

**“Russian Heroes, French Zombies”:
Diplomatic Tensions Between Great Powers in
the Central African Republic**

An Undergraduate Honors Thesis

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CONTENTS

Abstract	4
Acknowledgements	5
Introduction	6
Section I - Background	12
French Intervention in Africa: From Postwar to Present	12
“Red Fingerprints”: Soviet Engagement in Cold War Africa	22
Section II - Contemporary Dynamics in the Central African Republic	26
<u>Mode One: Soft Power - Media and Information</u>	28
A. Russian Strategy and State-Sponsored Media	28
B. Russia v. France in the Information Landscape	36
<u>Mode Two: Hard Power - Bilateral Relations with the Central African Republic</u>	61
A. Security Cooperation	63
B. Economic Links	65
C. Political Allyship and Conventional Diplomacy	67
Section III - Concluding Thoughts	72
Works Cited	75

Abstract

This honors thesis examines the respective approaches of diplomatic engagement by Russia and France in the Central African Republic (CAR). Given the present competition between great powers on the African continent, much of the current discourse on this topic has a tendency to view this competition as a reemergence of the Cold War struggle over the “Third World,” specifically that which occurred in Africa. This thesis seeks to add to the present discourse by arguing that the notion of a Cold War redux in Africa is a reductionist approach that neglects the domestic priorities that are the veritable catalysts behind Russian and French engagement with Africa, specifically in the Central African Republic.

The central aim of this project has been to analyze the motives and modes driving Russian and French engagement with the nation of the Central African Republic. By beginning with the historical background of France and the Soviet Union’s diplomatic engagement with Africa, I contextualize their patterns of diplomatic outreach and posit that the respective foreign policy legacies of the two powers contribute to their ability to act on the African continent today. Following this, I analyze the contemporary modes of engagement by France and Russia in the Central African Republic and evaluate the ways in which this has impacted their bilateral relationships with the CAR.

By using a multimedia approach to primary source analysis in both English and French, I have been able to evaluate a wide-range of sources that contribute to the broader understanding of how diplomacy is being conducted on the African continent using the tools of the twenty-first century.

Acknowledgements

To my parents and grandparents, who have afforded me the privilege of higher education and given me a gift I can only repay by dedicating my life in service to those who have been given less than me.

On the fifteenth of December 2022, forty seven troops from a logistical support unit of the French Army boarded a C-130 transporter aircraft and departed from Bangui Airport in the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). The departure of this last contingent of French troops marked the final withdrawal of the French military in CAR, which had maintained a presence in the capital city since late 2013 under its most recent security venture, *Operation Sangaris*, an African-led coalition dispatched to disarm militias involved in sectarian violence following a 2012 coup by muslim opposition forces.¹ Prior to the 2013 intervention, various French administrations had previously dispatched military forces six times since CAR achieved independence in 1960, often serving as the country's powerbroker and guarantor of nation-wide stability in a country plagued by civil strife and conflict. In 2016, then President François Hollande announced the official end of Operation Sangaris, but a small residual force remained in the capital to provide logistical support. Outside CAR, Paris has operated in a similar capacity in over a dozen former colonies known as the *Françafrique*, a bloc that has connected France and the francophone African states through diplomatic, economic, and security partnerships since the independence decade of the 1960s.

In the post-colonial era, France has largely retained its role as regional hegemon in francophone countries, yet shifting geopolitical tides are threatening French primacy in the region. More specifically, Russia has cultivated ties with a variety of African nations in a bid to expand its geopolitical standing in the face of its growing diplomatic isolation. While the case of a Russian push into Africa is not a novel development, the context in which the Putin regime is

¹ Maj. Rémy Hémez, "Operation Sangaris: A Case Study in Limited Military Intervention," *Military Review*, US Army, November-December 2016, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MJ-21/Garrett-Military-Diversity-1.pdf>.

expanding its influence in the region has complicated the relationships of African nations with France.

With CAR, the Putin regime began cultivating ties with current President Faustin-Archange Touadéra at a 2017 meeting between the Central African President and Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov. Consequently, Russia used its power on the UN Security Council to partially lift an arms embargo and began selling light arms to CAR.² In addition to arms, instructors and soldiers from the Wagner Group - a military contracting firm funded by Putin confidant Yevgeny Prigozhin - were sent to the country. During the first ever Russia-Africa Summit held in October 2019, CAR reached an agreement that further established Russian ties within its domestic security architecture by having Wagner forces operate in the field with the army and had advisors collaborating directly with President Touadéra.³ It was a consequence of the expanding influence of Russia in Central African affairs, particularly in the security domain, that France decided to withdraw its last remaining contingent of troops. The French sentiment towards Russia's newly outsized influence was most pointedly seen in a statement on the withdrawal by regional commander of the French forces Gen. Francois-Xavier Mabin, who said, "In 2021, when the presence of the private military company Wagner was increasingly intrusive in the country, France considered that the conditions were no longer met for us to continue working for the Central African armed forces."⁴ While the subsequent security vacuum created by the French departure is still developing, it has enabled a further expansion of the Wagner Group's presence and enhanced the mercenary group's capacity to operate unimpeded by French influence, opening the door for more explicit bilateral relations between CAR and Russia.

² Bram Posthumus, "The Curious Case of Russia in Africa," Al Jazeera, May 20, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/5/20/the-curious-case-of-russias-romance-in-central-african-republic>

³ Ibid.

⁴ "Fin de la présence militaire française en Centrafrique," Rédaction Africanews, December 15, 2022. <https://fr.africanews.com/2022/12/15/fin-de-la-presence-militaire-francaise-en-centrafrique/>

In the build up to and during its war against Ukraine, the Russian Federation has greatly intensified efforts to win African allies for both strategic cooperation and on the international stage. On the regional scale, with CAR for instance, the Kremlin has stimulated bilateral relations through the sale of arms, the promise of infrastructure projects contracted with private Russian firms, and through the mercenary Wagner group with its poorly-hidden ties to the Kremlin. On the international stage, it appears that this initiative has produced tangible results much to the satisfaction of Vladimir Putin. In the table below, we can see a general ambivalence amongst African nations towards certain Russian actions in Ukraine.

African Countries' Voting Records in Relation to the War in Ukraine

	Against Russia and supporting the resolution	For Russia and against the resolution	Mixed positions between abstention and absence	
			Abstention	Absence
1. March vote: condemn the invasion and demand Russian withdrawal	28	1	17	8
2. April vote: suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council	9	9	23	13
3. October vote: condemn Russia for annexing Ukrainian territories	29	0	20	5

SOURCE: TABLE COMPILED BY THE AUTHOR FROM MEDIA REPORTS AND THE UNITED NATIONS WEBSITE.

From this, we can surmise that while some African nations will at times condemn Russia's actions in Ukraine, the views of these nations are by no means monolithic, nor are they willing to write off the Putin regime entirely for hopes of potential cooperation.

In contemporary geopolitics, outsized influence such as the ability to sway an entire continent's UN voting record is a key modality of soft power projection currently being administered by the Putin regime. With this same mode of thinking, much of the discourse surrounding current geopolitical competition in Africa is often framed along the lines of a "New

Cold War.” Adherents of this notion would highlight the nature of the current geopolitical dynamics, similar to the Cold War struggle between the USSR and US wherein the two great powers attempted to reconstruct polities, economies, and societies of the Global South in their own image and likeness.⁵ As such, the contemporary domestic contexts of the powers that we will examine - France and Russia - have specific circumstances that must be explained. Within Russia, hierarchy of power begins with Vladimir Putin controlling the reigns of power and closely resembles that of a feudal court: beneath Putin, the court is populated by elites who curry favor with their patron by pursuing and protecting his interests in exchange for their vast wealth and privileged positions within Russian society.⁶ Consequently, it is elites like the aforementioned Wagner Group chief Yevgeny Prigozhin who have wielded the influence bestowed on them by Putin to help achieve the Kremlin’s goals in Africa and the CAR. The domestic concerns that underpin the French Republic’s Africa policy mainly revolve around the preservation of her prestige as a key player in global affairs, maintaining access to key resources, combating extremist violence, and maintaining regional stability.

However, in the present day’s increasingly multipolar global order, a framing à la Cold War redux is a reductionist approach. Instead of the current discourse which tends to focus on the resurfacing of Cold War or imperialist competition, Russia’s thrust into the Central African Republic and surrounding regions should be viewed as a fundamental component to a strategy that seeks to carve out a new bloc of non-democratic regimes with which it can engage in economic, security, and political partnerships as a means of ensuring regime durability in the face of global competition and western sanctions. One function of this bloc is that it would

⁵ Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development: The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955-1968*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 7.

⁶ Nathaniel Reynolds, “Putin’s Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group,” The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/GlobalRussia_NateReynolds_Vagner.pdf.

provide a new network in which Russia can export its domestic clientelist system, wherein the Russian elites are given immense wealth and influence in exchange for their patronage to the Putin regime. The paper will examine the modes in which it is pursuing these goals as well as the factors which limit them. Given that Russia is not operating in a historical vacuum, it is necessary for this paper to incorporate an analysis of the French position in that CAR as well, given France's historical ties to the country and surrounding region. Similar to the Russian insecurity of its declining geopolitical standing, so too is France, the hegemon in Africa for much of the twentieth century, concerned with its own ability to maintain its relevance in Africa amidst a growing tide of anti-French sentiment on the continent. The French position in the CAR has sharply declined in the last decade, and the dichotomy between waning French authority and growing Russian influence must be explored together. The focus of this paper will be a comparative examination of French and Russian foreign policies towards the Central African Republic. This analysis will primarily focus on the modes in which the Kremlin seeks to engineer a favorable political landscape in the CAR, which will by proxy facilitate a further extension of Russia's ability to project power throughout the surrounding region. Given this, the modes in which France seeks to preserve its footing will be of secondary concern, serving mainly as an alternative lens through which we can view Russia's intrusion into the region. Particular concern will be given to the two country's respective domestic contexts and priorities that govern their foreign policies.

First, this paper will examine the engagements of France and the Soviet Union in order to first examine the historical patterns of French and Russian intervention in the region, namely through the modes of political partnerships, economic initiatives, and security practices. It will then turn to the contemporary modes of soft power being leveraged by France and Russia in the

realms of traditional media and social media. Finally, it will explore the role of hard power in the Central African Republic and assess how bilateral relations have strengthened or deteriorated with Russia and France.

Section I: French Intervention in Africa From Postwar to Present

As the Iron Curtain fell over Europe and western powers strategized over how to counter the Soviet threat, the question of how to handle the African continent prompted heated debate. In a 1953 article in *Foreign Affairs*, French General Goislard de Monsabert wrote,

If tomorrow there should be another war, North Africa would resume its same all-important rôle, derived from the fact of its central position at the spot where the Mediterranean and African facades of the European and African continents meet. Without North Africa, Europe cannot breathe and cannot act unless it be to retreat. An essential condition to the acquisition of strategic supremacy. The real frontier of Europe, then, is the ancient Roman *limes* bordering the Sahara. From Casablanca to Berlin, from Kiel to Gabés,, everything interlocks, and because it does the whole area constitutes a single and indivisible theater of war.⁷

At the time of General Monsabert's article, much of Africa was still under French colonial control. Yet even after the African independence decade of the 1960s, the French foreign policy towards its former colonies was still driven by the domineering attitudes expressed in Monsabert's *Foreign Affairs* article. As Africa became a major theater of Cold War competition, France's enduring paternalistic view of the continent became systematized into her foreign policy. Similarly, the architects of the European Economic Community, which would become the European Union, were ever cognizant that the project of European integration, and therefore European security, was intrinsically linked to Europe's capacity to control Africa. On this, the scholars Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson note that, "efforts to unify Europe systematically coincide with efforts to stabilize, reform, and reinvent the colonial system in Africa."⁸ That

⁷ General de Monsabert, "North Africa in Atlantic Strategy," *Foreign Affairs* 31, no. 3 (1953): 418–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20030975>.

⁸ Peo Hansen and Stefan Jonsson, "Introduction: The Past that Europe Forgot," in *Eurafrica: The Untold History of European Integration and Colonialism*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 7.

France played a key role in the “Eurafrica” project, further illustrates the commonalities between France’s ability to intervene in Africa and French security and prosperity.

In order to understand the present conditions in CAR and local discourse surrounding France’s presence in the country, we must first look at the French foreign policy evolution. French efforts at diplomatic outreach will be examined in three modes - political partnerships, economic initiatives, and security practices. In doing so, we will be able to better delineate the historical methods of intervention in Africa by France and later, the Soviet Union.

The passing of the “Law of 23 June 1956,” or *Loi-Cadre*, was undoubtedly a major turning point in the political partnerships between France and her overseas colonial territories in Africa. Realizing the momentum of the African independence movements, French leaders at the time carefully leveraged their relationships with African elites in order to maintain control in their former colonies despite their nominal independence. The 1956 law passed by the French National Assembly transferred a number of administrative powers away from Paris into the hands of elected territorial governments in African colonies.⁹ In theory, the *Loi-Cadre* marked a shift in France’s approach towards Africa that seemingly indicated a newfound respect for African sovereignty, but in practice the law pointed more to the evolution of the colonial state. On this evolution, the scholar Tony Chafer has placed the *Loi-Cadre* within the wider context of an “emerging convergence of interests between French governing élites and African political leaders for the transfer of power to Africans,” and has identified these shared interests as the “defeat of the nationalist movement and the generation of a series of post-colonial collaborating regimes.”¹⁰ In doing so, Chafer describes this as effectively being a “dual process of

⁹ “France: The ‘Loi-Cadre’ of June 23, 1956,” *Internet History Sourcebooks: Modern History*, Fordham University, <https://sourcebooks.web.fordham.edu/mod/1956-loicadre.asp>.

¹⁰ Tony Chafer, “Zero Hour Approaches,” in *Francophone Africa at Fifty*, ed. Tony Chafer and Alexander Keese (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), 16.

consolidation and dissolution,” wherein the French government was alleviated from the cost of administering and maintaining its colonial territories by ostensibly conceding the point of African sovereignty, yet still retained the clientelist networks that allowed France to indirectly govern in the post-colonial era.

In what would later become the Central African Republic, the effects of the *Loi-Cadre* carried with it the promise of unprecedented regional influence. The new legal framework allowed for the election of “great councils” to preside over the two federal amalgamations of French West Africa (FWA) and French Equatorial Africa (FEA), of which the territory of Oubangui-Chari was a part.¹¹ An emerging politician from this territory, Barthélémy Boganda, was elected as head of the FEA with the ambition of transforming his region into a united territory under the name of the Central African Republic.¹² Although Boganda’s dreams of a singular, unified Central Africa fell short, his native territory of Oubangui-Chari assumed the title of his proposed confederation and the Central African Republic was founded as a member of the French Union at the end of 1958. Yet only three months later, on March 29, 1959, Boganda was killed under mysterious circumstances in a plane crash rumored to be orchestrated by local French businessman and the French Secret Service.¹³ Following his death, Boganda was briefly succeeded by socialist academic Abel Goumba. However, Goumba was suspected by the local French commercial and administrative communities, and even the Paris-based Ministry for Foreign Affairs, to be too radical. Instead, the French chose to propel David Dacko, a former deputy in Boganda’s cabinet, to fulfill the role of President.¹⁴ Once in power, Dacko turned to

¹¹ Peter Baxter, “France in Centrafrique: From Bokassa and Operation Barracuda to the Days of EUFOR,” (Pinetown, South Africa: Helion, 2019), 13.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Barthélémy Bogand,” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed June 4, 2023 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Barthelemy-Boganda>.

¹⁴ Peter Baxter, “France in Centrafrique.”

increasingly autocratic measures to extend his term in office. Through intimidation tactics with his private militia and the backing of French troops, when CAR gained independence on August 13, 1960, Dacko was elected to the presidency and soon after arrested Goumba and his supporters.¹⁵

Thus began a continuing trend in CAR towards political instability and violence as a means of political consolidation and control. In brief, the following forty years of political history in the Central African Republic has been defined by coups and takeovers, ranging in the extent of bloodshed with which they occurred but consistent in their frequency. Since 1960, France has intervened militarily seven times in CAR.¹⁶ Throughout the continent, the regularity with which France meddles in the affairs of her former colonies through military force has served as a rallying cry for anti-French actors. For some at the local level, the living memory of French intervention and disregard for African sovereignty is a powerful ethos that, at present, is being exploited by Russian forces.

While the economic and political networks established by French officials following the *loi-cadre* pointed to a shift towards quasi-autonomous, federal systems of governance, many of the African elites in former French colonies sought to assert the power of their individual territories, and instead adopted a rather nationalist stance. This dichotomy led to enduring tensions as the French sought to impose their economic might through slanted networks of financial exchange. During the independence decade of the 1960s, President De Gaulle adopted the decidedly neocolonial model of the *Françafrique*, which assumed that France, despite the abandonment of the colonies, should retain the exclusive right to develop African resources and

¹⁵Eric Young, "Dacko, David," In *Encyclopedia of Africa*. : Oxford University Press, 2010. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195337709.001.0001/acref-9780195337709-e-1130>.

¹⁶Cynthia Glock, "Can the Central African Republic Carry On Without France?" *RUSI Journal* 162, no. 6, (Jan 2018): 29.

markets.¹⁷ A key component of France's policy of economic engagement with the *françafrique* has been centered on continued access to the natural resources that underpin a wide-range of sectors in the domestic economy.

To ensure the efficient exchange of products and economic unity between Paris and her former colonies, the De Gaulle administration created the CFA Franc, a shared currency to enable economic exchange. The adoption of the currency by the 15 participating African states came with two significant provisions. The first was that member states were required to place 65% of their foreign exchange reserves in the French Treasury, and the second was that France was given veto power over the monetary policy of the countries in the union.¹⁸ In practice, the Union was divided into two zones - the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and the Economic Community of Central African Countries (ECCAS), which includes the Central African Republic. By creating cooperative financial institutions slanted in favor of France, De Gaulle helped facilitate economic exchange in the *françafrique* to bolster the domestic French economy at the expense of its former colonies.

The central mode of economic exchange between France and the *françafrique* dealt with key resources for French industry and security. In many ways, the domestic French economy has been built upon the large-scale extraction of natural resources from the African continent. One such resource, uranium, has become a central component in French energy security. Although the continent provides a vast array of other natural resources, uranium is a case in point because its use has widespread ramifications on the domestic operations of French society. Since France's first nuclear power plant came online in the 1960s, the nuclear industry has supplied the nation

¹⁷ Nikolay Medushevskiy and Alisa Shishkina, "Modern French Policy on the African Continent: Transformations of a *Françafrique* Model," *Journal of Asian and African studies* (Leiden) 57, no. 6 (2022): 1145.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 1146.

with over seventy percent of its energy.¹⁹ The African continent has been critical to France's long standing policy of energy security, and since decolonization France has relied on its ties with African states to fuel their policy of strategic energy sufficiency. The institutional mechanisms in place for France have enabled it to mine and develop uranium deposits in countries like Niger, Gabon, and the Central African Republic. Spurred by state policy, the French private sector has been incentivized to operate in these former colonies to extract, refine, and utilize African uranium to the benefit of France and detriment to her former colonies. This "privileged relationship" of France has hindered uranium-rich African states to develop their own nuclear capacities as codified in a variety of unequal treaties. The *Accords de Défense*, for instance, stipulates that the "strategic raw materials" of certain francophone African states must be made readily available to France and restricted to third countries, as required by the "interests of common defense."²⁰

Moving eastward to the CAR, a similarly exploitative economic policy has also been pursued by France in both energy and trade. All explorations of Uranium have been tightly controlled by French public and private interests, which limited the CAR's ability to promote itself as a hub for nuclear investment to states outside of France. In addition to its role as an exclusive uranium supplier to France, CAR has also been structurally limited by dependency on French trade and investment. The unfavorable nature of this exchange can be seen in 1987 figures which show that France accepted a mere 16.8% of CAR exports while supplying the nation with 52.4% of its imports.²¹

¹⁹ "Nuclear Power Plants Generated 68% of France's Electricity in 2021," US Energy Information Administration, January 23, 2023, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=55259#:~:text=Although%20France's%20first%20commercial%20nuclear,significant%20share%20of%20France's%20electricity.>

²⁰ Guy Martin, "Uranium: A Case-Study in Franco-African Relations," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 27, no. 4 (1989): 632. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/161112>.

²¹ *Ibid*, 637.

Since decolonization, however, the economic interests of Paris have not been the main driver of French policy towards Africa. Rather, it has been France's security policy that has driven many of the initiatives undertaken by the presidential administrations in the Fifth Republic. Many scholars have highlighted the preeminence of upholding French overseas prestige over economic influence. In his book *French Power in Africa*, the scholar John Chipman points to the primacy of French military reach over economic considerations, writing,

By and large, the struggle to hang on to overseas territories had little to do with economic considerations. For French relations with Africa, the political concepts of overseas power always overrode theories of economic necessity, just as the range and use of military power, which reflected political interests, was far out of proportion to the degree and importance of French economic interests in Africa.²²

In the context of the postcolonial period, and more expressly in the struggle over the "Third World" during the Cold War, the central component of French foreign policy towards Africa was based on the retention of French hegemony on the continent. Accordingly, the use of military force and other forms of hard power have been flexed by all French presidents since decolonization in order to achieve favorable outcomes in line with French strategic interests. This section will highlight the themes and motives behind key interventions throughout the *Françafrique* from the postcolonial Cold War era. It will then turn to more recent events, specifically in the Central African Republic, in order to understand the continuities between postcolonial and post-Cold War French military intervention.

By the time of the postcolonial era, the rhetoric of France's *mission civilisatrice* had been transformed into that of special or "privileged" relationship in which France was obliged to act in a paternalistic manner to and to underwrite the development of her former colonies out of necessity for their survival. Simultaneously, an alternative truism existed in that France, desperate to retain relevance in a newly bipolar world, also "needed" Africa to promote its

²² John Chipman, *French Power in Africa*, (Oxford: B. Blackwell, 1989), 188.

interests, grandeur, and security.²³ In many ways, the rhetoric that emerged surrounding French military intervention in this era illustrates the anxieties and paranoia the De Gaulle administration felt. As De Gaulle argued,

To give up co-operation would be equivalent to disavowing our role with regard to the evolution which carried people of Africa so much... to develop in their turn, without delivering themselves to one or the other of two hegemonies which divide the World... Why thus would France, which is itself in full expansion, keep away from a movement for which its traditional genius is largely the pillar on which depend, ultimately, the peace and fate of the world?²⁴

Thus, the twin-track approach of using their former colonies and allies as bulwarks against both Soviet encroachment and their own declining international prestige came to function as the dominant paradigm for roughly thirty years of French postcolonial security policy. Accordingly, France's ideological and pragmatic aversion to the spread of communism in Africa were manifested in interventions that demonstrate the catalyzing nature of grand narratives behind military intervention.

One essential instance of a grand-narrative driven intervention is the case of Zaire. In 1977 and 1978, rebel forces from neighboring Angola invaded a southern province. The French responded to both instances of Angolan incursions into the south of Zaire with military action, largely prompted by fears that the presence of Soviet and Cuban military personnel were part of a larger communism plot to destabilize the region.²⁵ Despite the fact that Zaire was never a French colony, the nation's status as a French client-state at the time led Embassy staff to believe that a leftist regime would "increase the possibilities for penetration of outside influences hostile to the west," and endanger more moderate regimes in surrounding countries.²⁶

²³ Bruno Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism: Security Policy in Sub-Saharan Africa*, (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2008), 62.

²⁴ Pascal Chaigneau, *La Politique Militaire de la France en Afrique*, (Paris: CHEAM, 1984), 20.

²⁵ Nathaniel K. Powell, "Battling Instability? The Recurring Logic of French Military Interventions in Africa," *African security* 10, no. 1 (2017): 52

²⁶ *Ibid.*

The 1970s are an essential period for examining the motives behind Franco-African security policy because it established the precedent of military intervention on the basis of France's obligation to counter instability. Under President d'Estaing (1974-1981), French security itself was explicitly linked to that of Africa. The army chief of staff under d'Estaing, General Guy Méry, wrote in 1978 that, "No one can deny that in Africa there is a climate of instability to which we cannot remain indifferent," for reasons of both "security and responsibility."²⁷ The precise basis of the reasoning behind security and responsibility was because of geographical proximity, the presence of vast numbers of French nationals on the continent, the importance of maritime routes linking raw material production to French markets, and of course, the special responsibility France had because of its historical links on the continent.²⁸ Stability, for French presidents ordering intervention throughout the postcolonial era, was largely a practice of upholding the status quo. With a legal permission structure in the form of defense agreements signed by many former colonies, France was largely free to intervene on its own terms, usually by coming to the defense of sitting political regimes which had established relationships with Paris. Within the framework of military cooperation agreements, signatory African states were permitted to call upon France for assistance in both cases of foreign encroachment as well issues of domestic stability.²⁹

One of the provisions tied to cooperation agreements was the ability for France to construct military bases in order to retain a permanent presence on the continent, which gives credence to the strategic landscape component of French postcolonial security policy. With numerous military bases dispersed around sub-Saharan Africa, France created a security network conducive to power projection and the upholding of its military prestige. On this basis, France

²⁷ Ibid, 51.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Charbonneau, *France and the New Imperialism*, 60.

sent military troops to intervene in Mauritania (1977-78), Chad (1978-1980), the Central African Republic (1979), and twice in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire, in both 1977 and 1978.³⁰

While the scope of this research does not allow us to view French intervention in these states on a tactical level, the actions of French troops on a local level are relevant insofar as it may explain the reasons behind the anti-French sentiment pervading Africa today. In the Central African Republic today, the presence of UN peacekeeping forces has yielded little results towards stabilizing the country. Moreover, a Russian-sponsored disinformation campaign has described the MINUSCA presence as under the control of France, which also falsely claims that France seeks to perpetuate conflict by funding armed rebel groups. The depiction of France as a puppet-master in CAR is a particularly poignant message that has gained momentum in the local discourse. Through Russian influence, Central African citizens are increasingly reminded of their nation's history of exploitation at the hands of France and, given Russia's lacking colonial legacy, are more prone to view Russia more favorably.

³⁰ Ibid, 62.

“Red Fingerprints” - Soviet Engagement in Cold War Africa

The living memory of the Soviet Union, and now Russia’s involvement in Africa draws a sharp contrast from that of France. Having never been involved in the slave trade, scramble for Africa, violent phases of decolonization, nor involvement with the exploitative postcolonial networks that continue to pervade many African nations, local populations that did engage with the USSR tend to view their past involvement much more favorably. Contrary to the French position, Soviet engagement with nationalist movements and development assistance programs have helped portray the USSR as an empowering ally who pursued equal partnerships on a bilateral basis. Regardless of the validity of these claims that are often highlighted by Kremlin-backed news agencies, it is true that by the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991, more than 50,000 Africans had studied in Soviet universities and military and technical institutes and at least another 200,000 Africans had received Soviet training on African soil.³¹

The relative brevity of the Soviet Union’s engagement with Africa in comparison to France means that this report will not detail as extensively the facets of Soviet foreign policy towards Africa as it did the French. Instead, the forthcoming section will aim to highlight the disparities between Franco-African relations and Soviet-African relations by focusing on the aspects of the latter that bolster and shape the current dynamics between Russia and Africa.

On security, the Soviet Union’s participation in the nationalist liberation movements that occurred throughout the continent has contributed to Russia’s generally positive perception. In both Angola and Ethiopia, the USSR played a major role in shaping the course of their respective movements, sharing common-cause with their anti-imperialist motives. The Soviets, of course, also had a vested interest in waging proxy wars with the western backed opponents of the

³¹ “Russia’s Return to Africa,” Atlantic Council, J. Peter Pham, March 14, 2014
<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/article/russia-s-return-to-africa/>.

liberation movements and gave substantial material support to secure favorable outcomes. By some estimates, Soviet and Cuban military aid to the MPLA of Angola totaled roughly \$250 million, in addition to over 11,000 military advisors and a plethora of different armaments.³² These vast sums of security-based material aid indicate the views of Soviet leaders on the importance of strong ties in Africa. Unlike the French, the Soviet Union's support of nationalist groups generated a positive public perception in the African countries that received Soviet military aid. In essence, it established the views that the French supported the status quo to preserve their privileged position throughout Africa, while the Soviets were in favor of African independence and self-determination. These concepts remain strikingly similar to the Kremlin-espoused narrative surrounding Russian involvement in Africa today. The analyst Sarah McArthur has succinctly described this Kremlin narrative surrounding new Russian military cooperation in Africa as, "an emphasis on the right of sovereign states to choose their own allies, they insinuate that the French reaction is merely the disgruntlement of a neo-colonial power which is losing its privileged position in Francophone African politics."³³ The remarkable continuity between the messaging of security cooperation by the Soviet Union and Russia respectively helps explain in part, the acceptance of Russian military support by African states with former Soviet ties.

On economic aid and cooperation, the Soviet Union was especially focused on assistance that would deepen bilateral ties, and hoped that through financial linkages, firmer political connections could be established to further wage cold war against the capitalist west. In other words, Soviet economic aid served as a function of the Soviet network of allies in the "Third

³² Christopher Stevens, "The Soviet Union and Angola," *African Affairs* 75, no. 299 (April 1976): 144.

³³ Sarah McArthur, "France To Pull Military Support In Central African Republic Amidst Disputes Over Ties With Russia," OWP, October 25, 2022, <https://theowp.org/france-to-pull-military-support-in-central-african-republic-amidst-disputes-over-ties-with-russia/>.

World.” From 1954 to 1956 for instance, Soviet economic assistance totaled \$271 million across 14 states and focused on capacity building projects in the realms of transportation, mechanized agriculture, irrigation, as well industrial and power projects.”³⁴ While the breadth and focus on capacity-building projects is markedly different from the economic cooperation of France with Africa, the Soviet Union maintained a similar transactionalist approach with regards to its investments as France did. For instance, the criteria in which Soviet aid was directed stemmed from three criteria: the strategic importance of the individual African state, the potentiality for that African state to provide them with raw materials, or to be a good market for the Soviet Union to export their goods, and the significance of influence from the West in the region.³⁵ Essentially, the USSR deemed the high cost of its investment in Africa to be worth the price of admission to compete with the western nations who had long-standing ties on the continent.

As investment stimulated political cooperation, the Soviets believed that strong economic ties would help catalyze African states on the march towards socialism. To generate further goodwill among the citizens of the African states they cooperated with, the Soviet Union invested heavily in human capital by assisting, “about 500 thousand specialists and skilled African workers were trained, including 170 thousand directly during the construction and operation of facilities, when Soviet engineers, technicians and workers transferred their experience and knowledge to local citizens working side by side with them.”³⁶ The sheer scale of technical assistance and training conducted by the Soviet Union is a key factor that separates Soviet involvement in Africa from that of France. Because of the Soviet Union’s investments in major economic projects and in human development, Russia is able to capitalize off of the

³⁴ Colin W Lawson, "Soviet Economic Aid to Africa," *African Affairs* 87, no. 349 (1988), 502-503.

³⁵ Oye Ogunbadejo, "Soviet Policies in Africa," *African Affairs* 79, no. 316 (1980), 299.

³⁶ Rachel Fink, “France and the Soviet Union: Intervention in Africa Post-Colonialism,” (Thesis, Wittenberg University, 2020), 38.

positive associations in the living memory of the USSR in Africa. As will be shown, through disinformation campaigns conducted by Moscow, the Russian Federation seeks to project its current projects in Africa as similar to those done by the Soviet Union. In doing so, Russia displays a key divergence from the historical legacy of France which has contributed to the Putin regime's growing ties on the African continent.

Section II - Contemporary Dynamics in the Central African Republic

Thus far, this project has endeavored to delineate the respective approaches of French and Soviet policy towards Africa in the postcolonial, Cold War era. We can see that, in the realm of diplomacy, economics, and security, the approaches of the two great powers on the continent created lasting memories in the societies of the African states in which they acted, and these memories inform the ability of France and Africa to cooperate with the nations of Africa today. With the case of the Central African Republic, the common thread of political instability and weak institutions has created a political context that is easily susceptible to foreign influence. In the 2010s, the highly limited capacity of the CAR government to deal with conflict within its borders meant that the leaders of the country turned to France for assistance.

In late 2012, then president of the CAR François Bozizé requested international support to subdue a Muslim rebel movement known as the Séléka. The Séléka rebel group stemmed from the northern, Muslim-majority region of the country and had advanced towards the Catholic-majority south, and by March of 2013 had deposed Bozizé and installed the country's first Muslim president.³⁷ Several months later, violent conflict broke out between the Muslim Séléka and Christian militias known as Anti-Balakas. By then, the United Nations and France began voicing concerns of potential genocide, as raised in a special report written by Adama Dieng, the UN Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide.³⁸ In December 2013 the UN Security Council voted unanimously on the authorization of military force to minimize sectarian violence and restore political order to the country and subsequently established the "African Led

³⁷ "Conflict in the Central African Republic," Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, accessed May 14, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violence-central-african-republic>.

³⁸ "The Statement of Under Secretary-General/Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, Mr. Adama Dieng, on the Human Rights and Humanitarian situation in the Central African Republic," Adama Dieng, United Nations Security Council, November 1, 2013, https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/our-work/Doc.4_2013-11-1.SAPG%20Statement%20at%20Aria%20Meeting%20of%20the%20UNSC%20on%20CAR.pdf.

International Support Mission in the CAR,” or MISCA.³⁹ After the successful disarmament of rebel forces and militia groups, the MISCA coalition gave way to the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the CAR, or MINUSCA. This new stabilization phase of operation in CAR, however, has widely fallen short of the expectations of both the international community and domestic CAR actors alike. International observers have noted that despite the peacekeeping force’s size of 10,000 plus soldiers, social tensions remain and security is yet to be restored, as locals have accused the force of inertia and decried it as ineffective.⁴⁰ Yet there are other forces at play which contribute to an increasingly hostile attitude towards western, especially French, intervention.

Today, it is Vladimir Putin’s supranational apparatus of military, technical, and propaganda networks that help to disseminate an ardently anti-Western message to facilitate the Russian Federation’s push onto the African continent. This is a rather novel development, as, only within the last decade or so, has the Kremlin indicated an interest in its former theater of Cold War competition.

“As History attests, Russia turns to Africa only in times of crisis or of rivalry with the West. Putin is no exception,” reads a report on Russo-African relations by the Atlantic Council.⁴¹ The resurgent African component of the Kremlin’s twenty-first century foreign policy is an indication of how the Putin regime seeks to buttress itself from the onslaught of sanctions, condemnations, and, perhaps most importantly, financial downturn stemming from its illegal moves in Ukraine. The following section will thus examine the modes and limits of how

³⁹ “Resolution 2127 (2013),” United Nations Security Council, December 5, 2013, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N13/594/43/PDF/N1359443.pdf?OpenElement>.

⁴⁰ Cynthia Glock, “Can the Central African Republic Carry On Without France?” *RUSI Journal* 162, no. 6, (Jan 2018): 31.

⁴¹ Abdelhak Bassou, “Military Relations Between Russia and Africa, Before and After the War in Ukraine,” Atlantic Council, February 2023, https://issuu.com/atlanticcouncil/docs/military_relations_between_russia_and_africa_befo.

Vladimir Putin's Russia has infiltrated the CAR. It will contrast the Russian approach to that of France, the historical partner of the Central African Republic, by explicating France's recent foreign policy approach vis-à-vis that of Russia in the two realms of **information** and **security**. Subsequently, we will be able to see how the systems in place to facilitate Russia's thrust into the CAR and wider region closely mirror the previously mentioned feudal-like clientelist system that exists at home in Russia. In essence, the Putin regime seeks to replicate its own domestic system of patronage abroad in order to create a network of alliances with African states, and the two modes with which it seeks to accomplish this are disinformation campaigns and security-based cooperation.

Mode One: Soft Power - Media and Information

A. Russian Strategy and State-Sponsored Media

The exportation of Russian media onto the African continent is an explicit exercise in soft power. The Kremlin has simultaneously, and skillfully, leveraged its domestic media outlets to reach a broad swath of Africans through the use of both traditional and social media. In an interview following the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russian author and current Director of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Alexei Vasiliev was quoted saying, "Africa is largely unaware of Russia, since African media mainly consumes Western sources and then replicates them. And all the fake news, the Russophobia and anti-Russian propaganda spread by the Western media, are repeated in the African media."⁴²

The narrative espoused by Vasiliev is one that has been proven to appeal to many Africans. It is a narrative with which they can identify - that traditional western forces, in this case the media, have deliberately manipulated the population to further their agenda. The

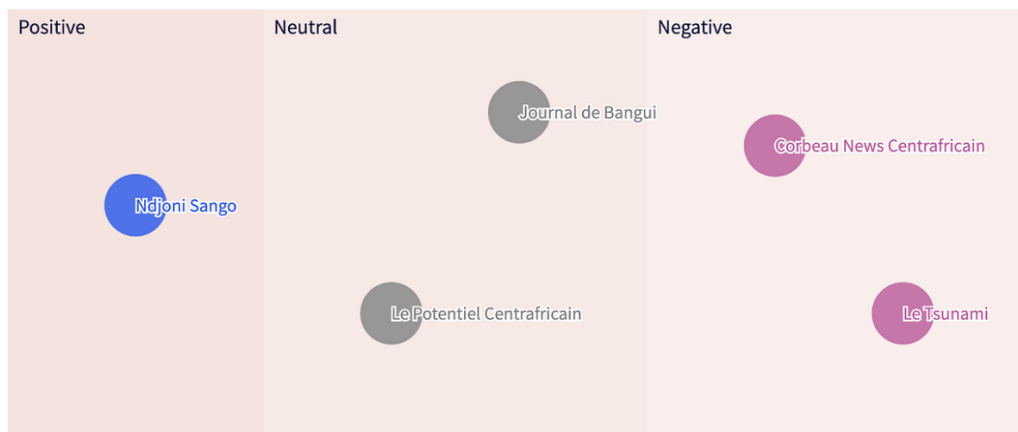
⁴² Peter Fabricus, "Russia Starts a New Chapter in Africa," The Daily Maverick, October 29, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-10-29-russia-starts-a-new-chapter-in-africa/>

Russian solution to this shared Russo-African grievance has been to play on its rhetorical support for national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states - just as the Soviet Union supposedly did - a line that they have spread widely through state-sponsored agencies like Sputnik and RT.⁴³ Perhaps more potently, however, are the local African media outlets who receive financial support in exchange for pushing a pro-Russia narrative. In CAR, the contemporary media landscape typifies the state of the country's journalistic polarization. The situation is clear - outlets that receive financial support from Russian actors overwhelmingly propagate a pro-Kremlin narrative while those that do not are free to offer more objective reporting.⁴⁴

Sentiments towards Russia in digital news media in the Central African Republic

An analysis of the news headlines of five digital news publications in the Central African Republic reveals that news outlets display a positive, neutral or negative sentiment towards Russia's activities in the country

Alignment ● Positive sentiment ● Neutral sentiment ● Negative sentiment



Source: CFA Analysis



Sentiment towards Russian narratives in digital news media in the CAR (Source: CFA)

⁴³ Cayley Clifford and Steven Gruzd, "Russian and African Media: Exercising Soft Power," South African Institute of International Affairs, February 2022, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40121>.

⁴⁴ The image was derived from a non-public report conducted by Code for Africa, a technology and journalism nonprofit that seeks to counteract digital disinformation in Africa. Article citation: "Friend or foe? How the Central African Republic's media reports on Russia," ANCIR iLab, January 12, 2022, <https://medium.com/african-c-i-r/friend-or-foe-how-the-central-african-republics-media-reports-on-russia-9c6496729de7>

For a case study of this phenomenon, we will look to two outlets on opposite ends of the spectrum shown above - Ndjoni Sango and Corbeau News Centrafricain - to examine their varying slants while reporting the same story. In this case, the respective local outlets are reporting on a situation that describes a massive payment of state-funds to the Russian Wagner Mercenary Group which conducts anti-insurgent activities and provides protection services to the

RCA: affaire d'un financement au Wagner, la primature dénonce une désinformation

Par **Ndjoni Sango** - 30 avril 2023



(Corbeau News) Central African

Republic: The Cases of 400 Million

Francs to Wagner: Government Tries to

*Manipulate Public Opinion*⁴⁵ →

⁴⁵ “RCA: affaire d’un financement au Wagner, la primature Sango, trans. Justin Wickstrand, April 30, 2023, <https://ndjonisango.com/2023/04/30/rca-affaire-dun-financement-au-wagner-la-primature-denonce-une-desinformation/>.

⁴⁶ “Centrafrique : affaires des 400 millions FCFA de Wagner : le gouvernement tente de manipuler l’opinion,” Gisele Moloma, Corbeau News, trans. Justin Wickstrand, May 1, 2023,

⁴¹<https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/centrafrique-affaires-des-400-millions-fcfa-de-wagner-le-gouvernement-tente-de-manipuler-lopinion/>

CAR President and his allies. In the headlines alone, we can see that the two news sites offer starkly different opinions on the story:

←*(Ndjoni Sango) CAR: Wagner Financing Case, Prime Minister Denounces Misinformation*⁴⁵

Centrafrique : affaires des 400 millions FCFA de Wagner : le gouvernement tente de manipuler l’opinion

Par **Corbeaunews** - Publié le 30 avril 2023 , 7:30

Bangui, 30 avril 2023 (CNC) — Le **gouvernement** centrafricain est à nouveau au cœur d’un scandale de détournement de fonds destinés à l’éducation et la santé. Une partie de ces fonds, soit 400 millions de francs CFA par semaine, aurait été versée à la société de mercenariat russe Wagner. Le premier ministre **Félix Moloua** a avoué publiquement ces faits à sa descente d’avion lors de son retour des États-Unis où il a participé aux réunions de Printemps des institutions financières de Breton Woods. Malgré cela, le service de communication de la primature tente de manipuler l’opinion nationale en affirmant que le propos du premier ministre a été dénaturé par certains médias nationaux.



Le premier ministre Félix Moloua

On headlines, the contrast in tone is evident - the pro-Russia outlet Ndjoni Sango has labeled the discourse surrounding massive payments to Wagner as misinformation, while the outlet which is less favorable to Russia decries the situation as a case of state-sponsored information contortion. Moreover, we can see that the cover images displayed by the respective outlets present dissimilar tones. While Ndjoni Sango - the outlet favorable to Russia - uses a well-lit, standard photo of the Prime Minister, Corbeau News uses an image with reduced saturation to convey an ominous mood to match the negative tone of the headline. At this point, a comparative textual analysis of the two articles would be presented. However, at the time of this writing the Ndjoni Sango website has been suspended for reasons unknown to the author. At least in the case of the Corbeau News article, the language of the text is quite charged, as the author accuses the government minister of embezzlement and the government as a whole of trying to manipulate public opinion. While the case of these contrasting articles is limited in scope, it provides a useful proxy to understanding the contemporary media landscape of the CAR - namely, that reporting is distorted by the financial intervention of Russia and that the most critical sources of information for the local population are now mired in a greater geopolitical battle to win over the hearts and minds of Africans.

The Putin regime undoubtedly relishes in the utility of having local news outlets at its disposal to disseminate pro-Russian information because it offers plausible deniability if accused of foreign interference. Moreover, the backing of local news outlets conveys a sense of legitimacy to the local population in that the voices espousing a Kremlin-friendly narrative are themselves native Africans. But the true utility of having a favorable image on the continent is more implicit. The Kremlin's exporting of Russian media networks, combined with its partnerships with local news agencies can be seen as part of its grand strategic push onto the

continent. As the analyst Joseph Siegle writes, “Africa, with its weak governments, abundant natural resources, colonial legacies, proximity to Europe, and fifty-four votes at the United Nations General Assembly, provides Russia an easy and attractive theater where it can advance its interests with limited financial or political costs.”⁴⁷ For President Putin and the Russian intelligence apparatus, operating in ways that limit financial or political costs is their *modus operandi*. The covert influence operations that have been conducted by the Kremlin globally - and are currently being conducted in CAR and across Africa - are the key components of expanding Russian influence. By empowering African voices in a bottom up approach - albeit through financial incentive - Moscow is able to confer a sense of legitimacy upon itself in the eyes of African governments. Thus, through the low cost ventures of backing local media outlets, Russia is gradually gaining access to the weak African governments and myriad tangible benefits such as natural resources and UN votes.

But on a continent where more than half of the population is under twenty five, the battle for hearts and minds takes place not just in the ivory towers of government nor at the ink-stained desks of local reporters. Instead, in the twenty-first century, the battle is fought perhaps most nefariously, behind keyboards and touchscreens - using memes, videos, and hashtags in what can be essentially described as social-media information warfare.

On the Russian side, digital influence campaigns are conducted on both the regional and local level. The Kremlin has carefully curated a network of self-styled “Pan-Africanist influencers” who serve as mouthpieces to promote the Russian Federation’s goals of establishing greater linkages with Africa. On a global scale, the Kremlin has deployed this network to push

⁴⁷ Joseph Siegle, “Russia and Africa: Expanding Influence and Instability,” in *Russia’s Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd, George C. Marshall Center, 2021, <https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/marshall-center-books/russias-global-reach-security-and-statecraft-assessment/chapter-10-russia-and-africa-expanding-influence-and>.

anti-Western narratives to justify its invasion of Ukraine in addition to its actions in Africa. One operative in this network, a French-Beninese man named Kémi Séba, spoke at a Russia-Africa Youth Forum and justified Russia's actions in Ukraine as a response to NATO's "encircling" and "arming of former Soviet republics... in the same way the West destroyed and dismantled Africa."⁴⁸ Moreover, the Kremlin has played on its non-colonial legacy to propel its digital reach onto the continent, as seen in comments by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov who spoke at the Russia-Africa Youth forum,

"We are united by the rejection of the so-called 'rules-based order' that the former colonial powers are imposing on the world. Russia greatly appreciates the fact that despite unprecedented and crude pressure, our African friends, like the overwhelming majority of the international community, have not joined the anti-Russia sanctions but continue developing dialogue and cooperation with us."⁴⁹

On a more regional scale, Séba and his confidant Nathalie Yamb, who has styled herself as "La Dame de Sochi," have emphasized deepening ties with Russia and have called for the removal of French and Western influence across the Sahel while encouraging more Kremlin influence.⁵⁰ Séba and Yamb, who have 1.1 million and 541,000 followers on Instagram respectively, are corroborated by official social media channels of the Russian government on Facebook and Twitter. In the images below, the official Facebook account of the Russian Ambassador to the CAR is seen admonishing two local news outlets, *Africa Intelligence* and *Corbeau News*, the latter being the newspaper with less-favorable views towards Russia used in the headline case study above. Some key lines from the Facebook post read as,

"The Russian Embassy in CAR is already accustomed to lies peddled by some newspaper, such as «Corbeau News» ... Without providing arguments against Russian policy, the two tabloids decided to give a low blow. We know who's behind it. We know those outside forces that are adverse to Russia. This animosity is due to

⁴⁸ "Yevgeniy Prigozhin's Africa-Wide Disinformation Campaign," US Department of State, November 4, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/evgeniy-prigozhins-africa-wide-disinformation-campaign/>.

⁴⁹ "Russia is Using African Influencers to Spread Its Lies on Twitter." *Coda*. Accessed March 15, 2023. <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/wagner-africa-disinformation-ukraine/>

⁵⁰ US Department of State, "Disinformation Campaign."

their envy for Russia, which has always fought against neocolonialism, while these forces have been ready to resort to the most despicable practices to overthrow regimes in Africa that they disliked. Nevertheless, we are sure that the forces of good will vanquish the forces of evil embodied in the newspapers “Corbeau News” and “Africa Intelligence.”⁵¹



Ambassade de la Federation de Russie en République Centrafricaine 
May 15, 2021 · 

! L'Ambassade de Russie en RCA est déjà habituée aux mensonges, colportés par certains journaux, comme par exemple « Corbeau News » et « Africa Intelligence ».

◆ Cette fois-ci, ils ont franchi la ligne rouge en ciblant l'Ambassadeur de Russie en RCA M. Vladimir Titorenko. C'est trop, étant donné que l'Ambassadeur agit au nom du Président et du gouvernement russe, c'est-à-dire il représente l'État russe et mène sa politique en RCA.

◆ Sans fournir d'arguments contre la politique russe, les deux tabloïdes ont décidé de donner un coup bas. Nous connaissons bien qui se cachent derrière. Nous connaissons bien ces forces extérieures qui éprouvent de l'aversion contre la Russie. Cette animosité est due à leur envie envers la Russie qui a toujours lutté contre le néocolonialisme, tandis que ces forces ont été prêtes à avoir recours aux pratiques les plus ignobles pour renverser en Afrique les régimes qui leur déplaisaient. Pour l'heure, ces forces vengent l'interpellation du terroriste qui a échoué une opération contre la présence russe en RCA.

◆ Néanmoins, nous sommes sûrs que les forces du bien vaincront les forces du mal qui sont incarnées par les journaux « Corbeau News » et « Africa Intelligence ».

◆ L'Ambassadeur de Russie poursuit son travail à Bangui pour promouvoir la coopération avec la RCA, y compris en appuyant le gouvernement centrafricain dans la lutte contre les rebelles, les bandits et les mercenaires.

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The post was then followed by this image and the hashtag #FakeNews. The language of this posting is a case in point of the themes of Russian information influence in the CAR. First, it establishes the anti-Russian news agencies as habitual liars and untrustworthy outlets. Next, in saying “We know who’s behind it,” the text alludes to western, probably French interference in CAR media to outline the anti-Russian news sources as illegitimate.

Following this, the post mentions Russia’s history of fighting neocolonialism as a way to express solidarity with the CAR citizens who seek to distance themselves from the influence of France. The last line is particularly concerning, and uses language that is typically associated with calls to violence. By casting the anti-Russian outlets as “forces of evil” who will be “vanquished,” the Russian ambassador escalates the stakes and conditions of criticizing Russia’s actions in the CAR.

⁵¹ Russian Ambassador to the Central African Republic, “The Russian Embassy in CAR is already accustomed to lies peddled by some newspapers,” Facebook, May 15, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/247247705769244/posts/1094565284370811>.

Lastly, at the end of the Russian Ambassador to CAR's Facebook tirade, he links a picture of this image followed by the #FakeNews. It is important to note this weaponization of the "Fake News" by the Russians. By casting doubt on the factual accuracy of news outlets who are critical of them, the Russians not only denigrate their opponents, but they also inflict a corrosive influence on the broader media landscape that causes individuals to be uncertain of all other information they hear. In doing so, Russia may be countering the accusations of nefarious online conduct in the short-term, but this mode of operation may be limited by the erosion of trust that the "Fake News" narrative inflicts on news media as a whole.

[#RCA](#) [#Russie](#) [#RussieAfrique](#) [#FakeNews](#) [#Россия](#) [#ЦАР](#)

See Translation



B. Russia v. France in the Information Landscape

Unlike the novel influence of Russia in the African media landscape, the origins of France's role in African mass media can be traced back to the 1890s. With a publication called *Le Petit Journal*, stories about the exploration of West Africa were filled with tales about courageous white expeditionaries who encountered human sacrifices, slave roundups, and secret societies.⁵² By peaking the interest of domestic French audiences with exotic stories, this stimulated an interest in other stories of French conquest that coincided with the real time consolidation of African territories.⁵³ Moreover, the themes of these stories depicted the French civilizing mission as a mutually beneficial endeavor that would bring stability to savage Africa and prosperity and prestige for France.⁵⁴ As France consolidated its colonial empire in Africa, the role of the media became a mode of soft power that highlighted the benefits of France's presence to African audiences themselves. The media environment of contemporary francophone Africa is a remnant of its colonial past, and French organizations like TV5Monde, Radio France International, and France24 are able to reach millions of Africans every day through radio, news articles, and television programming. Yet with recent cooperative agreements by Russian state media with African news outlets, and the growing influence of pro-Russian social media networks, French media and information hegemony has come into conflict with these new forces.

In terms of continental influence, the increased collaboration of the Russian Federation with African news outlets serves to espouse the benefits of Russo-African alliances, which poses a challenge to French media primacy on the continent. In the CAR border country of Cameroon,

⁵² Richard Smith, "A Popular View of Imperialism: The French Mass Press and the Conquest of West Africa," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 5 (1980): 51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

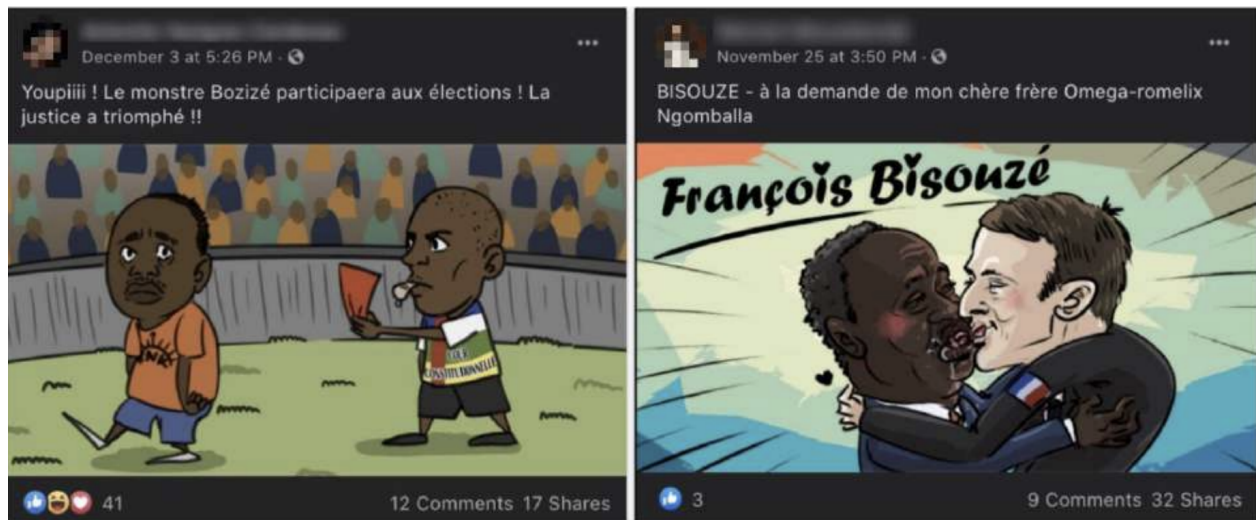
when Afrique Média, the nation's largest news outlet, partnered with Russian state news agency RT it released a news banner which read "The end of the West's misleading propaganda."

Yet the most clear instance of direct confrontation between Russian and French information actors is in the sphere of social media. According to reports by Facebook as well as the Stanford Internet Observatory, both France and Russia had created networks of fake social media accounts designed to promote their image and interests while simultaneously disparaging the other. Despite similar modes of operation, the respective French and Russian social media influence networks differed in their origin. On the Russian side, the operatives spearheading the disinformation campaign in CAR were found to have had links to the Internet Research Agency (IRA), a digital propaganda organization funded by Wagner Group head and Putin ally Yevgeniy Prigozhin. Conversely, as noted by the Stanford investigation, French social media operatives were not found to have ties to the government but the military.

Following a thorough investigation by Facebook officials and a subsequent report by the Stanford Internet Observatory and Graphika Analytics titled, "More-Troll Combat: French and Russian Influence Operations Go Head to Head Targeting Audiences in Africa," Facebook removed over 100 accounts of both French and Russian origin operating in the CAR. Therefore, unless otherwise specified, the images provided for analysis below will all originate from the Stanford-Graphika report as they are now removed from the platform.

By returning to our analytical framework of modes and limits, we may evaluate the ways in which French and Russian actors conducted their respective information operations and discern the extent to which these methods facilitated the goals of promoting image and interests. As highlighted by the Stanford Internet Observatory-Facebook report, the Prigozhin-backed disinformation campaign was conducted according to several themes. First, pro-Russian actors

clearly and consistently commented on electoral politics in CAR. In the run up to the nation’s December 2020 election, incumbent president Faustin-Archange Touadera, who established close ties with the Kremlin during the latter half of his first term, was the clear focus of posts by Russian assets who aimed to enhance his political standing. Moreover, there was also a focus on attacking Touadera’s primary challenger, François Bozizé. The anti-Bozizé postings were intended to characterize him as a close ally to France. In the images below, we can see the pointed images used to denigrate Bozizé. On the left, the caption refers to Bozizé as a “monster,” and the illustration on the right pointedly refers to him as having close relations with the Macron administration in Paris, making a pun on Bozizé’s name and the French “bisou,” or kiss.⁵⁵

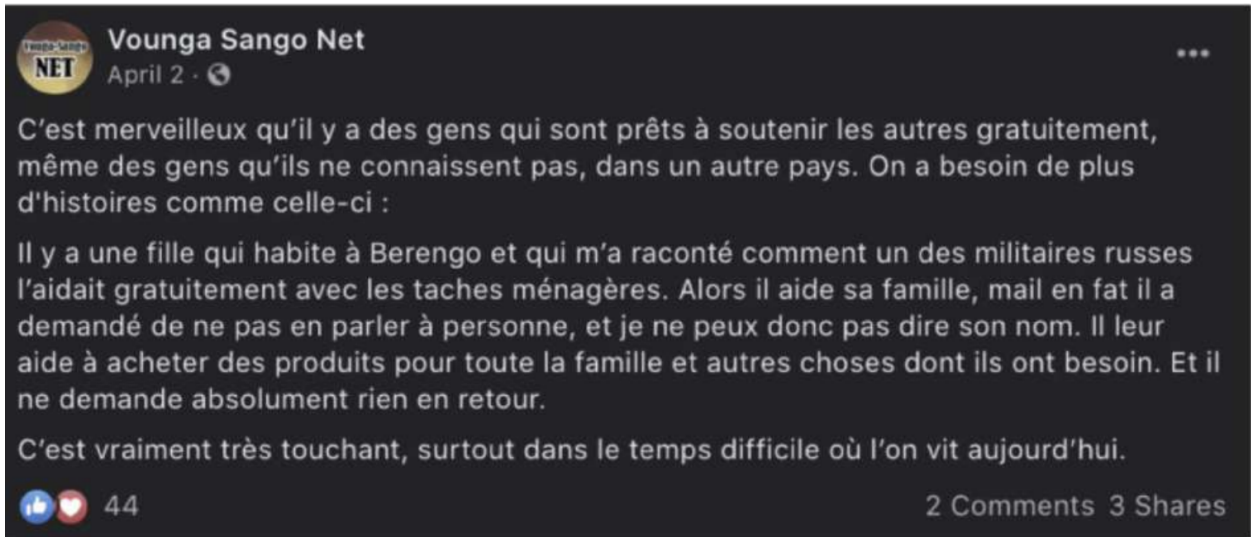


⁵⁵ “More-Troll Combat: French and Russian Influence Operations Go Head to Head Targeting Audiences in Africa,” Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory, December 2020, https://public-assets.graphika.com/reports/graphika_stanford_report_more_troll_kombat.pdf.

Another thematic mode of operation for Russian assets was the positive portrayal of Russia. This was done primarily through highlighting instances of cooperation between the Russian and CAR governments especially in cases of military cooperation. In the post above, one Russian operator posing as a CAR citizen praised Russia's shipment of armored vehicles, comparing them to crocodiles and noting that they are "strong and powerful, ready to face armed rebel groups!"



In another instance, a Russian-asset posted about a likely fabricated story involving a “Russian soldier,” i.e. Wagner mercenary, who helped a local woman with her housework and helped to purchase her groceries while asking nothing in return.⁵⁶



This mode of social media activity serves to highlight allyship between CAR and Russia on a macro and micro scale. By highlighting cases of military cooperation, as well as friendly local interaction, the Russian operation sought to underpin its presence in the country by being a force for good with both the CAR government and citizenry.

While highlighting positive cooperation is a critical component in the Russia-CAR information campaign, the negative portrayal of the French and UN presence in the country is an equally important mode of operation. It is with this mode that the falsehoods peddled by Russian-assets become more outlandish as illustrated in the images seen below. Here, we can see three Facebook posts which serve to undermine the UN presence in CAR as illegitimate and manipulated by France. There is also a post that derides French troops as rapists and thugs, accusing them of drugging and raping young women. In responses to these accusations, Russian

⁵⁶ “More-Troll Combat,” Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory.

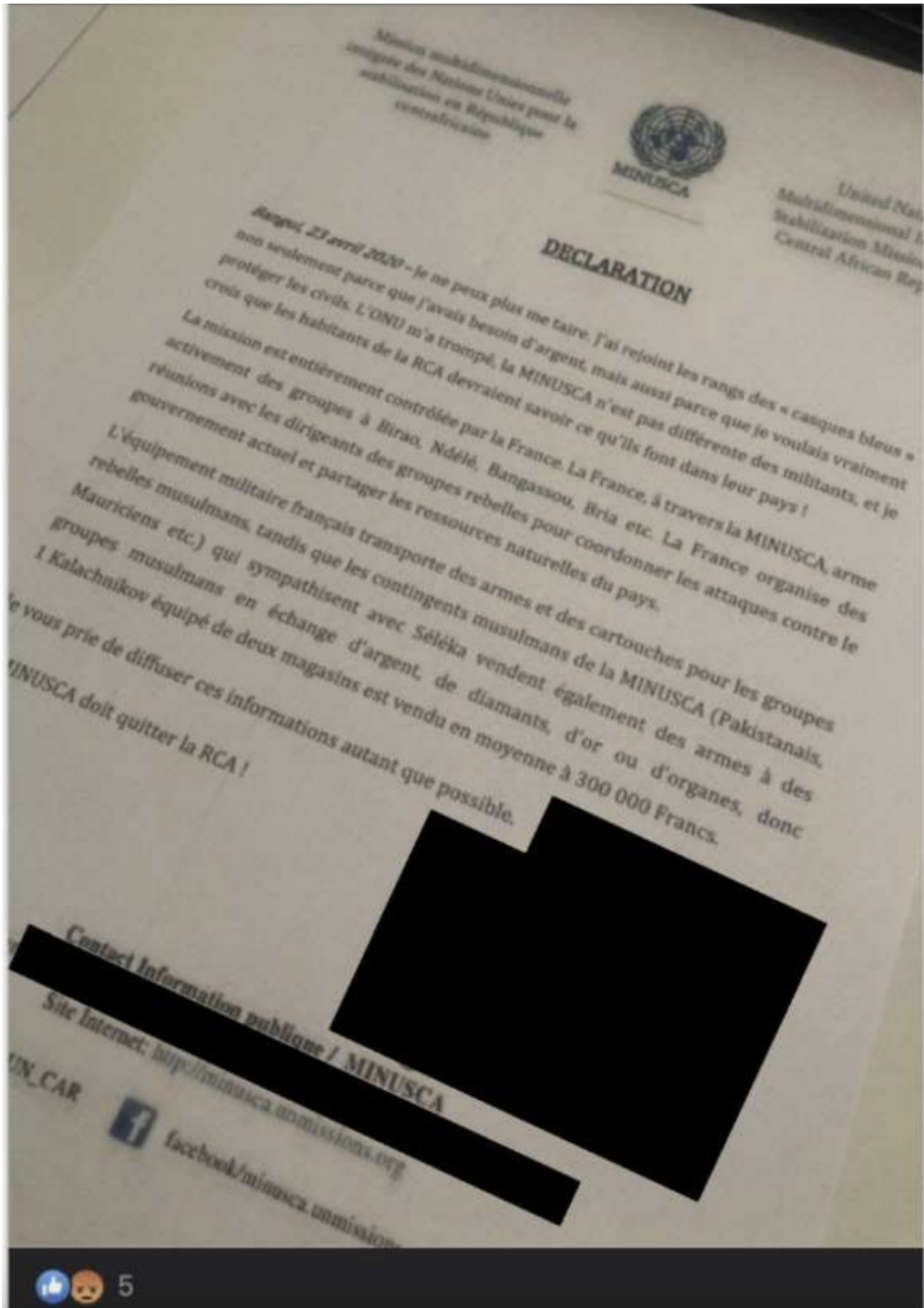
assets and authentic CAR accounts alike showed elevated hostility, with one post calling for revenge against the French troops.

On the theme of UN intervention, it is noteworthy that Russian-assets were deliberate in

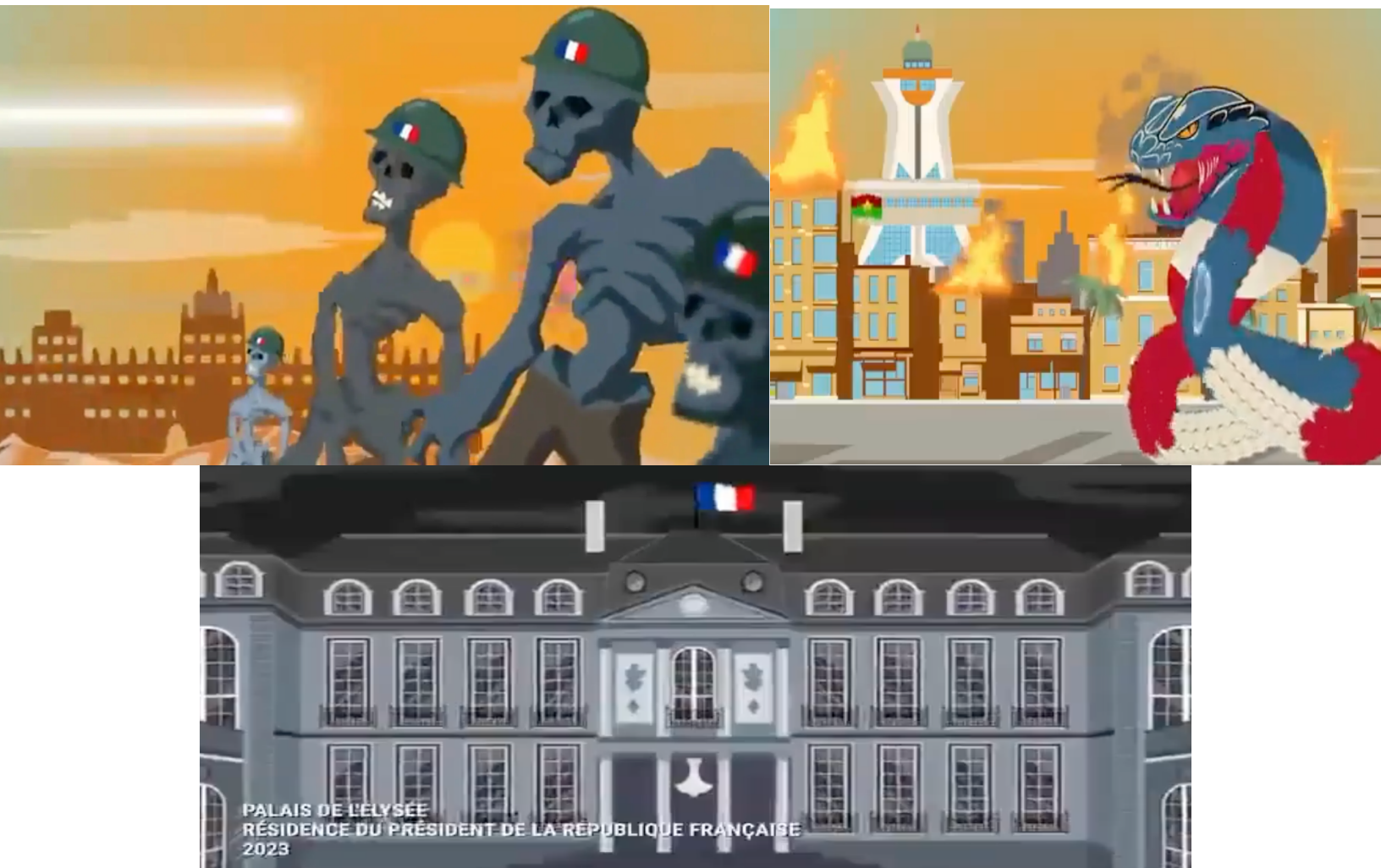


how they framed their blaming of France. Above, the two posts on the right describe the UN Security Council as being manipulated by France with respect to their policy towards CAR, with one post describing France as having done so in order to make the country a “living hell.” There was also a calculated effort to inculcate France for the actions of the UN peacekeeping operation MINUSCA, which itself is an Africa-led coalition. This demonstrates a mode of intentionality and understanding of the minutiae of international security policies on behalf of the Russian operatives, who were careful not to alienate potential African allies involved with the coalition. In a striking post about the presence of MINUSCA forces, a photo of a doctored report on official UN letter paper claimed that the UN mission is entirely controlled by France, who is

using the presence of MINUSCA as a cover to fund and arm rebel forces. The doctored report also claimed that France’s sale of arms to rebel militias is in exchange for “money, diamonds, gold, or organs.”



Lastly, video has become a key medium in which Russian operatives distribute propaganda and disinformation throughout the region. This format has been cause for alarm amongst African and Western intelligence officials because it enhances the reach of disinformation to illiterate audiences.⁵⁷ In a striking example widely-circulated online, an animated video depicts Wagner as a heroic force that defends against the West, specifically France. In the video, which was obtained by a twitter account with the username “alleyesonwagner” a self-described accountability project on the Wagner mercenary group, we can discern several telling themes. First, the depiction of France.



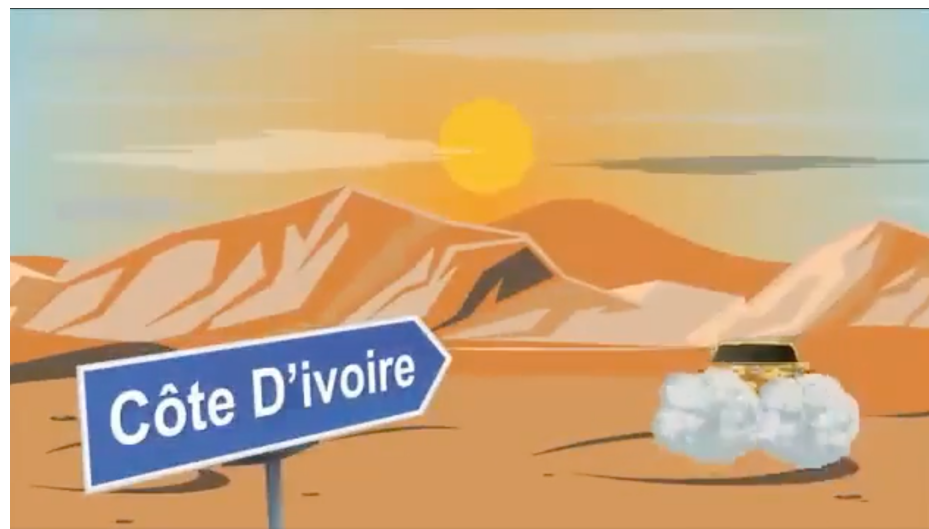
⁵⁷ Elian Peltier, Adam Satariano, and Lynsey Chutel, “How Putin Became a Hero on African TV,” The New York Times, April 18, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/13/world/africa/russia-africa-disinformation.html>.

In the screencaptures above, the French are explicitly shown to be forces of evil. The use of menacing creatures like the serpent and hordes of zombies characterize the French as having a parasitic and destructive presence, with the presidential palace being the residence of a stereotypically villainous leader. In the video, as the zombies approach the Malian soldier, they announce in a monotone and sinister tone, “We are the demons of Macron, now this is our country.” This French presence is starkly contrasted by the incoming of a Wagner mercenary,

who heroically parachutes into the battle and provides ammunition to the Malian soldier until the French zombies are destroyed. After thanking each other for their friendship, the Malian and Wagner allies then turn to assist a soldier in Burkina Faso, who fights off and



destroys the French serpent without assistance. He then turns to the Malian and Wagner soldiers and proclaims that the neighboring Ivory Coast is in dire need, as the three join forces and drive off to render assistance.



Before evaluating the French information warfare campaign, let us return to the modes of the Russian operation. It has been shown that there were three key themes that underline the social media activity of Russian operatives: commentary on the 2020 presidential campaign with favorable coverage towards the incumbent who was favored by the Kremlin, the highlighting of instances of cooperation on both inter-governmental and intra-personal scales, and a staunchly antagonistic portrayal of France and the presence of UN forces. While the modes of this disinformation campaign are novel in the context of Russia's engagement with Africa in the twenty first century, and the dynamic nature of the contemporary political-diplomatic landscape in CAR makes it difficult to discern the long-term ramifications of waging such a campaign, there are limits to this operation that will likely manifest over time. On this, the analyst Joseph Siegle has commented that Russia is solely pursuing transactional interests and is increasingly seen as a "partner of last resort."⁵⁸ As the Putin regime continues its push into CAR and the surrounding region, the inherently destabilizing nature of its presence will potentially undermine the longevity of the alliances it seeks to build. As African states grapple with the impact of widespread disinformation surrounding their elections and security situation, the already low levels of trust in governments and institutions will continue to wane. If these actions by Russia are left unchecked by the western allies of African nations, the Russian narrative will likely prevail and African nations will be convinced of the necessity of turning away from their western allies. By consequence, African nations that follow this path will be left with Russia as a veritable "partner of last resort." In essence, this will make it difficult for these same nations to cooperate with powers in the Global North outside of Russia, and African leaders may be left with sparse options with which to expand their diplomatic ties and economies. In other words, they may be forced to return to the same systems of patronage and subservience that underscored

⁵⁸ Siegle, "Russia and Africa."

their previous colonial relationships, but this time it will not be with the great powers of the West, but instead under a new banner - Vladimir Putin and the Russian Federation.

Although the underlying goal of France's disinformation campaign in the CAR is to dissuade the population from viewing Russia favorably, the modes of operation with which France conducted this operation greatly parallel that of Russia. There were two primary themes in which France conducted its operation in the CAR, namely, through the negative portrayal of Russian actions in the country and through highlighting cases that presented France in a positive light. As with the Russian operation, there was also a similar reliance on video. One key divergence from the parallels of the French and Russian campaigns, however, was that pro-French actors would at times adopt a more defensive and responsive posture, and would occasionally point out specific accounts or news outlets which were known to spread disinformation. While this may have been an attempt to counter the Russian online narrative, it can also be seen as an implicit indication that French social media operatives were cognizant of the greater reach that Russian assets possessed on social media platforms and were actively seeking to counter this.

On the theme of Russia's presence in CAR, the pro-French social media network was keen to depict the Russian presence as a form of neo-colonialism. In the posts below, French operatives highlighted the Wagner Group's mining of the CAR's mineral resources, primarily gold and diamonds.

Francis Kota shared a post. 2d · 🌐

shared a link to the group: Cercle de Réflexion pour l'essor de la Centrafrique. 2d · 🌐

<https://www.coupsfrancs.com/la-russie-veut-chasser-la-.../>
Le néocolonialisme russe ne trompe plus personne 🤔

<https://www.coupsfrancs.com/la-russie-veut-chasser-la-.../>
Russian neocolonialism doesn't cheat on anyone anymore 🤔

Hide original · Rate this translation

COUPSFRANCS.COM
LA RUSSIE VEUT CHASSER LA FRANCE POUR INSTALLER SES MERCENAIRES ET PILLER L'AFRIQUE ...

Seen by 2

Martin Kossipé

Translation: Russia Wants to Drive Out France to Install Its Mercenaries and Loot Africa

Marius Ndebe July 2, 2019 · 🌐

Je suis horrifié par ce qu'il arrive !! C'est fou de laisser faire ça !! Ça me déprime !!! Que le Seigneur nous protège !!!

Cercle de Réflexion pour l'essor de la Centrafrique July 2, 2019 · 🌐

Vol des ressources minières de Centrafrique ? Finalement, beaucoup se plaignaient de la fuite des ressources minières. Ils ont voulu changer de tutelle. Deux ma... See More

CORBEAUNWS-CENTRAFRIQUE.COM
Centrafrique : quand les Russes et les Chinois exploitent à volonté les diamants dans le Mambéré-Kadéï. [...]

Marius Ndebe July 11, 2019 · 🌐

Comment expliquer le lien entre la présence d'un groupe militaire Russe armés (Mercenaires Wagner) en RCA en dépit de la loi internationale qui interdit cela

ET

La présence de sociétés minières Russes avec des contrat obtenus "bizarrement" pour récolter des pierres précieuses ?

JE VEUX EXPLICATIONS LA

COALITION POUR LA REFOUNDATION DE CENTRAFRIQUE [CRC] July 10, 2019 · 🌐

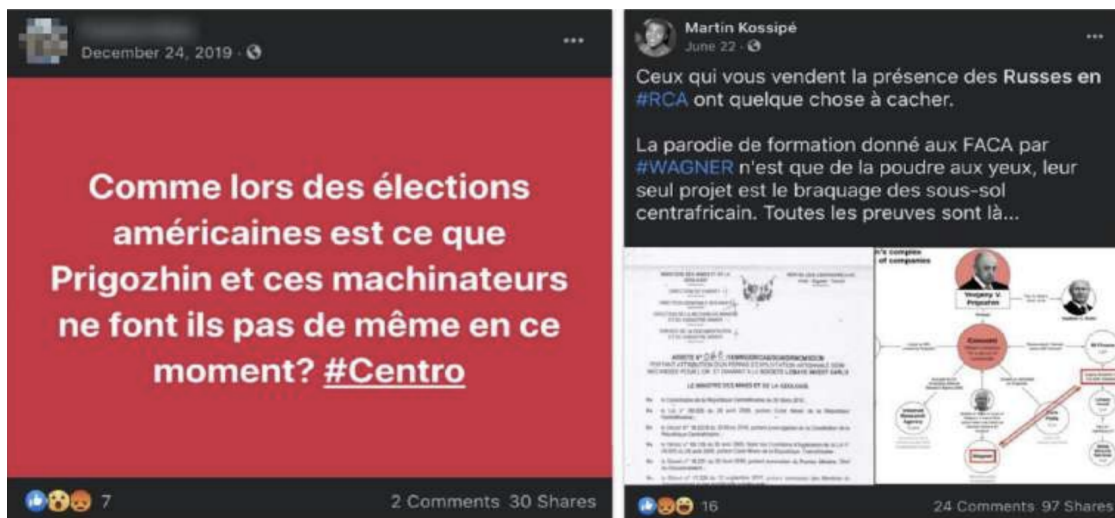
1 8 Shares

Translation: How to explain the link between the presence of an armed Russian military group (Wagner Mercenaries) in CAR despite the international law that prohibits this

AND

The presence of Russian mining company with contracts obtained "oddly" to harvest precious stones

Outside of neocolonialist rhetoric, French actors also portrayed the Wagner mercenaries as fueling insurrection and committing crimes. Moreover, other posts that specifically mentioned the head of the Wagner Group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, generated the highest engagement out of all other social media activity. In these posts, French operatives suggested that Prigozhin was behind a disinformation campaign in the run up to the CAR's presidential election as he had done during the 2016 US presidential campaign. It is noteworthy that these posts were by far the most widely-shared out of all other French activity in the CAR.



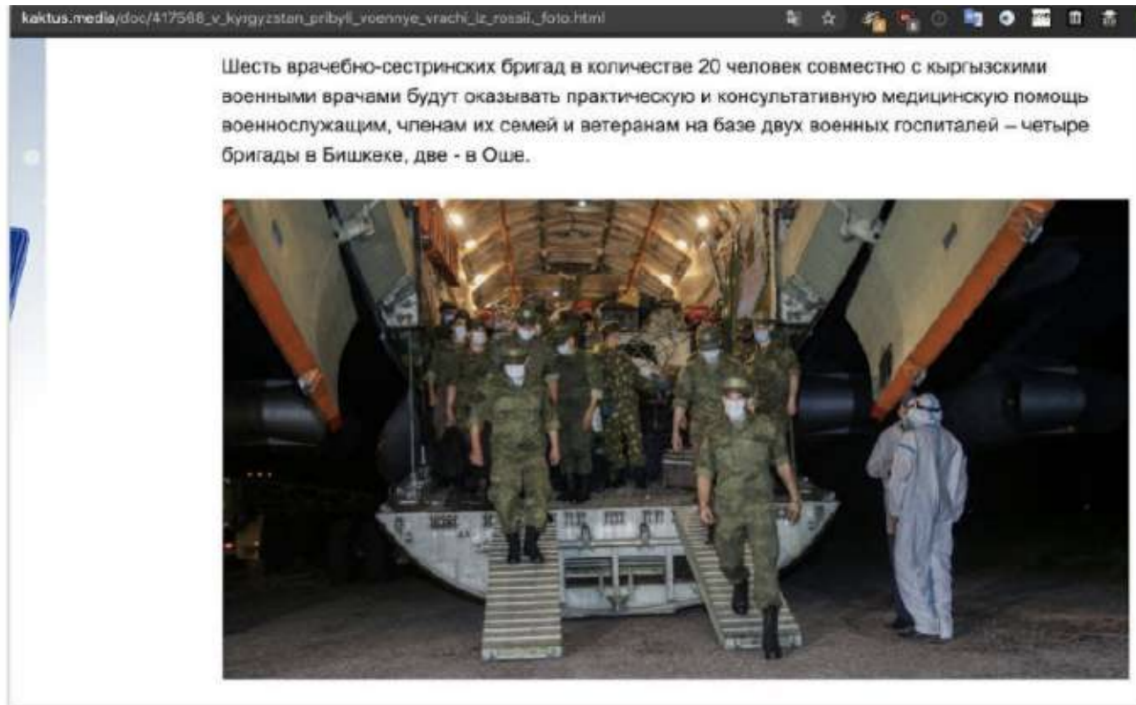
The French operation further sought to develop its anti-Russian counter-narrative by creating doctored images to hyperbolize the negative aspects of the Russian presence. The goal

of this mode of activity was another method of overtly characterizing Wagner forces as exploitative and violent. In one image by a CAR social media asset, an armed Wagner mercenary is seen overlooking a gold mining operation. Yet, as the Stanford Internet Observatory report noted, the image of the miner itself is from the Congo, and the armed Wagner soldier has been photoshopped into the picture, and the post even uses a hashtag that references slavery.



5 Shares

Additionally, another post falsely depicts a massive influx of Wagner troops, with a caption that describes how “a thousand Russian mercenaries have secretly arrived in Bangui.” However, the photo had been repurposed and doctored, as the original image is of the arrival of Russian medics on a military plane in Kyrgyzstan.



Another mode in which the French sought to pursue their counter-narrative was by highlighting exposed instances of Russian disinformation.

shared a post to the group:
Afrique conscience, Afrique éveillée.
November 20, 2019 · 🌐

Facebook démantèle une opération de désinformation russe en Afrique

Le seul pays qui peut vous aider à sérieusement lutté contre le terrorisme dans le monde actuel C'est la Russie avec Poutine!

FAKE

November 6, 2019 · 🌐

😊😊😊

[#Russie](#) [#RCA](#) [#Manipulations](#)

Martin Kossipé ▸ Cercle de Réflexion pour l'essor de la Centrafrique
April 3 · 🌐

URGENT : La Russie active ses relais de propagande en Centrafrique pour étouffer une affaire de viol à Berengo.

NOUVELLES+

NDJONI SANGO

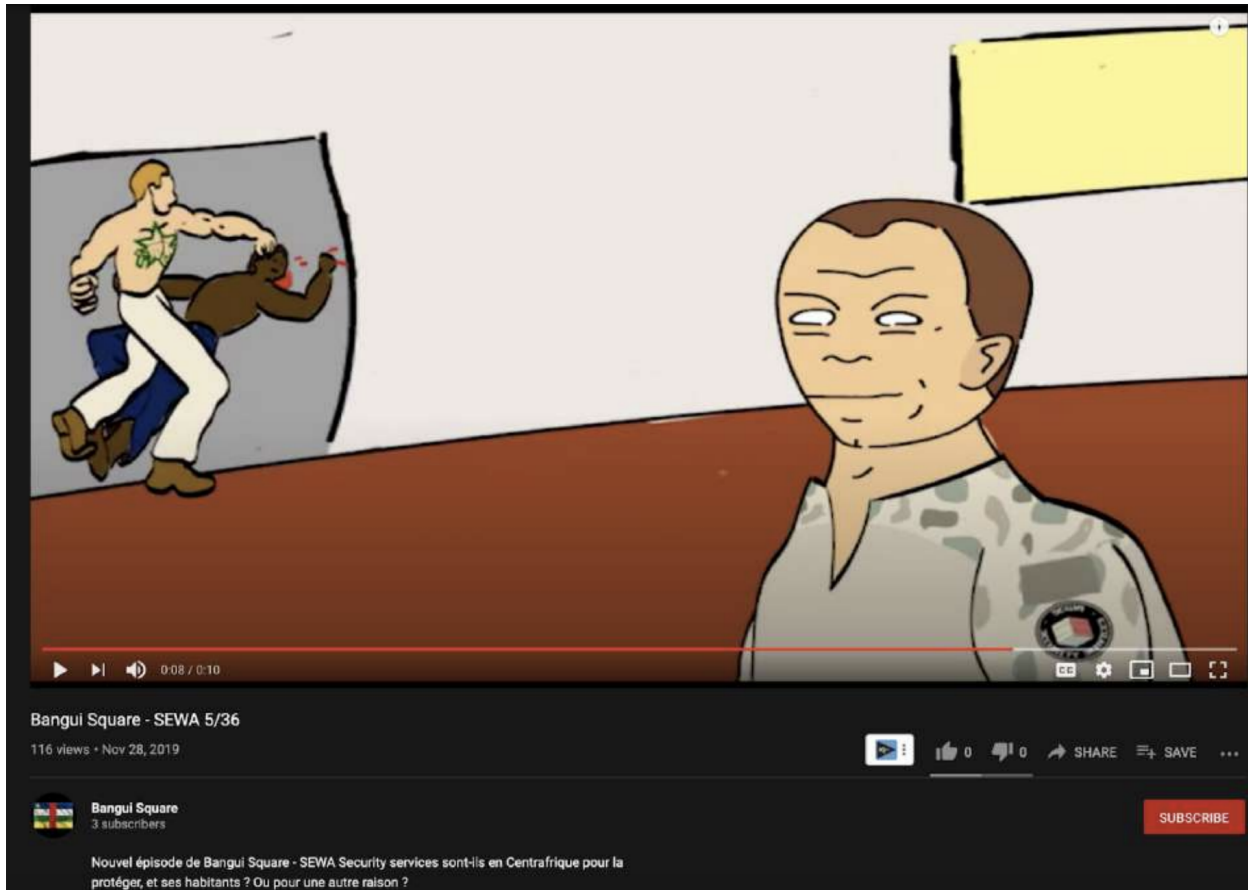
Le potentiel

👍👎👏 29

57 Shares

In these posts, pro-French actors emphasized verified reports of the Russian disinformation campaign exposed by Facebook investigations. In the image on the left, the cartoon Russian is depicted as angry, drunkenly shaking a bottle of vodka, and overlaid with Soviet iconography like the Red Star as well as the Hammer and Sickle. On the right, one French operative identifies three news outlets promoting Russian propaganda. Note, the middle outlet, Ndjoni Sango, is the same outlet that spread the Pro-Russian narrative discussed previously with regards to a news story about the misappropriation of state funds being paid to the Wagner Group.

With regards to the medium of video, the French operation created several animations that showed a hostile portrayal of the Russian presence. Unlike the Wagner video, however, the animation created by French operatives were not aimed at promoting friendship between France and Africa, but instead aimed at presenting the Russian presence in CAR as negative.



Here, we see a Russian soldier attacking a CAR citizen, while a commander looks on. Although this video has since been removed from YouTube and this image is the only available screen capture, the Stanford Report notes the onlooking commander as saying, “We are SEWA Security Services. Are we here to help the people of CAR?” SEWA is a known associate of Prigozhin’s Wagner Group.⁵⁹ Made in the same crude style as the Pro-Wagner video, this piece of French

⁵⁹ “More-Troll Combat,” Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory.

disinformation is another instance of visual instead of textual propaganda, aimed at enhancing the French operation's reach. However, user engagement with the French videos was far less than that of the Russian propaganda animations.

Conversely, the other mode in which the French conducted their information campaign was by positively portraying French cooperation. However, in this case the French operation was highly limited. As the presence of French actors on the ground in CAR was miniscule at the time, the assets of the broader French information campaign were more targeted towards outreach in Mali and the Sahel, where the French were more actively engaged. The single post provided about French-CAR cooperation, pertains to the sharing of material aid and personal protective equipment during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, all other social media postings by non-state actors aimed at promoting the image of France were directed towards Mali.

Keeping in mind the analytical framework of modes and limits, it is here that the French operation was most tangibly limited. The simple fact that French assets were more utilized in Mali, the country where France had a much larger presence than in the CAR, explains in part the reason that Russian social media engagement in the CAR was greater than it was for the French operation. As seen in the

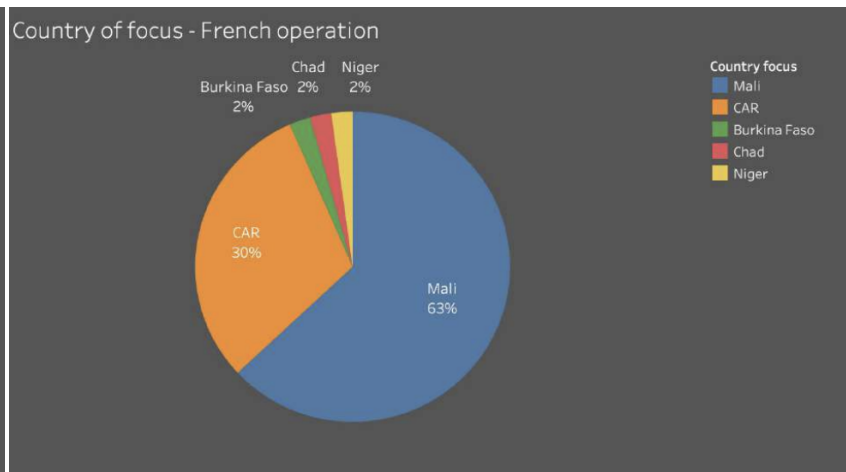
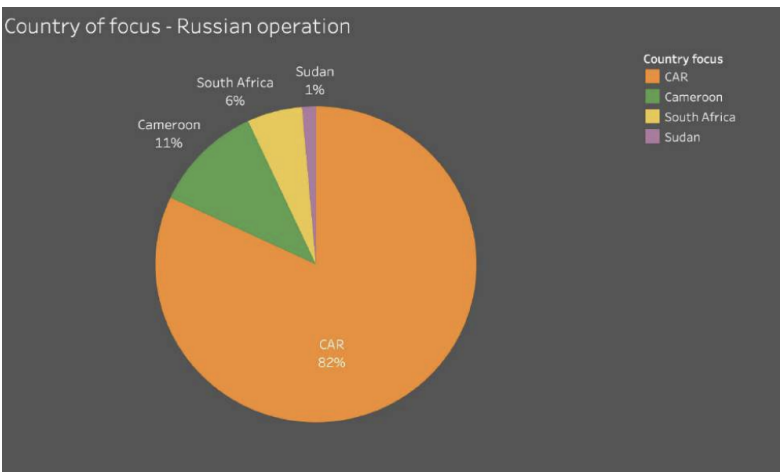
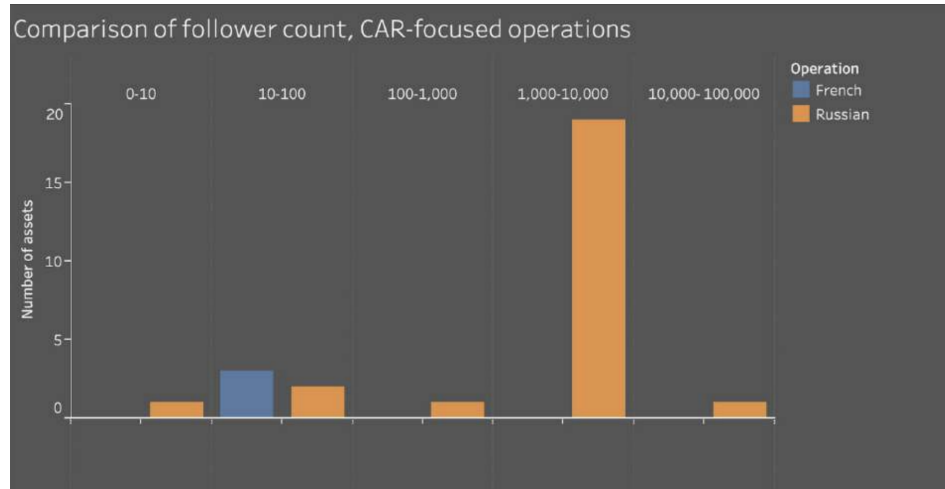


graphs, the French operation was conducted in CAR on a much smaller scale, both in terms of the assets dedicated to the country as well as the number of followers their respective accounts had. Here, we can see that the

follower account of Russian assets far outweighed the French.⁶⁰

However, this can be explained in large part by the scale of operation by both countries in CAR. Simply, Russia was dedicating far more operational capacity to its campaign

in the CAR than in any other country, whereas with France, operational capacity was far more limited.



⁶⁰ “More-Troll Combat,” Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory.

Lastly, it is necessary to look at instances where French and Russian assets interacted with one another. In terms of their respective modes of operation, French and Russian accounts displayed similar levels of antagonism toward one another through the forms of memes, videos, and explicit comments. Consistent on both sides of the influence operation was that they posed as locals, often stealing photos to use as their profile pictures to carry a sense of authenticity. In the case of direct engagement with each other, video posts and the subsequent replies to those videos, seem to be the most pointed mode for analyzing how both sides conducted their operations. In this YouTube screen capture, we can see an animation styled for children, depicting Russian and CAR national animals as they hold their country flags together in harmony.⁶¹ The video is narrated in French by a child-like voice and discusses the friendship between the lion (CAR) and bear (Russia) as they defend each other from hyenas.



⁶¹ "LionBear," Улыбаемся Машем, YouTube, July 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCZ0YSyWVhk>.

In the now-deleted English version of the video, there is an additional frame omitted in the French version that explicitly shows the hyenas to be American and French.⁶² While the video itself is certainly telling of the image Russian social media operatives wished to project with regards to its relationship with CAR, the response of a French operative is equally revealing. In this screen capture, we can see an account under the alias “Martin Kossipé,” who was later discovered to be a member of the French military



posing as a native of CAR. In his response to the original Wagner-produced animation, he admonishes the post as “Russian propaganda” that uses “very powerful subliminal messaging techniques aimed at altering judgment and influencing the opinion of the youngest.” In a post about the same video several months later, he described the

animation as a “Soviet brainwashing method.”

⁶² “More-Troll Combat,” Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory.

Having evaluated the respective French and Russian approaches to targeting information and public opinion in the digital sphere, we will now turn to another mode of analysis - how France and Russia exercise hard power in the CAR. Before continuing with an analysis of this second mode, however, it is essential that we revisit this paper's thesis.

My thesis argues that Russia's activity in the Central African Republic is a component of a strategy that seeks to carve out a new bloc of African states with which it can engage in economic, security, and political partnerships as a means of ensuring regime durability in the face of global competition and western sanctions. If this is to be the case, then the answer to the question of "Why CAR in particular?" must be reemphasized. As has been shown, the Central African Republic is a chronically weak state, mired by decades of instability, and, since 2013, a de facto civil war. Following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, the Putin regime indicated a resurgent interest in the African continent after a nearly two decade hiatus, and began engaging in bilateral relations with a variety of African nations largely on the basis of military cooperation. More important than security agreements, however, are the capabilities that an alliance with the Russian military affords. As seen in the Syrian Civil War, the Russian military - in defiance of the western counterterrorism coalition and the rest of the international community - proved itself to be capable of turning the tide in favor of a president on the brink of collapse.⁶³ Consequently, the African response to this can be most pointedly seen in the fact that since 2015, Russia has signed over 20 bilateral military cooperation agreements with African states.⁶⁴ Now, we can begin to see why, in the case of CAR President Francois Archange Touadera - the leader of a state facing intense civil conflict in a historically coup-friendly climate - would turn to Russia.

⁶³ Abdelhak Bassou, "Military Relations Between Russia and Africa, Before and After the War in Ukraine," Atlantic Council, February 2023, https://issuu.com/atlanticcouncil/docs/military_relations_between_russia_and_africa_befo.

⁶⁴ Jakob Hedenskog, "Russia is Stepping Up its Military Cooperation in Africa," FOI Swedish Defense Research Agency, accessed June 1, 2023, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206604#:~:text=Since%202015%2C%20Russia%20has%20signed,a%20permanent%20Russian%20military%20base>.

Thus, the perception of Russia as a harbinger of stability has facilitated the expansion of its cooperation with African leaders.

Despite the contingent of official Russian military advisers, by and large it is not the Russian armed forces that operate on African soil, but the privately owned Wagner Group, whose chief financier is Yevgeniy Prigozhin, a patron of the Putin regime. The Wagner Group can be defined as a semi-state actor, characterized by its opaquely defined relationship with the Russian state, but still with undeniable links to the Kremlin given Prigozhin's ties to President Putin.⁶⁵ The function of the Wagner Group operating in place of the Russian military in Africa is a critical mode of the Russian strategy on two levels. First, it provides the Kremlin with the plausible deniability of a legitimate armed Russian presence expanding onto the African continent. Secondly, it is an inexpensive mode of conducting a security policy, as Wagner services are far less costly than sending and maintaining a traditional armed force. In terms of what the Kremlin sees in CAR as a client, instability works in some ways to its advantage. Essentially, CAR's leaders are desperate for a solution to persistent armed conflict and views Russian cooperation as a means to an end, a fact which Moscow happily agrees. Second, the country's vast natural resources provide a means for the Kremlin to outsource its expansion into the country through individuals like Prigozhin on the cheap. Lastly, the CARs centralized geographic position means that it can serve as a launchpad for other expansionary moves it may take in the future.

With this information, the Russian interest in the CAR becomes more clear. Simply put, the utility of the Wagner Group is that it is low-risk and inexpensive. It offers a way of conducting foreign policy by-proxy, the cost of which is shouldered by Prigozhin, who in turn

⁶⁵ Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of Semi-State Security Forces: The Case of The Wagner Group," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2019), 182.

receives massive contracts for Wagner Services as well as permission to conduct mining operations of the CARs vast reserves of gold and diamonds. As a result of the goodwill generated by Wagner's service to the government of CAR - which include protection services and counterinsurgency operations - the Touadera administration has continued to strengthen official bilateral ties with Moscow.

In the case of the Wagner Group and the CAR, all roads lead back to Putin. Yevgeniy Prigozhin's enrichment from Wagner's contracts with President Touadera's administration as well as his access to gold and diamond mines in CAR is a clear instance of the domestic clientelist system of patronage between Putin and his oligarchs at work outside of Russia. But it is not that the Putin regime merely seeks to export this system outside of Russia for the exclusive benefit of the oligarchs, rather, it seeks to *replicate* this network of clientelism with the CAR president and other African leaders to pursue Putin's geopolitical goals alongside shared interests.

The role of France in this paper has been to serve as a counterweight to the actions of Russia. Examining the French role in Africa alongside that of Russia is a useful analytical tool for two reasons. First, it serves as a reference point for examining the modes of influence exerted by a power with deep historical ties and a colonial legacy, France, juxtaposed to a power whose presence on the continent is comparatively shorter and whose historical involvement is generally perceived as positive by most Africans. Second, it serves as a function of comparing two fundamentally different states who are experiencing some strikingly similar phenomenon on the world stage. For France, though the nation remains bolstered by strong alliances and plays a leading role in global diplomacy, many countries in its former sphere of influence are slowly drifting away towards new actors, such as Russia, who offer a strikingly different view of the

future and a strong break with the past. Conversely, it is Russia who has become markedly isolated on the global stage following its illegal invasion of Ukraine, and has in turn seen a sharp reduction in its ability to wield clout on the global stage, unlike France for instance. As a result of this reduction in global political clout, unlike that which, say, France possesses, the Russian Federation has shifted its sights to a more regional scale and chosen to operate within the former dominion of France. In other words, Russia has bolstered its efforts towards capitalizing on the shifting diplomatic ties of African nations away from France to counter its receding geopolitical standing.

In the following section, we will examine the way in which Russia has exercised hard power and engaged in its bilateral relationship with the Central African Republic. Through this, we will discern the modes of engagement that Russia has utilized and gain an understanding of how these modes have facilitated or limited the Kremlin's foothold in the CAR. We will also examine the modes that the French have used to maintain their waning relevance in the country, in order to compare how the respective French and Russian approaches to their bilateral relationships with the CAR are indicative of the broader developments in their country's geopolitical standing.

Mode Two: Hard Power - Bilateral Relations with the Central African Republic

Since the 2013 outbreak of civil war in CAR, the nation remains deeply unstable and in a precarious state of order. Today, the government wields little power outside the capital of Bangui, where most of the population resides, as roughly three-quarters of the nation's territory is under the control of armed rebel groups.⁶⁶ Although the United States and France retain embassies in Bangui, aid from both countries has dwindled in recent years in tandem with growing anti-western sentiments among the local population. Even as a large UN peacekeeping force remains in the country, since the 2017 meeting between President Touadera and President Putin, Moscow has rapidly established a firm relationship with Bangui and exported arms as well as the Wagner Group to consolidate its presence in-country.

The bilateral relationship between the CAR and Russia is primarily conducted on the basis of security through the use of Wagner mercenaries. Described by the scholar Kimberly Marten as "Russia's shadow army's state-run structure," Wagner has been deployed in a mutually beneficial way that enables the Kremlin to achieve its expansionary goals while also serving as a linchpin in the CAR's fight to win back territory from rebel groups. Additionally, President Touadera is believed to have Wagner troops within his presidential guard, as well as Russian advisers who enjoy close connections with key government ministers.⁶⁷

On an operational level, the mode of Wagner serves to advance several goals of the Kremlin. First, both the presence and actions of Wagner underscore a key theme of Russia's push into Africa, specifically, francophone African nations. As was noted in this paper's disinformation section, one essential mode of the Russian disinformation campaign was the

⁶⁶ Pauline Bax, "Russia's Influence in the Central African Republic," International Crisis Group, December 3, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/central-african-republic/russias-influence-central-african-republic>.

⁶⁷ Nathalia Dukhan, "Central African Republic: Ground Zero for Russian Influence in Central Africa," Atlantic Council, October 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep26688.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Acdfb54b8d5160eab9baf4a1fe3e0a9af&ab_sgments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1.

negative portrayal of France, which was a successful source of disinformation content in the domain of soft power. The key mode of Wagner's operation has been that it serves as a counterweight to the UN presence in terms of hard power, engaging in higher-risk counterinsurgency activities that showcase Wagner as strong and France as feckless.

While in CAR, the Wagner Group has engaged in aggressive combat missions aimed at displacing and eliminating contingents of rebel groups, and these actions have, despite vocal concerns from international observers, been largely portrayed as positive to the people of the Central African Republic. Through large disinformation campaigns conducted by Russian actors on traditional and social media, as well as with approval from the government, Wagner Forces are often promoted as champions of peace and security in CAR.⁶⁸ Conversely, the same disinformation operatives that promote Wagner also espouse rhetoric that portrays the French and UN forces that have operated in the country for years as corrupt, weak, and ineffective - mired in the red-tape of large organizations like the UN.

For its services, the Wagner Group is compensated in a way that not only enriches private individuals like its founder Yevgeniy Prigozhin, but also in a way that deepens the bilateral ties between CAR and Russia. In exchange for Wagner services, Prigozhin has been awarded access to the country's diamond and gold mines, which are believed to generate an estimated \$1 billion worth of resources per year.⁶⁹ Moreover, these mining concessions also exempt Wagner from paying taxes on the resources it extracts, and through similar agreements, CAR has outsourced its customs process and allowed Wagner to industrialize mines to generate further revenue.⁷⁰ Due

⁶⁸ Roman Asgarov, "Private Military Company in the Russian Manner: the Wagner Group and Business on the Blood in the Central African Republic," Turkish Journal of Policy Studies, no. 37, September 2021, <https://www.ulusam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Private-Military-Company-in-the-Russian-Manner-the-Wagner-Group-and-Business-on-the-Blood-in-the-Central-African-Republic.pdf>.

⁶⁹ "Wagner Group's Mining Operations Help Russia Evade Sanction," Africa Defense Forum, May 2, 2023, <https://adf-magazine.com/2023/05/wagner-groups-car-mining-operations-help-russia-evade-sanctions/>.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

to Wagner's status as a semi-state organization, material concessions and policies that enhance greater cooperation between the CAR government and Wagner can also be viewed as a tacit agreement towards extending ties with the Kremlin. In this sense, Moscow has a dual mode of furthering bilateral relations with CAR - that which it does with Wagner, and that which it does with its official state staff through conventional engagement in three primary modes - security cooperation, expanding economic links, and political allyship.

Security cooperation outside of Wagner and through the official channels of the Russian state's military is the first mode of the Kremlin's Africa strategy. The cornerstone of Moscow's strategy to strengthen its position in the CAR is its "security export mechanism," a term coined by the scholar Sergey Sukhankin to describe Russia's use of security-related services as a means of becoming a stakeholder in strategically important countries plagued by military-political instability.⁷¹ The key elements of this mechanism are the sale of arms and military training, mainly in the field counter-terrorism and anti-insurgency tactics.⁷² Russia's formal military and technical training of members of African militaries is another way that links the Russian military to various militaries across Africa, providing them ongoing access to mid- and senior-level African military officers throughout their careers.⁷³ At present, the CAR hosts nearly two thousand "military instructors," who train and equip members of the police force in addition to the military.⁷⁴ On the scale of national militaries, especially those in a massive country like the Central African Republic, it is reasonable to assume that even a few thousand Russian or Wagner

⁷¹ Sergey Sukhankin, "The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa," The Jamestown Foundation, January 10, 2020, https://jamestown.org/program/the-hybrid-role-of-russian-mercenaries-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-moscows-scramble-for-africa/#_edn30.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Siegle, "Russia and Africa."

⁷⁴ Nathaniel Reynolds, "Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group," The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/GlobalRussia_NateReynolds_Vagner.pdf.

soldiers is insufficient to have any substantive impact on the security situation. But as the analyst Joseph Siegle comments on the presence of Russian and Wagner soldiers, “While limited in numbers, these programs provide Russia a platform to impart its interpretation of civil-military relations within the continent.”⁷⁵ The practice of “imparting [Russia’s] interpretation of civil-military relations,” can be seen as a systematic mode of influence on security cooperation with potentially far-reaching implications. Simply put, if Russian and Central African troops share similar views on the function of the military in relation to government and policy, then there is an increased likelihood of extrajudicial actions as well as the potential interpretation that the government is a function of the military, as opposed to the inverse interpretation that exists in democratic societies. If we step outside of CAR, we can see that this problematic link has already manifested in Mali, where several officers involved in the country’s 2020 coup had recently returned from training in Russia.⁷⁶

At the end of 2022, France officially withdrew the last of its military presence in the CAR as a response to the growing ties between Bangui and Moscow.⁷⁷ Despite the continued presence of MINUSCA forces, the end of France’s own military presence has facilitated further cooperation between the CAR and Russia, as the French military presence can no longer serve as an obstacle between the official channels between CAR and Russian elites. As noted by the analyst Dr. Arielle Fosting, this represents a “downgrading of traditional French power in the CAR.”⁷⁸ That France was willing to cut its losses and disembark from military cooperation with

⁷⁵ Siegle, “Russia and Africa.”

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ “Last French troops leave Central African Republic amid closer Bangui-Moscow ties,” France 24, December 15, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20221215-last-french-troops-leave-central-african-republic-amid-closer-bangui-moscow-ties>.

⁷⁸ Dr. Arielle Georgette Djoufan Fosting, “Russia’s Game of Influence in the Reconfiguration of Military Cooperation in the Central African Republic,” Nkafu Policy Institute, November 9, 2022, <https://nkafu.org/russias-game-of-influence-in-the-reconfiguration-of-military-cooperation-in-the-car/>

a long-time ally is indicative of France's own changing priorities in the security landscape of sub-Saharan Africa, and, consequently, enables Russia to establish firmer connections with Bangui.

The establishment of **economic links** between Russia and CAR is the second mode that has been used to facilitate the two countries' bilateral relationship. To understand how these financial linkages underpin Russia's relationship with the CAR, we must first look at the Kremlin's broader strategy of economic engagement with the African continent. According to the Stockholm International Peace Institute, by 2012-2016 Russia had become the largest supplier of arms to Africa, accounting for 35 per cent of arms exports to the region, accounting for nearly one-fifth of its total trade volume on the continent.⁷⁹ At the first ever Russia-Africa Summit of 2019 in Sochi, President Putin outlined several avenues for economic cooperation. He began by stating that Russia's trade with Africa had doubled since 2014 to 2019, noting that Russia is gradually working to diversify its exports, while also highlighting the success of Russian firms in the areas of mineral extraction, energy, and gas.⁸⁰ In reality, however, the fine print of Russo-African economic cooperation illustrates a strikingly uneven portfolio. A report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies demonstrates several telling figures:⁸¹

1. Russia accounts for less than 1 percent of global Foreign Direct Investment in Africa
2. Russian exports to Africa are 7 times the level of African exports to Russia
3. Over 70 percent of all Russian trade with Africa is concentrated in just four countries- Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, and South Africa
4. Since 2018, the total volume of Russian trade has dropped 30 percent in aggregate

⁷⁹ Jakob Hedenskog, "Russia is Stepping Up its Military Cooperation in Africa."

⁸⁰ Vladimir Putin, "Russia-Africa Summit," The Kremlin, President of Russia, October 24, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61893>.

⁸¹ Joseph Siegle, "Decoding Russia's Economic Engagements in Africa," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, January 6, 2023, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/decoding-russia-economic-engagements-africa/>.

Russian financial ties with CAR specifically have already been touched on, and are largely conducted on a “weapons for natural resources” basis. In exchange for the security services conducted by Wagner as well as the training that instructors provide to the CAR army and police force, the CAR has licensed mining operations of gold and diamonds to several Prigozhin-linked shell companies.⁸² While the mineral wealth generated from these mines undoubtedly enriches the Wagner founder, an investigation by the Africa Defense Forum has found that gold and diamonds have been smuggled into loosely regulated mineral markets in the Middle East, converted into cash, and laundered back to the Russian treasury as a way of circumventing sanctions.⁸³ From this, we can see the economic utility of security cooperation, as natural resources provided by the CAR in exchange for Russian security assistance have been used to pay for the services of private actors like Prigozhin who provides Wagner troops, in addition to providing Russia with funds to combat western sanctions.

As with the mode of security, French economic cooperation with the Central African Republic is another mode in which we can see a decline in bilateral cooperation between the two nations. According to data provided by the Observatory for Economic Complexity, an MIT trade data tracker, exports between the two countries have mutually declined at a steady rate since 1995. France, who offers a diversified export portfolio, has decreased its exports from \$77.5 million in 1995 to \$39.9 million in 2021, at an annualized rate of decline of 2.52 percent.⁸⁴ For the CAR, bilateral economic ties have decreased even more drastically, at an annualized rate of 5.2 percent, from \$25.8 million in 1995 to \$6.42 million in 2021.⁸⁵ The simple fact that bilateral

⁸² Africa Defense Forum, “Wagner Group’s Mining Operations Help Russia Evade Sanction.”

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ “France/Central Africa,” Observatory for Economic Complexity, accessed June 7, 2023, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/fra/partner/caf>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

cooperation between the two countries has decreased across several modes of cooperation helps explain the growing ties between CAR and Russia.

Through the mode of economic cooperation with CAR and the broader continent, Russia is able to tout a growing network of allies and partners. Regardless of the actual dollar values of Moscow's economic dealings on the continent, the essential factor of this cooperation is that Russia can claim that it maintains vibrant ties with a wide circle of nations despite its ridicule at the hands of the west.⁸⁶ The Kremlin can peddle a narrative that, from Cairo to Cape Town, even in the face of international isolation and western sanctions regimes, the Russian Federation has emerged with new partners who share common cause with being marginalized by the west and together will be a potent force in a new multipolar world order.

Before the Kremlin narrative of multipolarity and robust alliances with African nations can be fully realized, Russia is tasked with being a key partner in stabilizing the African states it seeks to partner with. To do so, Moscow has utilized a third mode of cooperation in the form of **political allyship** and diplomacy with the leaders of the African states it wishes to engage with. In the case of the Central African Republic, an alliance with President Touadera has been firmly established through both official and unofficial channels with the Russian state and the Wagner group respectively. A series of leaked documents obtained by the London-based Dossier Center, an investigative unit funded by exiled businessman and Kremlin critic Mikhail Khodorkovsk show "the scale of Prigozhin-linked recent operations in Africa, and Moscow's ambition to turn the region into a strategic hub."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Siegel, "Decoding Russia's Economic Engagements in Africa."

⁸⁷ Luke Harding and Jason Burke, "Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa," The Guardian, June 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>

The image below is a version of the leaked document translated by The Guardian, and reveals the extent of Russia’s operational activity in the CAR.⁸⁸ Here, we can see the principle goals underlying the Russian mode of political allyship in the form of what many scholars have deemed as “elite-based diplomacy.” In the document above, the principle goal in the domain of political allyship is outlined as “replace national assembly representatives and [the] foreign minister, who are oriented towards France.” This is a pointed demonstration of how Russia is conducting its top-down approach in the CAR.

Russia’s African ambitions - what the document shows

All text is a direct translation from the document. We are only showing countries where the stated ambition is for level four or five cooperation (the two highest levels)

Key

Level of cooperation with power structures. Excellent, average, none

- Military cooperation
- Economic projects
- Humanitarian collaboration
- Political cooperation
- Police training
- Rivalry with France
- Media projects and press
- Lobbying interests at the UN

Central African Republic

Extent of cooperation: Level 5



- Russia - friend: 83%
- Strengthen and train army as a guarantee of security
- Stabilise political situation
- Replace national assembly representatives and foreign minister, who are orientated towards France
- Assist the building of state institutions
- Own radio station and two print publications
- 'Khartoum declaration' - start of real negotiation process between sides in conflict

Madagascar

Extent of cooperation: Level 5



- Victory in the second round by Andry Rajoelina, candidate for president, supported by the Company [Rajoelina denies receiving any assistance]
- Stabilise political situation, counteract protests, train police
- Produce and distribute biggest mass-selling newspaper (circulation - 2m copies a month)

Having successfully courted President Touadera, Moscow is now seeking to further implant itself in the country by manufacturing a pro-Russian political environment in the form of congressional representatives and cabinet-level ministers to pursue its agenda and pivot CAR away from France.

Today, the mode of political allyship for France in the Central African Republic has been greatly limited by the ever-expanding influence of Moscow. The current French President Emmanuel Macron has been active in trying to reform France’s image and restructure her participation on the continent. Under Macron, the most novel element of the French mode of

⁸⁸ Ibid.

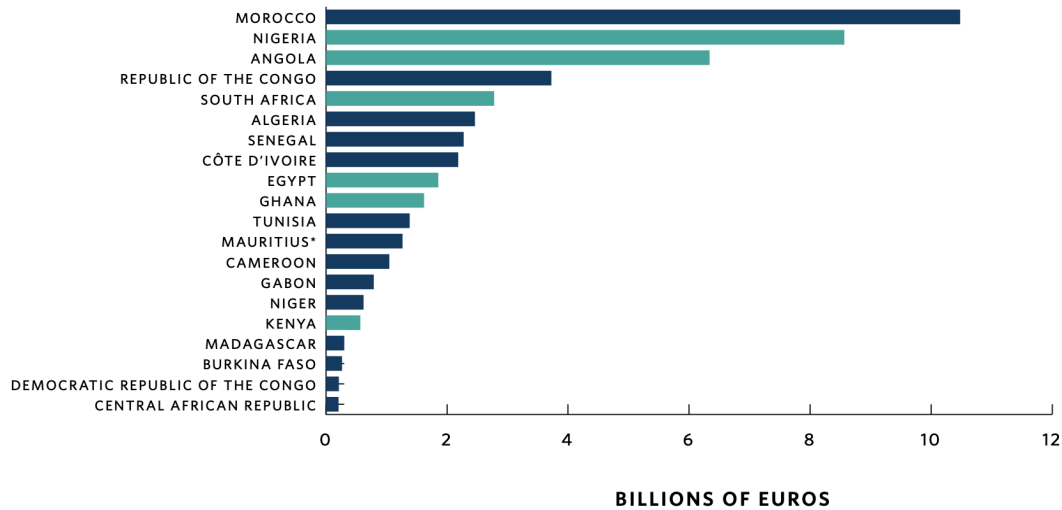
political allyship is that it aiming to expand cooperation with nonstate actors.⁸⁹ As the analyst Corentin Cohen notes, “Macron has been keen to embrace African business and artistic elites that could help to shape governance in Africa beyond political parties and governments that the French government and African citizens alike all too often see as unreliable.”⁹⁰ Unlike Russia, the Macron administration is greatly concerned with projecting a way of coexistence between France and Africa on equal terms, rooted in the values of democracy and stability. Consequently, this may also explain the reason for France’s near absence in the Central African Republic, especially compared to other former colonies. Macron is known for his active role in foreign policy and frequent visits to the continent. In early 2023, Macron embarked on a tour of central Africa to promote “renewed partnerships” and a desire to move away from the idea of Africa as the “French backyard.”⁹¹ Now in his second term, Macron has visited 25 African nations. Pointedly, the president is yet to visit the Central African Republic. Moreover, CAR now receives the lowest amount of FDI from France out of all aid-receiving African nations. Although France retains its embassy in the capital Bangui, the withdrawal of the French military presence, record-low levels of aid and foreign direct investment, and Macron’s negligence towards the Touadera administration has been both a response to and cause of the CARs turn towards Russia. The images below demonstrate these facts.

⁸⁹ Corentin Cohen, “Will France’s Africa Policy Hold Up?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2022, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Cohen_FranceAfrica_Policy_v4.pdf.

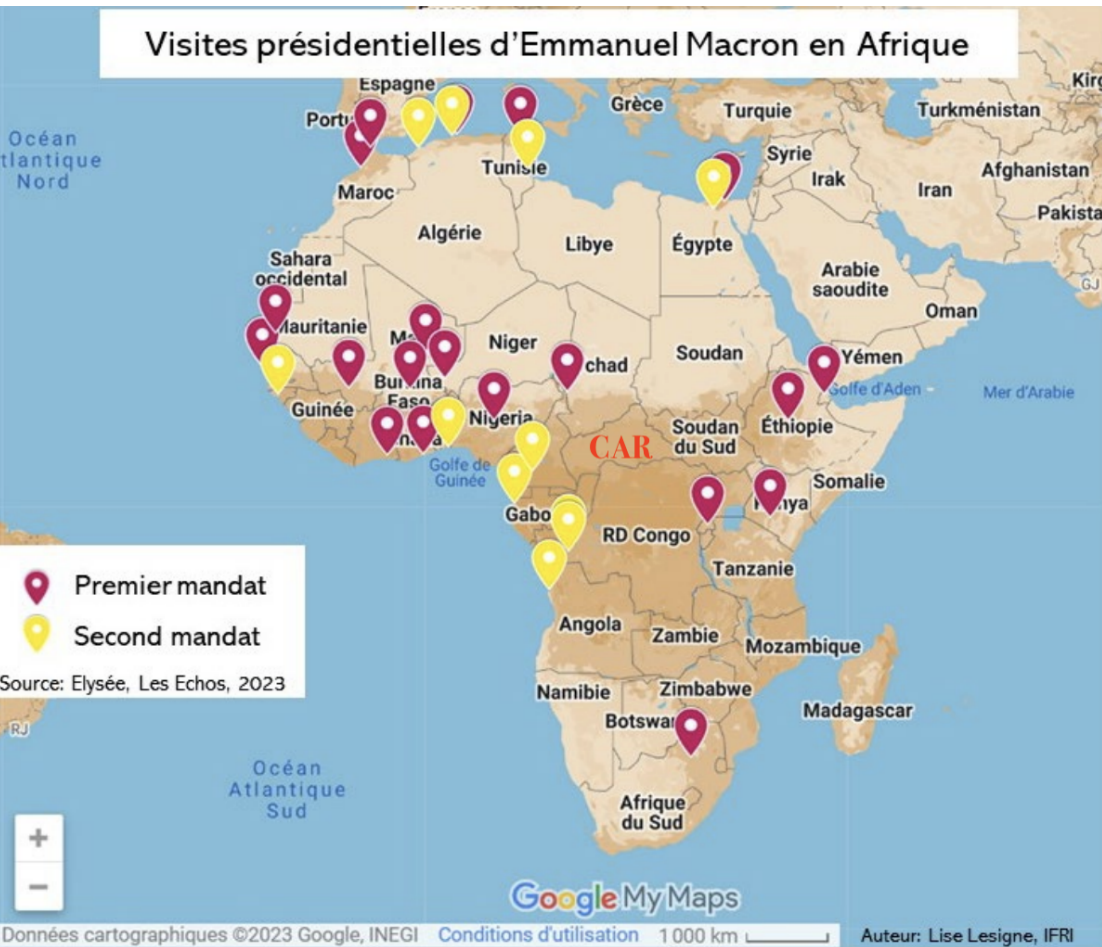
⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Lise Lesigne, “Le Voyage d’Emmanuel Macron en Afrique Centrale,” Institut Française des Relations Internationales, May 10, 2023, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/lesigne_antil_macron_afrique-centrale_2023.pdf.

Figure 1. French Direct Investment in Africa (2017-2020)



FRENCH SPEAKING COUNTRIES



Just as nature abhors a vacuum, so too does Vladimir Putin relish in the fact that France has seemingly created one through its absence in the CAR under Macron. France's mode of political allyship in the CAR, or lack thereof, has no doubt enabled Russia's growing ties with the country. As the Kremlin seeks to further deepen its bilateral relationship with Bangui, it will continue to do so if the present circumstances of French negligence in the country persist.

By coopting the elites of CAR's political system, Russia is able to operate more autonomously, cementing its foothold in the country on advantageous terms. The dynamics between the two countries are structurally slanted towards Russia - in exchange for inexpensive services to the CAR government, Russian nationals are able to enrich themselves off of mining contracts and arms sales to undercut the impact of western sanctions and diplomatic isolation. Moreover, through its alliances, the clientelist system of patronage that denotes the relationship of Russian elites to Putin is being constructed in the CAR and throughout Africa by way of the Russian model of elite-based diplomacy. The relationship between President Touadera and the Kremlin is the most pointed example of this, as Russia has coopted the Central African president by supplying offering him security guarantees in exchange for systematic influence. Under the facade of engaging in bilateral relations, the Putin regime is also able to project power and peddle its core narrative - that it is successfully insulating itself from attacks by the west, and that it remains a great power on the world stage because of its ability to build alliances with other nations.

Section III - Concluding Thoughts

In concluding this paper, let us return to where it began. As the French government withdrew its last contingent of military forces from the Central African Republic, virtually all scholars and media outlets characterized the French withdrawal as a marked example of the end of French primacy in the CAR, and in turn, an indication that the period of France as the hegemon of its former colonies is ending. Moreover, scholarly work and media reports alike have pointed to the fact that Russia's expanding influence in the CAR and throughout the African continent is proof-positive of the Putin regime's increasingly offensive measures of countering the western attempts to weaken Moscow following its full scale invasion of Ukraine. As such, the underlying assumption of much of the literature on Russia in Africa seemingly points to inevitability, that Russia is bound to achieve its sought-after expansion against the desires of the west, a view that is in line with the messianic paradigm that has underscored much of the last two centuries of Russia's self-perception in geopolitics. Indeed, this author has also grappled with avoiding the allure of the Kremlin's mystique.

But in turning to the past, specifically through the examination of the legacy of French postcolonial diplomacy with Africa, we can already begin to see cracks in the foundation of Vladimir Putin's grand strategy. In many ways, the role of France in postcolonial Africa is similar to that of contemporary Russia. The modes in which France controlled the vestiges of its colonial network through economic and security agreements in many ways mirrors the modern-day agreements between Putin's Russia and the African states it has allied itself with. The elite-based diplomacy that underscore postcolonial French and contemporary Russian foreign policy are emblematic of the narrow view that insulated leaders often see the world through - that the ability to wield power begins and ends from the top-down.

As a consequence, this paradigm points towards a direction that future scholarly work on this topic should focus on in order to portray a more holistic view of the African political landscape with regards to Franco-Russian competition. Namely, this paper opens many avenues for examining the role of non-state actors within the evolving dynamics of power struggles on the African continent. As has been shown, the level of influence wielded by social media is of primary concern for any state that wishes to extend its effective control on a country or region. In future literature, scholars could look to examine the tangible, local impacts of social media campaigns waged by foreign powers in Africa in order to discern the malleability of public opinion and the connectivity of online relationships between state and nonstate actors. Other avenues for future work could lead to comparative examinations about the relevance of traditional print or television media in relation to digital content as a way of delineating the importance of different mediums for waging campaigns on influence. In essence, the relevance of applying the analysis of this thesis may provide greater insight into the relationship of soft power and bilateral relations between countries in the Global North and countries in Africa.

By evaluating the continuities and changes in the way France and Russia sought to garner influence and control on the African continent in the past and the present, we have seen how changing domestic priorities and contexts have informed the success of this cooperation. In other words, by viewing the past and present as such, a story begins to emerge. It is a story, essentially, of how in the 21st century, a great power in decline - Russia - might save itself from the brink. On the other hand, it is also a story of how another great power seeks to retain its own relevance on the global stage - France - amidst competition from a desperate force with little to lose and everything to gain. Although there is little that is certain in the upcoming chapters of this story, the emergence of Africa as a global force of its own has already begun, and the decisions that

individual African states will make regarding their allegiances to foreign powers will shape the future of global cooperation, and global competition.

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