning itself as a strategic front in Russia's broader contest with the West. An analysis of recent events in the Central African Republic will assess how this rivalry is reshaping security governance in Africa and identify potential pathways for the West to reengage and restore positive relationships with African nations.

Keywords: strategic competition, democratic backsliding, Russia's influence, Africa, Wagner Group, organized crime.

Introduction

Understanding the strategic competition between the West and Russia currently taking place in Africa requires acknowledging the region's fragile democracies. Since the first calls for pro-democratic movements in Africa at the beginning of the 1990s, the path toward institutionalized democracy has not been linear. Instead, it has resembled a bumpy road filled with authoritarian breakdowns and brittle multiparty systems. Therefore, when discussing African political systems,

scholars and practitioners generally do not refer to them as fully developed and established democracies.

Over the last three decades, the hard-won gains in the fight for democratization of African states have been challenged across the continent, as citizens have faced growing restrictions on freedom of speech, human rights violations, and election interference by foreign actors. As a result, Africa became particularly vulnerable to democratic backsliding. This phenomenon, described as “the process of declining integrity for democratic values or institutions in a political system,” can thrive especially in young, developing states with weak governance.

This vulnerability applies predominantly to the francophone part of Africa.¹ The founding of many of these nations, whose constitutions were often modeled on that of France’s Fifth Republic, empowered strong executive leadership. This laid a fertile ground for future autocracies and military dictatorships, where “constitutions were transformed into instruments of coercion under the pretext of pursuing elusive goals of national unity and economic development.”² In such conditions, the lines between democratic governance and autocracy become blurred. These unstable states offer fertile ground for strategic competition between major powers seeking to expand their influence across the continent and strengthen their global hegemony.

Strategic competition has recently been defined as:

competitive state vs. state activity, somewhere in between cooperation and total war, but notably below armed conflict and violence. Such competition involves espionage, economic competition and intellectual property theft, intense cyberspace competition, sanctions, information operations, lawfare, military force positioning, diplomatic and military threats, intimidation, alliance peddling, and diplomatic maneuver – as long as none of this activity involves any violence, death, or destruction.³

Importantly, the way in which strategic competition is conducted depends greatly on the regime type. Autocratic regimes such as China and Russia prioritize state survival and control over the well-being and human rights of their citizens; in short, state security justifies violations of human security. For such states, exerting influence over other regions demonstrates their power, ensures regime stability, and can be pursued at any cost. To achieve such impact, autocratic states use tactics such as economic coercion, cyber warfare, information operations, resource control, and even state capture – methods that will be discussed later.

¹ “Democratic Backsliding,” Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs (website), n.d., accessed March 18, 2025, <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/explore-engage/key-terms/democratic-backsliding>.

² Leonardo A. Villalón, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of the African Sahel* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

³ James van de Velde, “What Is ‘Strategic Competition’ and Are We Still in It?” *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, February 2, 2024, <https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/what-is-strategic-competition-and-are-we-still-in-it/>.

Democratic governments also participate in strategic competition but in different ways. Democracies compete strategically through the ideological expansion of democracy, forming alliances, and creating multilateral institutions in which they can leverage their soft power instead of relying on oppression. The main goal of current Western democratic world powers—defined in this article as the United States and the European Union—is to protect the liberal international order with its democratic values and commitment to human rights.

This article focuses on the implications of Russia's strategic competition for democratic backsliding in Africa, using the example of state capture that occurred in the Central African Republic (CAR) recently. As Russia undertook multiple actions with varying threat levels, this article centers on the fight for influence in Africa and how it incites the democratic backsliding of targeted countries. Why is this relevant to the West? Because the Kremlin is using the same strategies across the continent, Africa is witnessing the emergence of its first regional bloc aligned with Putin's autocratic crony capitalism.⁴ Such expansion could eventually threaten not only the states in Africa but also lead to a global decline in democratic values.

The article presents a case study of the Central African Republic that offers insight into Russia's presence in Africa and its corrosive influence on democratization in the region. The analysis will demonstrate how total state capture and resource extraction are tools Russia uses to exert influence and challenge the current global order. By examining these activities, the article will assess how the strategic rivalry is undermining democratic values in Africa and will identify potential pathways for the West to reengage and restore positive relationships on the continent.

Methodology

Russia's renewed engagement in Africa has triggered considerable academic interest, particularly in the context of its war on Ukraine and hostilities with the European Union and the United States. Researchers widely agree that Russia's activities on the continent are part of its broader effort to reassert itself as a leading global power.⁵ However, due to the very recent nature of the developments discussed in this article, there are significant gaps in the literature. More-

⁴ Federico Manfredi Firmian, "Russia's State Capture Strategy in Africa, from Wagner to the Africa Corps," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 36, no. 4 (2025): 783-812, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2024.2432832>.

⁵ Giovanni Faleg and Stanislav Secieru, "Russia Forays into Sub-Saharan Africa: Do You Want to Be My Friend, Again?" Brief No. 6 (European Union Institute for Security Studies, March 2020), https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%206%20Russia%20Africa_0.pdf; Anna Naa Adochoo Mensah and Kwesi Aning, "Russia Resurgent? Untangling the Role and Meaning of Moscow's Proxies in West Africa and the Sahel," *Strategic Review for Southern Africa* 44, no. 1 (2022): 47-63, <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v44i1.4058>.

over, owing to the fragile security situation in many African states and their volatile institutions, existing data may be unreliable, unavailable, or entirely missing. Accordingly, this study uses a mixed approach. Qualitative methods, such as a case study and the theory of state capture, help clarify the reasons for democratic backsliding, while quantitative data, such as the Democracy Index and the most recent regional security reports, support the study's claims.

Russia's Approach to Strategic Competition

Organized Crime

As noted, Russia's strategic competition to achieve its economic and political goals takes various forms, one of the most prominent being organized crime. The Kremlin has employed active measures—such as subversive and covert operations ranging from disinformation to assassinations—since the 1950s. Such clandestine acts have grown much stronger since the mid-2000s and Putin's increasing disenchantment with the West. While the boundaries between legal and illicit activity have always been very murky in Putin's Russia, since 2012, state, private, and criminal spheres have become increasingly intertwined.

Over the last 13 years, the Kremlin has made it clear that it can demand a service or action from any individual for the greater good of the state. Such actions typically involve the support of intelligence services and are transactional in nature. However, since 2022 and Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the situation has further deteriorated, leading the Kremlin to use all measures it deems necessary in its perceived war against the West. This invasion meant "that the co-option of Russian-based organized crime as an instrument of Russian tradecraft abroad – a 'Crimintern' instead of the old, ideological Comintern, the Communist International, of Soviet times ... [became] a key element in Russia's political war campaign against the West."⁶

As explained earlier, strategic competition as conducted by the West uses measures such as sanctions, imposed on Russia after the 2014 annexation of Crimea, and more extensively after the invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Such measures have been only partially effective, as the Kremlin has been using various criminal networks and grey-market facilitators to launder money, smuggle sanctioned goods, or simply buy from neighboring countries sanctioned "smart products," which can easily be adapted for use in its defense industry, e.g., for building drones and missiles.⁷ The Kremlin is also known to rely on criminal money-movers to establish illicit financial flows that bypass sanctions and to utilize cryptocurrency to make and receive payments undetected.

⁶ Mark Galeotti, *Gangsters at War: Russia's Use of Organized Crime as an Instrument of Statecraft* (Geneva, Switzerland: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, November 2024), 13, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/gangsters-at-war-russias-use-of-organized-crime-as-an-instrument-of-statecraft/>.

⁷ Andrew Macaskill, "Exclusive: Russian Weapons in Ukraine Powered by Hundreds of Western Parts, Report Says," *Reuters*, August 8, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/russia-ukraine-war-2022-08-08/>.

Cyber Warfare

In addition to transnational criminal networks, Russia uses its cyber warfare toolkit to destabilize the West, especially the European Union. Russian intelligence services have been accused of using proxy groups to wage cyberattacks and conduct surveillance or sabotage operations. “No country has weaponized its cyber capabilities as maliciously or irresponsibly as Russia, wantonly causing unprecedented damage to pursue small tactical advantages and to satisfy fits of spite.”⁸

However, sabotaging cyber systems and conducting ransomware attacks are not the only threats. Online misinformation and disinformation campaigns are particularly dangerous weapons, leading to the destabilization of states, democratic backsliding, and divisions within societies. “The goal is paralysis through division, using whatever means at Russia’s disposal to widen existing fault lines and amplify populist and disruptive voices.”⁹

Assassination, Intimidation, and State Capture

Finally, Russia uses assassination, intimidation techniques, and state capture. The former two are difficult to assign culpability for, making it easy for the Kremlin to deny involvement. State capture, however, is occurring with greater frequency—especially in Africa—and seems to be a preferred method for the Kremlin to exert influence. Russia has employed the Wagner Group to conduct efforts ranging from resource extraction to providing security to African juntas. This private military contractor (PMC), officially designated as an organized crime group by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2023, is a key tool in Russia’s struggle for influence.

The Wagner Group – Russia’s State Capture Tool of Influence

The Wagner Group is a Russian-owned PMC that first emerged in Donbas during Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, supporting Russian military forces. Since its founding, the group’s role has been to operate as a proxy for the Kremlin, allowing plausible deniability for actions not explicitly approved by the Russian state. The group has been active in Ukraine, Syria, and, most recently, Africa.

Since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions have isolated Moscow, prompting Russian leaders to seek new alliances around the globe. Africa has emerged as a key arena in this effort, positioning itself as a strategic

ness/aerospace-defense/exclusive-russian-weapons-ukraine-powered-by-hundreds-western-parts-rusi-2022-08-08/.

⁸ “Six Russian GRU Officers Charged in Connection with Worldwide Deployment of Destructive Malware and Other Disruptive Actions in Cyberspace,” Video, US Department of Justice, Archives, October 19, 2020, www.justice.gov/opa/video/six-russian-gru-officers-charged-connection-worldwide-deployment-destructive-malware-and.

⁹ Galeotti, “Gangsters at War: Russia’s Use of Organized Crime,” 34.

front in Russia's broader geopolitical contest with the West. This is precisely where the Wagner Group plays a role. Although there has been significant overlap in foreign policy between the Kremlin and the Wagner Group, the two claim to be separate entities. Such a separation allows the group to operate outside international norms and laws, while Moscow remains conveniently insulated from any liability for the group's brutal tactics.

This symbiotic relationship has enabled Moscow to lawlessly advance its interests and exert power over—or even capture—multiple African states. A key goal for Russian President Vladimir Putin since 2006 has been to reconstitute Russian influence on the African continent and, specifically, cultivate African dependence on Russian military assistance.¹⁰ Between 2015 and 2019, Russia signed 19 military agreements with African states for the sale of weapons.¹¹ More recently, the Wagner Group has been providing security for African leaders and training their security forces, often in exchange for access to natural resources in the region.

However, Russia's interference in Africa's affairs has deeper and more sinister implications. Indeed, the Kremlin aims to undermine the Western-led liberal international order and expand its influence across the African continent. The Wagner Group maintains an extensive presence in Africa. By supporting pro-Russian governments and supplying intelligence to the Kremlin, the group helps Moscow advance its agenda on the continent.

Case Study: Moscow's Influence in the Central African Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) represents the most dramatic case in Russia's battle for influence in Africa. This landlocked, central African state has been in perpetual turmoil since its independence from France in 1960. Similar to its neighboring ex-French colonies, the CAR has been shaken by numerous coups d'état and military dictatorships over nearly 65 years of independence. Despite its abundance of diamonds, gold, oil, and uranium, it is one of the poorest countries in the world: according to the UN Human Development Index, it ranks 191st out of 193 countries. This dire situation created a perfect opportunity for Kremlin interference, facilitating Putin's goal of rebuilding Russia's influence in Africa. As mentioned earlier, Russia uses the Wagner Group as a substitute for an official Russian presence in the country. The spectrum of the group's intervention includes essential spheres of CAR statehood—political, military, and economic—and thus undermines its security governance. The extent of the group's dominance is so far-reaching that it constitutes a total state capture, in other words,

¹⁰ Denise Youngblood Coleman, "Special Report: Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group," *Political Intelligence Briefing* (International Security & Counter Terrorism Reference Center, July 2023).

¹¹ "Factbox: Russian Military Cooperation Deals with African Countries," *Reuters*, October 17, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/factbox-russian-military-cooperation-deals-with-african-countries-idUSKCN1MR0KH/>.

“the exercise of power by private actors—through control over resources, threat of violence, or other forms of influence—to shape policies or implementation in service of their narrow interest.”¹²

Political Sphere

Officially, CAR is a presidential republic, with a president, a prime minister, and a parliament. However, the pluralism of the CAR’s institutions has been challenged in recent years, beginning with the 2013 rebellions that led to the ouster of then-President François Bozizé, sparking yet another armed conflict between the country’s militias. The current president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, was elected in 2016. He has since undermined the country’s already fragile pluralism, contributing to significant democratic backsliding.

The CAR has experienced a sharp decline in political representation and the rule of law since 2018. In 2024, the Freedom House Index labeled the country as *Not Free*, assigning it a score of just 5 out of 100 for political rights and civil liberties.¹³ Key factors cited by Freedom House included the lack of free and fair elections, low government transparency, high rates of prosecution of opposition leaders, widespread corruption, and an inability to implement new policies due to poor governance. Moreover, Freedom House found no support for an independent media or freedoms of speech and assembly – all essential elements of a functioning democracy.

An assessment from the Global State of Democracy Initiative links the erosion of the rule of law in the CAR to the arrival of the Wagner Group, whose presence in the country has been growing since 2018. The group’s role in securing the July 2023 constitutional referendum—which allowed Touadéra to seek another seven-year presidential term and further strengthened his executive powers—serves as a stark example of the Kremlin using mercenaries to fuel democratic backsliding in Africa and push the region toward autocracy.

Such actions significantly undermine the Central African Republic’s stability. Foreign interference in the country’s affairs directly challenges the fundamental pillars of state security, including the rule of law, sovereignty, and constitutional integrity. Moreover, an overreliance on military solutions is exacerbating tensions with marginalized groups and insurgencies, perpetuating cycles of violence.

Apart from politically questionable election monitoring, the Wagner Group is known to influence CAR politics through disinformation campaigns. First, media

¹² Andreas Fiebelkorn, “State Capture Analysis: How to Quantitatively Analyze the Regulatory Abuse by Business-State Relationships,” Discussion Paper: Governance Global Practice No. 2 (The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, June 2019), 1, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/78006be9-f6b0-555b-886e-9f2cbe9befc4>.

¹³ “Freedom in the World 2025: Central African Republic,” Country Profile Report, Freedom House, n.d., accessed March 14, 2025, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/central-african-republic/freedom-world/2025>.

outlets in the country's capital, Bangui, are aligned with the Kremlin's political agenda and operate Wagner Group-run troll farms. Independent journalists critical of the government have often been threatened or even killed, leading to a near-total suppression of freedom of speech.¹⁴

At the same time, the Wagner Group has created a pro-Russian radio station, organized sports and cultural events, expanded Russian language studies at the university level, and produced propaganda films portraying Wagner troops heroically fighting rebels and terrorist groups.¹⁵ These efforts have shaped public opinion, resulting in widespread support for the Russian presence in the country.

Additionally, troll-farm-generated Facebook campaigns conveying anti-French and anti-Western messages have been accused of meddling in the CAR's political affairs by influencing public opinion and amplifying Russian regime media narratives, causing further democratic backsliding.¹⁶

With such widespread Russian presence in the political and public spheres of the CAR—enabled by the broad reach of the Wagner Group—there is very little room for Western democratic influence. As the CAR government makes concessions in political sovereignty, the country's democracy crumbles further.

Military Sphere

As mentioned before, the Wagner Group's presence in CAR dates back to 2018. Its initial involvement focused on providing training to the state military; however, the Russian instructors were quickly incorporated into the Central African Armed Forces (FACA). Soon after, Valery Zakharov, a former Russian intelligence officer, was appointed national security advisor to Touadéra.¹⁷

Wagner Group soldiers have been primarily involved in providing the president's security detail and ensuring the regime's survival. As such, their presence has considerably undermined the CAR's already fragile stability, as all forces are concentrated on protecting the small ruling elite, while state and human security are neglected. Moreover, the group's involvement in a counter-offensive that pushed back rebels from Bangui during the 2020 elections and secured another

¹⁴ "Africa: Central African Republic," Reporters without Borders, n.d., accessed March 14, 2025, <https://rsf.org/en/country/central-african-republic>.

¹⁵ Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon, and Julian Rademeyer, "The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa," *Research Report* (Geneva, Switzerland: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, February 2023), <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-in-africa/>.

¹⁶ Mick Krever and Anna Chernova, "Wagner Chief Admits to Founding Russian Troll Farm Sanctioned for Meddling in US Elections," *CNN*, February 14, 2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/02/14/europe/russia-yevgeny-prigozhin-internet-research-agency-intl/index.html>.

¹⁷ Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, "The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa."

term for Touadéra further established the Wagner Group's prominence in the country's security apparatus.¹⁸

Support to the security sector and its reform was previously the task of MINUSCA, the joint peacekeeping mission of the United Nations and the European Union. However, the mercenaries have successfully managed to oust the Western forces through online campaigns. These derogatory efforts led to further deterioration of the CAR's security, as "operating seemingly without any accountability, soldiers believed to be employed by Wagner [were] accused of carrying out horrific human rights violations, which ... allegedly intensified since the counter-offensive in early 2021."¹⁹ The Kremlin's drive to exert its influence in Africa has come at a great human cost, with mercenaries accused by Human Rights Watch of torture, arbitrary detention, and extrajudicial killings.²⁰ Such human rights abuses by the military can fuel resentment and resistance, further deepening the country's democratic backsliding.

The Russian government has used deceitful tactics in its mission to influence Africa and has aggressively engaged in strategic competition to displace France and the West as the primary military partners of the CAR. The above-mentioned interference by the Wagner Group and the growing role of the military in sustaining the political regime in the CAR are eroding democratic governance, as civil liberties and political freedoms are being suppressed in favor of security measures. The growing dominance of the military is undermining fragile democratic institutions, as power is concentrated in the hands of the president and his military entourage, supported and protected by the Wagner Group and the FACA. This decline in democratic values is reflected in the Democracy Index. Even though the CAR has consistently been one of the lowest-ranking nations since the creation of the index, a sharp decline coincided with the arrival of the Wagner Group in 2018. Specifically, the CAR scored 1.52 overall on a scale of 1 to 10 in 2018. In 2019, this number declined to 1.32. Despite the already dire situation for democracy in this fragile state, the score dropped further to 1.18 in 2023—the most recent index—classifying the CAR as an *authoritarian regime*.²¹

Touadéra and his associates' use of the country's resources to fund the military support of the Wagner Group is indicative of the Kremlin's strategic influence agenda – namely, economic takeover.

¹⁸ Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, "The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa."

¹⁹ Stanyard, Vircoulon, and Rademeyer, "The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa," 50.

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, "Central African Republic: Abuses by Russia-Linked Forces: Killings, Torture of Civilians," May 3, 2022, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/05/03/central-african-republic-abuses-russia-linked-forces>.

²¹ "Democracy Index, 2024," *Our World in Data*, last updated March 5, 2025, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/democracy-index-eiu>.

Economic Sphere

As noted previously, the political and military involvement of the Wagner Group has not only cost the CAR government in terms of concessions in state sovereignty, but it has also negatively impacted the CAR's economy. In order to pay for the Kremlin's support, President Touadéra granted Wagner-affiliated companies mining rights to the country's mineral deposits, allowing the group to exploit its gold, diamond, and logging reserves. In 2023, an international investigative and policy organization found that, with the approval of the authorities in Bangui, "Wagner has shown intense interest in Central African minerals, targeting mining sites and using violent military campaigns to drive away civilians and take control."²² As economic inequality is one of the drivers of democratic backsliding, Wagner's actions demonstrate a dramatic intensification of economic discrimination.

Apart from the financial losses to the state and the population, the CAR has become an arena for strategic competition between Russia and the West. The Kremlin, substantially suspended from Western markets after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, uses this African state to evade sanctions. As Moscow has largely been restricted from earning or accessing profits tied to gold production both within Russia and abroad—from utilizing gold to obtain foreign currency, or from participating in global gold and financial markets—it has relied on Wagner Group activities in the CAR to circumvent those restrictions. When Touadéra's government granted mining concessions to Russian-owned companies, their gold extraction activities appeared lawful. However, "activity becomes illegal when gold is smuggled or laundered into jurisdictions that have sanctioned Moscow and other actors."²³

The rule of law and adherence to international legal standards are key pillars of security governance. The CAR government's violations of international sanctions are thus another indication of the country's poor security, as the Touadéra regime is indirectly challenging the current global order and supporting Russia's rivalry with the West.

Moreover, the CAR's resource abundance has ironically turned out to be part of its own demise: "Natural resources increase the political stakes because soldiers realize that they will be able to capture the natural resource rents if they take power. As a result, natural resource abundance makes democracies more likely to fall to military coups."²⁴ As the example of the CAR demonstrates, the

²² "Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group's Blueprint for State Capture in the Central African Republic," *TheSentry.org*, June 2023, 26, <https://thesentry.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/ArchitectsTerror-TheSentry-June2023.pdf>.

²³ Marcena Hunter, "Going for Gold: Russia, Sanctions and Illicit Gold Trade," *Policy Brief* (Geneva, Switzerland: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, April 2022), 13, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/russia-sanctions-illicit-gold-trade/>.

²⁴ Daron Acemoglu, Davide Ticchi, and Andrea Vindigni, "A Theory of Military Dictatorships," *NBER Working Paper* 13915 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of

country's resource wealth has effectively been seized by the Wagner Group and the military. In this regard, economic factors can lead to state weakness and have a direct link to democratic backsliding. Resource extraction can increase the likelihood that democracies will succumb to military coups. Thus, CAR's resource abundance has fueled corruption, weakened governance, and facilitated violations of international sanctions – all while contributing to democratic erosion. Illegal resource extraction and smuggling highlight how international economic systems are intricately tied to the strategic competition between Russia and the West, with the CAR, in this case, serving as a battleground.

Conclusion

The Central African Republic offers a compelling example of how foreign interference, autocratic consolidation, overmilitarized governance, and resource exploitation can cause democratic backsliding in fragile states. “In just five years and with a limited number of military personnel, Wagner has managed to infiltrate CAR's military chain of command, as well as its political and economic systems.”²⁵ Broadly speaking, external interference by actors such as Russia and its proxy, the Wagner Group, has systematically undermined democratic institutions, restricted civil liberties, and prioritized regime survival over state security and the public good, leading to democratic backsliding. The Wagner Group's pervasive presence in the political, military, and economic spheres has challenged CAR's sovereignty and exacerbated existing vulnerabilities, perpetuating cycles of instability and violence.

The weakening of democratic values and institutions in CAR is evident, reflected in the suppression of political freedoms, lack of transparency, and persecution of opposition leaders. Such democratic backsliding aligns closely with Russia's autocratic regime and continues the Kremlin's brutal policies abroad. Using proxies, Moscow expands its sphere of influence in Africa to achieve its strategic goals and challenge the current world order.

In such dire conditions of lawlessness and anarchy, how can the West effectively respond to the Kremlin's influence and its role in democratic backsliding in Africa? Even though Moscow's grip is firm—particularly in CAR—the West's response could include expanding peacekeeping operations such as MINUSCA and supporting security sector reforms. Better funding of such international missions, along with support for regional military reforms, would be steps in the right direction. Moreover, investing in local NGOs would help empower civil society, protect independent media, and improve government accountability.

Developing closer relations with African partners—especially CAR's neighbors—for more effective intelligence sharing and counterterrorism initiatives

Economic Research, April 2008), 4, https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w13915/w13915.pdf.

²⁵ “Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group's Blueprint,” 32.

would also help counterbalance Wagner's influence. Imposing additional sanctions on the group's already extensive list of restrictions could further limit their activities. At the same time, increasing pressure on President Touadéra's regime and holding it accountable for blatant violations of sanctions would help prevent illicit resource exploitation, smuggling, and money laundering, and bring greater prosperity to the nation.

However, soft power should also play a role. Rebuilding diplomatic ties with the CAR government would go a long way in diminishing Russian influence. Promoting the long-term benefits of democratic principles and resilient governance—rather than Russia's quick fixes to ad hoc security incidents—is the only path to lasting prosperity and stability. Additionally, the African Union and the Economic Community of Central African States should be involved in strengthening regional partnerships with CAR. Promoting public diplomacy campaigns that emphasize the benefits of democratic governance and reach regional populations would also be instrumental in reversing Russia's impact. Taken together, such actions would help restrain democratic backsliding and significantly improve stability in this troubled African state.

Disclaimer

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