

RUSSIA'S FORAYS INTO SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

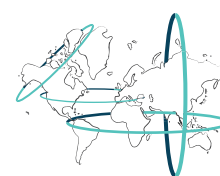
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Do you want to be
my friend, again?

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GEOPOLITICALSERIES

INTRODUCTION

In 1977, the Soviet Union's leadership was in a jubilant mood as Ethiopia had just switched sides to the socialist camp.¹ By the time of this event, the Kremlin had been conducting a renewed offensive on the continent for several years, propping up socialist regimes and 'liberation movements' in Angola, Mozambique, Namibia, Rhodesia (later Zimbabwe) and South Africa. Yet contrary to warnings that the Soviets might eventually 'swallow' all of sub-Saharan Africa,² by 1990 the offensive had fizzled out: ideologically and financially broken, Moscow cut military aid, suspended credit lines, wound down diplomatic representations, closed cultural centres and ultimately withdrew political support. When rebel forces advanced towards Addis Ababa in 1991, Moscow stood idly by as the Derg regime – its former poster child – disintegrated.

Over the course of the next two decades, post-Soviet Russia showed little interest in the sub-continent and only in the late 2010s did the Kremlin once again display the ambition to play a greater geopolitical role: sub-Saharan Africa reemerged in Russian political

Summary

- › Russia's political influence, military presence and economic weight in sub-Saharan Africa is still negligible compared to other global actors.
- › However, Russia is one of the fastest growing trade partners for sub-Saharan Africa and is mounting a remarkable comeback through a 'low costs, high returns and visibility' approach.
- › Russia's attractiveness for African leaders and elites is based on an alignment of strategic narratives, 'political technology' services, economic benefits, relatively cheap arms deliveries and a lack of normative conditionality.
- › The presence of Russian-supported disinformation networks and the expansion of quasi-private military companies risks undermining EU interests, objectives and values in the region.
- › Reinforcing the political and communication sections in EU Delegations and strengthening EU intelligence capacities could help prevent or deter some adverse foreign (Russian) influences.

discourse and trade and diplomatic traffic picked up. Simultaneously, Moscow revived alumni associations of Africans who studied in the Soviet Union and launched initiatives to lure more students to Russia. The Wagner Group – a military enterprise connected to the Russian state – also expanded its radius of action south of the Sahara.³

But what is driving Moscow's renewed activism? How different it is from its previous diplomatic thrusts? Can a coherent strategy be discerned behind this push? Finally, how is sub-Saharan Africa reacting to Russia's overtures and what does it mean for the EU?

WHY: FOUR REASONS BEHIND RUSSIA'S OUTREACH TO AFRICA

Several overlapping and mutually reinforcing factors can help decipher Russia's motivations and objectives. First of all, the Soviet Union's engagement in sub-Saharan Africa had left a bitter aftertaste in Moscow: the Soviets experienced ephemeral geopolitical gains, while financial costs kept escalating. Indeed, almost all that remained in the wake of the rapid geopolitical retreat of the 1990s was nearly \$17 billion worth of debt that sub-Saharan nations owed to post-Soviet Russia.⁴

This disappointment gradually faded away over time and now, two decades on, Russian ruling elites once again view the African continent as a geopolitical and business opportunity.⁵ For instance, oil giant Rosneft's search for business deals in Angola and Mozambique, countries in which its influential CEO Igor Sechin served as a military translator in 1980s, heralds Russia's shift towards a more extractive approach.⁶ Thus, if earlier engagements led to an overall economic loss, Moscow now aspires to 'keep investments low but returns high'.⁷

Economically, it aims to gain access to natural resources (oil, gas, diamonds etc.) while boosting exports of agro products (grain), fertilisers, arms and nuclear, digital and space technologies. Militarily, Russia frames itself as an anti-jihadist force striving to establish and deepen security ties with African armies and secure access to infrastructure to ensure the resupply and maintenance of its navy. Diplomatically, Russia seeks votes in support of its positions at the United Nations (UN) or other political gestures that uphold Moscow's diplomatic posture internationally.⁸

The conviction that policies in sub-Saharan Africa can this time bring about quantifiable dividends are inter-linked with Russia's great power instincts and its pre-occupation with securing the recognition of its global status. From the Russian point of view, sub-Saharan Africa is another battleground where established and rising powers clash for resources, market shares and political influence.⁹ Moreover, from 2010 onwards Russia has not derived its great power status exclusively from claims of pre-eminence in its immediate neighbourhood; its status is increasingly based on the ability to conduct a global foreign policy. In this regard, one Russian expert recently underscored that "Russia's policy in Africa shows that our geostrategic interests are wider than it is thought".¹⁰

This quest for status recognition is re-enforced to some extent by the deterioration of relations between Europe and Russia. As ties soured in the wake of the annexation of Crimea and the sanctions-related costs of waging war in Donbas rose, Moscow doubled its efforts to boost the non-European aspects of its foreign policy. Labelled as a 'flanking strategy',¹¹ it seeks to demonstrate that Russia cannot be isolated diplomatically and has viable economic alternatives.¹² To some degree, it serves to surprise and challenge Europe, gain new levers of influence and thus be able to up the ante beyond the European continent.

Last but not least, a string of military, political or economic successes in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have often paved the way for Russia's forays into sub-Saharan politics. First, after boosting grain exports to Egypt since the mid-2000s, Moscow gained and expanded its share in Sudan's wheat market (from 5% to 55%) throughout the 2010s.¹³ Second, Russia capitalised on its intervention in Syria to showcase and combat test its military equipment, acquiring new clients in sub-Saharan Africa as a result; its share in arms exports to the region went up from 19% to 28% between 2012 and 2018.¹⁴ Third, Moscow exploited the renewed Russia-Egypt partnership to organise the first ever Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, co-chaired by President Putin and President Sisi and held in Sochi.

There is a high degree of historical continuity here: North Africa traditionally played an important role in Soviet foreign policy¹⁵ and accomplishments there created the pre-conditions for engagement with southern Africa. The first conference of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) in Cairo in 1957, sponsored by the Kremlin, set the stage for the second one in Conakry in 1960 which facilitated Soviet outreach to African elites. The web of partnerships in North Africa served other purposes, too: for example,

in 1967 Soviet planes piloted by Egyptians flew from Algeria to transport Soviet weapons to Nigeria.¹⁶ Therefore, more often than not, there was and still is a mental and material link between Moscow's policy in the MENA and sub-Saharan Africa.

HOW: RUSSIA'S UNDERDOG STRATEGY

Moscow is aware of its quasi-underdog status on the continent and there is a recognition that Russia lacks the resources of the Soviet Union.¹⁷ The Soviets could rely on client states to share the financial or military burden of its policies in Africa: between 1954 and 1968, 30% of the Soviet bloc's regional economic assistance to Africa came from Moscow's Eastern European satellites.¹⁸ Similarly, Cuba, the USSR's Latin American ally, deployed troops to Africa, often in support of the Soviet agenda.¹⁹ Today, Russia does not have such allies to rely on, something which (combined with its weak economic performance over the last decade) explains Moscow's attempts to win influence in sub-Saharan Africa on the cheap.

There is another recognised drawback. During the two decades that Russia was largely absent from sub-Saharan Africa, more powerful external players filled the vacuum and Soviet-trained ruling elites gradually gave way to a new wave of leaders.²⁰ Now, because Russia came late to the contest for the future of Africa, it faces an uphill struggle to re-establish a position even close to what it held previously.

These limitations inform and shape Russia's current *modus operandi*. The Kremlin's rulebook in sub-Saharan Africa therefore prescribes a maximum use of existent advantages, a renewed outreach to African elites, the use of sectoral niches in which Russia can be politically and economically competitive, the swift exploitation of new regional openings, and (where possible) cooperation with like-minded great powers already entrenched in the continent.

The Kremlin regards strategic communications (StratCom) as an essential component to be fully exploited and create favourable conditions for Russia's resurgence. For this reason, just as the Soviet news agency TASS expanded its regional offices in the days of the Cold War, today Sputnik is in the early stages of multiplying its partnership agreements with local state media outlets so as to be able to directly provide what it refers to as 'untold stories'.²¹ While Russian StratCom denigrates certain competitors by constantly referring to the predatory behaviour of European imperial powers in the past,²² it boasts of the fact that it does not possess colonial baggage²³ and presents itself as a

friend who shares African societies' traditional values, a partner for economic development and a bulwark against security threats.²⁴

There is, however, another facet of Russia's StratCom, which comes in the form of a 'package of services for regime survival', catered to African leaders.²⁵ The early post-Soviet transition period gave rise to a cohort of 'political technologists' in Russia, who helped win elections with the use of electoral tricks ranging from fake candidates, rigged opinion polls and *kompromat* (compromising and/or incriminating material) while still preserving the appearance of a legitimate political process.²⁶ In the 2000s, this political industry continued to flourish and with the Kremlin's patronage entered the cyber domain (bots, trolls, fake web-pages etc.).²⁷ Recently, Moscow identified the usefulness of such 'election assistance' as a foreign policy tool and something which could provide a competitive edge in weak states.

Over the last years, the list of sub-Saharan countries in which Russian spin doctors and/or trolls have operated has rapidly expanded. Although presented as the initiative of private enterprises, this 'electoral assistance' is usually deployed in parallel with cooperation in the security field, Russia's diplomatic protection in international organisations and/or in some cases, loans. In turn, this helps create entry points and gain the trust of local ruling elites during times when they feel most vulnerable (elections, mass protests). States providing assistance to ward off or inhibit democratic changes and ensuring authoritarian leaders' survival have been labelled 'Black Knights'.²⁸ Russia has long supported such actors in the post-Soviet region, but it has now expanded this model to sub-Saharan Africa.

Russia's 'Black Knight' posture sits well with its extractive approach as its protection does not come free of charge. When shielding local rulers from domestic discontent and international pressure, the Russian government and its related companies often seek lucrative deals in return.²⁹ Protection is also traded for various diplomatic gains: support in the UN for Russia's position on Syria, an alignment with Moscow on restrictive cyber norms, or the withdrawal of the recognition of Kosovo, for instance.

When it comes to Africa-related issues in the UN, Russia often finds itself on the same side of the fence as China. The calculation in Moscow is that the experience of mutually beneficial cooperation in Eurasia can be replicated in sub-Saharan Africa.³⁰ Bilaterally, Russian and Chinese diplomats have pledged to coordinate their respective positions on Africa, while the two countries' navies have organised the first joint drills off the shores of South Africa.³¹ But this is only half of the story.

Gaining a foothold

Russian presence in sub-Saharan Africa (2010 - March 2020)

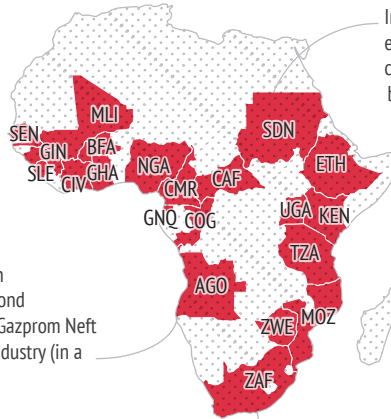
The term 'presence' is based on a set of indicators developed by the EUISS corresponding to specific categories (economic, military, strategic communications).



Economic

Resource extraction (oil, gold, diamonds, semi-precious metals), nuclear energy cooperation, agricultural products exports

In Angola, Russia is especially present in the diamond sector, with state-dominated Alrosa controlling the majority of Angola's diamond extraction market (in joint ventures with local state companies). Gazprom Neft also indirectly holds a small stake in Angola's petrol extraction industry (in a joint venture with Sonangol).



In Sudan, Russian companies Gazprom and Rosgeologia are exploring local gas and oil deposits. Entities linked to the Concord company group of Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Kremlin-linked shadow businessman close to Putin, have signed gold prospecting contracts, while state nuclear energy monopolist Rosatom recently concluded a memorandum with Khartoum to build a nuclear power plant. Russia also became Sudan's chief grain supplier in 2017.

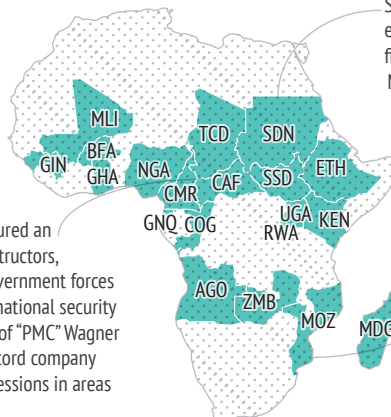
Russian companies are active across South Africa's resource extraction-refinement industries: Severstal in iron ore, Norilsky Nickel in gold mining and processing and Renova in manganese ore. State monopolist 'Rosatom' had concluded preliminary agreements to build South Africa's second nuclear power plant, though these were subsequently nullified by the High Court in Pretoria. Rosgeologia is also jointly exploring gas and oil deposits in the Indian Ocean with South African company PetroSA.



Military and security

Russian arms exports, presence of Russian private military companies, training of African military personnel, access to naval facilities

In the Central African Republic (CAR), in March 2018 Moscow secured an exception to a UN arms embargo to send around 200 military instructors, several thousand rifles and hundreds of grenade launchers to government forces in Bangui. A Russian, Valery Zakharov, is also President Toudéra's national security adviser. The CAR has since become the main area of deployment of "PMC" Wagner in Africa. Through this engagement, structures linked to the Concord company group purportedly secured major diamond and gold mining concessions in areas close to Bangui.



Sudan has bought significant amounts of Russian military equipment over the past decade. This includes 60 BTR-80A infantry fighting vehicles, 24 Mi-24P/Mi-35P combat helicopters, 14 Mi-8MT/Mi-17 transport helicopters and 100 Kornet/AT-14 anti-tank missiles. Near the end of Omar al-Bashir's rule, an agreement was signed on free access to Sudanese ports for Russian naval vessels. In 2018-2019, mercenaries of Russian "PMC" Wagner (an affiliate of Concord company group) were allegedly deployed by pro-regime forces at protests against President al-Bashir.

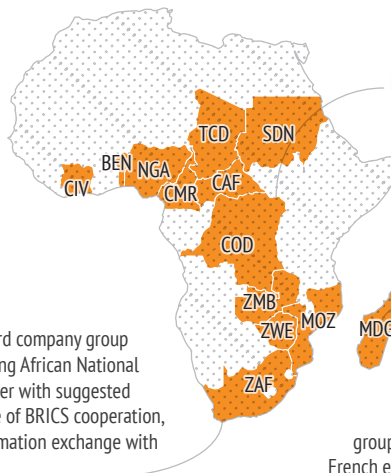
Mozambique and Russia signed an agreement in 2018 which simplifies the entry of Russian warships into Mozambican ports. The country has become "PMC" Wagner's most recent field of operation, with reports of around 200 mercenaries sent to the northern Cabo Delgado region to quell an Islamist insurgency.



Strategic communications and 'political technology'

Russian political strategists, trolls and bots, cooperation agreements between Sputnik and African state broadcasters

As part of efforts to expand their business to South Africa, Concord company group consultants prepared detailed analyses of the chances of the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party winning the 2019 general elections, together with suggested tactics for discrediting Cyril Ramaphosa's opponents. In the scope of BRICS cooperation, Russian broadcaster Sputnik has signed a memorandum on information exchange with the state-owned South African Broadcasting Corporation.



In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), an organisation linked to Concord company group named 'Afric' sent Russian nationals as observers to the 2019 Congolese presidential elections. In parallel, Facebook announced it suspended a network of fake accounts traced to Russia which sought to sow disinformation in the DRC.

Russians linked to the Concord company group were reported to have financed several candidates in Madagascar during the December 2018 presidential elections. Suspicions were also cast on the winner of the race, president Rajoelina, who refutes claims of being sponsored by Russia. Representatives of Concord company group have allegedly organised 'anti-colonial' protests in front of the French embassy in Antananarivo and in late 2019, Facebook announced the suspension of a network of fake accounts linked to the Internet Research Agency (affiliated to Concord company group) which spread political disinformation in Madagascar.

Despite this apparent alignment, Moscow also believes that the increased Chinese presence on the continent (and resultant unease generated among African elites) will inadvertently bring about opportunities for other great powers. As sub-Saharan African states strive to diversify their international engagements to avoid overdependence on China, Russia, with its modest resources but valuable political and security services, might therefore gain traction and play a more active role³² – as one keen observer put it: “there is China hysteria in Africa, there is no Russia hysteria in Africa”.³³ While Russia’s underdog status can consequently help it to mount a deeper comeback in Africa, the success of this approach very much depends on how the sub-continent reacts to Russia’s overtures.

WHAT DO AFRICANS WANT FROM RUSSIA?

Russia is only the latest global power to engage in the so-called ‘new scramble for Africa’.³⁴ When Vladimir Putin convened representatives from all the 54 countries of Africa in Sochi in October 2019, he did a remarkable job of turning a sequencing of bilateral agreements with African governments into a highly symbolic celebration of Africa’s collective ambitions, potential and self-determination, while revamping old bonds and perceptions rooted in the Soviet, Cold-War era.

According to figures cited by Putin, Russian trade with the African continent rose to \$20 billion in 2018.³⁵ However, North Africa is responsible for the lion’s share of this sum, with Russia accounting for only around \$4 billion of sub-Saharan African trade.³⁶ Nevertheless, total regional imports and exports with Russia grew by 43% between 2008 and 2018. This should be compared to trade dynamics with other major partners: imports from the US have stagnated, while exports fell by almost 60% over the same period and overall trade with China and India grew by 85%, respectively. This means that Russia is among the fastest-growing trade partners for sub-Saharan Africa, yet its relative weight compared to the EU (the largest trading partner, accounting for 25% of imports and 23% of exports) or China (around 12% of total imports and exports) is still negligible and it accounts for less than 1% of both Russian and sub-Saharan African global trade.³⁷

What, then, is prompting countries south of the Sahara to consolidate and expand partnerships with Russia? Four explanations can be provided.

Strategic narratives

The first explanation has to do with an alignment of strategic narratives in a changing world. Times have changed since the Soviet Union’s efforts to counter ‘Western imperialism’ in Africa through Marxist ideology: modern Russia’s foreign policy has no such ideological ambitions, yet its narrative continues to stress opposition to Western interference in countries’ domestic politics, be it through the promotion of democracy and human rights or military interventions, for instance.³⁸ Russia highlights collaboration over aid, something which is tempting to African leaders who view the West’s outreach as patronising. African countries, in other words, can trust Russia as a strategic partner to counterbalance Western influence. The geopolitical potential of such an alignment is significant: for instance, Russia has used its veto in the UN Security Council to protect African countries from human rights-related sanctions (Zimbabwe in 2008), while in 2014, 24 African countries abstained from the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea (and two opposed it).³⁹

Political tips and tricks

Russia is anything but an altruistic actor when it helps partners. Indeed, given that influence and disinformation operations are core tenets of Russia’s foreign policy around the world, why are the Kremlin’s troll

armies and political strategists not considered a threat in sub-Saharan Africa? The answer lies in the recent decline of military coups as a way to achieve regime change. While some observers saw the switch to a greater reliance on the processes of electoral democracy⁴⁰ as a step towards a fourth wave of democratisation, the electoral climate in sub-Saharan Africa instead became toxic. Incumbents often resort to a

variety of means and subterfuges to rig the results of elections in their favour: taking control of the state apparatus, amending the constitution, changing electoral laws, dominating the media, making arbitrary arrests and detaining opponents, as well as engaging in electoral fraud and repression. Russia’s disinformation toolbox and political technology instruments are subsequently regarded as assets which can be used to influence the polls, while limiting accountability and minimising the risks of authoritarian leaders’ direct responsibility in manipulating elections. Madagascar was among the first (and will not be the last) operations in this regard.⁴¹

As for sub-Saharan civil society groups, they tend not to perceive Russia as a bigger threat than other powers

that once more explicitly projected their influence and interests to the detriment of African ones (former colonial powers, the US). Close links between Russia and many African media⁴² outlets also often protect Moscow from negative exposure. Finally, Soviet soft power continues to play a role in shaping perceptions, as USSR-era educational and diplomatic ties created useful networks which still endure in Africa today. It is these networks that Russia is reviving and supporting to help sustain its current strategy.

Rational choice: low-costs, high-gains

Third, countries in sub-Saharan Africa are rational agents that determine which actions are worth pursuing, and which are not, based on a cost-benefits analysis.⁴³ In a context of growing multipolar competition and an increased global supply of deals and investment offers, African countries are in the enviable position of being able to pick and choose their economic partners. This benefits both their collective agency (for instance, in the pursuit of specific agendas in multilateral negotiations, such as the EU-African Union (AU) partnership or the Doha Development Agenda) and individual interests. From this point of view, Russia represents an opportunity to diversify their partnership and investor base, while decreasing dependency on big lenders such as China, and, consequently, minimising the risks of falling into a debt trap.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Russian investments cover sectors that are at the top of many African governments' strategic agendas, such as armaments and nuclear energy, and in which Russia has a competitive advantage *vis-à-vis* other global players. Russia's assistance, therefore, tends to come at relatively low costs and yield high gains by bypassing caveats or conditions that restrict the margin of manoeuvre of many Western partners.

Best seller?

Fourth, the competition, or available alternatives, should be examined in order to understand Russia's attractiveness. Few other global actors currently offer a partnership that is as comprehensive as Russia's. Old colonial ties and conditionality hamper the appeal of the EU and its member states, while the US under the Trump administration has decreased both security and political engagement in Africa and accompanied what is left with a rhetoric of disdain and neglect. The Gulf states' and Turkey's influence is vulnerable to Red Sea rivalries and India mainly focuses on high-tech development. Finally, an over-reliance on China and the sustainability of Chinese infrastructure

projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is becoming a source of concern in many African capitals.

Seen through all these lenses, it is easy to understand why an expansion of trade volume between Russia and Africa from \$20 billion to \$40 billion, as announced by President Putin in Sochi, is not just a matter of 'how much money', but finds deeper roots in Africa's agency in a multipolar world.

IS RUSSIA IN AFRICA THE NEW NORMAL?

Despite its attractiveness, projection of Russian power in Africa faces some limitations.

First, Russia's share of influence in sub-Saharan Africa is still limited, and its approach has not been entirely successful. Despite the attention given to Russian private military contractors and arms sales, and the high visibility of the Sochi Summit in the global media, Russia's levels of bilateral trade, political influence and military presence remain comparatively low. Sometimes Russia is better at marketing its achievements than at actually accomplishing things. Russian mercenaries are reportedly only present in a few theatres, and not all of their engagements were successful.⁴⁵ Russia's 'great return' to sub-Saharan Africa is therefore more modest than the newspapers portray:⁴⁶ it is not part of a grand, hegemonic strategy, but is instead opportunistic, driven by geo-political imperatives and seeks to develop selected clientelist relations with authoritarian leaders.⁴⁷ However, while lacking strategic ambition, this approach has still provided Russia with an entry point.

Second, Russian knowledge of socio-political realities in Africa is poorer than imagined. Electoral influence and disinformation operations, for instance, have so far been largely unsuccessful. In Madagascar, the Russian operation did not result in President Rajaonarimampianina's re-election, and Russian agents made a late switch to campaign for his rival Rajoelina after realising that the incumbent's chances of winning were negligible. Russia also lacks the capacities and diplomatic infrastructure to engage with local communities and politico-ethnic groups across Africa, something which severely undermines the effectiveness of its agents. While Moscow has the ambition to become a major player in election operations, and it offers its support to African leaders at a competitive price, it would still take several years and

Moscow lacks the capacities and diplomatic infrastructure to engage with local communities and politico-ethnic groups across Africa.

huge investments to develop the necessary network and know-how to have significant impact. An important variable in this regard is also the survival of those long-standing sub-Saharan African leaders which currently rely on Russian help, as they are increasingly being pushed out through democratic transitions.⁴⁸

Third, even if an upward trend for Russian military and political influence is assumed in the next 5-10 years, the return on investment for Russia could be exposed to geopolitical shocks, with the subsequent risk of undermining the country's global strategy. The main lesson from Soviet engagement in sub-Saharan Africa was that costs exceeded the benefits: a multipolar world requires Russia to be resourceful, and may eventually push the Kremlin to act so as to avoid being trapped in any geopolitical quagmires which lie outside the areas of its immediate strategic interest. Russia may therefore opt for a pragmatic foreign policy strategy, keeping costs low but maximising the economic opportunities as much as possible, all the while keeping media attention high so as to amplify its engagement.

Even with those limitations, there are important short- and long-term implications for the EU. In the short term, Russia's operations and deals in sub-Saharan Africa will not constitute a direct threat to Europe, but may undermine EU interests, external action and normative power in specific areas. For instance, Russian arms sales have had an impact on the mandate and effectiveness of the EU Training Mission in Central African Republic (EUTM-RCA) in matters related to security sector reform (SSR) and the implementation of the integrated approach to support the transition process.⁴⁹ Elsewhere, in post-Bashir Sudan, Russian support to the Transitional Military Council and efforts to delegitimise the Sudanese opposition⁵⁰ are at odds with the EU's approach to support a peaceful transition, promote civilian rule and condemn any form of violence and human rights abuses.⁵¹

In the long term, should Russia sustain and manage to scale up its influence, the implications for Europe could incrementally worsen, expanding from single countries to the continental level, particularly if Russian soft power and disinformation campaigns help fuel anti-Western sentiment or hamper democratisation and good governance across sub-Saharan Africa. While it is unlikely that Russia will develop a continental grand strategy, the presence of a wide Russian-supported disinformation network or a patchwork expansion of private military companies would clash with EU objectives and values. Yet whatever the exact future scenario, it is clear that Russia is there to stay in sub-Saharan Africa, alongside other global powers.⁵²

When adjusting its strategy towards sub-Saharan Africa, it is vitally important for the EU to carefully assess its priorities and role in the new African balance

of power. The bigger (and perhaps graver) risk for the EU, from a strategic point of view, would be to become the firefighter in a region where other players, including Russia, actively contribute to acts of political arson. To avoid that outcome, moving from being a donor to a fully-fledged geopolitical player is paramount; one which is able to act using soft and, as required, hard power tools. The EU's strategic approach will in particular need to balance European interests with the most pressing issues for sub-Saharan African countries, from employment to violent extremism. In this process, the quality of the relationship (and of EU concrete engagements) matters more than the sheer quantity of Official Development Assistance (ODA) or Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows – as the Russian underdog approach shows.

As multipolarism becomes the new normal in sub-Saharan Africa, Russia's projection of influence is just one element of a bigger systemic change, but a potentially attractive and dangerous one for Africans if it becomes uncontrolled or contributes to elite capture. Allowing Russia to set new trends and establish operating bases to delegitimise European values and perceptions on the African continent would be strategically imprudent. Current EU foreign policy instruments, from electoral support to crisis response and prevention, need the flexibility to operate in an environment where assistance should not only be tailored to local needs, but be mindful of the growing impact of foreign influences. Beefing up capacities for intelligence analysis, early warning and situational awareness, and reinforcing the political, press and information sections in EU Delegations could help to counter or deter the propaganda and disinformation operations of foreign actors. At the politico-strategic level, re-assessing the relationship between the EU and sub-Saharan Africa in this new light should therefore be a priority as leaders from the two continents engage in the post-Cotonou negotiations and approach the sixth AU-EU Summit.

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