

# PISM REPORT

## AFRICA CORPS—A NEW ITERATION OF RUSSIA'S OLD MILITARY PRESENCE IN AFRICA



FILIP BRYJKA | JĘDRZEJ CZEREP

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OLD MILITARY PRESENCE IN AFRICA

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## CONTENTS

Key Takeaways.....	5
Introduction.....	7
Creation of the Africa Corps.....	10
Areas of the Africa Corps' Activities.....	13
Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger) —The Africa Corps' Most Promising Partner.....	14
Mali—Easy Adaptation.....	15
Burkina Faso—Africa Corps' First Solo Mission.....	17
CAR—Continuing and Seeking Attention.....	19
Libya—An Emerging Centre.....	20
Niger—Africa Corps Solidifies Junta's Anti-Western Turn.....	22
“News” Zone: The African Initiative as the Africa Corps' Propaganda Tube.....	24
Economic Sphere of the Africa Corps' Activities.....	27
The Future of the Africa Corps.....	31
Prospects for the Development and Further Activities of the Africa Corps.....	31
Threats to the Africa Corps.....	37
Recommendations.....	40
About the Authors.....	41



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- After Prigozhin's rebellion, the Russian government divided the Wagner Group's (WG) military, business, and information empire. The various elements were placed under the supervision of formal military and intelligence structures (GRU, FSB, SVR). The former WG operating in African countries was replaced at the end of 2023 by the Africa Corps (AC), which is subordinate to the Ministry of Defence.
- After the death of Prigozhin, whose personal involvement stimulated Russian activity in Africa, the Russian state's attention in this direction not only did not weaken, but strengthened. In creating the AC, Russia took an assertive approach to expand its military presence in Africa to include Burkina Faso and Niger, and possibly Chad and other states in the region in the future.
- By deciding to allocate reserves of manpower and equipment to maintain and expand its military activities in Africa, Russian leadership proved it felt comfortable about its prospects on the Ukrainian front.
- Although centralising this structure and staffing it with a new command ran the risk of reducing its effectiveness, AC's first actions demonstrate that it retained the ability to flexibly exploit opportunities as they arose.
- The now former WG's existing core of personnel is essential for organisational reasons and for continuity of working relationships in Africa. This is particularly true for the Central African Republic (CAR).
- The new formation is being used to pursue Russian strategic objectives more coherently than was the case under the Prigozhin-led WG. The AC is also intended to be used to a greater extent and more openly than the WG to displace Western (especially French and U.S.) political influence from Africa.
- The most important direction has become the Sahel, where AC is expected to help increase the capacity of a new anti-Western political bloc initiated by Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger—the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The importance of CAR is diminishing. Russia's approach to maintaining relations with the warring forces in Sudan is changing. Libya has so far not become the centre of AC operations as announced, but it is possible that it will soon reach this status.
- The success of supporting Malian forces in retaking Kidal from separatists confirmed AC's readiness to conduct large-scale military operations in Africa.
- Success in Mali has antagonised two neighbouring states—Algeria and Mauritania—which will make it difficult, if not impossible, for the AC to achieve some of its stated goals.
- Russia's ability to gain control over migration routes and instrumentalise people movements is questionable.
- Through AC, Russia wants to increase the exploitation of natural resources to allow it to generate profits and finance further projects in the region. However, the very model of AC's relations with the host countries is changing: there will be fewer attempts to set up their own

companies, such as mining companies, and take on risky ventures with uncertain profits to self-finance structures on the ground, and more intensification of formal economic relations.

- In the information sphere, the newly established African Initiative in Russia, which will be responsible for involving local journalists and activists in pro-Russian activities, is taking centre stage.
- Despite the greater openness of the new policy, the structure of AC and the logic of its operation is still based on a clandestine model. For example, its local command is not disclosed.
- Western states should take an active role in countering AC’s activity by, among other things, expanding and coordinating the imposition of sanctions on individuals and entities linked to this structure.

THE WAGNER GROUP IN AFRICA	AFRICA CORPS
In Africa from 2017	In Africa from 2023/2024
Militarily active in Sudan, Libya, CAR, Mali, Mozambique	Militarily active in Mali, Libya, Burkina Faso, Niger, CAR
The military part of the “Prigozhin Empire”, closely connected to its business and the infosphere components	Formation overseen by the Ministry of Defence and military intelligence (GRU), separated from outreach and economic activities (especially the <i>African Initiative</i> service)
In addition to supporting increasing Russia’s influence, it pursued its own objectives	Full coherence with state priorities
Autonomy in planning	Strategic directions are determined by the state and its geopolitical interests
Activity centre in the CAR	Political focus directed towards the Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger); Libya to serve as operational hub
Operated quickly and situationally	Initial concerns about inflexibility proved unfounded
Risky business ventures for self-financing in host countries	Used to strengthen formal economic ties
Command structure in countries of operation mostly known	Deeply secretive command structure in host countries
Established a wide network of links with local politicians and entrepreneurs	Gradually taking control of WG resources, (exception: CAR)
After Prigozhin’s death, WG’s branding and symbolism initially was removed, later reinstated both within AC and separate from it.	AC brand not so recognisable, apparently accentuated in Burkina Faso and Niger



## INTRODUCTION

Despite the rebellion by the Wagner Group (WG), then led by Yevgeny Prigozhin, which occurred in June 2023, the Russian government has no intention of abandoning the use of the military-business model he developed for its presence in Africa, which translates into financial gains as well as political influence for Moscow. This is now being developed by the Africa Corps (AC). The formation is gradually increasing its control over forces previously operating as part of the WG, particularly in Mali, Libya, and the Central African Republic (CAR).<sup>1</sup> It is also initiating entirely new operations in Burkina Faso and Niger.

Through AC, officially not part of the armed forces but controlled directly by the Ministry of Defence and military intelligence (GRU), Russia seeks to undermine Western (mainly French and American) influence in Africa. In return for providing military services to local regimes, Russian companies gain the opportunity to exploit the natural resources located there (including gold, diamonds, oil, timber, uranium, and rare earth metals). The funds obtained in this way, which are impossible to estimate precisely,<sup>2</sup> are primarily used to finance the group. However, they can also be used to some extent to pay for the war effort in Ukraine. Russia, for example, settled in gold a 2022 contract worth \$1.75 billion for the purchase of 6,000 Iranian Shahed-136 drones,<sup>3</sup> although it is uncertain whether the gold came from Africa.

In order not to lose operational control over an armed formation such as the AC again, the Russian authorities decided to clearly separate structurally the business, propaganda, and military components of the former “Prigozhin empire”. Oversight of the various sectors of the former organisation’s activities was divided between the Ministry of Defence and Military Intelligence (GRU), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Federal Security Service (FSB).

The military assets of the former Wagner Group have been broken up and officially subordinated to the Ministry of Defence and (partly) Rosgvardia. While this will increase control over them, it weakens the *plausible deniability*, i.e., claims of a lack of links between these formations and Russian state structures, which has been used by both the Russian authorities and their African partners. The structures that have absorbed former Wagner operators have become partners, or accomplices, in AC recruitment processes.

Some of the economic resources located in Russia, including the companies that make up the Concord Group, were entrusted to Yevgeny’s son Pavel. Arguably, his presence in the new structure was intended to set an example for those former WG fighters loyal to Prigozhin to enter into contracts with structures overseen by the Ministry of Defence. In turn, Russian oligarchs and the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) took over his media assets.<sup>4</sup>

The propaganda facilities of the African Corp have been entrusted to FSB Fifth Service “Department for Operational Information and International Relations” officer Artem

<sup>1</sup> Советник президента ЦАР: страна готова принять российскую военную базу, “African Initiative”, 16.01.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/2024/01/sovetsnik-prezidenta-czar-strana-gotova-prinyat-rossijskuyu-voennuyu-bazu/>.

<sup>2</sup> Figures in the order of US\$2.5 billion reported, for example, in the Black Gold Report appear to be overestimated, see J. Berlin, D. Clement, L.P. Elufisan, E. Hicks, Z. Kész, *How the Kremlin is using Wagner to launder billions in African gold*, The Blood Gold Report, December 2023, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> A. Buncombe, *Russia paid Iran ‘in gold bullion’ for drones used in attacks on Ukraine*, “The Telegraph”, 07.02.2024, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2024/02/07/russia-paid-billions-gold-bullion-shahed-drones-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>4</sup> A. Troianovski, D. Walsh, E. Schmitt, V. Yee, J.E. Barnes, *After Prigozhin’s Death, a High-Stakes Scramble for His Empire*, “New York Times”, 08.08.2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/world/europe/prigozhin-wagner-russia-africa.html>.

Kureyev. This associate of the Valdai Club, which is close to Russian President Vladimir Putin, is the editor-in-chief of the African Initiative portal, which is a channel for promoting AC and Russian policies in Africa. The SVR, in turn, oversees the Russian cultural institutions under the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which are part of *Rossostrudnichestvo*, headed by Yevgeny Primakov (grandson of the former prime minister and head of the SVR). In Africa, after Prigozhin's death, he accelerated the process of expanding a network of so-called Russian Houses under this banner, inspired by the *Alliances Françaises*.<sup>5</sup>

The change from WG to AC provided an opportunity to review the existing range of activities carried out by Prigozhin's affiliates in terms of their coherence with the state's objectives, their usefulness, and whether they should be continued or extinguished.

Under Prigozhin's leadership, the process of defining WG's areas of operation—both geographically and thematically—was characterised by autonomy beyond Russian standards. It depended heavily on the assertive exploitation of emerging opportunities (e.g., political changes). The success of some ventures, such as business, facilitated the initiation of others. The personal relationships of his colleagues with local officials were also a driving force for action. As a result, it was not the state's priorities that fully determined WG's activity map. Not infrequently, the mechanism was the other way around—it was the state that followed the activities of the Prigozhin structure. This is exemplified by CAR, which in 2018–2021 became the area of the most visible Russian activity despite the country's low regional importance. Another example is WG's connections with Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which has limited Russia's room for manoeuvre in the country. Maxim Shugaley, a participant close to Prigozhin in numerous influence operations in Africa, assessed this phenomenon generally positively. According to him, WG's trump card was the ability to make decisions “quickly and situationally”.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after Prigozhin's death, he warned that the new, more centralised structures replacing it would not be able to achieve similar capabilities quickly. This means that, in the medium term, the existing personnel and organisational core of operations in Africa, based on ex-Wagner operators, will not be fully replaced.

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<sup>5</sup> J. Gadon, *From Luanda to Dakar, Moscow rolls out its cultural diplomacy*, “Africa Intelligence”, 8.09.2023, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/southern-africa-and-islands/2023/09/08/from-luanda-to-dakar-moscow-rolls-out-its-cultural-diplomacy,110040902-evg>.

<sup>6</sup> Максим Шугалей: “Африка это будущее планеты, свои позиции там Россия сдавать не собирается”, “СОБКОР | Собственный Корреспондент”, 29.09.2023, <https://sobcor.news/29092023/4320/>.

### DIVISION OF THE WAGNER GROUP IN RUSSIA, UKRAINE, AND BELARUS —THE AC’S HINTERLAND

The paramilitary core of the former WG has been broken up and divided between the military and the National Guard (Rosgvardia). In addition to the AC, the Ministry of Defence and the GRU also oversee the **1<sup>st</sup> Volunteer Assault Corps (VAC)**, a formation of numerous military companies subordinate to the Redut military company (comprising nearly 30 different units), as well as other irregular formations fighting in Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> The VAC is headed by Gen. Vladimir Alekseev, acting as the head of the GRU Operational Group within the so-called Special Military Operation (SMO). The formation has most likely been incorporated into the GRU’s organisational and personnel structure and operates at the 462<sup>nd</sup> Spetsnaz Training Centre.<sup>8</sup> In charge of recruiting for the VAC is Andrei “Sedoy” Troshev, a close associate of Prigozhin in the past who did not support his mutiny but signed a contract with the Ministry of Defence along with 10 other commanders of the WG.

Some of the former Wagner operators have ended up in **Rosgvardia** units, where they act as instructors and fight in combat units. Under the laws of 12 December 2023, so-called volunteer formations may be formed within the National Guard structures on the model of those subordinated to the Ministry of Defence (MoD). They are to be used for “specific defence tasks during mobilisation, martial law, armed conflict, anti-terrorist operations, as well as the use of armed forces outside Russia.”<sup>9</sup> These units are being formed on the basis of a decision by the President of the Russian Federation, which allow Putin to maintain direct control over their use in overseas operations. Officially, the formation of the 1<sup>st</sup> Rosgvardia Volunteer Corps began in January 2024. Ultimately, it is to consist of three brigades (15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and the 17<sup>th</sup>, with 2,200 soldiers each), with the 17<sup>th</sup> to be an assault brigade and operate beyond Russia’s borders, the 16<sup>th</sup> to take part in combat operations alongside other volunteer National Guard units, and the 15<sup>th</sup>, on the other hand, a reserve brigade to train new volunteers.<sup>10</sup> The corps commander is most likely to be Anton “Lotos” Yelizarov. However, he is not subordinate to the around 3,000 Wagner operators associated with Prigozhin’s close associate Alexander “Ratibor” Kuznetsov, who were placed in the Chechen special unit “Akhmat”.<sup>11</sup> Although formally subordinate to the Rosgvardia, in mid-April 2024, the unit most likely came under the supervision of military structures, as indicated by its commander Gen. Apta Alaudinov’s assumption of the post of deputy head of the MoD’s Main Directorate of Military-Political Work.

The last part of the military component of the former Wagner Group is the so-called **Belarusian Contingent** of about 400 former Wagner fighters acting as instructors training the Belarusian ground forces, Spetsnaz, air force, territorial defence troops, as well as units subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (including the special unit “Typhoon” created in May 2023 for counter-insurgency operations). It is most likely to be under the command of Alyaksey “Brest” Biarhovin, a former soldier of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Independent Spetsnaz Brigade of the Internal Forces of Belarus, who has been fighting as a mercenary in Ukraine since 2015 and in Africa since 2018.

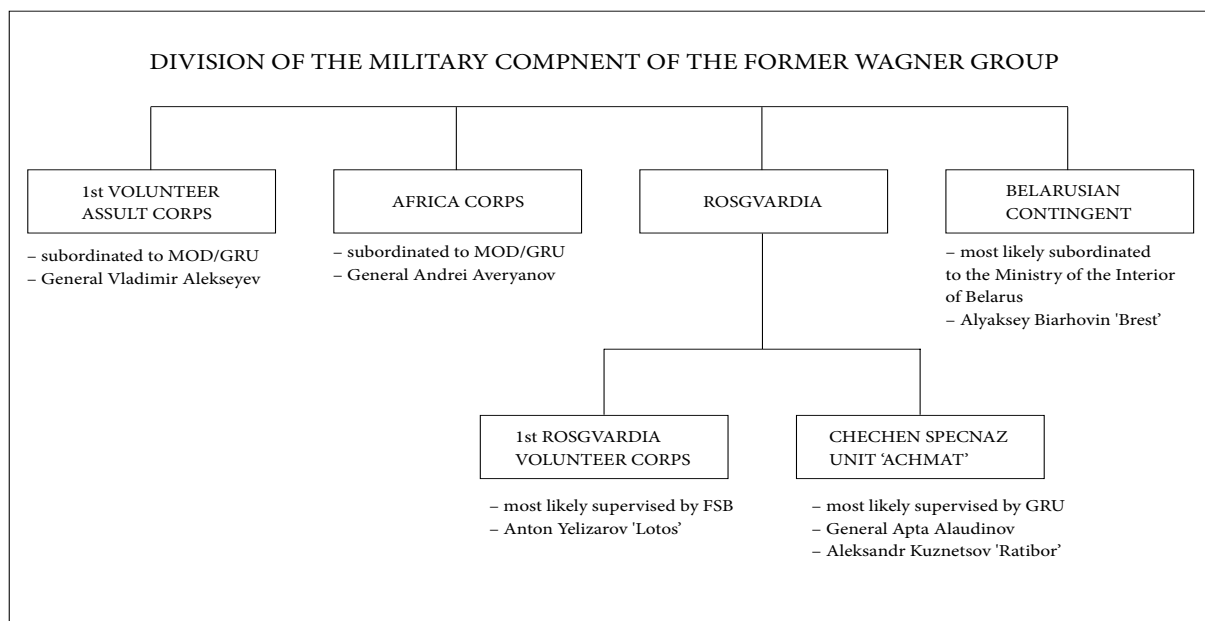
<sup>7</sup> Уловка “Редут” Как ГРУ создало фантомную ЧВК для вербовки тысяч россиян на войну в Украине, “Радио Свобода”, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/chvk-redut-skhemy-systema/32708135.html>.

<sup>8</sup> “ВЧК-ОГПУ” Telegram account, 8.01.2024, <https://t.me/vchkogpu/44974>.

<sup>9</sup> Госдума приняла законы, позволяющие Росгвардии иметь свои добровольческие формирования и наказывать за критику в их адрес, “Настоящее Время”, 12.12.2023, <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/rosvardiya/32727295.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Возвращение ЧВК Вагнер: Грозный вихрь снова над зоной СВО, “БОЕВОЙ КОНТЕКСТ”, 18.01.2024, <https://dzen.ru/a/ZajuKTEHMncqOYez>.

<sup>11</sup> Кадыров объявил о переходе трех тысяч экс-бойцов группы “Вагнер” в “Ахмат”, “RIA Novosti”, 05.04.2024, <https://ria.ru/20240406/kadyrov-1938159002.html>.



### CREATION OF THE AFRICA CORPS

Signals pointing to a plan to create a new armed structure to replace the WG appeared as early as July 2023 during the Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg. At the time, Defence Minister Gen. Sergei Shoigu communicated to representatives of African states to terminate their contracts with the WG and sign new ones with military companies controlled by the Russian defence ministry. According to information on the AC's official Telegram channel, the decision came immediately after the summit.<sup>12</sup>

Between August and September 2023, Deputy Defence Minister Gen. Yunus-bek Yevkurov visited a number of African countries (including Mali, Libya, Algeria, CAR, Niger, and Burkina Faso), during which he discussed the new terms of military cooperation with Russia (including counter-terrorism and the fight against paramilitary groups). In these talks, he was accompanied, among others, by Gen. Andrei Averyanov, commander of the GRU's Special Action Service (Centre 161), responsible for, among other things, diversion and sabotage activities (Unit 29155), recruitment of illegal agents (so-called illegals) and personnel of military companies (Unit 54654). He is considered to be the originator of the AC and, in all likelihood, in addition to nominally heading it, Minister Yevkurov, exercises supervision and control over this formation.<sup>13</sup>

The new name "Afrikanskiy Korpus", referring to the "Slavic Corps",<sup>14</sup> but also—like the Wagner Group—evoking neo-Nazi associations, appeared in the public space on 21 November 2023 with a "programmatic" publication in the *African Initiative*. Russian military sources quoted

<sup>12</sup> "Африканский Корпус" Telegram account, 20.12.2023, <https://t.me/KorpusAfrica/5>.

<sup>13</sup> J. Watling, O.V. Danylyuk, N. Reynolds, *The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022-24*, Royal United Services Institute, pp. 10, 20.

<sup>14</sup> The Slavic Corps was a Hong Kong-registered mercenary group made up of several Russian private military companies (mainly the Moran Security Group) that was first deployed to Syria in 2013 to protect oil production infrastructure. Among them were FSB and GRU veterans, including Dmitry "Wagner" Utkin, who was later tasked with commanding the mercenaries in Ukraine from which the WG was formed. The Slavic Corps was in turn led by Vadim Gusev and Yevgeny Sidorov. The structure was disbanded after documents exposing the presence of Russian mercenaries in Syria fell into the hands of Syrian jihadists. The leaders of the Slavic Corps were then arrested by the FSB and sentenced to three years in prison under Article 359 of the Criminal Code (mercenary activities), see S. Sukhankin, *Russian PMCs in the Syrian civil war: from Slavonic Corps to Wagner Group and beyond*, Jamestown Foundation, 18.12.2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-pmcs-in-the-syriancivil-war-from-slavonic-corps-to-wagner-group-and-beyond/>.

there indicated the goal of supporting African states in “resisting the neo-colonial influence of the West”, securing a “resource base” from them, and strengthening the African-Russian “partnership of equals”.<sup>15</sup> Increased arms exports were also among the stated objectives, as well as the announcement of infrastructure, humanitarian projects, especially anti-epidemic projects (in reference to Russian assistance during the Ebola epidemic in West Africa).

AC’s self-presentation on its official Telegram channel adds that the structure was created to “expand Russia’s military influence” in Africa, make good use of “windows of opportunity” resulting in the weakening of Western influence in the region, “consolidate” Russia’s diplomatic gains and support its “geopolitical interests”.<sup>16</sup> Characteristically, Russian interests, both political and economic (e.g., with regard to natural resources), will be emphasised more openly in AC’s communication than in WG’s.

A *Vedomosti* article from 22 December 2023, considered to be the second official declaration of the new formation, indicated that it was in the process of being located or prepared for operation in five countries: Libya, Mali, Burkina Faso, CAR, and Niger.<sup>17</sup> Minister Yevkurov was to be responsible for establishing the scope of cooperation with each of these country’s governments. The defence ministry source quoted indicated that other smaller structures resembling private military companies (PMCs), set up by other power structures and corporations, would also be operating in Africa.

Recruitment for the AC started in November/December 2023. Candidates were promised “service under the guidance of competent commanders with combat experience, payments in foreign currency, medical care and social benefits”.<sup>18</sup> A new feature of the personnel recruitment process is that active-duty Russian soldiers can also be seconded to the AC (with the commander’s approval), which has been—presumably as a consequence of numerous applications—specified that this does not apply to pre-contract *Rosgvardia* members or those currently fighting in Ukraine<sup>19</sup> (although rumours of such transfers circulated in spring 2024 among soldiers’ wives,<sup>20</sup> perhaps because going to Africa is seen as safer). In doing so, they retain not only their military ranks (at WG there were no military ranks at all, but functions within the five specialist groups) but also all the privileges associated with contract service. This is another indication that the AC is a *de facto* expeditionary part of the armed forces/military intelligence of the Russian Federation.

The formation of the AC is expected to be completed by the summer of 2024, with a declared target of 20,000–40,000 troops. The planned size of the AC appears to be significantly overestimated and will be difficult to achieve given the challenges of replenishing Russian personnel losses in Ukraine, but is in line with announcements of using it for “large-scale military operations”.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> M. Ivanov, *Routes of the African Corps. Why Russia is expanding its military presence in Africa*, “African Initiative”, 21.11.2023, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2023/11/routes-of-the-african-corps-why-russia-is-expanding-its-military-presence-in-africa/>.

<sup>16</sup> “Африканский Корпус” Telegram account, 20.12.2023, <https://t.me/KorpusAfrica/5>.

<sup>17</sup> И. Лакстыгал, Что известно об “Африканском корпусе” России, “Ведомости”, 22.12.2023, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2023/12/22/1012398-chto-izvestno-ob-afrikanskom-korpuse-rossii>.

<sup>18</sup> “Африканский Корпус” Telegram account, 20.12.2023, <https://t.me/KorpusAfrica/7>.

<sup>19</sup> *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, ISW, 20.12.2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-20-2023>

<sup>20</sup> “Remote Destinations: How the Wagner Group Recruits for African Operations”, Nordsint/Verstka Media, 4.04.2024, <https://nordsint.org/2024/04/04/remote-destinations-how-the-wagner-group-recruits-for-african-operations/>

<sup>21</sup> M. Le Cam, T. Eydoux, L. Savoye, E. Bellanger, *Au Burkina Faso, la première base militaire russe d’Africa Corps*, “Le Monde”, 6.03.2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2024/03/06/au-burkina-faso-la-premiere-base-militaire-russe-d-africa-corps\\_6220477\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2024/03/06/au-burkina-faso-la-premiere-base-militaire-russe-d-africa-corps_6220477_3212.html).

At the time of writing this report, the estimated size of the AC (taking into account WG resources) was probably already over 6,000, including about 2,000 in Mali, 1,600 in CAR, about 1,800 (with an increasing trend) in Libya, 100-300 in Burkina Faso, and 100–200 in Niger. It is unclear whether any soldiers remain in Sudan of the around 100–200 who were there when the civil war broke out in April 2023.

Roughly half of AC's personnel, especially the command staff, are former Wagner operatives with combat experience, who are the preferred candidates, probably also members of the Redut military company.<sup>22</sup>

In recruitment announcements, AC states that its recruitment point is in Krasnodar Krai,<sup>23</sup> which may indicate the use of the former Wagner base in Molkino located at the GRU's 10<sup>th</sup> Spetsnaz Brigade.

The salary offered by the AC is paid in cash in foreign currency (most likely U.S. dollars). The minimum amount for an ordinary soldier is RUB 110,000 (about \$1,200). The monetary allowance depends on rank, seniority, and the country of the contract, according to Government Decree No. 812 of 26.12.2005. In total, recruits can count on about RUB 240,000 (about \$2,500) per month. Although salaries in AC are comparable to those currently received by soldiers fighting in Ukraine, contracts in Africa are considered much safer than fighting on the Ukrainian front. What distinguishes AC from WG is the retention—in the case of contract soldiers serving in the Russian armed forces—of all benefits and guarantees (including military mortgage, service flat, rent payments, medical care).<sup>24</sup>

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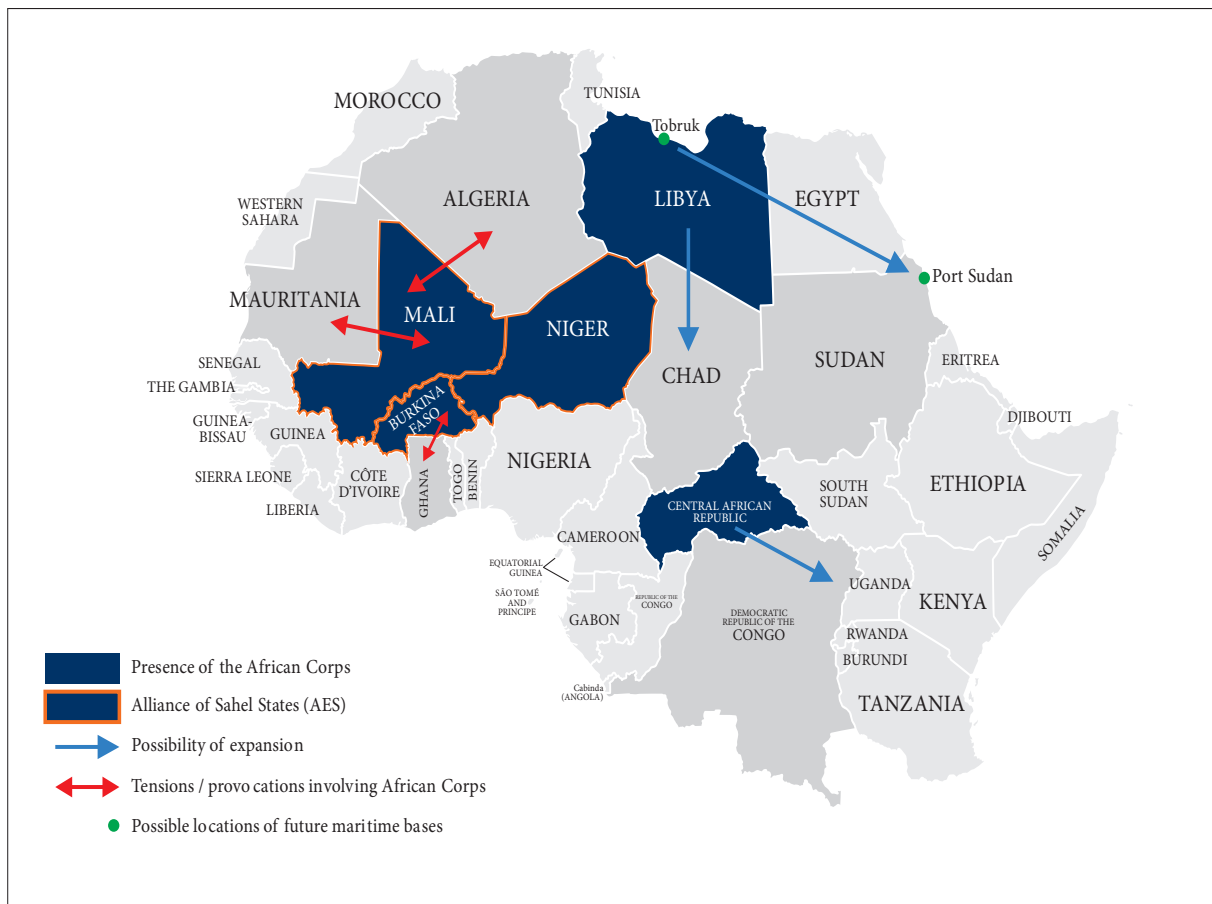
<sup>22</sup> *Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment*, ISW, 20.12.2023, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-december-20-2023>; F. Bryjka, *Not just Wagner: Russia Backing a Host of Semi-Private Military Companies*, "PISM Bulletin", no. 163, 10.11.2023.

<sup>23</sup> "Африканский Корпус" Telegram account, 25.12.2023, <https://t.me/KorpusAfrica/43>.

<sup>24</sup> "Африканский Корпус" Telegram account, 20.12.2023, <https://t.me/KorpusAfrica/9>.

## AREAS OF THE AFRICA CORPS’ ACTIVITIES

The most significant change on Russia’s part is the shift in focus, primarily towards where the activities of post-Wagnerian and newly created structures will be able to support Russia’s clear political priorities. Against this background, activities in the CAR have lost their privileged position. Similarly, sticking to one anti-government side of the war in Sudan appears unprofitable.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, the possible establishment of a centre of influence in Sub-Saharan Africa in Libya and support for the formation of an anti-Western political bloc in the French-speaking Sahel on the basis of cooperation with juntas are definitely gaining ground. The military presence, implemented for support on battlefronts as a security guarantor for friendly governments and as a form of realising geopolitical rivalries, will take different forms in each country. In will, however, as in the case of the WG, be linked to activity in the economic space and informational influence.



<sup>25</sup> *Russia pledges support for Sudanese military-led government*, “Sudan Tribune”, 29.04.2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article285033/>.

## ALLIANCE OF SAHEL STATES (MALI, BURKINA FASO, NIGER) —THE AFRICA CORPS' MOST PROMISING PARTNER

As of February 2023, Burkina Faso's ruling Col. Ibrahim Traore Burkina Faso and Mali's ruling Col. Assimi Goita Mali were discussing a proposal for a federation that Guinea could also join. In September 2023, two months after the coup led by Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani in Niger, the anti-French and, to varying degrees, pro-Russian military authorities from Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey formed the so-called Alliance of Sahel States (AES), referring to the historical commonality of the Liptako-Gourma area shared by the three states. There are indications of Russian support in the formation of the AES. Russian Academy of Sciences expert Grigory Lukyanov indicated that "of course the AES is being created not without coordination with Moscow".<sup>26</sup> The bloc has undertaken a number of joint policies, including the formation of a defence alliance (a share in its creation is claimed by the Russian defence ministry<sup>27</sup>) and the establishment—on paper for the time being—of a joint anti-terrorism force. The AES countries pledged to cooperate in controlling the information space, an extension of the policy of removing French media and later extinguishing local critical voices. As an example of this, consider the subsequent bans on Starlink terminals by Mali and Burkina Faso.<sup>28</sup>

In January 2024, the AES states announced in a joint statement that they were leaving the regional organisation ECOWAS. The latter has found itself in a crisis of credibility, accused of being too beholden to Western influence, for example, in imposing sanctions and seeking to intervene against pro-Russian putschists, but no longer in the event of abuses of power by pro-Western leaders. Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are also signalling an exit from the regional monetary union and abandoning the CFA franc, a symbol of French influence over the economies of their former colonies. A visit by representatives of the Russian banking sector to Burkina Faso in January 2024 included a discussion of plans for a new currency for the AES bloc.<sup>29</sup> It is likely that Russia will want to print it.<sup>30</sup> This trajectory highlights the desire to transform an *ad hoc* alliance into a permanent regional structure, an alternative to the pro-Western ECOWAS, capable of attracting more states (e.g., Chad) and creating, according to Ivan Loshkariev, "an arc of [Russia-] friendly states from the Gulf of Guinea to the Atlantic".<sup>31</sup>

The relationship with Russia is becoming both a necessity for AES governments, triggered by the need for its support in the fight against jihadist groups after the departure of French, EU, and UN forces, and a natural choice. For them, it is a means of realising the carrying demand for diversification of partnerships, a confirmation of the validity of the ideological proposals of anti-democratic sovereigntism with elements of Pan-Africanism, jointly referred to by, for example, Alexander Dugin and Beninese activist Kemi Seba. For Russia, too, their success would confirm the narrative of the anti-democratic changes in these countries as an "African

<sup>26</sup> И. Лакстыгал, *Что...*

<sup>27</sup> M. Ivanov, *Routes of the African Corps ...*

<sup>28</sup> *Communiqué sur la commercialisation irrégulière par Starlink de terminaux permettant de se connecter au réseau Internet, par voie au Burkina Faso*, Autorité de Régulation des Communications Electroniques et des Postes (ARCEP), 20.03.2024.

<sup>29</sup> *A high-ranking Russian delegation has arrived to Burkina Faso*, "African Initiative", 26.01.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/01/a-high-ranking-russian-delegation-has-arrived-burkina-faso/>.

<sup>30</sup> Since 2016, Libyan dinar banknotes have been printed in Russia and used in the part of the country controlled by Gen. Haftar's forces, which have established a parallel central bank based in Al-Bayda.

<sup>31</sup> И. Лошкарев, "Сделать в Сахеле дугу дружественных стран, и завязать их в союз, было бы огромной зоной успеха!", "African Initiative", 20.10.2023, <https://afrinz.ru/2023/10/sdelat-v-sahele-dugu-druzhestvennyh-stran-i-zavyazat-ih-v-soyuz-eto-bylo-by-ogromnoj-zonoj-uspeha/>.



Spring”,<sup>32</sup> set in contrast to the “Arab Spring”, which according to Alexander Malkovich<sup>33</sup> was the result of a Western conspiracy to destabilise the region, allegedly planned to be later extended south of the Sahara as part of the “lowering of the belt of instability”.<sup>34</sup> As a consequence, Russia is given ample opportunities to capitalise on the processes taking place in these states on their own (e.g., public support, especially in the capitals, for the juntas’ policies), as well as to persuade these states to take decisions that will affect the West, or to create the impression of such influence. The Russians might have inspired them, for example, to dismiss the United Nations human rights representatives in Mali and Burkina Faso in early 2023 (their activities were damaging the image of the juntas), which preceded demands for the withdrawal of the MINUSMA mission.

In turn, U.S. pressure on the Niger authorities not to tie themselves to Russia and Iran became the pretext for the denunciation of the 2012 Niger-U.S. military agreement, again creating the impression of the exceptional value of an alliance with Russia. This was confirmed by the unambiguous tone of Gen. Tchiani’s congratulatory letter to Putin after his re-election a few days later, in which the latter congratulated him on his “brilliant” victory. In each of these cases, the coupling of Russian policies and juntas’ interests from the AES area offered incomparably greater political advantages than could be obtained in the CAR.

#### MALI—EASY ADAPTATION

In Mali, where Wagner forces were present as of December 2021, the actual transit to the AC model had already begun under Prigozhin. In the Russian mercenary forces in the country, a relatively high proportion of Russian Ministry of Defence personnel was characteristic.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the later-enforced process of transitioning WG fighters to contracts with the ministry did not encounter any major difficulties, especially as the role of Commander-in-Chief of the force was likely to be retained by the incumbent Ivan Maslov.

Although the original mission of the Russians was to fight extremists from the Al Qaeda-linked coalition Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) and from the Islamic State’s Sahel Province (ISSP), the opportunity to support the authorities against a less threatening opponent opened up from mid-2023. At that time, separatists from the north of the country, mainly Tuareg, under the banner of the *Cadre stratégique permanent* (CSP-PSD) coalition, came out openly against the Malian state. In the autumn of 2023 Maslov, who, after Prigozhin’s death, took up residence in the Russian embassy in Bamako together

<sup>32</sup> “Надо искать перспективных молодежных лидеров из Африки”. Интервью председателя Африканского клуба МГИМО, “African Initiative”, 26.10.2023, <https://afrinz.ru/2023/10/nado-iskat-perspektivnyh-molodezhnyh-liderov-iz-afriki-intervyu-predsdatelya-afrikanskogo-kluba-mgimo/>.

<sup>33</sup> From 2019 to 2021, he headed the Foundation for the Protection of National Values (FZNC), which is one element of Prigozhin’s propaganda network in Africa. In 2021, the US imposed sanctions on the FZNC and its affiliated Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC). The foundation campaigned in support of Maria Butina, who was arrested in 2018 in the US for espionage and became an FZNC ‘expert’ after her release. Two associates of the foundation were arrested in Libya in 2019 for interfering in the political process there. Since 2022, Malkievich has been involved in Russia’s propaganda activities related to the war in Ukraine, see more widely: *Report on The Malkievich Propaganda Machine the Wagner-Allied Network in Ukraine*, ‘Reporters Without Borders’, 20.04.2023, [https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/04/The%20Malkevitch%20Propaganda%20Machine\\_EN.pdf](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/04/The%20Malkevitch%20Propaganda%20Machine_EN.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> *Dark story of “colour revolutions” in Africa*, by Alexander Malkevich, African Discussion Club, The Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC), 22.08.2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20230328183101/https://en.fznc.ru/2019/08/22/dark-story-of-color-revolutions-in-africa-by-alexander-malkevich/>.

<sup>35</sup> J.A. Lechner, *Is Africa Corps a Rebranded Wagner Group?*, “Foreign Policy”, 7.02.2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/02/07/africa-corps-wagner-group-russia-africa-burkina-faso/>.

with other former WG leaders and GRU representatives,<sup>36</sup> directed an offensive on Kidal, a bastion of Tuareg separatists for years beyond the reach of the Bamako-based authorities. His former WG people were allowed to preserve Wagner symbolism and traditions. In addition to the Russians, the 400-km raid north involved Malian troops, Tuareg loyalists (militia led by El Hadj Ag Gamou, the Imghad Tuareg Self-Defence Group and Allies, GATIA), and small missions from Burkina Faso and Niger at the staff level<sup>37</sup> and air support.<sup>38</sup> Turkish drones equipped by the Malian army also provided air support. The asset the Russians brought to this operation, which will go down in the AC's account, was their experience in coordinating offensives.<sup>39</sup>



AC patrolling Mali-Mauritania border in April 2024, source: WG propaganda video screenshot, [https://t.me/wagner\\_group2022/7819](https://t.me/wagner_group2022/7819)

The seizure of Kidal sparked patriotic enthusiasm in Bamako, as it represented—despite the jihadists' parallel advances—a symbolic renewal of the Malian state's control over its own territory. In its name, Ag Gamou became governor of Kidal province. The offensive made it possible to attribute effectiveness to the new post-Prigozhin structure; the first footage of the occupied Kidal, published by Tuareg activists hostile to Russia, shows mostly armed whites (Russians) greeted by the non-Tuareg population with Malian flags.<sup>40</sup> This success gave the pretext to declare—a week later—the creation of AC.<sup>41</sup> The victory also politically strengthened

<sup>36</sup> B. Roger, M. Olivier, *Investigation: How Putin is taking control of Wagner in Africa*, "The Africa Report", 2.02.2024, <https://www.theafricareport.com/331580/investigation-how-putin-is-taking-control-of-wagner-in-africa/>.

<sup>37</sup> L. Viallet, *Une victoire sanglante et fragile : comment Kidal a été prise par Wagner*, "Contrepoints", 15.11.2023, <https://www.contrepoints.org/2023/11/15/467072-une-victoire-sanglante-et-fragile-comment-kidal-a-ete-prise-par-wagner>.

<sup>38</sup> W. Nasr, *Niger: The Inevitable Revocation*, "IntelBrief", The Soufan Center, 22.03.2024, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2024-march-22/>.

<sup>39</sup> J.-H. Jezequel, *Military Rule and Russian Mercenaries in the Sahel*, International Crisis Group, 1.03.2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/military-rule-and-russian-mercenaries-sahel>

<sup>40</sup> "Rhissa Ag" Twitter (X) account, 14.11.2023, <https://twitter.com/AgAnchawadje/status/1724500100645351904>.

<sup>41</sup> "Африканский корпус" ВС России объявил о наборе специалистов, "African Initiative", 20.12.2023, <https://afrinz.ru/2023/12/afrikanskij-korpus-vs-rossii-obyavil-o-nabore-speczialistov/>.

the ruling junta, which gained confirmation of the rightness of the expulsion of French and UN forces, accused by it (and in the Russian narrative) of favouring separatists and jihadists. It also benefited the military governments of Burkina Faso and Niger, and thus the AES, which issued almost identical congratulatory notes on the “liberation” of Kidal. At the same time, the operation also gave a clear signal that WG’s legacy would not be wasted. The footage of the hoisting of WG’s black flag, which hung over the Kidal fort, aroused enthusiasm in online channels close to Prigozhin’s former network. In their eyes, it gave the lie to statements that “Wagner is a thing of the past”, such as those issued by PMC Redut when it announced its own recruitment for African missions in August.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the “old” WG proudly referred<sup>43</sup> to texts from Western media describing, on the basis of satellite images from February 2024, the expansion of its base at the Modibo Keita airport in Bamako.<sup>44</sup> Contrary to experts’ expectations, instead of disappearing, its activity has increased, which should be attributed to the successful finding of a common *modus operandi* with (or within) the AC. It also benefits the junta by allowing it to maintain, to some extent, its ability to deny Russian state interference. It will therefore come as no surprise that since February this year, in addition to the recruitment by AC, those willing to go to Africa have been sought again under WG’s own banner. The recruiters for the latter, identified by Nordsint and Verstka Media, are veterans of WG’s operations in Sudan and Syria.<sup>45</sup>

#### BURKINA FASO—AFRICA CORPS’ FIRST SOLO MISSION

The first country to accept an AC mission *sensu stricto* as a result of a bilateral agreement with Russia was Burkina Faso. Paradoxically, from the beginning of his rule, the leader of the junta there, Col. Ibrahim Traore, was not enthusiastic about inviting foreign troops despite the apparent pro-Russian sympathies in Ouagadougou. He preferred, to support his own army against extremist groups, to develop a paramilitary auxiliary unit recruited from volunteer civilians of the so-called Volunteers for the Defence of the Homeland (VDP). He declared that “our Wagner is the VDP”.<sup>46</sup> However, he changed his mind after the attempted coup of September 2023, which threatened his power, and also under the influence of unfulfilled expectations about the effectiveness of the VDP (extremists also stepped up attacks on civilians suspected of collaborating with the structure).

In November 2023, the first group of about 20 Russian instructors from the RSB Group<sup>47</sup> arrived in the country and, among other things, were to assist in the ousting of some 3,000 extremists from the local Ansarol Islam group (allied to the JNIM coalition) from the area around the town of Djibo.<sup>48</sup> This would probably be the first instance of Russian participation in a combat operation against jihadists in Burkina Faso, and could serve as the founding myth of AC in the country.<sup>49</sup> The instructors also prepared the ground for the arrival of an already

<sup>42</sup> P. Sauer, *How Russia is recruiting Wagner fighters to continue war in Ukraine*, “The Guardian”, 9.11.2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/09/how-russia-recruiting-wagner-fighters-continue-war-ukraine>

<sup>43</sup> <https://t.me/wagnernew/14194>.

<sup>44</sup> S. Doak, *Russian forces expand base in Mali after death of Wagner Group leader Yevgeny Prigozhin*, “Sky News”, 28.02.2024, <https://news.sky.com/story/russian-forces-expand-base-in-mali-after-death-of-wagner-group-leader-yevgeny-prigozhin-13082977>.

<sup>45</sup> “Remote Destinations...”

<sup>46</sup> *Burkina Faso’s Traoré denies diplomatic split with Paris*, “France24”, 04.02.2023, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20230204-burkina-junta-leader-not-severed-ties-with-paris-denies-wagner-presence>.

<sup>47</sup> И. Лакстыгал, *Что...*

<sup>48</sup> *Burkina Faso Army Recaptures all Population Centres North of Djibo*, “African Initiative”, 15.12.2023, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2023/12/burkina-faso-army-recaptures-all-population-centres-north-of-djibo/>.

<sup>49</sup> *Burkina Faso: jihadist attack in the north, against the town of Djibo*, “Africanews”, 28.11.2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/11/28/burkina-faso-jihadist-attack-in-the-north-against-the-town-of-djibo/>

competent contingent of around 100 Russian fighters on 24 January 2024 (with another 200 to be announced). According to a text on the African Initiative Telegram, which was the first (before the official AC channel) to publish photos of the offloading, the mission is primarily to protect the Ouagadougou-Bamako road threatened by extremists and “French-backed” bandits.<sup>50</sup> It is also intended to help ensure the security of Col. Traore, which replicates the model previously used by WG in CAR under the banner of the Sewa Security Services. However, it can be assumed that they will, as in Mali, take part in supporting the army on the frontline. The Loubila installation near Ouagadougou is considered to be the first African AC base. Following the logic of “replacing” WG with AC, one would expect that in a country with no previous history of a WG force presence, only the AC network would be built, serving as a “display window” for the new structure. This is also suggested by the opening of the Russian embassy and a Russian House in the Burkina Faso capital in December 2023.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, in the recruitment channels of the “old” WG, again looking for volunteers for African missions, there have been suggestions that the Wagner operators are planning a presence in this country as well.<sup>52</sup> If this were to happen, it would confirm the trend of combining the capabilities of the two structures rather than the consistent elimination of WG in favour of AC.



*Arrival of the AC contingent into Burkina Faso in January 2024* Source: <https://t.me/africaninitiative/1762>

<sup>50</sup> “African Initiative“ Telegram account, 24.02.2024, <https://t.me/africaninitiative/1753>.

<sup>51</sup> *Burkina: Russia reopens its embassy after 31 years of closure*, “Africanews”, 29.12.2023, <https://www.africanews.com/2023/12/29/burkina-russia-reopens-its-embassy-after-31-years-of-closure/>.

<sup>52</sup> “WAGNER GROUP” Telegram account, 4.04.2024, <https://t.me/wagnernew/14942>.

## CAR—CONTINUING AND SEEKING ATTENTION

The closest thing to preserving the former status of Prigozhin’s structures is the CAR. Unlike other countries, as recently as May 2024, soldiers there were not required to sign new contracts as a condition for continuing.<sup>53</sup> The authorities there also declared—more clearly than elsewhere—a commitment to familiar personnel. The influential Livestock Minister Hassan Bouba, the *de facto* liaison officer between WG and rebel groups (who enabled the enlistment of local fighters to Wagner, the so-called “black Russians”), paid tribute to Prigozhin in Saint Petersburg at his funeral on 27 August 2023. In his entry in the book of condolences, Bouba referred to their long-standing close cooperation and trust.<sup>54</sup> Shortly afterwards, advisor to the President of the CAR, Fidèle Gouandjika, posed in a “Je Suis Wagner” T-shirt during an interview with CNN.<sup>55</sup> The Wagner Monument in Bangui remained the site of official celebrations.

CAR’s President Faustin-Archange Touadéra made a direct appeal to Russia to continue working with its existing, locally known representatives. At a meeting with Averyanov, Yevkurov and Konstantin Mirzayants (commander of PMC Redut) on 2 September 2023, he demanded assurances that his partner in the CAR would remain Dmirtiy Sytyi, who had built a career there from translator and assistant, through commanding influence operations and developing business operations within the Prigozhin empire. After Prigozhin’s rebellion, Sytyi appeared in media outlets close to the WG chief, for example, Afrique Media TV<sup>56</sup>, declaring loyalty to him and assured that Prigozhin would continue to lead the operations in the CAR. Although Sytyi disappeared from CAR for a while after Prigozhin’s death, he returned to the country in February 2024 and continues to oversee Russia’s civilian and business projects in the country.

Although the GRU is primarily responsible for the main sphere of AC’s activities related to the provision of military services, in the CAR, the supervision of cooperation with local security forces was taken over in August 2023 by an officer of the SVR, Col. Denis Pavlov.<sup>57</sup> His arrival coincided with the departure from the country of Vitaly Perfilyev, a former soldier in the French Foreign Legion, who also served as security advisor to President Touadéra, and commander of the military component of the WG in the CAR. This was the most serious visible organisational change to date (a new head of military structures was also due to arrive in the country, without revealing himself publicly). Presumably in order to reassure partners in the CAR that it would not disrupt the continuity of relations, in December 2023 the first coordinator of the WG’s activities in the country and Perfilyev’s predecessor as Touadéra’s advisor and Sytyi’s mentor, Valery Zakharov,<sup>58</sup> a former FSB officer, appeared there after a two-year absence.

<sup>53</sup> J.A. Lechner, *Is Africa Corps ...*; J.A. Lechner, interview, May 2014.

<sup>54</sup> E. Yemale, *Centrafrique : le criminel et fugitif de la CPS Hassan Bouba à Saint - Pétersbourg pour rendre un hommage au “ Bourreau des Centrafricains “ Evgueni Prigojine*, “Le Tsunami”, 28.08.2023, <https://letsunami.net/centrafrique-le-criminel-et-fugitif-hassan-bouba-a-saint-petersbourg-pour-rendre-un-hommage-au-bourreau-des-centrafricains-evgueni-prigojine/>.

<sup>55</sup> *CNN Investigates Wagner’s future in Africa*, “CNN”, 19.09.2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2023/09/19/exp-prigozhin-russia-wagner-putin-central-african-republic-africa-clarissa-ward-fst-091912pseg1-cnni-world.cnn>.

<sup>56</sup> “Casus Belli” Twitter (X) account, 23.07.2023, <https://twitter.com/casusbellii/status/1683196080047964161>.

<sup>57</sup> M. Krutov, S. Dobrynin, M. Zivanovic, *With Wagner In Disarray, A Russian Diplomat With Spy Links Surfaces In The Central African Republic*, “Radio Free Europe”, 7.12.2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/wagner-russia-central-african-republic-investigation/32719917.html>.

<sup>58</sup> *Wagner’s Valery Zakharov makes discrete return to Bangui*, “Africa Intelligence”, 19.12.2023, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-africa/2023/12/19/wagner-s-valery-zakharov-makes-discreet-return-to-bangui,110130676-art>.

Sensing the imminent loss of their privileged position due to the redirection of the AC's attention to the Sahel, the CAR authorities themselves are trying to “reminisce” and argue for the value of a continued Russian military presence. It is above all the CAR authorities themselves who are seeking the establishment of a permanent Russian base, capable of housing up to 10,000 troops, in Berengo, the current working base of the WG (although other locations, such as the outskirts of Bangui, are also mentioned). This would guarantee them protection against the resurgence of armed groups, and the continuation of a political process whereby disarming rebels surrender their weapons to the Russians.<sup>59</sup> Following the establishment of the AC, the offer to locate the base was repeated by Gouandjika. In an interview with *African Initiative*, he explicitly pushed the idea, stressing that Russia could obtain more mining concessions,<sup>60</sup> that his country “trusts Russia a thousand percent”, and warned that if abandoned, it would be “swallowed” by the West.<sup>61</sup> This was an allusion to attempts by the U.S. to install its own PMC (Bancroft) in the CAR as competition for WG, which would help President Touadéra loosen the Russian “grip”. It is likely that it was due to Bancroft's presence—minimal in fact—that Sytyi<sup>62</sup> returned to the country in his role of overseeing the anti-U.S. protests in the CAR.<sup>63</sup> Although the plans for Bancroft apparently failed, the spectacular demonstrations, accompanied by declarations of attachment to Russia, have become a tool for the CAR authorities to “remind” Russia of the attention it should pay to the CAR. In practice, a division into two parallel post-Wagner groups is being drawn in the CAR: the old structure under the leadership of Sytyi, maintaining especially business resources, and the new one, which is an organic part of the AC.

## LIBYA—AN EMERGING CENTRE

Although in the initial declarations, Libya was indicated as the centre and starting point for AC expansion, in the first months of the formation's activity it did not yet fulfil such a function. After Prigozhin's death, the activity of Russian mercenaries in the country—those who had signed new contracts with the ministry—present, among others, in Sirte (Al-Ghardabiya airbase and port) and Al-Khadim near Benghazi in the east of the country, and in the Al-Jufra and Brak Al-Shati bases in the south. At the former in December 2023, WG lost an Il-76 transport aircraft,<sup>64</sup> further weakening its mobility. Mercenary activities were also affected by changes in Russian political calculations. The strategy calculated for the complete victory of Gen. Khalifa Haftar in the civil war was abandoned, not least because of doubts the Russians had built up about his ability to govern.

Although the intensity of relations has declined in recent years (Putin even refused to meet with Haftar in 2020), the breakthrough for their improvement was the bilateral talks in September 2023. A new military agreement was then worked out.<sup>65</sup> According to Bloomberg's sources, this was to include the stationing of Russian ships in the port of Tobruk, renewing

<sup>59</sup> *Leaders of Armed Groups in CAR Urged to Surrender to Russian Specialists*, “African Initiative”, 19.12.2023, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2023/12/leaders-of-armed-groups-in-car-urged-to-surrender-to-russian-specialists>.

<sup>60</sup> А.Замараева, “Мы доверяем России на тысячу процентов”. *Интервью советника президента ЦАР*, “African Initiative”, 6.03.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/2024/03/ny-doveryaem-rossii-na-tysyachu-procentov-intervyu-sovetnika-prezidenta-czar/>.

<sup>61</sup> *Советник президента ЦАР: страна готова принять российскую военную базу*, “African Initiative”, 16.01.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/2024/01/sovetnik-prezidenta-czar-strana-gotova-prinyat-rossijskuyu-voennuyu-bazu/>.

<sup>62</sup> “Stop Wagner” Twitter (X) account, 1.02.2024, <https://x.com/stopwagnergroup/status/1763503456717869397>.

<sup>63</sup> He was also seen in May 2024 laying down arms by rebels from former anti-balaka groups in Kuango, see Jack Margolin's Twitter (X) account, 2.05.2024, [https://twitter.com/Jack\\_Mrgln/status/1786097117049782475](https://twitter.com/Jack_Mrgln/status/1786097117049782475).

<sup>64</sup> *На авиабазе в Ливии уничтожен Ил-76 - возможно, российский*, “Radio Svoboda”, 17.12.2023, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/na-aviabaze-v-livii-unichtozhen-il-76---vozmozhno-rossiyskiy/32734193.html>.

<sup>65</sup> *Putin's Move to Secure Libya Bases Is New Regional Worry for US*, “Bloomberg”, 5.11.2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-11-05/putin-s-move-to-secure-libya-bases-is-new-regional-worry-for-us>.

the prospect of achieving the main objective in Libya—obtaining a permanent naval military base, the second in the Mediterranean after Syria’s Tartus. It is likely that the construction of its infrastructure has already begun. Haftar, in turn, was to seek air defence systems and training for pilots and special forces.<sup>66</sup>

At the beginning of 2024, Russian military personnel in Libya were estimated at 800,<sup>67</sup> and showed no visible activity. However, according to an investigation by the French project All Eyes on Wagner, Russian investigative journalists from the Sistiemia project, Verstka Media and Radio Svoboda, there was an intensive redeployment of people linked to the AC, Spetsnaz, and GRU over the next few months. As a result, in late April and early May, their number may have reached 1,800.<sup>68</sup> However, contrary to AC’s own rule, such a significant strengthening of Russian forces’ capabilities in Libya was not reported on a regular basis by AC-affiliated news channels. These reacted later and exclusively by repeating already available information<sup>69</sup> about April’s large delivery—estimated at 6,000 tonnes of equipment—of Russian military supplies by sea from Syria’s Tartus to the port of Tobruk.<sup>70</sup> Journalists tracking troop movements at the time identified the ships *Ivan Gren* and *Alexander Otrakovsky*, and the frigate *Mercury*. According to sources from the Libyan website Fawasel Media, which was the first to publish footage of the unloading, this was the fifth such transport to arrive at the port of Tobruk in recent weeks.<sup>71</sup>

Some of the newly arrived AC forces in Libya have been redeployed to Niger. Others, which include Syrian and Libyan mercenaries, have been deployed with military equipment to at least 10 locations in eastern Libya controlled by Gen. Haftar’s LNA (including Kharruba/Al Khadim, Jufra, Tobruk, Ajdabiya, Waddan, and El Marj). A new training camp used by AC to train local partners has also been established near Benghazi. The Libyan AC contingent is believed to be commanded by four Russians previously in charge of operations in Syria.<sup>72</sup>

The increase in the number of forces is accompanied by a new political approach to Libya. By intensifying contacts with the government in Tripoli<sup>73</sup> Russia would like to bring about a reconciliation of the feuding administrations and a *de facto* reunification of Libya. Not coincidentally, as recently as March, the *African Initiative* website featured publications exploring Russia’s prospects of joint projects harnessing the Haftar and Tripoli government administrations, for example, obtaining a share in the reconstruction and expansion of the Libyan railways with branches to Niger and Chad.<sup>74</sup> Announcements of political mediation

<sup>66</sup> *Putin’s Move...*

<sup>67</sup> A. McGregor, *Russian Military Intelligence Takes Over Wagner Operations in Libya*, Jamestown Foundation, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 21 Issue: 38, <https://jamestown.org/analyst/andrew-mcgregor/>.

<sup>68</sup> *Objectif Méditerranée pour African Corps*, “All Eyes on Wagner”, 10.05.2024, <https://alleyesonwagner.org/2024/05/10/objectif-mediterranee-pour-african-corps/>; “Готовится большая заварушка”. *Военная экспансия России в Ливии*, “RadioSvoboda”, 10.05.2024, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/gotovitsya-boljshaya-zavarushka-voennaya-ekspansiya-rossii-v-livii/32939757.html>.

<sup>69</sup> “Арабская Африка” Telegram account, 13.04.2024, <https://t.me/arabicafrica/13743>.

<sup>70</sup> “Russian Forces Spotter” Twitter (X) account, 12.04.2024, <https://twitter.com/TiaFarris10/status/1778723773048328232>.

<sup>71</sup> “Fawasel Media” Twitter (X) account, 14.04.2024, <https://x.com/fawaselmedia/status/1779532119053586496>.

<sup>72</sup> *Objectif Méditerranée...*

<sup>73</sup> *With no embassy in Tripoli, Russian diplomats set up shop at Radisson hotel*, “Africa Intelligence”, 13.02.2024, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2024/02/13/with-no-embassy-in-tripoli-russian-diplomats-set-up-shop-at-radisson-hotel%2C110158850-art?cxt=PUB&utm\\_source=AIA&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=AUTO\\_EDIT\\_SOM\\_PROS&did=109733649](https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2024/02/13/with-no-embassy-in-tripoli-russian-diplomats-set-up-shop-at-radisson-hotel%2C110158850-art?cxt=PUB&utm_source=AIA&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=AUTO_EDIT_SOM_PROS&did=109733649).

<sup>74</sup> M. Ilyin, *Trans-Sahara Corridor. Will Russian Railways return to Libya?*, “African Initiative”, 19.03.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/03/trans-sahara-corridor-will-russian-railways-return-to-libya/>.

were directly made in Libya in May by the Russian envoy to the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov.<sup>75</sup>

Although at the time of the announcement and later formation of the AC there were no signs indicating the existence of an actual centre of operations for this formation in Libya, such as a permanent outpost of its command, it is possible that the country, or at least the part of it controlled by Haftar, will soon achieve this status. Undoubtedly, the importance of Libya (especially the Al Jufra airbase) as a logistical hub is growing.<sup>76</sup> It is likely to be able to house reserve AC forces relocated to Sub-Saharan states if needed (currently transport flights are mostly from Russia via Syria). However, coordination with the UAE, Haftar's main patron, which may at some stage begin to assess Russia as a competitor, would be required to achieve these results. There would also need to be real progress in unifying (or at least normalising) Libya, something that Western partners have not been able to achieve. This could be hampered by significant opposition to Russia's role motivated by religious or ethnic considerations. One such radical opponent of it is the Grand Mufti of Libya, Dr. Sadiq Al-Ghariani, who has called for the killing of "atheist" AC fighters, whose arrival in Libya he compared to the French invasion of Algeria and the British conquest of Egypt. At the same time, the proximity of the conflict in Mali is becoming an important context. In February 2024, there were unconfirmed reports of the abduction of several WG/AC fighters by Libyan Tuaregs in retaliation for the occupation of Kidal.<sup>77</sup>

#### **NIGER—AFRICA CORPS SOLIDIFIES JUNTA'S ANTI-WESTERN TURN**

Niger, mentioned from the beginning of AC's communications as the country of its future operations, had been in talks with representatives of the Russian defence ministry since late 2023. Following meetings on 4 December in Niamey, when junta chief Gen. Tchiani and his defence minister, Salifou Modi, received Yevkurov, among others, and on 15 January in Moscow, the parties signed military cooperation agreements.<sup>78</sup> Although the ruling junta—whose leadership is more collective in nature than in Mali and Burkina Faso—was not unanimous on the idea of inviting the Russian military, the prospect of an AC mission arriving was obvious given the political trajectory the Nigerian authorities were on. According to the usually well-informed Rybar military blogger, it was delayed because of the situation in Syria (seizure of WG resources) and Russia's Belgorod.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, the prospect became imminent with the Niger junta's termination on 17 March 2023 of a military agreement with the U.S., under which the Americans maintained a drone base near Agadez. The shift came after U.S. pressure for Niger not to tie up with Russia and Iran.<sup>80</sup> Finally, on the night of 10 April, a Russian transport plane landed at Niamey airport with the first cargo load of military equipment, allegedly with a notable anti-aircraft component, and 100 military "instructors".

<sup>75</sup> Twitter (X) account of the Embassy of the Russian Federation in Libya, 9.05.2024, <https://twitter.com/LibyaRussian/status/1788331425281790140>.

<sup>76</sup> J.M. Winer, *In Libya, UN failure and Russian influence require updated US policy*, Middle East Institute, 25.04.2024, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/libya-un-failure-and-russian-influence-require-updated-us-policy>.

<sup>77</sup> *Tuareg-Wagner clash in Libya?*, "Africa Confidential", vol. 65, no. 5, 29.02.2024, [https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/14863/Tuareg-Wagner\\_clash\\_in\\_Libya](https://www.africa-confidential.com/article-preview/id/14863/Tuareg-Wagner_clash_in_Libya).

<sup>78</sup> *Russia and Niger agree to develop military ties, Moscow says*, "Reuters", 16.01.2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/russia-niger-agree-develop-military-ties-moscow-says-2024-01-16/>.

<sup>79</sup> "Rybar" account on Telegram, 11.04.2024, <https://t.me/rybar/59081>.

<sup>80</sup> J. Czerep, *Niger Ends Military Cooperation with the U.S.*, "PISM Spotlight", no. 22/2024, 21 March 2024, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).





Arrival of the AC “instructors” into Niger in April 2024.

Source: ORTN-Télé Sahel video screenshot, [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3398992190394237](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3398992190394237)

Although the anti-aircraft equipment itself is not shown in the material, the need to operate it provides the justification for the ‘trainers’—the *de facto* nucleus of the AC mission—to remain in the country. Significantly, this type of weaponry does not meet current Nigerian needs on the counter-extremism front. Rather, it could have a use as a form of pressure on the Americans to physically abandon the U.S. Base-201 in Agadez as it provides a theoretical opportunity to shoot down U.S. drones. The AC’s arrival was accompanied by increased agitation for anti-U.S. protests. It also signals Russian forces’ readiness to take over its infrastructure, just as WG occupied bases in Mali that were abandoned by French *Barkhane* forces. This would correspond to AC’s primary objectives, mainly the geopolitical rivalry with Western countries. From the point of view of the Niger authorities, the equipment could also serve as a form of protection for the junta against a possible split and, for example, the use of aviation by a faction that would want to overthrow Gen. Tchiani’s authority.

The Il-76 aircraft was accompanied by crews from Niger’s public television channel *ORTN-Télé Sahel*, and *Ria Novosti* war correspondent Alexander Zakharchenko. The former’s material stressed the importance of Niger “regaining full control” of its airspace.<sup>81</sup> In turn, the authors of the Russian report stressed that AC’s arrival challenges NATO (U.S. and German forces, among others, were stationed at the same airport), and takes place in the context of a competition for influence. The reporter stressed that from Agadez the Americans “control half of the African continent”.<sup>82</sup> Both reports featured AC soldiers as interviewees, obscuring their faces in a manner characteristic of WG. In the weeks that followed, further shipments arrived: the first according to the junta was undisclosed, and the second, dated 4 May, involved humanitarian and military aid, including an increase in military personnel.<sup>83</sup>

<sup>81</sup> “RTN”, Facebook account, 11.04.2024, [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3398992190394237](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3398992190394237).

<sup>82</sup> *Российские специалисты прибыли в Нигер*, “Ria Novosti” Facebook account, 12.04.2024, [www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2393229437546780](https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=2393229437546780).

<sup>83</sup> Twitter (X) account of the Nigerien junta, Conseil National pour la Sauvegarde de la Patrie, 5.05.2024, [https://twitter.com/NIGER\\_CNSP/status/1787185234988982298](https://twitter.com/NIGER_CNSP/status/1787185234988982298).

The push out of the U.S. from Niger by AC will weaken the Americans' capabilities to conduct operations against jihadists in West and North Africa. The 700 military personnel at the Agadez base conducted intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) operations using MQ9 Reaper drones with a range of 1,850 km, among other things. In order not to lose these capabilities, the Americans have been looking for an alternative location for their base since the beginning of the year, holding talks with the authorities in Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana. The possibility of using an air base in Niger, centrally located in relation to the other AC missions, will consolidate Russia's logistical capabilities in Africa. However, the small Russian contingent will not be sufficient to effectively combat terrorist groups operating there.

#### “NEWS” ZONE: THE AFRICAN INITIATIVE AS THE AFRICA CORPS' PROPAGANDA TUBE

Established in September 2023, the *African Initiative* serves as a “news agency” publishing in Russian, English, French, and Arabic and runs a number of channels on Telegram. It positions itself as an “information bridge between Russia and Africa”,<sup>84</sup> and a central Russian resource for information on Africa, Russian activities, including military, on the continent and expert analysis. The creation of the *African Initiative* was first announced, even before its online launch, by the Russian army-owned Zvezda TV.<sup>85</sup> In many respects, the *African Initiative* is taking over the role of strategic communications setter previously held by the Prigozhin-linked and Malkievich- and later Shugaley-led Foundation for the Preservation of National Values (FZNC) and its affiliated entities (e.g., the African Discussion Club).<sup>86</sup> Shugaley himself, long declaring loyalty to Prigozhin and criticising the Russian authorities in the wake of his death, finally joined the pro-AC effort in May 2024. Also under the name and logo of the *African Initiative*, a local bilateral “friendship” organisation was established in Burkina Faso with personal links to the Kureyev structure.<sup>87</sup> Together with the Russian House, it prepared friendly ground for the arrival of AC soldiers. Among other things, it organised cultural events (film screenings and a graffiti festival<sup>88</sup>), sports tournaments, including a tournament of the martial art sambo (invented in the USSR, popular among Soviet commandos) with the participation of players from Russia, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger.<sup>89</sup> The radio programme “Russian Time” also contributes to the popularisation of Russia.<sup>90</sup> These activities largely mimic those used on behalf of WG in CAR in 2018 when Prigozhin-linked entities were hyperactive in creating an image of Russia and WG ‘trainers’ as an attractive partner close to the common man.<sup>91</sup>

<sup>84</sup> A. Kureyev, “African Initiative” Telegram account, 2.10.2023, <https://t.me/africaninitiative/3>.

<sup>85</sup> *African Initiative: Russia's new mouthpiece in Africa*, “African Digital Democracy Observatory”, 6.02.2022, <https://disinfo.africa/african-initiative-russias-new-mouthpiece-in-africa-65aa76fcc255>.

<sup>86</sup> Among other things, the FZNC conducted and published its own opinion polls from African countries.

<sup>87</sup> *OPA russe sur le Burkina*, “All Eyes On Wagner”, 04.12.2023, <https://alleyesonwagner.org/2023/12/04/opa-russe-sur-le-burkina/>.

<sup>88</sup> *Burkina Faso hosts a graffiti festival organised by the NGO African Initiative*, “African Initiative”, 20.01.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/01/v-burkina-faso-prohodit-festival-graffiti-organizovannyj-nko-afrikanskaya-inicziativa/>.

<sup>89</sup> A.G. Barry, *L'association sportive burkinabè de SAMBO et l'association “African Initiative” main dans la main pour le rayonnement de la discipline*, “Burkina24”, 28.01.2024, <https://burkina24.com/2024/01/28/l'association-sportive-burkinabe-de-sambo-et-l'association-african-initiative-main-dans-la-main-pour-le-rayonnement-de-la-discipline/>.

<sup>90</sup> J. Jarka, *Russia's African lab: How Putin won over Burkina Faso after French adieu*, “Al Jazeera”, 15.03.2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/3/15/russian-time-how-burkina-faso-fell-for-the-charms-of-moscow>.

<sup>91</sup> J. Czerep, *Illusion of Attractiveness: Russia's Pursuit of a Success Story in Africa*, in: A. Legucka, R. Kupiecki, *Disinformation and the Resilience of Democratic Societies*, The Polish Institute of International Affairs, Warsaw 2023, pp. 143–155.



Artem Kureyev – Head of the African Initiative. Source: Zvezda TV video screenshot, <https://tvzvezda.ru/video>

A branch of the *African Initiative* has also been established in Bamako, the capital of Mali, and a correspondent is working from Niger. This is the nucleus of a new model of influence-building in the infosphere, involving greater involvement of local organisations and opinion leaders, the recruitment of local journalists working on the ground (e.g., Savane Medias in Burkina Faso), and the acquisition of staff from entities previously associated with Prigozhin.<sup>92</sup> These include, for example, Anna Zamaraeva, deputy editor of the *African Initiative*, formerly one of WG’s spokespeople,<sup>93</sup> or Viktor Lukovenko, *alias* Viktor Vasilyev, liaison officer with the *African Initiative*’s local offices. Authors affiliated with the Russian Foreign Ministry services, the Institute for Contemporary State Development (a think tank close to Dmitry Medvedev), RTVI, *Tomix*, or the channel in Telegram *Strakh i Nienavist v Bamako*<sup>94</sup> also work with the portal.

Disinformation operations make use of the infrastructure still set up for Prigozhin, such as the channels on Telegram: *Afrikanistika*, *Arabskaya Afrika*<sup>95</sup> (which, despite its name, also publishes about the Sahel countries), *Departamente*, or the Lukovenko-run *Ulybayemysya & Mashem*.<sup>96</sup> The latter has previously been active mainly in the CAR, where it became famous as the first place to publish a Lobaye-produced (Prigozhin’s mining company) popular animation promoting the Russian contribution to the Khartoum Peace Agreement (2019),<sup>97</sup> Prigozhin’s diplomatic success in the CAR. Newly created channels are also being involved, such as *Afrikanski Kalashnikov*,<sup>98</sup> established on 28 September 2023, publishing original information

<sup>92</sup> *The Kremlin’s Efforts to Spread Deadly Disinformation in Africa*, Office of the Spokesperson, U.S. Department of State, 12.02.2024, <https://www.state.gov/the-kremlins-efforts-to-spread-deadly-disinformation-in-africa/>.

<sup>93</sup> M. Le Cam, T. Eydoux, *African Initiative, la nouvelle tête de pont de la propagande russe en Afrique*, “Le Monde”, 7.03.2024, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/03/07/african-initiative-la-nouvelle-tete-de-pont-de-la-propagande-russe-en-afrique\\_6220609\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/03/07/african-initiative-la-nouvelle-tete-de-pont-de-la-propagande-russe-en-afrique_6220609_3212.html).

<sup>94</sup> *African Initiative: Russia’s new mouthpiece...*

<sup>95</sup> “Арабская Африка” Telegram account, <https://t.me/s/arabicafrica>.

<sup>96</sup> “Улыбаемся Машем” Telegram account, [https://t.me/s/afric\\_ylbkka](https://t.me/s/afric_ylbkka).

<sup>97</sup> *LionBear*, “Улыбаемся Машем” YouTube account, 18.07.2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCZ0YSyWVhk>.

<sup>98</sup> “Африканский Калашников” Telegram account, <https://teleg.eu/s/afrikanikalashnikov>.

and analysis from the areas of AC military operations. For these activities, Russia engages, among others, MGIMO graduates specialising in African affairs. The African Initiative is collaborating with Grigory Korolyev, a popular computer game developer in Russia (known online as GrishaPutin), in the development of a new strategy game, *African Dawn*, about Russia's building of influence in West Africa at the expense of France and the West. It would serve not only to promote the Russian narrative about this part of the world but also to help preparing new cadres for influence operations.<sup>99</sup>

At the narrative level, the *African Initiative*, in addition to promoting AC, disseminates, along with a network of related channels on Telegram, among others, conspiracy theories suggesting that U.S. pharmaceutical companies are conducting biological experiments in Africa under the pretext of vaccination programmes.<sup>100</sup> In parallel, this theme has become the focus of messaging by Togolese-French activist Egountchi Behanzin, one of Africa's most pro-Russian influencers and a guest at the Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg.

The “news agency” *AES Info* can also be considered a new element of influence in the information zone, linked to the support of the AES political project. Although it presents itself as unofficial, it publishes unique content from inside the military governments of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, emphasising, for example, phone calls between junta leaders and Putin, and the almost only non-Sahel topics it covers are events in Russia. This was particularly evident in the case of the attack on the Krokus arena.<sup>101</sup> In reporting on the anti-U.S. protests in Niger on 14 April 2024, it used video footage from Russia's RT.<sup>102</sup>

Cooperation with formal, local media is also developing for AC. Shortly after the Russia-Africa summit, the agency and radio network Sputnik signed cooperation agreements with a number of African broadcasters, including *APS* (Senegal), *AMP* (Mauritania), *Gambia News Agency*, and major media groups *Radio Africa Group* (Kenya) and *New Vision* (Uganda).<sup>103</sup> In Niger, for example, the Russians have influence over the content presented by the state broadcaster *ORTN-Télé Sahel*. On the day of Gen. Tchiani's telephone conversation with Putin on 26 March, it published—in Russian, with subtitles in French—a report from Niamey by Russian journalist Aleksandr Kharchenko (the same one who would later be present at the arrival of the AC mission). In it, he showed, among other things, the devastated building of the closed French embassy, praised the junta's development policies and the break in military cooperation with the U.S. He announced that in this context Russia was ready to “extend the hand of friendship” to Niger.<sup>104</sup> Broadcasting from the presidential palace, allegedly from in front of the room from which Tchiani was on the phone with Putin, he reported that the leaders' conversation was about, among other things, the military-industrial complex. Another *ORTN-Télé Sahel* production, unusually broadcast in English with a speech synthesizer, outlined how the presence of U.S. forces is detrimental to Niger. It stated, presumably as a result of a sloppy

<sup>99</sup> A. Kureyev, A. Zamaraeva, 'African Dawn'. *Russian cyber athletes threaten the West in Africa*, “African Initiative”, 2.02.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/02/african-dawn-russian-cyber-athletes-threaten-the-west-in-africa/>.

<sup>100</sup> *The Pentagon has commissioned a study of Lassa fever from West Africa. Are Africans going to be test subjects again?*, “African Initiative”, 20.02.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/02/pentagon-zakazal-razrabotku-lekarstva-ot-afrikanskoj-lihoradki-lassa/>.

<sup>101</sup> “AES Info” Twitter (X) account, 23.03.2024, <https://twitter.com/AESinfos/status/1771493666785271856>.

<sup>102</sup> “AES Info” Twitter (X) account, 14.04.2024, <https://twitter.com/AESinfos/status/1779462773824487666>.

<sup>103</sup> *Sputnik Expands Network of Partners in Africa*, “Sputnik”, 1.08.2023, <https://en.sputniknews.africa/20230801/sputnik-expands-network-of-partners-in-africa-1060978151.html>.

<sup>104</sup> *La fédération de Russie a une parfaite vision de la situation du Niger actuelle depuis l'avènement du CNSP à la tête du pays*, “RTN” Facebook account, 26.03.2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=395883253237026>.

translation of the Russian-prepared text, that the U.S. government was paying Niger “not a kopeck” (instead of “not a cent”) for the use of the base.<sup>105</sup>

There has been a noticeable increase in the number of conspiracy theories published by regional, pro-Russian news outlets favouring Russia and Donald Trump in recent months, combined with news of current events. For example, commenting on the terrorist attack near Moscow, *AES Info* published Trump’s statement about Hillary Clinton’s alleged founding of the so-called Islamic State.<sup>106</sup> *Malijet*, on the other hand, for example, publishes accounts of Trump’s attacks on President Joe Biden on immigration.<sup>107</sup> The latter site, once considered reliable, is increasingly using numerous hashtags about the U.S. and NATO on its social media.<sup>108</sup> Posts openly supporting Trump are also published by Nathalie Yamb (Cameroon/Switzerland), a leading anti-French and pro-Russian influencer, present at the first and second Russia-Africa summits. This signals—in view of the unclear situation of the dismantled Prigozhin “troll farm”—Russia’s willingness to involve, with the help of AC, African resources in operations to influence the U.S. presidential election.

### ECONOMIC SPHERE OF THE AFRICA CORPS’ ACTIVITIES

Access to natural resources becomes the stated—more openly than with WG—motivation and justification for AC’s activities. However, as with WG, it is difficult to estimate the scale of profits derived by the group from this, as well as the potential for feeding surpluses into the Russian state budget and, for example, maintaining its ability to wage war in Ukraine. This is due to the largely informal nature of the market for trading gold mined in the region mainly in an artisanal manner and on a small scale, the non-recording of most actual export volumes, especially to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) using flights from Bangui, Cameroon’s Douala, and Bamako.<sup>109</sup> Instead, there is a clear shift towards increasing the importance of official economic cooperation as a means of financing AC, and moving away from the risk factor carried by the model developed by Prigozhin.

Securing access to resources largely determined WG’s activity in Sudan, where Prigozhin-controlled companies were the leading buyer of raw material from small-scale prospectors, and in the CAR, where it obtained a mining licence for the Ndassima mine and later developed, among others, timber exports through the company Bois Rouge.<sup>110</sup> However, in **Mali**, where WG had been operating since 2021, it had failed, despite the creation of further “local” mining companies (Alpha Development, Marko Mining), to gain permanent control over the mining points, which the military authorities were also not in favour of. Rather, they were willing to raise tax obligations for mining companies operating in the country, mainly Western ones (from 2020 to 2023, revenues increased by around 15% to around \$1.7 billion), conduct audits in the sector or revise the Mining Code to increase the state’s ability to pay for the expensive

<sup>105</sup> *Dans l’optique de l’affirmation de sa souveraineté le Niger dénonce les accords militaires qui ne lui apportent rien dans le cadre de lutte contre le terrorisme*, “RTN” Facebook account, 6.04.2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1157046582413262>.

<sup>106</sup> “AES Info” Twitter (X) account, 23.03.2024, <https://twitter.com/AESinfos/status/1771509284406190416>.

<sup>107</sup> *‘Il faut virer l’escroc’: Trump attaque violemment Biden et axe son discours sur l’immigration*, “Malijet”, 3.04.2024, [https://malijet.com/actualite\\_internationale/289426-il-faut-virer-l-escroc-trump-attaque-violemment-biden-et-axe-son.html](https://malijet.com/actualite_internationale/289426-il-faut-virer-l-escroc-trump-attaque-violemment-biden-et-axe-son.html).

<sup>108</sup> B. Whitehouse, “Bridges From Bamako” Twitter (X) account, 10.04.2024, <https://x.com/BridgesFromBKO/status/1778117046624018580>.

<sup>109</sup> *Re-examining Russia’s presence in West Africa’s gold sector*, Global Initiative, Risk Bulletin #3 - March 2022, <https://riskbulletins.globalinitiative.net/wea-obs-003/01-russias-presence-in-west-africas-gold-sector.html>.

<sup>110</sup> *Treasury Sanctions Companies and Individuals Advancing Russian Malign Activities in Africa*, US Department of the Treasury, 8.03.2024, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2164>.

(\$10.8 million in cash per month) services of the Russians.<sup>111</sup> Those also hoped to take over Malian companies nationalised by the state. Both during the Prigozhin era and later, the Russians, especially chief geologist Sergei Laktionov, were said to have pressured the Malian authorities to nationalise foreign mines, especially the most profitable Loulo-Gounkoto run by Canada's Barrick Gold.<sup>112</sup>

It has not been ruled out that one of the objectives in support of the Kidal capture operation was to take control from the CSP separatist coalition of around 100 points of manual/small-scale gold mining in the Kidal and Tessalite areas,<sup>113</sup> from which many local actors, including UN forces, were believed to be illegally exporting raw material.<sup>114</sup> AC militants also briefly took control<sup>115</sup> of the largest non-industrial gold mine, Intahaka, near Gao. It was used financially by various groups, including jihadist groups, but was primarily the domain of the Tuareg militia GATIA,<sup>116</sup> allied to the Bamakao government and AC. The move thus looked politically ill-conceived (it threatened conflict within its own ranks) or represented a manifestation of impatience over access to resources. Agreements reached in Moscow in October 2023 by Russian companies with the Malian Minister of Minerals Alousséni Sanou<sup>117</sup> were likely to go the same way.

A new policy in place in both Mali and Burkina Faso are plans to establish gold refineries, which would help the governments of these countries, and possibly indirectly Russia, to obtain a permanent share of the profits associated with its production. In Mali, the Russian conglomerate Krastsvetmet is to be responsible for its construction and technology transfer. A plant capable of processing 200 tonnes per year would be the largest gold refinery in West Africa. However, the realisation of these plans—sketchy and non-committal for now—is a long way off. Feasibility studies alone could take three to five years to complete. Nevertheless, in March 2024, a Malian delegation visited the Russian partner's facilities in Krasnoyarsk and concluded further agreements.<sup>118</sup> Mali already has a fully Malian-owned refinery (Marena Gold) processing 28 tonnes of material and producing around 6 tonnes of gold per year,<sup>119</sup> and a second, Kankou Moussa (KMR). It is very difficult for them to compete with the smugglers' preferred makeshift smelters located, among others, in the central market of Bamako, where the bulk of the bullion later exported by air, mainly to the UAE, ends up. It is difficult to imagine the success of a Russian refinery in such a defined market, where there is a lack of demand for the services of a professional refinery, unless its launch is accompanied by the forcible taking of an informal part of it under control and taking profits away from its existing, often high-profile, beneficiaries.

<sup>111</sup> This initially accounted for about 1/7th of the state's defence budget and was later gradually increased.

<sup>112</sup> B. Roger, *In Mali, Wagner has big plans for gold mines*, "The Africa Report", <https://www.theafricareport.com/339532/in-mali-wagner-has-big-plans-for-gold-mines/>.

<sup>113</sup> L. Viallet, *Une victoire sanglante ...*

<sup>114</sup> *Gold Trafficking in the Sahel*, United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), New York 2023, p. 18.

<sup>115</sup> Earlier, in early 2023, in a similar way and also for a short time, WG had forcibly taken over three mines near the Guinea border: Balandougou, Koyoko and Yanfolila.

<sup>116</sup> B. Roger, *In Mali...*

<sup>117</sup> M. Le Cam, *Au Mali, les opérateurs miniers sous la pression fiscale de Bamako pour payer les mercenaires de Wagner*, "Le Monde", 21.12.2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/12/21/au-mali-les-operateurs-miniers-sous-la-pression-fiscale-de-bamako-pour-payer-les-mercenaires-de-wagner\\_6207137\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/12/21/au-mali-les-operateurs-miniers-sous-la-pression-fiscale-de-bamako-pour-payer-les-mercenaires-de-wagner_6207137_3212.html).

<sup>118</sup> *Siberian Krastsvetmet to build a refinery in Mali*, "African Initiative", 26.03.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/03/siberian-krastsvetmet-to-build-a-refinery-in-mali/>.

<sup>119</sup> F. Baldé, Exclusive interview with Ismael Siby CEO of Marena Gold, "Kapital Afrik", 14.04.2023, <https://www.kapitalafrik.com/2022/09/25/exclusive-interview-with-ismael-siby-ceo-of-marena-gold/>.

However economically risky, these activities would nevertheless be part of a welcome trend of African countries increasing their value-added capacity locally, as in the case of lithium processing developed with Australian capital.<sup>120</sup> Russia’s involvement in these processes indicates that long-term, strategic thinking is emerging for AC, in addition to *ad hoc* measures, linking investment with the likely promise of profit-sharing, with support for economic transformation in an objectively desirable direction. Its other manifestations are the announcements of cooperation with Mali in the construction of nuclear reactors by Rosatom<sup>121</sup> and solar farms by its subsidiary Novavind.<sup>122</sup>

Similar processes are taking place in **Burkina Faso**, which produces (officially) 57.3 tonnes of gold per year, although output has been declining for several years due to the expanding conflict with groups linked to Al-Qaeda (JNIM coalition) and the Sahel Province of the Islamic State (ISSP). For years, Nordgold, a company owned by one of Russia’s richest men, Alexei Mordashov, has been active in the Burkinabe market (and in neighbouring Guinea), operating the Bissa and Bouly mines, among others. Its Taparko mine had to close due to the threat of attack by extremists. In December 2022, shortly after Col. Traore’s coup, Nordgold was granted a new concession by the military authorities, estimated at four years for the Yimiougou mine, which it had been seeking since 2017.<sup>123</sup> Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo warned Western partners at the time that this was a form of payment for the services of WG, which he said was already present in Burkina Faso (which was not confirmed at the time).<sup>124</sup>

In November 2023, the Burkina Faso authorities announced the start of construction of the first gold refinery in Ouagadougou by a consortium made up of the state (51%) and Mali’s Marena Gold (49%), where production is expected to start at the end of 2024.<sup>125</sup> In December 2023, they revised the Mining Code to ensure more revenue from mining companies,<sup>126</sup> and shortly afterwards banned the export of non-industrially mined gold. As in Mali, the authorities are thus in the process of cleaning up and increasing their control over the market.<sup>127</sup> It is likely that the Russian authorities will seek—or have already agreed—to obtain a share of the profits generated thanks to those changes as a form of payment for AC’s presence. However, there are currently no clear signs of this. In Burkina Faso, as in Mali, there is a memorandum of understanding with Rosatom for the construction of a nuclear reactor.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>120</sup> Leo Lithium Ltd. website, ‘Goulamina Project details’ tab; <https://www.leolithium.com/goulamina-project/goulamina-project-details/>.

<sup>121</sup> *Россия и Мали подписали Меморандум о взаимопонимании по сотрудничеству в области использования атомной энергии в мирных целях*, Rosatom, 13.10.2023, [https://rosatom.ru/journalist/news/rossiya-i-mali-podpisali-memorandum-o-vzaimoponimanii-po-sotrudnichestvu-v-oblasti-ispolzovaniya-ato/?sphrase\\_id=5344917](https://rosatom.ru/journalist/news/rossiya-i-mali-podpisali-memorandum-o-vzaimoponimanii-po-sotrudnichestvu-v-oblasti-ispolzovaniya-ato/?sphrase_id=5344917).

<sup>122</sup> A. Tembely, *Mali: la construction de deux centrales solaires de 300 mégawatt annoncée à Bougouni et Sanankoroba*, ‘Maliko News’, 8.03.2024, <https://malikonews.com/mali-la-construction-de-deux-centrales-solaires-de-300-megawatt-annoncee-a-bougouni-et-sanankoroba/>.

<sup>123</sup> H. Reid, *Burkina Faso denies favouring Russia’s Nordgold over gold mine permit*, 6.02.2023, ‘Reuters’, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-denies-favouring-russias-nordgold-over-gold-mine-permit-2023-02-06/>.

<sup>124</sup> K. Mensh, *Ghana Says Burkina Faso Paid Russian Mercenaries with Mine*, ‘VOA’, 15.12.2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ghana-says-burkina-faso-paid-russian-mercenaries-with-mine-/6878119.html>.

<sup>125</sup> *Construction Of First Gold Refinery Begins In Burkina Faso*, ‘AFP’, 23.11.2023, <https://www.barrons.com/news/construction-of-first-gold-refinery-begins-in-burkina-faso-cd8de771>.

<sup>126</sup> K. Hoje, *Burkina Faso Names New Mining Minister in Government Reshuffle*, ‘Bloomberg’, 17.12.2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2023-12-17/burkina-faso-names-new-mining-minister-in-government-reshuffle>.

<sup>127</sup> *Burkina Faso Halts Export Of Gold From Artisanal Mining*, ‘AFP’, 21.02.2024, <https://www.barrons.com/news/burkina-faso-halts-export-of-gold-from-artisanal-mining-11bf303d>.

<sup>128</sup> *Burkina Faso and Russia’s Rosatom sign agreement for nuclear power plant*, ‘Reuters’, 13.10.2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/burkina-faso-russias-rosatom-sign-agreement-nuclear-power-plant-2023-10-13/>.

In the case of **Niger**, gold mining is concentrated in the most dangerous, frontier parts of the Tillaberi region, which is a free operating space for ISSP jihadists. Thus, possible physical access to the mines would require the deployment of significant forces to drive out the extremists. Even this, however, could be insufficient, as their recruiting base is the local population from the Fula ethnic group, making even the displacement of armed groups insufficient to dismiss the risk of attacks. In this context, profits from oil sales can be identified as the most likely source of remuneration for AC in Niger. The transmission infrastructure from Niger's Agad oilfields was in place shortly before Gen. Tchiani took power, and commercial exports (via Benin) have been expected to begin in May 2024, although later Niger-Benin political tensions put that in question. Shortly after AC's mission arrived, the junta's government signed an agreement with China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) for a \$400 million loan repaid with oil.<sup>129</sup> It is possible that AC's stay will be financed in a similar way.

According to Oumarou Abdourahamane, now an influential pro-Russian politician from Niger, the subject of the Russian-Niger talks in January included the exploitation of deposits in new uranium fields by Russian companies.<sup>130</sup> It is likely that access was also an important factor in reviving Iran's contacts with Niger.<sup>131</sup> The possible loss of EU access to Niger's deposits, from which it obtains about 25% of its uranium supply for power plants, would also be a political success for Russia—it would hinder the transformation of the EU's energy sector and could increase its dependence on energy from Russian nuclear power plants.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> J. Niabyage, *Chinese state firm agrees US\$400 million loan for Niger junta in return for oil*, "South China Morning Post", 17.04.2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3259074/chinese-state-firm-agrees-us400m-loan-niger-junta-return-oil>.

<sup>130</sup> A. Dubrovsky, *From uranium to grain: why is Russia-Niger cooperation feared by the West?*, "African Initiative", 18.01.2024, <https://afrinz.ru/en/2024/01/ot-urana-do-zerna-pochemu-sotrudnichestva-rossii-i-nigera-boitsya-zapad/>.

<sup>131</sup> *Niger Ends US Alliance Amid Accusations Of Uranium Deal With Iran*, "Iran International", 18.03.2024, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403184053>.

<sup>132</sup> J. Bias, *The Long Arm of the Kremlin and the Politics of Uranium*, "Bloomberg", 3.08.2023, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2023-08-03/niger-coup-the-long-arm-of-russia-and-the-politics-of-uranium>.



## THE FUTURE OF THE AFRICA CORPS

AC’s activities, extensive and better thought out than WG’s, have the potential for further expansion. Its possible directions are the subject of much speculation, often fuelled by the Russian side or by the concerns of European politicians and media. Certainly, AC’s ambitions are not limited to its presence in the five countries of confirmed military presence described in AC-related channels since its formation. However, its further development will largely depend on the dynamically changing situation in the region, the effects of its presence, including the mistakes made, and the interests and perspectives of the host countries and those neighbouring them.

### PROSPECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT AND FURTHER ACTIVITIES OF THE AFRICA CORPS

**Chad** may be considered the most desirable expansion direction from the AC point of view. This country, located in the neighbourhood of pro-Russian CAR, eastern Libya and Niger, is the most important location for French forces in the Sahel (it was, among other things, the headquarters of the *Barkhane* mission). At the same time, the prevailing sentiment—often anti-French—is similar to that which preceded the upheavals and pro-Russian political shifts in the AES states.<sup>133</sup> These are compounded by the political support received from France by the Chadian leader, Mahamat Idriss “Kaka” Déby Itno, who took over the government as a result of a coup, but who, because of his pro-Western orientation, did not face similar condemnation as his peer coup-makers from Mali, Burkina Faso, or Niger. Disclosed U.S. intelligence documents from February 2023 indicated that WG was planning to overthrow this Chadian government with the participation of Chadian rebels trained in CAR.<sup>134</sup>

A pro-Russian turn is also possible without a change of power as a strategy for survival and renewed legitimacy by “Kaka” Déby. Faced with conflict in neighbouring Sudan, he has agreed, against part of his own army and ethnic base (the Zaghawa group present both in Chad and in Sudanese Darfur), to allow a supply route from the UAE to pass through Chadian territory for the Rapid Support Force (RSF), which cooperates with WG. This threatens insurgency in Chad itself, especially since the RSF have been attacking the civilian Zaghawa population in Darfur, and tests Déby’s ties to Western partners. Against this backdrop, Déby’s talks with Putin in Moscow on 24 January 2024 (immediately after the Niger-Russia negotiations), the participation of a sizable Chadian delegation in the pro-Putin World Youth Festival in Sochi,<sup>135</sup> and later the growing tension ahead of the elections announced for May 2024, intensified speculation of a possible pro-Russian turn. Reinforcing these, in April the *AES Info* published a poll asking, “do you agree that Chad joining the AES would strengthen cooperation in the Sahel?”<sup>136</sup> Concerns about the reshuffle of alliances in Chad, within whose authorities there are high-profile factions eager to invite Russian forces, were partly confirmed by a letter sent by the country’s air force commander, Idriss Amine Ahmed, to the U.S. defence attaché on 2 April 2024. In it, he demanded an immediate halt to all operations by U.S. forces at the

<sup>133</sup> *Chad: ‘Nothing will be the same again’*, “APA”, 16.05.2022, <https://apanews.net/chad-nothing-will-be-the-same-again/>.

<sup>134</sup> R. Chason, *As Russians plot against Chad, concerns mount over important U.S. ally*, “The Washington Post”, 24.04.2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/04/23/chad-wagner-russia-leaked-documents/>.

<sup>135</sup> “Mahamat A Adam Bechir” Twitter (X) account, 10.02.2024, <https://x.com/BlazianP/status/1766748631921508507?s=20>.

<sup>136</sup> “AES Info” Twitter (X) account, 10.04.2024, <https://twitter.com/AESinfos/status/1778012824930766886>.

Adji Kossei base.<sup>137</sup> In order not to escalate the conflict, the small U.S. force that had been stationed at the French base on Chadian territory using it as a hub for special operations in the region,<sup>138</sup> left the country at the beginning of May, while rumours, fuelled by Russian sources,<sup>139</sup> of the possible arrival of Russian forces were growing in the country. During the vote on 6 May, to which the Chadian authorities did not allow observers from EU-funded social organisations,<sup>140</sup> a mission of “political specialists” led by Maxim Shugaley<sup>141</sup> appeared—apparently at the invitation of Deby’s staff. This demonstrates that the country’s authorities have integrated the game around military partnerships into their current political calculation, something that Russia will certainly want to exploit.



Maxim Shugaley in Chad during the May 2024 presidential elections Source: [t.me/max\\_shugaley/1009](https://t.me/max_shugaley/1009)

<sup>137</sup> Chad air force chief orders US to halt activities at army base, letter shows, “Reuters”, 19.04.2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/chad-air-force-chief-orders-us-halt-activities-army-base-letter-shows-2024-04-19/>.

<sup>138</sup> H. Britzky, O. Liebermann, N. Bertrand, Chad’s government threatens to kick out US troops as Russia expands influence in Africa, “CNN”, 18.04.2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/18/politics/chad-us-troops-threat>.

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, posts and recordings on the “Белые дяди в Африке” Telegram account, which is close to the Russian mercenary community (1.05.2024, [https://t.me/wagner\\_group2022/7634](https://t.me/wagner_group2022/7634)), or the Lukovenko-run “Улыбаемся & Машем”, 2.05.2024, [https://t.me/afric\\_ylbka/6963](https://t.me/afric_ylbka/6963)).

<sup>140</sup> EU Hits Out At Sidelining Of Chad Election Observers, “Barron’s”, 7.05.2024, <https://www.barrons.com/news/eu-hits-out-at-sidelining-of-chad-election-observers-f2052cf4>.

<sup>141</sup> Maxim Shugaley’s Telegram account, 6.05.2024, [https://t.me/max\\_shugaley/1009](https://t.me/max_shugaley/1009).

**Sudan** is also an area of growing Russian interest. Prigozhin’s legacy in this country has been an excessive association with the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF), which have been waging war against government troops since 2023. Sudan was the first country of activity for Prigozhin’s structures in Africa, important for the acquisition of gold. While prior to the war, proximity to the RSF, which dominated the mining sector, was crucial in the acquisition of bullion, the mechanism for its export included cooperation with Sudanese military intelligence. The war disrupted this arrangement by placing Russian forces clearly on the anti-government side, which weakened its influence. As a result of the fighting, Russians additionally lost the gold refinery they controlled. Although the former WG was no longer active in Sudan itself, it continued limited logistical support to the RSF from within CAR and Libya. Far from making the faction dependent on Russia, however; the UAE remained its most important sponsor and source of supplies. However, when it became clear that the RSF would not take over the whole country, the partnership with it began to harm Russian strategic objectives—it dismissed the possibility of achieving its main objective, the establishment of a naval base in the Red Sea, whose coast remained in the hands of government forces. In addition, Ukrainian military intelligence (HUR) and special forces (SSO) began to operate in Sudan, carrying out selective elimination (targeted killing) of members of the RSF and perhaps the few Russian mercenaries themselves.<sup>142</sup> In this context, the country is not mentioned as an area of current or future military presence in any programmatic material from AC or related institutions, for example, in maps attached in *African Initiative* articles.<sup>143</sup>

In parallel, however, the internationally-recognised Sudanese military authorities led by Gen. Abdel Fatah al-Burhan sought to end Russia’s cooperation with the RSF diplomatically, in exchange for promises of benefits, for example, in the oil and gas sector.<sup>144</sup> This resulted in, among other things, the supply of fuel from Russia, which began in April<sup>145</sup> with the tankers *Pavo Rock*, *Conga*, and *Marabella Sun* docking at Port Sudan, which serves as the government’s temporary capital. Texts critical of the RSF began to be published by the *African Initiative*.<sup>146</sup> A clear course correction was brought about by the visit of Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov to Port Sudan on 28 and 29 April 2024, preceded by a meeting of intelligence chiefs. At that time, he publicly recognised the Burhan-led Sovereign Council (collective presidency) as the only legitimate authority, which meant at least a declaratory break with the RSF, and promised “qualitative”, uncapped military support to the Sudanese army.<sup>147</sup> This would include expertise, and potentially a military presence. The expectations of the Russian side are the end of Ukrainian-Sudanese cooperation and a binding agreement on the naval base. This could explain a meeting, conducted on the sidelines of the visit, between the Russian delegation and Mohamed Al-Amin Turk, an influential tribal leader of the Beja people of the Red Sea coast, on whose favour any project in Port Sudan depends.

The Sudanese case not only continued to demonstrate Russia’s ability to flexibly adapt policies to changes on the ground, tuning the relations after Prigozhin to the state’s strategic objectives, but

<sup>142</sup> *Ukraine’s special services ‘likely’ behind strikes on Wagner-backed forces in Sudan, a Ukrainian military source says*, “CNN”, 20.09.2023, <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/09/19/africa/ukraine-military-sudan-wagner-cmd-intl/index.html>.

<sup>143</sup> E.g. “Африканский корпус” ВС России объявил о наборе специалистов, “African Initiative”, 20.12.2023, <https://afrinz.ru/2023/12/afrikanskij-korpus-vs-rossii-obyavil-o-nabore-speczialistov/>.

<sup>144</sup> *Dr. Jibril meets the Russian President’s special envoy to the Middle East and Africa*, Spokesperson of the Government of Sudan, 17.01.2024, <https://spokesperson-sd.com/en/archives/1231>.

<sup>145</sup> O. Rickett, M. Amin, *Sudan war: Russia hedges bets by aiding both sides in conflict*, “Middle East Eye”, 6.05.2024, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/russia-sudan-war-saf-rsf-hedges-bets-both-sides-support>.

<sup>146</sup> *London Holds Secret Talks with Sudan’s RSF - The Guardian*, “African Initiative”, 15.04.2024, <https://afrinz/en/2024/04/london-holds-secret-talks-with-sudans-rsf-the-guardian/>.

<sup>147</sup> *Russia offers ‘uncapped’ military aid to Sudan*, “Sudan Tribune”, 3.05.2024, <https://sudantribune.com/article285164/>.

also of playing on two fronts. It allows, as in Libya, the hope of maintaining influence regardless of the outcome of the war.

Instead, it is unrealistic to drag **Algeria**, Russia's most important arms trade partner in Africa, into political positions close to the AES in the current circumstances. Such an objective was clearly stated in the AC's programmatic statement in the *African Initiative*.<sup>148</sup> Bilateral Russian-Algerian talks in various formats took place in the following months. However, the fundamental problem remains the prospect of conflict in northern Mali, with which Algeria is linked by cross-border ties between related populations (e.g., Tuaregs of the Ifoghas clan) and a tradition of secret services' engagement in local security politics. Algeria, which concluded a peace agreement between the separatists and the government in Bamako in 2015, wanted it to hold. So, when it began to fall apart in early 2023, it made unsuccessful attempts to save it.<sup>149</sup> In the process it clashed with the antagonistic approach of the government of Col. Goita in Mali, which does not recognise in Algeria a partner in this matter. As a result, Algeria perceived the renewal of the open north-south war, with Russian AC's support for Malian forces, as a policy that was hostile to it. The war's fallout was costly to Algeria itself—the families of the Tuareg residents of Kidal took refuge in camps in Algeria. In the *African Initiative*'s narrative, the Tuaregs have been portrayed as puppets of France and the West, and Algeria as their sidekick,<sup>150</sup> making understanding even more difficult. For the AC, the WG-modelled flexibility proved to be a burden in this case: by seizing the opportunity to gain a greater role in Mali, the Russians embarked on a collision course with Algerian interests, losing the opportunity to gain a much more valuable partner.

Due to the activities of WG/AC in Mali, there have been numerous incidents of attacks by Malian and Russian forces on Mauritians living in Mali since 2023. There are also incidents of Russians crossing the border into **Mauritania** without the consent of the Mauritanian authorities. For example, on 7 April, Malian and AC forces entered the border village of Mad Allah, where they opened fire on civilians. A spokesman for the Mauritanian government stated that its army would “respond with firmness and will not look passively at violations of its borders”<sup>151</sup> (to confirm this, the country's army later conducted a series of drills near the border<sup>152</sup>). In response, the AC-linked Telegram *Departamente* channel published an analysis accusing Mauritania of favouring separatists from northern Mali and JNIM jihadists.<sup>153</sup> Both the AC's actions and the communication that accompanied them towards Mauritania indicate a sense of impunity and an entitlement to further expansion without regard for the sovereignty of neighbouring states. This is a short-sighted approach which, as in the case of Algeria, antagonises potential partners and will politically hurt Russia's interests.

The prospect of Russia gaining control of and instrumentalising irregular **migration routes into Europe**, which has been stirring emotions in European media and among diplomats in the region, is also questionable. This prospect is largely a projection by European observers

<sup>148</sup> M. Ivanov, *Routes of the African Corps ...*

<sup>149</sup> *Algerian secret services in survival mode in North Mali*, “Africa Intelligence”, 20.03.2023, <https://www.africaintelligence.com/north-africa/2023/03/20/algerian-secret-services-in-survival-mode-in-north-mali,109925161-ge0>.

<sup>150</sup> M. Ivanov, *Routes of the African Corps ...*

<sup>151</sup> *Le calvaire des civils mauritaniens au Mali : ils sont devenus la cible de l'armée malienne et de Wagner*, “Observateurs de l'Azawad”, 20.04.2024, <https://assiwil.blogspot.com/2024/04/le-calvaire-des-civils-mauritaniens-au.html>.

<sup>152</sup> G. Ben Mbarek, *Mauritania holds border military drills amid increasing tensions with Mali*, “The National News”, 6.05.2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/mena/2024/05/06/mauritania-holds-border-military-drills-amid-increasing-tensions-with-mali/>.

<sup>153</sup> *Мавританский фактор в нападениях ДНИМ*, “Departamente” Telegram account, 7.04.2024, <https://t.me/departamente/3532>.

arising from an apparent analogy with the actions of Russia and Belarus on the EU’s eastern borders.<sup>154</sup> However, unlike the top-down “routes” created by Russia and Belarus, the direction of migration through the Sahara to the Mediterranean coast is well-established and does not require Russian encouragement or direction. Although the Niger authorities in November 2023, terminated the agreement with the EU criminalising irregular migration (the so-called Law 2015-36), certainly with Russia’s favour, and human smuggling agents returned to Agadez (for years a migration hub), this was largely motivated by the recovery of the region’s economy, and workers’ shuttling into Libya. The agreement with the EU resulted in a collapse of those, and the promise of compensation from the EU Trust Fund for those losing their jobs as a consequence of the 2015-36 Act failed to meet local expectations.<sup>155</sup> However, a change in Niger authorities’ approach to mobility does not bring Russia much closer yet to being able to exert significant “migration pressure” on Europe.

Algeria forcibly and violently, using numerous abuses, withdraws Sub-Saharan African migrants to the border with Niger because it fears their influx into its own territory. This puts a strain on Niger’s Sahara Alarmphone organisation, for example, which provides them with assistance and further aggravates the dispute between AES and Algeria. In April 2024, the government of Niger issued a note of protest on this issue and called on the Algerian ambassador to provide an explanation,<sup>156</sup> and on IOM representative Nicoletta Giordano to intervene to ensure that Algerians do not divert representatives of other (non-Nigerien) nationalities to Niger.<sup>157</sup> In contrast, the border with Libya is neither under the control of Niger nor Libyan authorities, but of local armed groups. The border economy, both legal and illegal, is a space for the livelihoods of tens of thousands of armed actors who have been embedded in local arrangements for years. On the Libyan side, this is handled by armed groups of the Tebu population, pursuing their own local interest and keeping their distance from both Gen. Haftar’s forces and foreign actors. It is an illusion to believe that a new, external player, with minimal—in the scale of the borderlands—forces, absent from the area, can take control of them. No one has succeeded so far since the Midi-Midi Treaty of 1893, which sanctioned this state of affairs.<sup>158</sup> The motivation of both Gen. Haftar (who is in close relations with, for example, the Italian and French authorities) and the hypothetical new authorities of a united Libya, whose creation Russia would like to support, to conflate the international community and self-isolate would also be questionable. In the long term, they would prefer to pursue international recognition.

However, other possible directions of AC expansion are worth noting. In February this year, Ukraine’s National Centre of Resistance, a structure of the Special Operations Forces of Ukraine that operates within the framework of information warfare, published an analysis of AC’s development indicating—presumably based on intelligence—that it was planning to send a military mission to **Togo**. There, the Russians would provide support to that country’s

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<sup>154</sup> A.M. Dyer, *NATO Countries Respond to Russia’s Instrumentalisation of Migration*, “PISM Bulletin”, no. 11 (2319), 26 January 2024, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/nato-countries-respond-to-russias-instrumentalisation-of-migration>.

<sup>155</sup> M. Simoncelli, *Agadez has begun to live again*, “Al Jazeera”, 12.04.2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/longform/2024/4/12/agadez-nigers-gateway-to-the-sahara-finds-new-life-in-the-migrant-trade>.

<sup>156</sup> *Niger condemns Algeria’s violent treatment of Sub-Saharan migrants*, “North Africa Post”, 5.04.2024, <https://northafricapost.com/76385-niger-condemns-algerias-violent-treatment-of-sub-saharan-migrants.html>.

<sup>157</sup> *Après l’Ambassadeur de la République Algérienne Démocratique et Populaire auprès de la République du Niger hier, c’est au tour du représentant résident de l’Organisation Internationale pour les Migrations (OIM) au Niger...*, “RTN” Facebook account, 5.04.2024, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1134775187942090>.

<sup>158</sup> V. Prashad, *Tuareg accuse France of promoting Libya’s latest post-NATO war*, International State Crime Initiative, 17.08.2015, <http://statecrime.org/tuareg-accuse-france-promoting-libyas-latest-post-nato-war/>.

president, Faure Gnassingbé.<sup>159</sup> Such an action would be in line with the well-tested model of making leaders with weak legitimacy (such as Bashar Al-Assad, Touadera) dependent on each other. In March, Gnassingbé staged a constitutional coup by abolishing universal presidential elections,<sup>160</sup> thereby creating conditions in which the risk of a military putsch against his rule, and hence his need for protection, increases. During the blockade of the border with Benin, the main export channel for Niger, entry into Togo, would have given ECOWAS-sanctioned AES countries access to the sea. However, following the cancellation of sanctions on Niger and Mali by ECOWAS on 24 March,<sup>161</sup> this argument has lost weight. Nevertheless, the prospect is possible in which AC services are claimed by leaders unsure of relying on their own strength in moments of political upheaval (as in Togo) or, for example, wanting to carry out a succession of power within the family (Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Uganda).

In April, the formerly Prigozhin-linked Afrique Media TV service published information about AC's arrival in the **Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC)**, where the authorities are confronting numerous rebel groups in the east of the country, notably the Rwandan-backed M23.<sup>162</sup> Indeed, in view of the openly declared inability of UN forces (MONUSCO) to confront the group,<sup>163</sup> the option of inviting Russian forces gained popularity in the country in late 2022 and early 2023.<sup>164</sup> According to Afrique Media, Russian forces have already cooperated with the Congolese army against militants of IS Central Africa Province operating near the Ugandan border, allegedly participating in the elimination of its commander, nicknamed "BagDad".<sup>165</sup> However, this website can hardly be considered credible—it has repeatedly published disinformation—and these reports have not been confirmed by other sources. Nevertheless, this option cannot be excluded. The strong Russian presence in neighbouring CAR allows for a small, trial intervention, which could also strengthen pro-Russian factions in the DRC authorities, a state the U.S. is actively seeking to keep in its orbit. At the same time, by focusing on fighting the jihadists rather than the M23, the WG/AC would avoid coming into conflict with other forces intervening against the latter (e.g., the South African bloc's SADC mission, contractors from the Romanian military company Asociatia RALF).

Also as provocative as expansionist was the publication on the channel of the Rusich militia, accused of war crimes in Ukraine, of a photo of Kharchenko posing with a Russian flag in southern Burkina Faso, near the border with **Ghana**.<sup>166</sup> This corresponded with earlier—at the time, probably premature—warnings by that country's president against the Russians, and also with the likely choice of Ghana by the U.S. to relocate some forces from Niger.

<sup>159</sup> *Russia does not abandon plans to seize control of West Africa*, Центр національного спротиву, 24.02.2024, <https://sprotyv.mod.gov.ua/en/russia-does-not-abandon-plans-to-seize-control-of-west-africa/>.

<sup>160</sup> *Togo adopts new constitution, parliament set to elect president*, "France24", 26.03.2024, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240326-togo-adopts-new-constitution-parliament-set-to-elect-president>.

<sup>161</sup> *ECOWAS lifts sanctions on Guinea, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso; restores power supply*, "Vanguard", 24.02.2024, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2024/02/ecowas-lifts-sanctions-on-guinea-mali-niger-burkina-faso-restores-power-supply/>.

<sup>162</sup> *Des militaires russes se rendront en République démocratique du Congo*, "Afrique Media TV", 16.04.2024, <https://afriquemediatv.com/2024/04/16/des-militaires-russes-se-rendront-en-republique-democratique-du-congo/>

<sup>163</sup> As a result, they have been forced out of the DRC and will leave the country by the end of 2024.

<sup>164</sup> *Wagner Mercenaries in Eastern DR Congo? Social Media Monitoring*, Insecurity Insight, 2023, <https://insecurityinsight.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Wagner-Mercenaries-in-Eastern-DR-Congo-Social-Media-Monitoring-February-2023.pdf>.

<sup>165</sup> *Des militaires russes...*

<sup>166</sup> "ДШИРГ Русич" Telegram account, 27.03.2024, <https://t.me/dshrg2/1715>, geolocation thanks to: "Seter" Twitter (X) account, 16.04.2024, <https://x.com/osintseter/status/1780194126899642521>.

## THREATS TO THE AFRICA CORPS

The biggest limitation to the success of AC's plans is the possibility of the **collapse of friendly governments** in AES states, thereby derailing the Russian-backed flagship political project. This could occur as a result of factional rivalries within the armed forces, their growing authoritarianism or under pressure from jihadist groups. Systems based on charismatic military leadership, where force-derived agency is an advantage, normalise coups as natural political actions. Consequently, each of the military governments in the AES bloc faces, to varying degrees, the prospect of falling as a result of the intervention of yet another officer currently in conflict with those in power. The authorities may be underestimating the symptoms of danger if public support for the military government persists in the capitals, like Bamako, Ouagadougou, or Niamey. However, they are undermined by the persistence of deep economic crises, frustrations over the lack of a development dividend, a growing sense of injustice, the impression of the replacement of one elite by another, and of one neo-colonial partner (France) by another (Russia).

Signs of a growing crisis of confidence can already be seen in, for example, Mali, whose authorities in April 2024 banned political parties and discussions on the end of the transition period.<sup>167</sup> Strengthening the opposition to Col. Goita may also be the announced return of the charismatic imam Mahmoud Dicko,<sup>168</sup> who, by leading the protests against President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in 2020, paved the way for the coup, but is now criticising the junta. In Burkina Faso, on the other hand, the practice of forcibly conscribing critics of the authorities to the army's auxiliary units (VDP) is intensifying.<sup>169</sup> Ongoing repression and the lack of real improvement in the quality of life will erode support for the military, pro-Russian authorities. This could lead to another crisis and shift in sentiments, similar to that in Guinea from 2019-2021, where the Russian-encouraged<sup>170</sup> president decided to illegally extend his rule, and as a result lost power and Russia lost its privileged position.

However, the biggest threat to AC is the further **expansion of jihadists**. Just as criticism of France, which paved the way for Russia's entry into the Sahel, was born out of a sense that its military presence did not help contain JNIM and ISSP violence, a similar perception of Russia's failings will undermine trust in AC. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), despite Russian involvement (the longest in Mali), extremist violence is increasing across the AES.<sup>171</sup> Their territory of operation is also expanding, which at some point could threaten the capitals. Historically, the governments of Mali and Burkina Faso have been losing legitimacy and collapsing when they proved ineffective on the frontline, or when the jihadists spectacularly overrode military posts. Now, the likely further successes of the extremists, like the April kidnapping of 110 Malian civilians from buses near Bandiagara,<sup>172</sup> will also incriminate AC. The instances of incompetence and attacks on civilians by its soldiers

<sup>167</sup> *Mali's junta suspends political party activities until further notice*, "Reuters", 11.04.2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/malis-junta-suspends-political-party-activities-until-further-notice-2024-04-10/>.

<sup>168</sup> M. Konate, *Retour de l'imam Dicko à Bamako*, "KONATE Malick" Twitter (X) account, 10.04.2024, <https://twitter.com/konate90/status/1778143408441192815>.

<sup>169</sup> K. Cissé, *Burkina Faso outcry over 'conscription used to punish junta critics'*, "BBC", 7.04.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68166717>.

<sup>170</sup> *Russian ambassador sparks backlash with suggestion Guinea change constitution*, "Reuters", 11.01.2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN1P51UT/>.

<sup>171</sup> *The Sahel: A Deadly New Era in the Decades-Long Conflict*, ACLED, 17.01.2024, <https://acleddata.com/conflict-watchlist-2024/sahel/>.

<sup>172</sup> *Militants in Mali kidnap over 110 civilians*, "Voice Of America", 22.04.2024, <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/militants-in-mali-kidnap-over-110-civilians/7579978.html>.

that characterised the WG's actions will be similarly perceived.<sup>173</sup> Although AC's conduct on the counter-extremism front does not currently dominate the local debate, giving way to juntas' popular symbolic rhetoric, time, and the overt nature of its presence, will henceforth work against AC. A dangerous trend, particularly evident in Mali, is the departure and even torpedoing of local peace agreements with extremists that limit violence. In February 2024, Malian authorities, with the help of AC, arrested a key Muslim cleric, Komani Tanapo, an architect of the local peace agreements in Macina and Niono. He was later killed in custody.<sup>174</sup> Similarly in Niger, the assumption of power by Gen. Tchiani's junta undermined the successful policy of his predecessor, President Mohamed Bazoum, of dialogue and bringing extremists back into society.<sup>175</sup> Open channels of communication that allowed, among other things, the release of hostages were also lost.<sup>176</sup> The Niger authorities are now cautiously trying to return to some of the predecessor's policies in this regard, but so far no results are visible. Instead, AC (as WG did earlier) is using violent methods in conjunction with Malian forces that fuel the spiral of violence. In 2024, as in the previous ones, numerous cases of attacking entire communities, torture, theft of property, killings without distinguishing between perpetrators/suspects and bystanders, rape, and persecution along ethnic lines<sup>177</sup> (especially against the Fula population, now—in the context of the war against the CSP-PSD—increasingly also against Tuaregs and Arab tribes) are recorded. The result is an increased influx of recruits to extremist groups.



*IS militants investigating a Malian aircraft crushed on April 29, allegedly piloted by Russians*  
Source: video screenshot from Amaq Media, IS-quasi official propaganda channel

<sup>173</sup> W. Nasr, *How the Wagner Group Is Aggravating the Jihadi Threat in the Sahel*, "CTC Sentinel", November/December 2022, vol. 15, issue 11, pp. 23-25.

<sup>174</sup> D. Baché, *Mali: mort en détention du marabout Komani Tanapo*, "RFI", 20.03.2024, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20240320-mali-mort-en-d%C3%A9tention-du-marabout-komani-tanapo>.

<sup>175</sup> J. Czerep, *Sahel States Opt for Negotiations with Jihadists*, "PISM Bulletin" no. 103 (2020), 23.06.2022, <https://www.pism.pl/publications/sahel-states-opt-for-negotiations-with-jihadists>.

<sup>176</sup> This was the case, for example, of an American nun kidnapped in Burkina Faso who was freed through the mediation of the Niger authorities in September 2022, see: W. Nasr, *Religieuse américaine libérée au Niger: 'La stratégie du président Bazoum porte ses fruits'*, "France24", 6.09.2022, <https://www.france24.com/fr/afrique/20220906-religieuse-am%C3%A9ricaine-lib%C3%A9r%C3%A9e-au-niger-la-strat%C3%A9gie-du-pr%C3%A9sident-bazoum-porte-ses-fruits>.

<sup>177</sup> *Mali: Army, Wagner Group Atrocities Against Civilians*, Human Rights Watch, 28.03.2024, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/03/28/mali-army-wagner-group-atrocities-against-civilians>.



The development of the AC is also influenced by the **situation in Russia itself** and related to the course of the war in Ukraine. The broad plans associated with this formation are based on a positive scenario for Russia in terms of the development of the war situation, which will allow it to freely dispose of its personnel reserves. However, this is a tentative assumption. In mid-April this year, information emerged indicating that Gen. Averyanov had failed to meet the Kremlin’s deadlines for the development of the AC, and that the Russian government even intended to withdraw some troops from Africa to the Belgorod region, where they would counter pro-Ukrainian operations.<sup>178</sup> The same was supposed to be the reason for the delay in the start of the mission in Niger and may have encouraged the reactivation of recruitment for missions to Africa under the old WG banner. The latter’s Africa-oriented propaganda activity increased after the official AC Telegram channel stopped posting on 3 May. Also, heated arguments between mercenary-linked bloggers on what is going on in CAR may have reflected frictions within the security establishment about the role of Africa within the states’ priorities. While *VChK-OGPU*, considered close to security services, claimed to have learned that key commanders Dmitry “Salem” Podolskiy (the former WG’s Assault Detachment) and “Iceman” were to be withdrawn from CAR to Ukraine,<sup>179</sup> the *African Initiative*-linked Artem Blinov suggested on his Telegram the former deliberately amplified rumours to hurt the well-meaning CAR-based troops’ image.<sup>180</sup> Wherever the truth was in this case, the story was a reminder that interference by the Kremlin, or the command conducting the war in Ukraine, in the AC’s organisation can be anticipated if they feel that the dispersal of Russian forces at any given time is more of a burden than a service to Russian strategic interests.

It is also unclear whether the publication in early May of a video recorded in Kyrgyzstan of a new structure, the *Central Asia Initiative*,<sup>181</sup> modelled on the *African Initiative* and featuring its personnel (Lukovenko), is evidence of the latter’s success or a harbinger of a crisis. On the one hand, it indicates that the new model of presence in Africa is promising enough to take its elements **to other parts of the world**. On the other hand, in the Prigozhin era, the analogous expansion of the Shugaley-led FZNC’s activities into Afghanistan had the effect of shifting the weight of its interest closer to Russia’s borders and weakening its activity in the African direction. A similar evolution may be in store for the AC’s support structures, as well as for the Corps itself.

<sup>178</sup> “ВЧК-ОГПУ” Telegram account, 15.04.2024, <https://t.me/vchkogpu/47562>.

<sup>179</sup> “ВЧК-ОГПУ” Telegram account, 16.05.2024, <https://t.me/vchkogpu/48205>.

<sup>180</sup> “Страх и ненависть в Бамако (ARTEM BLINOV)” Telegram account, 16.05.2024, <https://t.me/ortemblinov/826>.

<sup>181</sup> *О политике Великобритании в Центральной Азии (интервью с Динмухамедом Алмамбетовым)*, “Central Asia Initiative” YouTube account, 3.05.2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mSPywbMiDKo>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- Countries and international organisations (e.g., UK, Lithuania, Ukraine, Canada, OSCE, NATO Parliamentary Assembly, European Parliament) that have recognised the Wagner Group as a terrorist organisation or transnational criminal organisation (U.S.) should extend this endorsement to the AC, the heir and continuation of WG.
- Despite sanctions imposed by the EU, U.S., UK, Canada, Australia, or Japan on individuals and entities linked to WG, the Prigozhin-led structure successfully avoided their consequences through a series of intermediaries and front companies around the world. One of the reasons for this was a lack of Western coordination, resulting in gaps in sanctions regimes and too slow action. By the time sanctions were introduced, WG already had further companies through which it could continue its activities. In order to increase the effectiveness of countering AC's activities with sanctions, Western countries should share more intelligence on AC-linked economic actors (especially their structure and real stakeholders), as well as coordinate the imposition of sanctions and speed up the process.
- Western countries considering extending sanctions lists, as well as strategic communication units in the EU, should take steps to target structures linked to the *African Initiative*, the main transmission belt of Russia's (dis)information activities in Africa.
- The EU should use the negative perception of AC activity in some countries, such as Algeria and Mauritania, to communicate in the African direction, highlighting the lack of respect for the sovereignty of these countries (as a counterpoint to the Russian "sovereigntist" narrative).
- To delegitimise the Russian narrative in Africa, especially vis-à-vis the model of governance that characterises the AES bloc, the example of the Senegalese elections will be useful. It indicates that the democratic framework remains relevant for Africans expecting to realise the national interest and improve their position vis-à-vis foreign partners. To achieve change in this direction, it is not necessary to entrust unchecked power to the military and invite AC. This undermines the Russian narrative of pro-Russian coups as an "African Spring".
- Western states may consider taking more active measures against AC, such as cyberattacks to disrupt infrastructure used for disinformation campaigns (including troll and bot farms in Africa). Such operations will not escalate the West's conflict with Russia, but will limit the freedom of action of an aggressor conducting offensive information manipulation and interference against NATO, EU, or African states.

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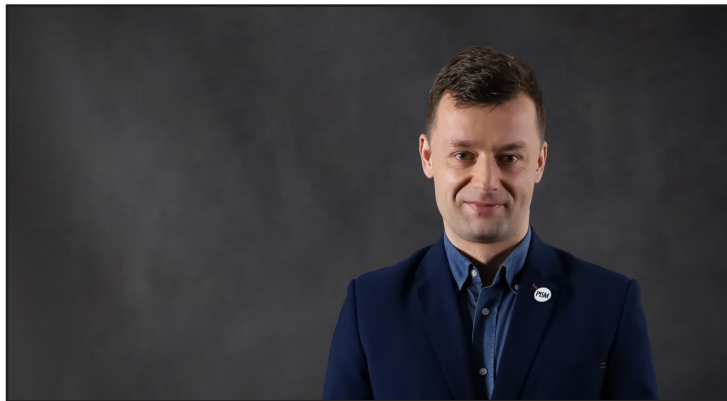
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