

# RUSSIA IN AFRICA: COMPETING FOR STRATEGIC INFLUENCE

## EVENT SUMMARY

The EUISS convened a closed-door event on 4 July 2024 in Brussels, bringing together independent experts and EU policymakers to engage in a collective assessment of Russia's policy in Africa. The debate, the first in the EUISS' new series of roundtables **THE RUSSIA ROSTRUM**, was conducted under the Chatham House rule.

Russia seeks to improve its global standing, limit isolation, evade sanctions and secure other material gains through its engagement in Africa. It is not among the top traders or investors with the continent or investors there. Its soft power cannot compete with China's. Nevertheless, the network of relations and the assemblage of means Moscow tactically deploys in pursuit of its interests in an asymmetric, hybrid manner, as well as its capacity to exploit local vulnerabilities and fragilities and leverage existing grievances, must not be underestimated.

Russia has no "Africa policy" but the continent's importance is highlighted in the most recent foreign policy concept (2023).<sup>1</sup> In addition to asymmetrical tactics of positioning and benefiting from *niche* advantages including in the mining or energy industry, it has several strategic objectives such as establishing deeper influence *coast-to-coast* across the Sahel and gaining access to the Red Sea through Port Sudan. If materialised, this would be a serious issue for the EU. Africa also matters to Russia as a divided continent when it comes to multilateral fora and positions on the war on Ukraine (e.g. UNGA resolutions, participation at the Bürgenstock Summit).

When assessing its comparative strengths, Russia emerges as particularly good at communication and disinformation campaigns. It has been able to successfully target those campaigns, capitalising on existing ideas and grievances. It has also shown capacity to conduct efficient counterinsurgency operations in support of local regimes. However, these operations have also been controversial because of their brutality and the nature of interference in the complex local conflicts. For example, the intervention of Wagner/Africa Corps to suppress the Tuareg insurgency in Mali has been seen with suspicion by Algeria, one of Russia's important

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<sup>1</sup> Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации (2023), available at: [https://mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/fundamental\\_documents/1860586/?lang=ru](https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/?lang=ru).

partners but also a sponsor of the peace process. As a result of the war in Ukraine, arms exports as Russia's conventional means of developing relations with African countries have also been in decline.

Therefore, Russia's initiatives and its perception in Africa show a mixed record. Even the *juntas* Moscow supports resist excessive interference in the economic sector, notably natural extraction, by the Kremlin and linked entities. For example, the regime in Mali has refused to follow an earlier example of the Central African Republic to award extensive mining concessions while Niger has resisted the deployment of Africa Corps beyond trainers so far. Overall, Russia has been seen favourably only by 26.7% of Afrobarometer respondents in 2020-2021 (i.e., before the full invasion of Ukraine) compared to 61.9% who had a favourable perception of China – and 38.7% of favourable views for the EU (2021-2023).<sup>2</sup>

Moscow's projection of its own identity as a speaker for the "global majority", an advocate of the polycentric world, a successful defender against Western imperialism and colonialism and a proponent of "traditional values" should not be seen as sinking too deep. Indeed, it is not always central to Russia's strategic communication campaign as shown by the example of Mali where Moscow has been focusing more on supporting the regime and peddling anti-Western sentiments. Comparatively, China has been much better at identity projection – and while Moscow and Beijing have been gravitating toward each other lately, in Africa their interests sometimes visibly collide (Mali). That said, there is not much appetite overall in Africa to align with outside great powers but rather to diversify partnerships.

The disintegration and restructuring of Yevgeny Prigozhin's conglomerate of entities including the Wagner Group (2023-) has had an uneven impact on the pursuit of Russia's state interests in Africa. The ways in which its footprint is transformed differ locally. In the Central African Republic, the conglomerate's operation has continued mostly uninterrupted. In the Sahel, Africa Corps with tighter control by the Ministry of Defence/GRU and less operational autonomy has largely succeeded Wagner and has engaged in new activities (Niger).

### POLICY IDEAS<sup>3</sup>

- The EU should develop a global policy for Russia, with Africa as one specific focus area. Here, the emphasis should be on strategic fundamentals like minerals and migration, but the perspective should be broader and based on the understanding that migration will be impossible to manage without addressing its root causes including insecurity caused by terrorist activities.
- The more strategic approach would benefit from deeper knowledge and streamlined situational awareness of Russia's activities in Africa.
- The focus on strategic priorities should not be confused with the EU resigning on the normative foundations of its engagement with partners in Africa. The EU should seek to build a consensus of regional states including those in the Gulf on the Port Sudan issue. It should also be wise to apply pressure. That said, the EU should capitalise on its strengths, paying more attention to local actors'

<sup>2</sup> See the relevant rounds of Afrobarometer, available at: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis/>.

<sup>3</sup> The list does not represent the consensus of the roundtable but rather summarises ideas expressed by its various participants.

perspectives, providing support to pluralist societies and benefitting from the desire of local societies for more political participation.

- An effort should be made to counter Russia's disinformation campaigns and foreground Kremlin-linked entities' gross violations of human rights and the grievances they are creating, as well as the pivotal role they play in shipping Africans' wealth out of the continent and the strategic corruption that makes possible the chains of collusion indispensable to these outbound flows.