

Vilnius University

INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE

Eastern European and Russian Studies Programme

AUŠRA GRAŽYTĖ

2nd year

RUSSIA'S COME BACK TO AFRICA: AN ENDEAVOUR AIMED AT MITIGATING  
THE PREVAILING INFLUENCE OF THE WEST

MASTER'S THESIS

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2025.01.10

Vilnius

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## **BIBLIOGRAPHICAL ENTRY**

Gražytė A., Russia's come back to Africa: an endeavour aimed at mitigating the prevailing influence of the west: Master in eastern European and Russian studies program, Master thesis / Vilnius University Institute of International Relations and Political Science; tutor: Dr. Laurynas Jonavičius; Vilnius, 2025. – 57 pages

**Key words:** Africa, Africa's shatter belts, Russia, Moscow, Kremlin, Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, engagement, West, influence, Wagner group, mercenaries, narrative.

**Summary:** This master thesis analyses Russia's engagement in African shatter belts as an endeavour aimed at mitigating the influence of the West. In order to explain the Russia's used efforts to minimize Western influence in Africa's shatter belts, the dependency theory and transimperialism were synthesized to provide a comprehensive framework. While the analysis of post and pre-USSR periods provide understanding of Russia's contemporary politics and strategy. Furthermore, the research focuses on two case studies of Moscow's engagement: Mali and Central African Republic. The research provides an understanding on Russia's used tools to gain its influence as well as their effects on mitigation of Western influence and overall stability of analysed states.

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## INTRODUCTION

The carried out diplomatic outreaches through the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in 2019, considerably improved Russia's image among African states<sup>1</sup> and 2022 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's lengthy tour across multiple African countries<sup>2</sup> further increased opportunities for Moscow to foster amicable partnerships. This comeback to Africa coincides with the deteriorated relations with the West in the light of Moscow's pursued hostile foreign policy as well as annexation of Crimea in 2014<sup>3</sup> and most notably Russia's incursion into Ukraine in February 2022<sup>4</sup>. These actions have led to Russia's attempt to assert itself as dominant power in order to mitigate the risk of international isolation following sanctions from the West, which would also lend legitimacy to its actions in Ukraine. Therefore, in the complex landscape of international relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Russian Federation, confronted with the West, has turned once again to seek alliances in Africa.

In states such as Mali and Central African Republic, where for years the West had dominant influence, given the colonial history as well as states' reliance on economic and military aid from the Western nations, Russia is trying to change this geopolitical landscape by positioning itself as an alternative ally. Moscow's choice to seek partnership with these states coincides with the Mali's and Central African Republic's beneficial geopolitical position, which opens the door to Western and Central African regions and provides opportunity to gain access to natural resources, that these states are rich of<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, its involvement with the mentioned Africa's shatter belts coincides with the deteriorated political stability and security situation as well as countries' worsening relations with the Western powers. In light of this, Moscow employs its military instruments, most

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<sup>1</sup> Deutsche Welle, "Vladimir Putin opens first Russia-Africa Summit", October 23, 2019

<sup>2</sup> Kester Kenn Klomegah, "Sergey Lavrov embarks on geopolitical lecturing tour to Africa", Modern Diplomacy, January 24, 2023

<sup>3</sup>"Russia and the West:What Went Wrong and Can We Do Better?," DGAP, n.d., <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/russia-and-west-what-went-wrong-and-can-we-do-better>.

<sup>4</sup> Mathieu Droin and Tina Dolbaia, "Russia is still progressing in Africa. What's the limit?," CSIS, August 15, 2023

<sup>5</sup> Joe Inwood and Jake Tacchi, "Wagner in Africa: How the Russian mercenary group has rebranded", BBC, February 20, 2024

notably its PMC Wagner group<sup>6</sup> as well as economic giants such as Rosatom<sup>7</sup> to provide more alternative options for the states. Furthermore, by claiming to be the great power, that argues for a multipolar world order counterbalancing western “neocolonial” policy<sup>8</sup>, Moscow tries to be even more appealing to Africa’s shatter belts. This calculated approach sees Russia stepping in when Western influence wanes, often in the aftermath of political turmoil or strained diplomatic ties.

Nevertheless, Kremlin’s engagement in the mentioned African shatter belts using soft power tools, and military means, by pushing historic grievances, and also employing economic agreements, in areas rich in natural resources seems to be only a conciliatory front of Russia’s long-term strategy. In its quest for renewed influence, Kremlin firstly seeks to promote and defend its national interests that are rooted in the notion of Russia’s “special” role of shaping international agenda<sup>9</sup>. Thus, all of the employed tools seem to mostly serve the Russian interest rather than the recipient states - at the price of the long-term stability and independence. Interestingly, the effectiveness of Russia’s efforts can be seen particularly when examining the voting patterns of African states in the 11<sup>th</sup> Emergency Special Session, held by United Nations General Assembly. There 26 African states either voted against, abstained or were not even in the room during the voting for condemnation of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, demanding immediate withdrawal of Russian military forces<sup>10</sup>. Thus, **the research problem** lies in Russia’s used mechanisms that are attractive for the unstable African regimes, that have colonial grievances against the West as they aim to stay in power in the short term, but it is safe to assume that, in the long term, these African countries are doomed to humanitarian crises, dependence on Russia and loss of sovereignty.

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<sup>6</sup> Martin Russell, Eric Pichon “Russia in Africa: A new arena for geopolitical competition”, European Parliament, Members’ Research Service, November 2019

<sup>7</sup> African Energy Week. “AEW 2024: Rosatom’s SMR Technology Can Drive Africa’s Just Energy Transition,” November 7, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Tass, “Russia Has Never Acted as Colonizer, Unlike West — Putin,” TASS, September 12, 2023, <https://tass.com/economy/1673569>.

<sup>9</sup>Gregory Carleton, “Why Russia thinks it’s exceptional”, The Conversation, October 18, 2017

<sup>10</sup> Development Reimagined, “Infographic: How did African countries vote on Russia and Ukraine at the UN?”, Development Reimagined, February 23, 2023

**Research question:** How Russia using its engagement in Mali and Central Africa Republic minimises Western Influence in Africa's shatter belts and gains benefits?

**Research aim:** To analyse Russia's strategic engagement through its soft power, economic, and military means to reduce Western influence in Africa's shatter belts - Mali and Central African Republic – leading to dependency on Russia.

**Defended statement:** Russia's engagement in Africa's shatter belts (Mali and Central African Republic) minimizes Western influence and increases Russia's economic and political benefits, at the price of the long-term stability and independence of analysed Africa's shatter belts.

**Research objectives:**

1. To synthesize dependency theory and transimperialism in order to explain Russia's used efforts to minimize Western influence in Africa's shatter belts.
2. To examine the historical context of Russia's engagement in Africa in the context of Cold War and post-Soviet era, focusing on how Moscow's approach evolved through the years.
3. To analyse used mechanism in Russia's engagement in Mali and Central African Republic, such as: 1) military cooperation; 2) economic agreements; 3) soft power and evaluate their effect in mitigating the influence of the West and ability to provide additional benefits for Moscow.

**The object of the research:** Russia's efforts to mitigate Western influence through its engagement in Africa's shatter belts.

**Methodology:**

In order to conduct in-depth analysis of Russia's come back to Africa as an endeavour aimed at mitigating the influence of the West, qualitative research methods will be used. Firstly, case studies of the geopolitical dynamics involving Russia in the Central African Republic (CAR), and Mali will be used to conduct a thorough and detailed examination of Russia's engagement in Africa's shatter belts, offering contextual grasp of the topic. Case studies will take into account

relevant circumstances, and events surrounding opportunities used by Moscow to increase its influence. Furthermore, following independent variables were identified: 1) military tools; 2) economic agreements; 3) soft power tools such as narrative projection and public diplomacy efforts; that all are used in Russia's engagement in Mali and Central African Republic. While the dependent variables include: 1) weakened West influence in Mali and Central African Republic; 2) gained economic benefits for Russia; 3) gained support in international arena (specifically – beneficial votes in UN General Assembly voting); as well as 4) increased Mali's and Central African Republic's dependence on Russia, which impacts states' sovereignty, stability and overall security. Secondly, content analysis is going to be conducted through the examination of Russia's leaders' public speeches, official statements and pro-Russian media coverage of Moscow's engagement in Africa. The second research method was chosen for the purpose of getting a better understanding of the efficacy and ramifications of Russia's narrative formation in the Africa's shatter belts and its impact on power dynamics. By synthesising the recurring narratives, a cohesive understanding of common themes and patterns will be distilled. Lastly, document analysis will be used to examine historical background of Kremlin's engagement in Africa through unclassified United State's Central Intelligence Agency's documents as well as to understand regional implications that further create opportunities for Russia to ensure its influence via Africa's regional organizations' normative instruments, thus with this method focusing on contextual aspects. The mentioned qualitative research methods, that are going to be used in the research are crucial for conducting the analysis from a variety of angles on Russian Federation's engagement in Mali and Central African Republic. Through combining these methods and analysing, comparing the identified variables the research will gain comprehensive insights on the research problem.

### **Literature review:**

Despite Kremlin's slow resurgence in Africa since the 2000s, with its significant increase after the beginning of Putin's second presidency term, when Russia began to position itself as a counter force to the West, only in the past few years there has been a light increase of research that would focus on this phenomenon. However, most of the available literature is

expert-written by thinktanks, rather than scientific literature, which signals a lack of scientific research on this topic; therefore, this literature review will balance the existing scientific and expert work. Furthermore, even in the limited literature a lack of consensus between the scholars is noticeable, considering the motivation itself as well as how much influence Russia can have in Africa, this is due to the fact that, despite Russia being one of the main arms exporters as well as its PMC's involvement with continents elites, Moscow's economic presence is limited if compared to other great powers<sup>11</sup>. Another issue, present in the scholarly works is that a clear definition of what it entails for one state to have influence on another is often absent. Therefore, before delving into these various viewpoints of different scholars, it is crucial to have thorough grasp of what influence is. According to Robert Dahl it is a relation between actors through which the intentions, goals or preferences of one or more individuals affect the behaviour or predispositions to act of others in a way that it aligns with the intentions, goals or preferences of the influence wielders<sup>12</sup>. Such definition acknowledges the complexity of process formed by interactions between various actors' intentions.

The motivation behind Russia's comeback to Africa dives scholars into three major "camps". First "camp" of scholars falls under the believe that the state's focus is on economic interests and competition with other great power - China<sup>13</sup>. This argument is supported by Paul Stronski who to further support this claim analyses Russia's trade with Africa, which shows that the trade is indeed growing. However, it needs to be understood that the official number do not capture all of Russia's economic endeavours in the continent (security services, arms trade)<sup>14</sup>. The second group of individuals, labels Kremlin's motivation as mainly intended for gaining political leverage to

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<sup>11</sup> Steven Gruzd, Samuel Ramani, and Cayley Clifford, "Russia in Africa: Who Is Courting Whom?," *South African Journal of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (October 2, 2022): 401–5,

<sup>12</sup>Emily Meierding and Rachel Sigman, "Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition", *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6,4 (2021)

<sup>12</sup> Paul Stronski, "Late to the party: Russia's return to Africa", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 16, 2019

<sup>13</sup> Jidefor Adibe, "What does Russia really want from Africa?", *Brookings*, November 14, 2019

<sup>14</sup> Graeme P. Herd, "Understanding Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment", *George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies*, 2021

undermine influence of the West<sup>15</sup>. Lastly, the final “camp” combines both mentioned motivations, which is predominantly argued by Joseph Siegle. According to him Kremlin by managing a modest level of trade, using misinformation campaigns and mercenaries to back marginalized governmental officials strategically support diplomacy focused on the elite<sup>16</sup>. Looking to this through the lens of Transimperialism framework, which refers to power projection by adapting traditional imperialistic strategies to the globalization processes, only strengthens J. Siegle argument, as the state in order to increase its power and influence uses the combination of transnational elite networks and invests in important economic sectors, military assistance and diplomatic engagements<sup>17</sup>, thus meaning that Russia creates an environment which serves its strategic interests. Therefore, taking into consideration of all three presented “camps” it seems most plausible that motivation behind Russia’s comeback to Africa is combined of economic interests and gaining political leverage to undermine influence of the West.

Then again, taking into consideration, the amount of influence Russia has in Africa at least half of literature suggests that it is quite limited. According to Kimberly Marten, who acknowledges the increase of Russian influence in the region, states that it continues to stay limited. K. Marten argues that the longstanding economic presence of other global powers, such as China, European Union and United States in the continent limits Kremlin’s influence as it can find it difficult to establish a significant presence as it lacks the economic allure<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, Emmanuel Dreyfus argues that military activities, such as agreements with African governmental entities may not be sustainable due to Russian Federation’s own internal issues as well as the continent's poor standing on Kremlin's foreign policy agenda<sup>19</sup>. These sorts of arguments presented

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<sup>15</sup> Meierding and Sigman, “Understanding the Mechanisms of International Influence in an Era of Great Power Competition.”

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Siegle, “Russia in Africa: Undermining Democracy Through Elite Capture – Africa Center,” Africa Center, March 7, 2022

<sup>17</sup> Celeste A. Wallander, “Russian transimperialism and its implications”, *The Washington Quarterly*, (2007):107–122

<sup>18</sup> Kimberly Marten, “Russia’s Back in Africa: Is the Cold War Returning?”, *The Washington Quarterly*, (2019):155-170

<sup>19</sup> Emmanuel Dreyfus, “Moscow’s Limited Prospects in Sub-Saharan Africa,” *Kennan Cable*, 47(2020)

by scholars collectively indicate the various variables that limit Russian influence in Africa's shatter-belts.

However, Joseph Siege counters these ideas by stating that these types of assessments often do not pay enough attention to the extent of instability that can be created with low number of resources in African shatter-belts. The underfunded governments, fragility and susceptibility of the states as well as general stability of the continent is a "great" ground for Kremlins pursuit of targeted goals<sup>20</sup>. The coopting of political actors, gaining access to resources can affect the long-term stability and self-governance of different states. Ironically, the private military company (PMC) Wagner group, which is state funded by Russia have sent troops to "suppress instability" in states such as Mali, etc. However, a chance that unrest may continue is due to the fact that Wagner has a strong motivation to maintain a certain amount of instability in order to gain profit and justify its existence. Moreover, as the private military company's agreements with the mentioned states frequently entail arms sales, access to resources, J. Siege argues that Kremlin's interests in the continent live on the continuation of instability. Therefore, Russia's "mercenary" diplomacy approach, that includes the spread of false information, the sale of weapons, the use of private military company and etc. highlights that Kremlin's priorities do not include African stability. As according to Wendy Williams, the typically implemented patron-client basis deviates from the goals of most African residents as it poses a direct danger to democratic values, affecting development as well as security<sup>21</sup>, which further proves J. Siege argument.

Continuing further, one of the most significant elements in literature on Russia's foreign policy is its anti-colonial and anti-western stance in Africa. In order to explain this narrative, scholar Abbott A. Brayton, goes back to the Cold War period pointing out the beginning of Kremlin's narrative posing itself as a counter part to the "old colonial powers" and building relations with African leaders, promoting communism against capitalism, thus promising a better

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<sup>20</sup> Graeme P. Herd, "Understanding Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment"

<sup>21</sup> Wendy Williams, "Shifting Borders: Africa's displacement crisis and its security implications", Africa Center for Strategic Studies, No.8, (2019):21-36

future<sup>22</sup>. Yet again, one could argue that this strategy as now was an economic and geopolitical smoke screen for the actual goals Soviet Russia tried to accomplish. Therefore, in the complex landscape of international relations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Russia continues the anti-colonial stance. According to S. Ramani, Russia chooses to provide already mentioned military and political assistance to the regimes in Africa, which are perceived as “marginalized” by the Western powers<sup>23</sup>. This can be seen in the mentioned cases of Central African Republic, Mali. For instance, after almost a decade since the beginning of the Operation Barkhane, junta, ruling Mali, demanded French troop withdrawal and increased anti-west narrative<sup>24</sup>. According to Mali’s prime minister France “stabbed” Mali in the back with “neo-colonialist, condescending, paternalist, and vengeful policies”, which further pushed them to look for different alternatives, thus seeking cooperation with Russian Federation, which lead to the deployment of Russia’s paramilitary organization<sup>25</sup>. However, the usage of military assistance plays another role in Russia’s engagement in Africa. The state has a large military presence in Africa’s shatter belts, which comes to the region promising security and stability, which the West was not able to gain, as argued by M. Galeotti the actual motivation for this presence is to obtain profitable mining contracts and other financial interests in exchange of military assistance<sup>26</sup>. Additionally, businesses from Russia have obtained large concessions for Africa’s natural minerals (e.g. gold and diamonds in Central African Republic)<sup>27</sup>, which in reality have little or no gain for the local economy as the agreements are mostly carried out through illegal means, thus favouring foreign oligarchs and only elites in African nations. By gaining control over critical sectors and minimizing direct host state’s government’s engagement, further increases Kremlin’s power<sup>28</sup>. One could argue that the weak

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<sup>22</sup> Abbott A. Brayton. “Soviet Involvement in Africa”, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, No. 17, (1979) 253–269

<sup>23</sup> Ramani, S., "Russia in Africa: A New Arena for Geopolitical Competition." *The Diplomat*, (2020)

<sup>24</sup> William Drozdiak, “The French just gave us another lesson in how not to fight terrorism”, *Washington Post*, August 29, 2022

<sup>25</sup> RFI.fr, “Mali post-coup PM denounces France, salutes Russia at UN”, *France 24*, September 24 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Galeotti, M. "Armies Without States: Private Military Contractors and Their Implications for International Security." *Cambridge University Press*, (2019)

<sup>27</sup> Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, "Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, (2018):4-32.

<sup>28</sup> Rauta, V. "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict: Fighting by Other Means in the Twenty-First Century." *Routledge*, (2020).

governance of juntas' regimes further enables Russia to gain all possible benefits with little or no monitoring, hence facilitating the exploitation of their own states. All of the arguments above, are strengthened by scholars A. Makarychev and V. Morozov, who state that Russia's engagement in Africa is mostly about the exploitation of resources and economic gain rather than being a contributor of stability and security for the region, which it initially poses itself as<sup>29</sup>.

Overall, taking into consideration the introduced literature on the Russia's engagement in the Africa's shatter belts show possible different motivations behind its strategy, focusing on the combination of economic interests and gaining political leverage to undermine influence of the West. It also shows the complexity of Moscow's used tools distinguishing the main ones: 1) economic exploitation; 2) military assistance; 3) soft power through anti-colonial narrative and diplomatic means. One could argue that Russia most likely pushes on self-serving agenda to gain certain benefits as well as mitigate influence of the West in the African shatter belts (Mali and Central African Republic) despite portraying itself as a counter force to the West's neocolonial policies and becoming the "saviour/protector" of security and stability in the continent. However, as the majority of literature argues that Russia's influence in Africa's shatter belts is rather limited, especially considering the lack of economic trade, the argument provided by scholar J. Siegel that counters it by suggesting that despite the low number of resources can be create instability. Thus, the following research of Russia's engagement will expand on this idea, following the fragility, susceptibility and overall existing vulnerabilities of the states that Russia uses for its own strategic agenda, including the mitigation of Western influence.

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<sup>29</sup> Andrey Makarychev and Viatcheslav Morozov, "Multilateralism, Multipolarity, and Beyond: A menu of Russia's policy strategies", *Global Governance*, No. 17, (2011):353–373.

## **1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In pursuance of simplifying the complexity of international relations, strategies of states and their relations to one another, researchers tend to generally apply theories and different approaches in their work, as it lets to accomplish clarifying information and enhance the analysis of the topic more critically. Therefore, selection and examination of the certain framework and its correlation to Russia's motivation behind the engagement with Africa's shatter belts (Mali and Central African Republic) is essential to provide plausible and a new insight into the research. As this topic requires a more comprehensive approach, a dual framework that combines transimperialism and dependency theory is going to be used. These two frameworks allow examining the complexity of the topic through a more thorough lens as transimperialism sheds light on the state's strategy and means used to expand its global influence while maintaining centralized political authority, while the dependency theory helps to analyse the structural inequalities and power imbalances, thus forming a solid theoretical foundation of the research on Russia's comeback to Africa.

### **1.1.The core of dependency theory**

Dependency theory, popularised between 1960s and 1970s, has regained its relevance and scholarly interest in recent years due to global inequalities and increasing poverty. It originated as an approach proposed by Argentinian economic Raul Prebisch to analyse the Latin America's underdevelopment<sup>30</sup>, looking into the impacts of colonialism on the socioeconomic and political structures. According to Frantz Fanon, in its core, the theory focused on how colonial powers initially created a system in order to advance their economic and geopolitical objectives, creating the ground for systemic inequalities<sup>31</sup>. Overtime theory evolved into a broader framework aimed at understanding the core issues and reasons of underdevelopment. As of now, theory's application to present economic imbalances, calls into question the relation between economic expansion of "core" or wealthy states and underdevelopment of "periphery" or poor states. Unlike trickle-down

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<sup>30</sup> Andre Munro, "Dependency Theory", Encyclopedia Britannica, October 1, 2024

<sup>31</sup> Parvati S, "Dependency Theory: Definition, Approaches, Examples, Limitations", Sociology Group, September 26, 2022

economic theory, that hypothesises about natural inequality reduction through economic growth, which leads to wealth flowing from rich to poor, dependency theory argues that systematic obstacles for “periphery” states are created as the “core” state uses periphery one’s resources, markets to fuel their own benefits, thus creating a fundamentally uneven relationship<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, this theory comes into relevance when analysing economic and power asymmetries as well as systematic obstacles, that foster dependencies in 21st century.

The major points of dependency theory revolve around the structural inequalities of the global arena. This drives from the main idea of the theory, considering concept of underdevelopment, which according to it is a deliberate exploitation of resources from poorer states to benefit the wealthy ones, thus also dividing global economy into 1) mentioned wealthy and highly industrialized states, that concentrate power and advancement; and 2) the poorer states, that face dependency. Moreover, theory points out the unequal integration into the global economy, as the main role of “periphery” states is to supply their resources, cheap labour, while the “core” state control capital accumulation, technological innovations and etc., resulting in intrinsically uneven exchanges. Lastly, theory emphasises that such inequality occurs due to formed networks of poorer and wealthier states’ elites<sup>33</sup>. Government officials, business leaders or the ruling class representatives frequently form local elites, that can economically or politically benefit from resource extraction or trade deals that evidently harm the general population. Due to this, structural inequalities stay entrenched as powerful entities can oppose any attempts to alter such system.

Despite the fact that the traditional concept of dependency theory, indicates that “core” states are the rich capitalistic countries of the West, in the context of Russia’s and Africa’s shatter belt relations, Moscow has economic, political and military counterweight over its partners in Africa. Furthermore, as Russia’s activities are compliant to those of the “core” states, thus challenges the original concept, particularly considering its exploitation of poorer regions or states, which is not

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<sup>32</sup> Olusola Samuel Oyetunde, “Is Dependency Theory Relevant in the Twenty-First Century?” E-International Relations, August 17, 2022

<sup>33</sup> Olusola Samuel Oyetunde, “Is Dependency Theory Relevant in the Twenty-First Century?”

a new phenomenon for Kremlin, considering its imperial and soviet history. During the imperial era, it significantly relied on resource extraction and exploitation of local population from occupied regions in Central Asia, Caucasus and Eastern Europe. Moreover, while advocating anti-colonialism Soviet Union operated similarly, further exploiting its occupied regions to fuel its own development, military and other goals<sup>34</sup>, which established the groundwork for the ongoing Russia's engagement with periphery states in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By utilizing its economic, political and military capabilities, Russia's reengagement in Africa comes in no surprise, as state conducts arms deals, resource extraction agreements as well as ensures strategic political, elite alliances. For instance, Moscow uses its private military company's presence in Africa's shatter belts as a tool to affect the already mentioned elite networks in order to pursue its own strategic agenda, as it promises to assist the leaders of the states to stay in power in exchange of accessibility to their rich natural resources. Therefore, all of the above-mentioned tools and actions reveal patterns of exploitation and increased reliance, as local elites allow resource extraction in exchange for political and military backing, in this way distancing them further from the West. Furthermore, as "core" states are characterized by the global influence, this can also be applied to Moscow, looking into the African nations' voting results, that were mentioned in the beginning of this research, which show growing support for Russia and proves its success in influence cultivation in the continent.

## **1.2. Transimperialism framework**

While classical imperialism mainly entails territorial "conquest" and rule, transimperialism, before mostly used to analyse the complexity of imperial history and its processes<sup>35</sup>, in the changing dynamics of global politics of 21<sup>st</sup> century, has arisen as a vital paradigm to explain strategic posture of states, that use globalization in their favour to implement their imperialistic ambitions. This is done by selective integration as state engages in foreign trade and investments,

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<sup>34</sup>Grégory Dufaud, "Repressed Peoples in the Soviet Union", *Encyclopédie D'histoire Numérique De L'Europe*, June 22, 2020

<sup>35</sup> Daniel Hedinger and Nadin Hee, "Transimperial History - Connectivity, Cooperation and Competition", *Journal of Modern European History* 16, No. 4, (2018):429-452

while consciously avoiding undertakings such as transparency, the rule of law etc.<sup>36</sup>, that provide no direct benefits, using globalization solely for one's interests. As these actions oppose liberal democracy principles it is no surprise that transimperialism approach is usual to authoritarian regimes. Such states, characterized by opaque governance and centralized authority, expands their domestic system of rent-seeking into global arena, maximizing one's gains<sup>37</sup> as state forms transnational links with foreign elites (enterprises, governments and etc.) creating networks that serve as means for the state to reinforce its wealth and influence through closed relationships. It is done through pursuing bilateral cooperation with weaker authoritarian states, that usually need financial or military aid to ensure its regime's survival<sup>38</sup>, thus granting the "more powerful" state access to its profitable sectors. Thus, usage of economic means, cultivation of elite networks and bilateral agreements, as well as adopting globalization to one's advantage do not only ensure financial benefits but also it allows to gain international influence for the "powerful" authoritarian regimes, that suits their larger strategic goals.

The presented characteristics of transimperialism framework align with the case of Russian Federation. The state is pursuing its geopolitical goals via engaging in global commerce and investment into profitable sectors, where it retains control, merging with international elite networks, deploying its paramilitary organization and cultivating relationships through diplomatic means. Furthermore, Russia's integration into international economy entails "dodging" certain factors of liberalization that are part of competitive market<sup>39</sup>. This assertive strategic activity on a global scale has allowed Kremlin to expand its patrimonial authoritarian regime beyond its borders, expanding its sphere of influence by establishing transnational networks with international elites. In case of Russia's engagement in Africa's shatter belts (Mali and Central African Republic), by offering military backing for regimes, employing diplomatic means and by

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<sup>36</sup> Celeste A. Wallander, "Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications"

<sup>37</sup> Cfi Team, "Rent-seeking", Corporate Finance Institute

<sup>38</sup> Christina Cottiero and Cassandra Emmons, "Understanding and Interrupting Authoritarian Collaboration", International foundation for electoral systems, (2024):10-27.

<sup>39</sup> Celeste A. Wallander, "Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications"

forging opaque partnerships and exclusive networks of dependents, Russia is able to increase its geopolitical power and oppose Western reform initiatives.

### **1.3. Russia’s strategic engagement in Africa through the lenses of transimperialism and dependency theory**

Having delved separately into dependency theory and transimperialism by providing the main ideas of each framework, this subchapter provides examination of Russia’s reengagement in Africa by merging these two approaches. Dependency theory focuses on power imbalances between “core” and “peripheral” states, that are based on unequal economic links, while transimperialism highlights uses globalization for ones’ benefit. Therefore, by combining these two frameworks an in-depth analysis can be done as it shows the dual character of Russia’s engagement in Africa, based on its well-established old imperialistic tactics that are tailored to the changing nature of contemporary global dynamics.

One of the key aspects of Russia’s strategy is the use of military support, which consists of deployment of Russian Expeditionary Corps, also known as Africa Corps, as well as Wagner Group and arms sales to African states. As Russia supports authoritarian regimes, that are not supported by the West, it deploys its mercenary groups in order to provide security for the elites and help them maintain political “stability” in their states. In exchange Moscow gets resource extraction contracts, mainly for gold and diamonds<sup>40</sup>. Such, not transparent commercial agreements again tether the “periphery” states’ economic destiny to the sole interest of Kremlin and the elite networks<sup>41</sup> especially considering Africa's resource-based economy. The provision of preferential access to valuable natural resources for Moscow ensures “patron-client” dynamic as elites need backing to preserve power, while the “core” state not only financially benefits but increases its strategic dominance in the area, which is backed by Transimperialism as according to the framework this is a form of Russia’s geopolitical strategy. As mentioned before, arms sales are

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<sup>40</sup> Nicodemus Minde, “Russia’s Africa Corps – More Than Old Wine in a New Bottle”, Institute for Security Studies | ISS Africa, March 7, 2024

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Siegle, “Russia in Africa: Undermining Democracy Through Elite Capture – Africa Center,” Africa Center, March 7, 2022

another key aspect of Russia's military support to Africa. Despite not being the main supplier, Russia uses it as another method to guarantee that African nations are further reliant on Kremlin for security and future defence needs<sup>42</sup>. These factors embody dependency theory's idea that powerful states utilize its tools to keep "periphery" states reliant on ongoing external support.

In addition to providing military support in order to get access to African states' resources, Kremlin uses its business initiatives and investments in Africa to increase the reliance. For instance, Russia uses its state-owned enterprises such as Rosatom, that can offer technological help to African nations<sup>43</sup> in order to emerge itself in major sectors such as nuclear energy as well as establish rent-seeking opportunities. As Kremlin positions itself as a crucial partner, it uses its industrial and technological strengths to develop long-term dependency. This is due to the fact that despite such involvement providing certain benefits for African nations it ensures that "periphery" states would continue to rely on "core" states technology and expertise for further development, which aligns with dependency theory.

Moreover, Moscow uses soft power tactics, through its declared anti-colonial posture, through diplomatic channels and programs such as the Russia-Africa Summit, as Kremlin portrays itself as a friendly alternative to the West, who cares about continents security situation, economy and development<sup>44</sup>, while in reality these mechanisms are used to conceal the actual power inequalities between Russia and its partners. Moscow's presence also influences Africa's state evolvement in continental organizations like African Union and Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)<sup>45</sup> as it creates conspiracy theories and narratives that discourages Africa's shatter belts to continue their involvement or reengage with these organisations. For instance, ECOWAS encouraged states such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to rethink their decisions to withdraw from the organisation in order to maintain some sort of relations with the

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Arms Exports to Sub-Saharan Africa: No Longer the Main Actor", Italian Institute for International Political Studies, September 30, 2024

<sup>43</sup> African Energy Week, "AEW 2024: Rosatom's SMR Technology Can Drive Africa's Just Energy Transition," November 7, 2024

<sup>44</sup> Mikhail Komin, "Deconstructing Russia's Anti-colonial Posturing in the Global South." European Council on Foreign Relations, November 27, 2024.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Naumann Foundation. "ECOWAS: Russian Advance in Africa?", January 2, 2024

region, yet as Russia began to spread the narrative that ECOWAS is closely linked to the West, trying to impose the neocolonial policies, the states have become even more sceptical about their memberships, which lead to a further isolation<sup>46</sup>. This is supported by transimperialism as according to the framework Russia extents its patrimonial authoritarianism globally by using mentioned cooperation with elite networks and pushing on patron-client relations based on power, reliance, and rent seeking<sup>47</sup>. Furthermore, according to the dependency theory the “core” state usually leverages “periphery” state’s governments to further core’s geopolitical agenda, which is also supported by transimperialism framework through the lens of use of elite networks. This is evident in Russia-Africa dynamic as Moscow uses its close connections with Africa’s political elites to gain support in international organizations, such as United Nations, especially considering the crucial topic of war in Ukraine<sup>48</sup>.

*Table 1 Comparison of frameworks; Source: made by the author*

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Dependency theory</b>	<b>Transimperialism</b>
<b>Main idea</b>	Power imbalances between “core” and “peripheral” states, that are based on unequal links	Power projection by adapting traditional imperialistic strategies to the globalization processes
<b>Tools</b>	Resource extraction, arms trade to foster dependency.	Elite networks; military support; soft power; rent-seeking;

Overall, by adopting combined approach to analyse Russia’s strategy, which is combined of projection of authority abroad and economic pragmatism, it shows how these Kremlin’s old imperial methods perpetuate reliance of African states, while also continuing the cycle of inequity, despite Russia portraying itself as a “saviour/protector” of security and stability in the region. Transimperialism and dependency theory highlight the dual characteristics of Russia’s engagement in Africa, as it emphasizes on use of globalization for one’s benefits, while ensuring reliance of “periphery” states, thus impeding the development of economic and political

<sup>46</sup>Al Jazeera, “Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Agree to Grace Period in ECOWAS Withdrawal,” Al Jazeera, December 15, 2024

<sup>47</sup> Celeste A. Wallander, “Russian Transimperialism and Its Implications”

<sup>48</sup> AfricaNews, “African Countries Divided Over UN Vote Against Russia.” Africanews, October 13, 2022

institutions as well as distancing them from the West. These mechanisms guarantee continuation of inequity cycle in the dynamics between Russia and African states.

## **2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF RUSSIA IN AFRICA**

From the 1950s, Russia, the then Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, began its involvement in Africa which became more evident with the spread of the anti-colonial movement in the continent. USSR provided military, ideological, and economic support to anticolonial groups and socialist-leaning governments<sup>49</sup>. This period developed strong ties with key African states, left a legacy of cooperation, and had a long-lasting impact on the continent's political and military scene. After the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia's presence dwindled, leaving a vacuum that was filled by other global powers such as China and the West. In order to understand the motivations and strategy behind Russia's resurgence in Africa from, the analysis of the historical context is required. This will lay the ground for the further analysis as history presents the prior relationships, strategic interests that may continue to shape Kremlin's posture in the presents. Therefore, this chapter is dedicated for the examination of Russia's historical background in Africa, dividing it into two subchapters to analyse Soviet Union's involvement from 1950s till its dissolution and Russian Federation relations in Africa after the dissolution of USSR in the early 1990s.

### **2.1. Soviet era engagements**

Following Soviet Union's early years, the regime paid little to no attention to African states, as it perceived them excessively undeveloped. However, after the beginning of independence movements in Sub-Saharan Africa, regime saw an opportunity to establish its influence in the place of old colonial powers. Nikita Khrushchev sought cooperation with the newly independent African governments by utilizing the spread of the anti-colonial movement in the continent and the narrative of socialism being a superior approach for growth<sup>50</sup>. Other major factors including that

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<sup>49</sup> Abbot A. Brayton, "Soviet Involvement in Africa." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 17, no. 2 (1979): 253–269

<sup>50</sup> Sebastian Seibt, "From Khrushchev's KGB to Putin: the deep roots of Russian influence in Africa", France 24, July 18, 2023

Africa had never seen a colonial power from communist state, admired Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' development and shared the hatred for capitalism, which in their eyes was interlinked with imperialism, helped to put Moscow in a more advantageous position with the newly formed governments in the continent. In order to fully secure its relations with the new states, Moscow pushed the idea that national freedom cannot be fully achieved unless the state initiates social and economic changes as well as cuts off all colonial ties<sup>51</sup>. This was done, despite state being socialist or capitalist as one can be always transformed and become more "progressive". Therefore, USSR tried to gain and maintain diplomatic ties with as many as possible Sub-Saharan African states to be able to locate as many of their own officials in the region as possible, who would not only carry out usual diplomatic matters, such as cultural or consular tasks but also gather intelligence as well as spread anti-western propaganda. According to unclassified Central Intelligence Agency's, the then National Intelligence Council's 1981 report, Moscow attempted to stop local governments from following the orientation of the West by using anti-Western narratives and heightening of lingering colonial resentment<sup>52</sup>.

Nonetheless, as Soviet Union had to tolerate regimes that did not fully align with their ideals in order to have influence over the Sub-Saharan region, it often caused problems. Policies that had the combination of socialistic, distinctive regional characteristics and sometimes even certain capitalistic elements were often adopted in such states which lead to transactional and conditional relationships as well as resistance of full-scale alignment with Communist monolith. Additionally, challenges and issues of the Cold War period followed Moscow to Africa, as both Soviets and Americans fought over the influence in global arena<sup>53</sup>. The geopolitical rivalry had a significant impact on the relations with the African states as "anti-Americanism" would often overshadow its anti-capitalistic aims, thus as mentioned before leading to the establishment of cooperation with ideologically not compatible regimes. However, the major events between 1960 and 1965 exposed

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<sup>51</sup> Jay Dee, "The Cold War in Independent Africa", Central College, 1993

<sup>52</sup> United States of America, Central Intelligence Agency, Soviet Policy and Africa, declassified report, date of releasement to the public 2012

<sup>53</sup> R. Eric Weise and William E. Macaulay, "The Soviet-American Struggle For Influence In Africa: A Pragmatic Assessment", *The African Review: A Journal of African Politics, Development and International Affairs*, No.12(2), (1985): 32-42.

the limited USSR's influence in Africa at the time. As newly formed Republic of Congo, under the government of pan-Africanist Patrice Lumumba faced Civil War due to the efforts of mineral-rich Katanga's region to secede. The government was supported by Moscow and some other African states, while the rebels of Katanga were backed by Belgian mining companies, European mercenaries and later by United States. By 1961 as colonel Joseph Mobutu with indirect support from United States was able to overthrow Patrice Lumumba's government during a coup<sup>54</sup>, it showed the evident fragility of Moscow's influence and raised questions how long it would last. Due to this, other African states like Mali questioned Union of Soviet Socialist Republics' capabilities as the regime was not able to successfully project military forces. Thus, as Leonid Brezhnev came to power and Congo Crisis events showed USSR's weaknesses, regime's strategy towards Africa saw a general shift<sup>55</sup>, that put full priority on military assistance for like-minded continent's states.

The supply of conventional arms, military training for national liberation movements, organizations and other groups that could not obtain weapons from the West, provided a significant boost in USSR's reputation and as members or leaders of these movements rose to power it played a great role in the future relationship between USSR and their states. Additionally, Moscow provided private protection for the political leaders and deployed KGB and GRU officers to conduct espionage operations and gain foothold by providing support for the previously mentioned movements<sup>56</sup>. The representatives from the USSR's intelligence organizations were included in each of state's embassies' delegations. They worked "hard" to intimidate and manipulate local media, spread disinformation and propaganda as well as watch over the Americans, depicting them as schemers plotting against everyone who comes in their way<sup>57</sup>. While Moscow used their own intelligence agents to conduct subversions it is also crucial to note that they used proxies to carry out tasks that could have great political cost. This allowed to conduct military tasks, avoiding

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<sup>54</sup> Office of the Historian, Foreign Service Institute "Milestones in the history of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian" (n.d.).

<sup>55</sup> Sebastian Seibt, "From Khrushchev's KGB to Putin: the deep roots of Russian influence in Africa", France 24, July 18, 2023

<sup>56</sup> Richard Bissell, "Soviet Policies in Africa.", *Current History* 77, no. 450 (1979): 124–36

<sup>57</sup> Sebastian Seibt, "From Khrushchev's KGB to Putin: the deep roots of Russian influence in Africa"

Moscow's direct involvement, that would not be presented as superpower clashes, thus decreasing political and military retaliation from the West. As Cuba's and East Germany's military personnel were based in Sub-Saharan Africa to aid its liberation<sup>58</sup>, they also provided effective military support for USSR's clients in order to prevent their regimes from collapsing and defend chosen insurgencies. The relationship between Moscow, Cuba and East Germany was based on the mutual interests, since the respective leaders of the countries concerned thought that their presence and activities in Africa would help their own regimes. It gave wider access to African nations' leaders, elite networks and allowed to influence the daily operations in those states.

Concerning the other types of support USSR provided for the Sub-Saharan states, it would include economic assistance as well as aid projects. The economic assistance was usually gained through loans, trade and short-term swing credits<sup>59</sup> for which recipient socialist-oriented states were expected to repay with local "goods" at low prices<sup>60</sup>. While the aid projects include building hospitals, dams, oil or gold refineries and financing industrial projects, that appeared to be helpful would often end up delayed, suspended or affected by inadequate planning. Furthermore, as stated in Central Intelligence Agency's released report on Soviet Union's aid programs in Africa, USSR would withdraw from projects if it would no longer benefit them and would not agree to change contracts even if pleaded to extend repay time, thus leading to some African states declining further proposals from Moscow<sup>61</sup>. Additionally, to military and economic assistance, the educational aid through which the regime was able to further deepen its connections with Africa's leaders and proved to be greatly successful as students when returned would be with a highly positive opinion towards the USSR. The regime funded around 100 thousand African students to gain their education by 1989 in universities such as Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University in Moscow. Overall, the Soviet Union's strategy towards Africa proved to be an effort to achieve

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<sup>58</sup> Gareth M. Winrow, "East German Military/Security Involvement in Africa", in *The Foreign Policy of the GDR in Africa*, ed., Stephen White, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 308

<sup>59</sup> Colin W. Lawson, "Soviet Economic Aid to Africa." *African Affairs* 87, no. 349 (1988): 501–18.

<sup>60</sup> United States of America, Central Intelligence Agency, *Problems Associated with Soviet Aid Programs in Africa*, declassified report, date of release to the public 1999

<sup>61</sup> United States of America, Central Intelligence Agency, *Problems Associated with Soviet Aid Programs in Africa*, declassified report, date of release to the public 1999

objectives that resonated with the interest of Sub-Saharan nations but only if it aligned with Moscow's broader ambitions. Moreover, despite certain failures USSR was able to use regions instability to gain foothold in newly independent states and advance its objectives such as increasing its position as global power, undermining power of the West, particularly United States, as well as gaining support from African nations in international arena and etc. However, with Gorbachev coming to power the USSR saw many changes. The last leader of the Soviet Union attempted to revive the state's economy, which had stagnated during the Brezhnev's years, by introducing domestic policy reforms as well as changes in foreign policy<sup>62</sup>. Yet, despite the attempts to improve the situation in the state, the implemented reforms failed and the rapidly worsening economic crisis as well as political instability that weakened regime was leading the superpower closer to its collapse which subsequently led to decreased interest and ability to provide support to like-minded partners in Africa<sup>63</sup>. By 1991 previously mentioned series of events brought the inevitable collapse of the Soviet Union<sup>64</sup>, which marked the beginning of the new era.

## 2.2. Post-Soviet era resurgence

In the early 1990s as the successor of Soviet Union, Russian Federation saw further decline of relations with African states. This was due to the fact that the newly founded government searched upon the reasons behind its predecessor's economic misfortunes that the newly founded state inherited, and a common consensus was reached, that USSR's involvement with African nations were one of the factors that pushed regime to its economic decline<sup>65</sup>. Moscow adopted new foreign policies towards African nations that led to decline of trade, end of provision of aid as well as subsequently demanding debt repayment and ignoring any requests for debt relief or deferred payments. Furthermore, diplomatic ties with some African states also were cut due to the closure

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<sup>62</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Mikhail Gorbachev: Biography, Facts, Cold War, & Significance", Encyclopedia Britannica, December 9, 2024

<sup>63</sup> Alexander V. Kozemjak and Roger E. Kanet, 'Russian policy toward sub-Saharan Africa: Disengagement or cooperation', Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, No. 22, (1995): 1-6

<sup>64</sup> U.S Department of State, "Dissolution of the USSR and the establishment of independent republics", U.S Department of State, 1991

<sup>65</sup> Alexander V. Kozemjak and Roger E. Kanet, 'Russian policy toward sub-Saharan Africa: Disengagement or cooperation', Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien, No. 22, (1995): 1-6.

of nine embassies and four consular offices<sup>66</sup>. As Russian Federation put its focus on domestic issues and alignment with the West, most of the economic, diplomatic, political, and military cooperation with African nations reached an all-time low. Thus, amidst Russia's drastic retreat from Africa few Sub-Saharan nations' diplomats, based in Moscow tried to gain guarantees that the state was not shifting its focus away<sup>67</sup>. In 1994 the then prime minister Viktor Chernomyrdin voiced his concerns during a conference held for Russian ambassadors based in African states, that Moscow's focus on inward policies has caused strategic costs, especially in arms trade. According to Chernomyrdin, as Russia was losing its ties with Africa, it left a void that was being filled by others with weaponry inferior to Russian one<sup>68</sup>. Furthermore, Yevgeny Primakov from his first year as a Russian foreign minister expressed his ideas of multipolar world and a wish to counterbalance influence of United States over the world for Russian Federation to gain its predecessors status as a global power<sup>69</sup>. Thus, Moscow tried to adopt a more pragmatic approach towards African states by reengaging in arms trade as well as gaining easy accesses to market in return for provision of debt relief.

However, the state's attempts at reengagement became the most visible only after Vladimir Putin came to power. Since his first presidency term, Putin has been clear on his stance over the dream of restoring the glory of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, especially when in 2005 he infamously addressed the Assembly and the public declaring that the collapse of USSR was the greatest tragedy<sup>70</sup>. Thus, by taking inspiration from Yevgeny Primakov's policy directions, Putin's administration pushed upon foreign policy transformation, that prioritized strategies for Russian Federation to regain status of global power, which included some efforts to strengthen relationships with African nations as well<sup>71</sup>. Throughout the 2000s, Russian state-owned

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<sup>66</sup> Cayley Clifford, "The Bear is back: Russian re-engagement with Africa is picking up with Putin in the driving seat", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, July 8, 2021

<sup>67</sup> Alexander V. Kozemjak and Roger E. Kanet, "Russian policy toward sub-Saharan Africa: Disengagement or cooperation", *Bundesinstitut für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien*, No. 22, (1995): 1-6

<sup>68</sup> Alexander V. Kozemjak and Roger E. Kanet, "Russian policy toward sub-Saharan Africa: Disengagement or cooperation"

<sup>69</sup> Jonathan Steele, "Yevgeny Primakov obituary", *The Guardian*, June 28, 2015

<sup>70</sup> NBC News, "Putin: Soviet collapse a "genuine tragedy", *NBC News*, April 25, 2005

<sup>71</sup> Joseph Siegle, "Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?", *South African Journal of International Affairs*, December 10, 2022

companies such as Gazprom and Rosatom as well as non-state enterprise (yet state-linked) like Lukoil began to substantially invest into the continent. Additionally, with steadily growing trade, Moscow continued its debt relief program<sup>72</sup>. Nevertheless, despite a steady build up of relations with the Africa, the actual reengagement began during Vladimir Putin's second term as the head of state. In 2014 following the annexation of Crimea, as Russian Federation violated international law and Ukraine's sovereignty Moscow was faced with sanctions from the West<sup>73</sup>, which marked a major shift in geopolitics since the Cold War era. Due to the isolation from the Western nations and state's economic crisis between 2014 and 2015, Russia notably increased its interest towards Africa as it presented as an alternative to make up for state's loses<sup>74</sup>. Interestingly it coincided with the West's slow decline of influence over the region due to political and social upheavals<sup>75</sup>. Trade grew significantly going from \$5.7 billion in 2009 to \$20 billion in 2018 and Russia moved up the ranks considering its arms supply to the continent. On one hand, it did not surpass other international players like China, European Union or United States, while on the other hand Russian Federation provides a more flexible approach that circumvents conditionalities and unlike other trading states, Moscow avoids strict adhere to agreed debt repayment terms, which is more appealing to some African leaders<sup>76</sup>. Moreover, considering security cooperation, between 2015 and 2018 Kremlin had signed agreements with more than 20 African states covering variety of spheres including military training, advisory and counter-terrorism missions. During that time, reports about Russian private military companies' such as Wagner and Patriot presence in couple of African states came to light, that provide direct deniability to Putin's administration in sensitive missions<sup>77</sup>. While on the international arena Moscow uses its relations with African nations to gain support in international organizations in return for provided services as permanent member of

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<sup>72</sup>Mthuli Ncube, "Russia's Economic Engagement with Africa", Africa Economic Brief, No.2(7), (2011): 1-7

<sup>73</sup>Lubomyr A. Hajda and Stepan Andriyovich Kryzhanivsky, "Ukraine | History, flag, Population, President, Map, Language, & Facts", Encyclopedia Britannica, December 29, 2024

<sup>74</sup> Amanda Paul and Ivano di Carlo, "The Russia-Africa Summit: The next stage in the Kremlin's Africa charm offensive", European Policy Centre, October 17, 2019

<sup>75</sup> Newsroom, "The second anti-colonial war in Africa", Modern Diplomacy, August 18, 2023

<sup>76</sup> Amanda Paul and Ivano di Carlo, "The Russia-Africa Summit: The next stage in the Kremlin's Africa charm offensive"

<sup>77</sup>Anna Caprile and Eric Pichon, "Russia in Africa: An atlas", European Parliamentary Research Service, (2024):1-11

United Nations Security Council. Yet, this engagement became even more evident later on. The era of fully renewed engagement of Moscow's efforts to boost its influence clout on Africa, culminated in the 2019 with the first Russia-Africa Summit, where Russian efforts were officially established and additionally highlighted "achievements" such as \$15 billion worth of arms sold annually to Africa as well as continuity of more than 20 projects started by previously mentioned Russian giants Gazprom, Lukoil and Rosatom as well as Rostec and Rosgeo in energy and mining sectors. Not surprisingly, during the Summit, additional contracts in various sectors, including media, infrastructure and military were signed<sup>78</sup>. Moscow's approach could be considered as a pragmatic one, drawing upon Cold War period networks as well as adding new alliances and presenting itself as an alternative to the West.

As mentioned before, Russian Federation uses African states to gain more credibility considering international issues. As of February 2022, Moscow violated Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity by beginning the so called "special operation". In order to condemn Moscow's aggression against Ukraine and infringement of state's sovereignty as well as demand immediate withdrawal of Russian military the United Nations General Assembly held the 11<sup>th</sup> Emergency Special Session, which was needed due to the fact that UN Security Council was unable to reach an agreement<sup>79</sup>. During the first voting in March, African states were divided with 28 votes in favour, while 1 voting against, 17 states abstaining and 8 were not in the room. While during the voting considering the Human Rights Council membership suspension, out of 28 states previously voted against Russian aggression, 18 of them abstained, thus leaving only 10 votes in favour<sup>80</sup>. All of the voting choices can be explained by few reasons. Firstly, states like Mali or Central African Republic, either abstained or voted against due to strong and long-lasting ties with Moscow as well as fearing for their own agendas' disturbance which are linked with Russia's presence in the states. Other countries tried to remain neutral according to non-aligned movement. Last are the states that chose not to directly condemn Moscow's aggression but rather call for conciliation. This was seen during further voting that referenced a peaceful resolution, negotiation

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<sup>78</sup> Nataliya Bugayova et al, "The Kremlin's Inroads After the Africa Summit", ISW Press, November 8, 2019

<sup>79</sup> United Nations, "Emergency special sessions", General Assembly of the United Nations, (n.d)

<sup>80</sup> Development Reimagined, "Infographic: How did African countries vote on Russia and Ukraine at the UN?"

and mediation to end full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It gained more support from African states reaching 29 votes in favour in October 2022 and in February 2023 – 30 African states voted in favour out of 54<sup>81</sup>. While, in July of 2023, the second Russia-Africa summit took place, where despite the original agenda putting focus on socio-economic, scientific and security Russo-Africa cooperation, Moscow was unable to avoid questions concerning the impact of war in Ukraine on the African economy. Continent's leaders tried to pressure Putin to extend Black Sea Grain Initiative to which he did not agree and instead only offered grain donations. Moreover, Russia rejected African proposal to end war in Ukraine, labelling it as too difficult to fulfil<sup>82</sup>. Overall, the Russia-Africa Summit underscored Moscow's diplomatic efforts to reason with its partners, yet it also showed worries of African leaders over the impact war in Ukraine has for the continent.

However, despite the complexity of Russian African relations, it has continued to evolve, especially with like-minded counterparts. This is due to the fact that, unlike the West, Moscow prefers to engage with other authoritarian regimes, thus avoiding transparency, bypassing international regulations and other aspects that are usual in relation to cooperation with democratic nations. Additionally, such cooperation is more “attractive” for the African states, that are ruled by local elites, as they are usually pressed by the African Union, regional communities or the West to establish democratic norms in their respective states<sup>83</sup>. Therefore, Russia has been able to implement economic, diplomatic and military agreements, expanding its significance. As for instance by using its private military company to provide arms Moscow avoids United Nation's embargo, thus by the beginning of 2023, Russian Federation was the top supplier of arms to Sub-Saharan Africa, surpassing China and France<sup>84</sup>. This is due to the fact that despite competitive market, some recipient states are obligated to choose Russia since the Western nations avoid providing arms to states under military junta. Yet, military, economic or diplomatic means are not the only ones employed by Moscow to regain and spread its influence in Africa, as Putin utilizes soft power using ideological appeal of anti-colonialism. The common narrative spread by Kremlin

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<sup>81</sup> Development Reimagined, “Infographic: How did African countries vote on Russia and Ukraine at the UN?”

<sup>82</sup> Anna Caprile and Eric Pichon, “Russia in Africa: An atlas”

<sup>83</sup> International IDEA, “The state of democracy in Africa, International IDEA, 2023

<sup>84</sup> Marion Douet, “Russia overtakes China as leading arms seller in sub-Saharan Africa”, Le Monde, March 28,

is that the West, usually the United States, implement monopolistic policies to pursue exploitation and maximally increase influence over the world, while Russian Federation is positioned as an old friend and the great power that protects Africa's independence. This can be seen in his speech at the Eastern Economic Forum in 2023. There he claimed that unlike the West which continues to implement neocolonial policies even today, Russia has never been a colonial power and instead helped the continent during the decolonisation period, which is well remembered by African nations<sup>85</sup>. Later the same year, during the Valdai International Discussion Club's 20th annual meeting as Russia's president discussed his ideas for new world order, he called the western nations arrogant and their history mainly being period of continues territorial conquest<sup>86</sup>. This is anti-colonial stance is not a new development as similar rhetorics have been previously made. For instance, during his first presidency term, at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 Putin expressed his criticism towards United States' dominance over the world and stated that its actions undermine international law and geopolitical stability<sup>87</sup>. This narrative has been utilized strategically throughout the years and unsurprisingly mirrors propaganda of the Soviet Union, that portrayed Soviets as anti-imperialists, helping African nations in their struggles with colonial powers and evilness of capitalisms<sup>88</sup>. Its end goal remains consistent - seeking to undermine the influence of the West by drawing parallels with their colonial past and current actions while simultaneously justifying its own foreign policy and strengthening ties with the Global South. Additionally, this narrative is spread not only by the head of state, but also through forums such as "For Freedom of Nations". The movement was created in the beginning of 2024 by the United Russia Party in order to bring together like-minded nations to condemn globalisation and Western neo-colonial policies also positioning Russia as the leader of this "fight"<sup>89</sup>. Interestingly, despite

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<sup>85</sup> Eastern Economic Forum, "Russia has never acted as colonizer, unlike West-Putin", TASS, September 12, 2023

<sup>86</sup> Meduza, "From the New World Order to coke and hand grenades Here's what Putin said at Russia's annual Valdai Discussion Club", Meduza, October 6, 2023

<sup>87</sup> Thom Shanker and Mark Landler, "Putin says U.S. is undermining global stability", The New York Times, February 11, 2007

<sup>88</sup> Witold Rodkiewicz, "An anti-colonial alliance with the Global South. The new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", Centre for Eastern Studies, April 7, 2023

<sup>89</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the "For the Freedom of Nations" Forum of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neocolonialism", The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 16, 2024

condemning Western history and actions today, Putin glorifies Russia's imperial and Soviet Union's past showing the application of selective historical narrative, which undermines Moscow's own current war with Ukraine. This is due to the fact that Russia's anti-colonial rhetoric starkly contrasts with its own expansionist ambitions<sup>90</sup>. However, the anti-colonial narrative serves Moscow's needed purposes as another strategic tool aimed at mitigating Western influence and expanding its own, it also shows regimes hypocrisy.

Overall, by examining Soviet Union's engagement in Africa, analysing its strategies and one could argue that USSR laid groundwork for Russian Federation's engagement in the continent, as USSR had a major role supporting decolonisation processes leaving historical ties, even though it used Africa as a strategic arena to pursue its ideological objectives and compete with United States. Thus, despite the major drawback between the late 80s and 90s, when Moscow shifted its focus on the internal issues, under the rule of Vladimir Putin it has actively reengaged itself, especially since his second term as the president. In the contemporary Africa Kremlin builds its strategy by leveraging the USSR's legacy, adapting it in the context of current geopolitical situation, making it more flexible and interest-based rather than ideological. The state continues using the old Soviet era's narrative, where it portrays itself as a counterbalance to the colonial West, an ally to Global South accompanied by diplomatic, economic and military means, it chooses its partners based on their relationship with the Western nations, leveraging historical grievances and estranged relations as well as using the limited choices of African states that are under multilateral sanctions.

### **3. CASE STUDIES OF RUSSIA'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFRICA**

The analysis of USSR's and post-Soviet eras' engagement in Africa provided an overall overview of Moscow's applied strategy and reasoning behind its comeback to the continent. However, a deeper examination of its engagement is needed in order to better understand the mechanisms and their severity that Kremlin employs to pursue influence. Additionally, concrete case studies will provide comprehensive view of how Russia's strategic tools impact African

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<sup>90</sup> Taras Kuzio, "Vladimir Putin's anti-colonial posturing should not fool the Global South", Atlantic Council, November 16, 2023

states' governance, regional stability as well as grasp over broader implications for the international order and power dynamics. Therefore, this chapter will focus on Moscow's engagement in two Africa's shatter belts, where political instability, civil wars and other circumstances have created conditions for foreign powers to gain crucial influence. Firstly, the case study on Moscow's engagement in Mali is going to be analysed, where Russia capitalizes on the growing anti-Western sentiment and applies other strategic tools to assert its influence. Secondly, Central African Republic's case is going to be examined, where Russia is well known for its private military company's presence which is closely related with resource extraction. Both cases were chosen deliberately as they reflect on economic, political and soft power dimensions and outcomes of Russia's renewed engagement. Each subchapter begins with the overview of the situation in the country in question, providing critical context of geopolitical vacuum Kremlin is trying to fill. This is followed by analysis of applied Russian mechanism, their impact on the state and broader implications. Therefore, by conducting these case studies a nuanced foundation is going to be made for the evaluation of implications of Moscow's strategic engagement.

### **3.1. The case of Mali**

As part of the historically significant eastern trans-Saharan caravan route for centuries Mali has been renowned for its gold resources, that lead to Mali's Empires prosperity. But like all great empires, after its powers decline it was succeeded by Songhai Empire and by the late 16<sup>th</sup> century invaded by Morocco<sup>91</sup>. However, during the period known as Scramble for Africa, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, what is now known as territory of Mali it was colonized and connected to French West Africa as part of French Sudan<sup>92</sup>. During the period of decolonisation, Mali was able to gain independence from the colonial power and by 1960 become the Republic of Mali. Thus, the young sovereign state pursued Africanisation policies, that lead to disengagement with France, forming new alliances including one with the Soviet Union, signing trade and cultural agreements.

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<sup>91</sup> Andrew Clark, Kathleen M. Baker and Pascal James Imperato, "Mali - Culture, history, maps, & People", Encyclopedia Britannica, January 3, 2025

<sup>92</sup> The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "French West Africa - Map, Independence, & History", Encyclopedia Britannica, July 20, 1998

Additionally, the then government of Mali, took inspiration from USSR's socialism, adapting it to their own needs<sup>93</sup>. However, the state-controlled economic policies, poverty and populations dissatisfaction with the government led to military coup by the end of 1968. Therefore, the Military Committee of National Liberation, led by Lieutenant Moussa Traore took control over Mali until transitioning to one party political system, giving control to Malian People's Democratic Union party with Traore as a president. During this period Mali's government tried to establish good relations with France, thus balancing between its alliances with the West and the Soviets. The Traore's regime was able to maintain control up until 1991 as riots and demonstrations erupted due to demand for democratic changes, resulting in a military coup led by Amadou Toumani Toure, that overthrew Traore's government. These events culminated by the 1992 elections, marking the establishment of multiparty government. However, despite Mali's governments efforts to improve economic and security situation in the state, was faced by declining foreign aid, environmental issues, protests and return of Tuareg rebels. This culminated in 2012, as long-lasting issues with with Tuaregs turned into mass conflict, Mali loosing northern territory, that was too overwhelming to Malian military forces leading to another military coup. These events were condemned by international community and in the view of the deteriorating situation, that posed threat to the entire region the United Nations Security Council authorized the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA), which was supported by French operation Serval in order to help state's security forces<sup>94</sup>. By the beginning of 2013, the operation was successful in the recapture of Mali's northern territory, followed by authorization of UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) that succeeded AFISMA to work on stabilization, ensuring security and support for the government<sup>95</sup>. Additionally, French Serval operation transitioned to Barkhane mission, that focused more on the regional stability and counterterrorism<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>93</sup> John N. Hazard "Mali's Socialism and the Soviet Legal Model", *The Yale Law Journal* vol. 77, 1(1967), 42

<sup>94</sup> United Nations, "Security Council authorizes deployment of African-Led International Support Mission in Mali for Initial Year-Long Period", United Nations, December 20, 2012

<sup>95</sup> United Nations. "About MINUSMA", United Nations, February 27, 2019

<sup>96</sup> Nathaniel Powell, "Why France failed in Mali - War on the Rocks", February 22, 2022

However, despite all of the internal and external efforts, violence continued. The MINUSMA and French mission was unable to stabilize the state and stop the spread and violence carried out by the jihadists. Therefore, by the beginning of 2020 Mali once again experienced political upheavals culminating in the first Malian coup d'état, when the military dissolved the elected government and suspended the constitution. This was followed by another coup d'état in the following year with the then vice president Assimi Goita in front as the government of interim president Bah N'Daw was unable to maintain promises about future reforms and conduct transition to civilian rule. Thus, by the end of May 2021 Goita assumed office as interim president of Mali vowing to implement previously promised constitutional reforms and conduct proper democratic elections. Unsurprisingly, Goita continued to fail to deliver promises similarly to his predecessor<sup>97</sup>, despite pressure from regional and international communities. Furthermore, fueled by dissatisfaction with French Barkhane operation, its failure to contain terrorism in the region as well as labeling ruling military junta as illegitimate, pressuring the state to pursue return of civilian government, Goita and its administration continuously criticized France and began exploring alternative partnerships, that would be more supportive to the regime. On one hand, this resulted in the resurgence of Moscow's relations with Bamako<sup>98</sup>, while on the other it signaled a deepening rift between France and Mali.

The end of 2021 was marked by the beginning of formal security cooperation between the military junta and Russia, as Moscow sent its mercenary group to provide military training to Malian military forces. Therefore, due to the hostility and faced with the appearance of Wagner company France declared their troop withdrawal from the region in 2022, ending almost a decade-long Barkhane mission<sup>99</sup>. The short run competition between Russia and Mali's previous partners, resulted in Russia filling the power vacuum by using its mercenary group accompanied by arms trade, to increase the capacity of Malian military forces. Through the years of its deployment, the Wagner group has been providing the already mentioned training and has been participating in

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<sup>97</sup> Andrew Clark, Kathleen M. Baker and Pascal James Imperato, "2012 coup and warfare in the north", Encyclopedia Britannica, January 8, 2025

<sup>98</sup> Nathaniel Powell, "Why France failed in Mali - War on the Rocks", February 22, 2022

<sup>99</sup> Cyril Bensimon, Philippe Ricard and Elise Vincent, "Mali: la France acte son retrait avec la fin de l'opération militaire « Barkhane ». LeMonde, February 17, 2022

combat action in areas with an increased number of al-Qaeda affiliates and rebels. Furthermore, Wagner provides security services for junta's leaders, giving access to the elite network of Mali. These services cost Bamako around 10,8 million dollars every month, at least as mentioned in the published information<sup>100</sup>. However, taking into consideration the benefits Wagner's presence in Mali provides, rather than reassuring and enforcing states security, it ensures needed efforts for the ruling military junta to stay in power. The cost of regime's survival is access to Mali's rich natural resources, most notably gold and uranium reserves. This comes as no surprise, because as "dictated" by the usual Kremlin's modus operandi – offset missions' costs through activities that generate revenue; and so, even before the Wagner group's deployment some of its representatives have allegedly been seen scouting state's natural resource reserves<sup>101</sup>. Having close access to the ruling elite, which in principle is driven by nepotism and own interests above all<sup>102</sup>, Moscow is able to gain easy access to these valuable and strategically important resources, especially considering gold, which according to the Human Rights Foundation usually is illegally mined and exported to Dubai, which subsequently is known for being Russian money laundering hub<sup>103</sup>. This helps Kremlin to circumvent sanctions and continue funding its activities in Ukraine by gaining profit from the mentioned Wagner's "side" operations. Additionally, by instrumentalizing Wagner group in the heat of Mali's fallout with France and state's unstable security situation Moscow gains crucial influence over the military junta. Another key aspect of Wagner's involvement in Mali to be considered is its perception in the state. Since its PMC deployment, Russia has begun to conduct disinformation campaigns aligned with spread of anti-western sentiments. Moreover, some of the published polls by entities often affiliated with the Wagner group show enormous and further growing support for military cooperation with Russia and expressing their dissatisfaction with counterterrorism efforts that were previously carried out by French operation<sup>104</sup>. Despite these

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<sup>100</sup> Kyle Robertson, "An Iron Curtain in the Sahel", Washington Institute, August 15, 2024

<sup>101</sup> Carl Michael Gräns, "Russia's growing influence in Mali", Swedish Defence Research Agency, January 2023

<sup>102</sup> Mvemba Phezo Dizolele and Cameron Hudson, "Mali: Untangling the Politico-Security Knot", CSIS, October 30, 2024

<sup>103</sup> Human Rights Foundation, "Russia's Influence in Mali - Human Rights Foundation," November 15, 2024

<sup>104</sup> Palmer, Alexander, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, and Jennifer Jun. "Base Development in Mali Indicates Continued Russian Involvement." Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 10, 2024.

alleged polls’ results, the activities of the PMC have faced controversy as reports on human right abuse as well as unprovoked violence have appeared. However, Malian government has opposed any allegations, viewing Moscow’s partnership as critical to states security<sup>105</sup>. This raises more concerns especially if looking into the increased number of human rights violations and civilian abuse. United Nations Human Rights office report that Malian forcercs together with Wagner have been committing atrocities against civilians, with killing 500 people in five-day operation in 2022, committing sexual violence and torture<sup>106</sup>. According to Human Rights Watch reports, by the end of 2023 the number of internally displaced individuals reached 375 000 and overall, 8.8 million people needing humanitarian aid<sup>107</sup>. Furthermore, as showed in figure 1, since the withdrawal of French troops and the beginning of Mali’s military cooperation with Wagner, the refugee situation in the state gas grown exponentially, by the end of 2024 reaching 135 538<sup>108</sup>.

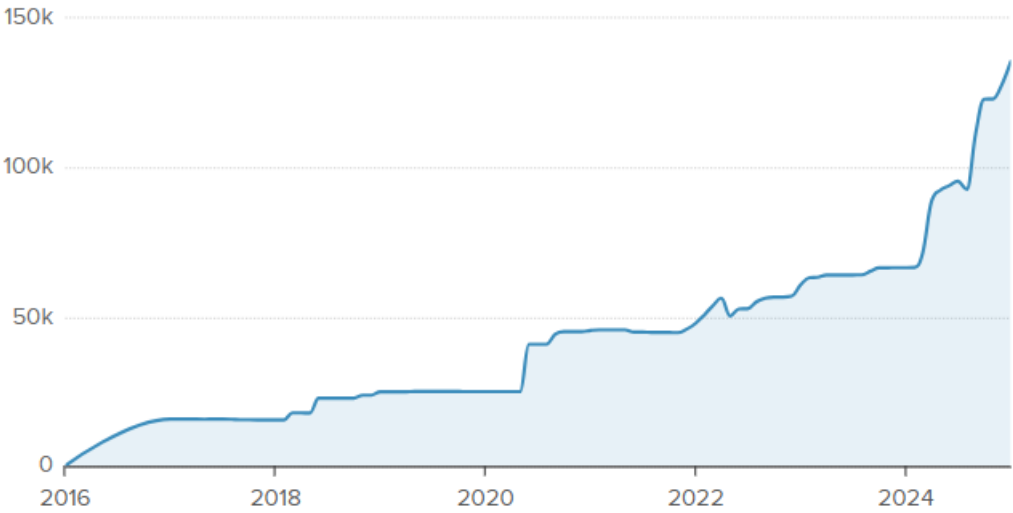


Figure 1 Number of Malian refugees; Source: Operational Data Portal

Taking into account the economic and developmental part of Mali’s and Russia’s cooperation, they have signed deals on production of oil, gas and certain minerals such as lithium,

<sup>105</sup> Carl Micheale Grans “Russia’s growing influence in Mali is Burkina Faso next?”, FOI Swedish National Defence Research Institute, 2023

<sup>106</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner “Malian troops, foreign military personnel killed over 500 people during military operation in Moura in March 2022 – UN human rights report” May 12, 2023

<sup>107</sup> “Mali,” Human Rights Watch, January 11, 2024

<sup>108</sup> Operational Data Portal “Country – Mali” (n.d.).

implementing signed memorandums in the beginning of Russia's resurgence. In 2023, during the Russia-Africa Summit, both state leaders engaged in diplomatic discussions to further increase their partnership. Moscow demonstrated its support to the state by declaring provision of humanitarian aid packages, that contains grain, fertilizers and fuel to Mali<sup>109</sup>. Furthermore, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov and Malian minister for foreign affairs and international cooperation have continued talks on cooperation in fields of energy, agriculture and technology<sup>110</sup>. Additionally, in 2024, Mali has signed three cooperation agreements with Rosatom, Moscow's state-owned nuclear company, including a deal on building a low-power nuclear reactors<sup>111</sup>.

The military and economic cooperation between two states was accompanied by Russia's soft power tactics. As mentioned before, since its reengagement in Bamako, Russia has begun to spread anti-western sentiment to gain favorable reaction to Wagner's presence in the state as well as create conspiracy theories. According to Kremlin, for many years, Mali has faced recurring political instability, economic challenges and violence not only because of the conflict with jihadists or the rebels but also due to the foreign interventions carried out notably by France, who is backed by the United States, regional organizations like Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as United Nations. The narrative pushes the idea that these international players are trying to perpetuate neo-colonial policies and fuel instability, in order to undermine the state's sovereignty<sup>112</sup>. In his speech in 2023 during the joint conference with Mali's minister for foreign affairs and international cooperation, Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov not only expressed how Moscow greatly values and wants to extend their cooperation with Mali in key sectors of mineral resources, energy and defense as well as appreciates Mali's support in United

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<sup>109</sup> Kester Kenn Klomegah, "Russia and Mali Review Military Partnership," *Modern Diplomacy*, March 3, 2024

<sup>110</sup> "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions during a joint news conference with Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Mali Abdoulaye Diop, Bamako, February 7, 2023" The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. February 2023,

<sup>111</sup> Jedrej Czerep "U.S. Rivalry with Russia and China over Nuclear Technology in Africa Heating Up" *PISM*, September 10, 2024

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Russia-Soft-Power-final.pdf>

Nations for Russia but also stated that both states fully condemn West's neocolonialism<sup>113</sup>. Furthermore, after the beginning of Russian invasion in Ukraine, many state-owned companies faced western sanctions, including its outlets, notably – RT, that was based in France. However, this did not pose many challenges as new cooperation with French speaking nations in Africa provided opportunities. For instance, RT was able to gain an agreement with anti-Western Afrique Media TV, that targets West African states such as Mali<sup>114</sup>. This allowed Moscow to intensify its media campaigns and use the already existing dissatisfaction and distrust to further prejudice Malians against the West. Significantly, the mentioned media outlet has portrayed Moscow and its private military company as a key ally in Mali's fight for its sovereignty, while showcasing ECOWAS, United Nations' operation MINUSMA and the West as powers trying to decline Bamako's efforts<sup>115</sup>. Furthermore, other media outlets as Sputnik and Mali's Mali Actu are also actively spreading similar narratives, resonating with the recipient society, increasing the anti-colonial sentiments. Through social media campaigns, Russia further spreads its narratives, reaching more diverse audience. Thus, it comes with no surprise that Mali has seen strong alignment of its society with anti-Western sentiment, while viewing Russia as a loyal ally<sup>116</sup>, which allows Moscow to gain even more influence in the state.

Moreover, another aspect that needs to be examined is the reaction of the key regional organizations such as African Union and Economic Community of West African States in the view of the events taking place in Mali. The activities of African Union are outlined in its normative instruments such as the Constitutive Act of African Union which collectively establishes fundamental principles for member states. Article 3 of the Act determines organizations objectives, that include fostering democratic governance, human rights, sovereignty and etc.; while Article 4 emphasizes AU's principles that include condemnation of changes of government that do not align

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<sup>113</sup> "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's statement and answers to media questions during a joint news conference with Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the Republic of Mali Abdoulaye Diop, Bamako, February 7, 2023"

<sup>114</sup> Luigi Narbone "Russia's soft power strategies in the MENA region and Africa", Luiss Mediterranean Platform (n.d)

<sup>115</sup> Addo, "Afrique Média TV: Kremlin's New African Mouthpiece?," Medium, April 26, 2024

<sup>116</sup> Carl Micheale Grans "Russia's growing influence in Mali is Burkina Faso next?," FOI Swedish National Defence Research Institute, 2023

with state's constitution<sup>117</sup>. These principles are reinforced by African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance, that sets comprehensive standards for improvement of democracy and governance throughout the continent, promoting fair elections, separation of power, transparency, that according to its Chapter 3 Article 3 member states have to implement<sup>118</sup>. Thus, in 2021 the Peace and Security Council of the African Union accordingly to organizations normative instruments condemned the military junta's ruling as well as suspended Mali from any African Union activities till the restoration of constitutional order<sup>119</sup>. This is important as the membership allows easier integration and provides more opportunities for economic cooperation among the continent, thus increasing economic and political development. This means that due to Mali's suspension from AU activities, the state is isolated from the participation in decision-making processes as well as loses economic support from the organization<sup>120</sup>. Another key regional organization is the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which according to the Article 3 of its Treaty, establishes an economic union in the region creating a common market as well as monetary union and promotes cooperation and regional development. Furthermore, Article 4 states that organization also promotes peace and security between member states as well as democratic governance<sup>121</sup>. Membership in ECOWAS allows regional integration and ensures economic growth as well as provides needed development, peacekeeping and other efforts. However, after the acquisition of ECOWAS having close ties with the West and states suspension due to the military takeovers, Mali together with other two military led states Burkina Faso and Niger declared their withdrawal from the organization in the beginning of 2024. However, the ECOWAS is trying to convince the mentioned states to stay in the block, providing them with "grace period" to rethink their decision<sup>122</sup>. Overall, by looking into Mali's suspension from African Union and decision to exit ECOWAS, it is clear that these events signal a significant setback for

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<sup>117</sup> African Union, Constitutional Act of African Union (n.d.)

<sup>118</sup> African Union, African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (n.d.)

<sup>119</sup> "African Union Suspends Mali From Participation in All Activities of the African Union and Decides to Constitute an Evaluation Mission to Engage With All Concerned Stakeholders | African Union," n.d.

<sup>120</sup> "AU in a Nutshell" African Union. (n.d.). <https://au.int/en/au-nutshell>

<sup>121</sup> Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), Revised Treaty 1993

<sup>122</sup> Al Jazeera, "Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger Agree to Grace Period in ECOWAS Withdrawal," Al Jazeera, December 15, 2024

the state as it loses benefits and opportunities provided by memberships in both organizations. This further isolates the state from regional and continental cooperation, which one could argue could lead to greater dependence on Russian Federation, who unlike the AU and ECOWAS, does not condemn the ruling military junta but legitimizes their rule and provides necessary support for the regime to maintain power.

In conclusion, Moscow has resurged in Mali using its mercenary group capitalizing the growing anti-western sentiment and state's instability for its own benefit. Its strategic approach combines military cooperation, economic initiatives as well as creation of strategic narratives to further gain influence and undermine the West. While the military junta uses Moscow's support to legitimize its ruling and stay in power, Russia, through Wagner's gained access to state's natural resources is able to gain financial benefits, thus proceeding to circumvent sanctions. Additionally, as Mali is suspended from African Union and prepares for the exit from ECOWAS, it increases its regional isolation, which one could argue only further pushes it to closer relationship with Russian Federation. However, since the begging of Russia's reengagement in Mali, it has increased states instability, as its interest is not to create stability, as it increases its ability to influence unstable countries more than stable ones.

### **3.2. The case of Central African Republic**

Central African Republics' history is deeply rooted to the colonial period as in the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century the colony Ubangi-Shari was founded, which is the present-day CAR. Before that, the region of Central Africa itself was rather unexplored, except for the area surrounding the trans-Saharan and Nile River slave trade routes. However, as the territory was annexed to French Congo, it marked the beginning of French domination in the region. This period was characterized by exploitation of people, famine, diseases and resource extraction<sup>123</sup>. However, after the World War II, the Provisional Government of the French Republic created the French Union, which replaced the old colonial empire. This new entity, was created to foster a shared French identity without the

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<sup>123</sup> Jan S.F. Van Hoogstraten, Tamara Lynn Giles-Vernick, and Thomas E. O'Toole, "Central African Republic | Culture, History, & People," Encyclopedia Britannica, December 27, 2024

distinction of race and religion, ensuring the assimilation of overseas territories<sup>124</sup>. It also provided some autonomy as local assemblies were formed. Thus, by 1957, Social Evolution Movement of Black Africa was formed which was able to take control of the Ubagi-Shari Territorial Assembly, which eventually led to the creation and independence of Central African Republic.

The former colonial power provided assistance to CAR in key areas such as defence and trade in order to pursue good relations with newly formed state's government led by David Dacko as a president. However, his governance was characterized by patronage-based ruling, as he eliminated political opposition by establishing one-party system and governmental positions and state's finances to "reward" his loyal supporters at the expense of economic stability and overall national prosperity. Thus, only after 5 years of its independence Central African Republic experienced coup d'état led by Jean-Bedel Bokassa. Nevertheless, the new government did not bring any positive changes just the opposite as it abolished the constitution and legislature beginning the era of Bokassa's regime. During his time in power state's debts continued to grow, despite its abundance of natural resources such as gold, diamonds and rich agricultural lands. Furthermore, Bokassa declared himself as an Emperor of the Central African Empire, which lasted until 1979 as he was overthrown by French operation, which led to renewal of the Republic<sup>125</sup>. The following years were marked by continuation of political instability as in 1981, the state once again faced a coup, which established authoritarian rule under Andre Kolingba. However, as the nation grew tired of economic instability and centralized governance, democratic movements began to spread in Central African Republic in the early 1990s, demanding for democratic elections, which were finally held in 1993. Despite this, the state continued to face overall instability with the approaching bankruptcy due to years of mismanagement of financial resources, three attempted coups and human right abuses, which led to the establishment of United Nations' peacekeeping operation MINURCA<sup>126</sup>. Since its independence state has continued to be shaped

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<sup>124</sup>Simpson, Alfred William Brian "Human Rights and the End of Empire: Britain and the Genesis of the European Convention", Oxford University Press (2004), 285

<sup>125</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica. "Jean-Bédél Bokassa | Central African Dictator, Emperor & Military Leader." Encyclopedia Britannica, December 2, 2024

<sup>126</sup> United Nations "MINURCA". (n.d.). <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/past/car.htm>

by political, economic instability, social unrest and struggle for democratic governance, which for years has been hindered by its previous leaders.

Unfortunately, these issues have continued into the new millennium, as the state experienced another coup d'état in 2003, followed by emergence of the rebels, which further increased state's overall instability. Motivated by economic inequality, insufficient governance as well as ethnic tensions, rebel coalitions began to form, such as Seleka, consisting mainly of Muslims, which in 2013 was able to overthrow the government using brutality. After the rebels took over, the violence persisted and, in the response, Christian militias formed another coalition Anti-Balaka, which added the element of religious hostility to the fuelling conflict<sup>127</sup>. In light of the increased brutality all over CAR, United Nations Security Council imposed arms embargo on CAR<sup>128</sup> and authorized the deployment of International Support Mission (MINUSCA) to the Central African Republic alongside French army's peacekeeping operation Sangaris in 2013<sup>129</sup>. These international interventions were able to prevent a bigger humanitarian crisis, as disarmament and peace agreements were reached between the rebel coalitions. Furthermore, peacekeepers were able to help the state to conduct presidential elections. Thus, in 2016, France began its military troop withdrawal, leaving MINUSCA as primary security force. As stated by the then France's minister of defence Jean Yves Le Drian, this decision directly attributed to successfully accomplished mission's objectives to stop fighting in CAR<sup>130</sup>. However, the local nation expressed fear for the future of peace as doubts of MINUSCA's effectiveness without the strength of French troops emerged<sup>131</sup>. Unfortunately, it all came true as territorial disputes between the rebels reemerged, which intensified in 2017. In order to piece the country together, Central African Republic began to search for a more help, turning to the Russian Federation and signing a military cooperation agreement, with Russia deploying its former military officers to train CAR's forces<sup>132</sup>.

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<sup>127</sup> "Conflict in the Central African Republic | Global Conflict Tracker," Global Conflict Tracker, (n.d.)

<sup>128</sup> "UN Arms Embargo on the Central African Republic," SIPRI, (September 13, 2024)

<sup>129</sup> United Nations "MINUSCA" (n.d.)

<sup>130</sup> BBC News, "France Ends Sangaris Military Operation in CAR," October 31, 2016,

<sup>131</sup> AfricaNews, "Sangaris Mission in CAR Officially Ends on October 30," Africanews, October 29, 2016

<sup>132</sup> ICoCA - International Code of Conduct Association, "MODERN MERCENARIES: THE WAGNER GROUP IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC - ICoCA - International Code of Conduct Association," August 30, 2024

Interestingly, in the beginning of this military cooperation neither Russia nor Central African Republic acknowledged the presence of Russia's private military company in the state, despite the reports made by United Nations, United States and other international entities. However, similarly to Mali's case, Moscow's PMCs including Wagner group and Sewa Security Services has been conducting military operations together with the local military forces, protecting key sites of critical infrastructure as well as provides security services for the state's leaders, providing direct access to the Central African Republic's elite network. By the provision of protection, it also ensures that the present government stays in power. Additionally, Valery Zakharov, reportedly linked with Federal Security Services (FSB) in 2018 was appointed as security adviser to the president of the Central African Republic, Faustin-Archange Touadera, which fully ensured Moscow's direct contact to the CAR's leader. Therefore, it comes in no surprise that a subsidiary of Russian company M-Finans, Lobaye Invest Sarlu a mining enterprise as well as another company Midas Recources linked to Wagner, have gained permission to oversee gold and diamond extraction missions<sup>133</sup>. Thus, it comes in no surprise, that as of now companies linked to Wagner, and thus to Russian Federation have overtaken the management of the majority of Central African Republics gold mines, including the major Ndassima gold mine<sup>134</sup>.

Additionally, in 2020, chairing the Kimberly Process, Moscow used its position to lift the ban of diamond export for Central African Republic to be able to reenter the market<sup>135</sup>. This also enables Russia to leverage global commodity markets, which further provides more influence. The overall estimate on the possible profit Russia gains through the lucrative resource contracts is up to one billion dollars every year<sup>136</sup>. Again, this strategic model aligns with previously mentioned Russia's modus operandi – generation of revenue to offset missions' costs; it shows, how Moscow

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<sup>133</sup>Sidiropoulos, Elizabeth, and Chris Alden. "Russia in Africa — Post-Soviet Re-Engagement." Inside the Russia-Africa Matryoshka: Summitry, Geopolitics and Resources. South African Institute of International Affairs, 2019.

<sup>134</sup> Catrina Doxsee, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, and Jennifer Jun, "Central African Republic Mine Displays Stakes for Wagner Group's Future," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 3, 2022

<sup>135</sup> Reuters "Russia to push for lifting limits on Central African Republic diamond exports", Reuters February 25, 2020

<sup>136</sup> Catrina Doxsee, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, and Jennifer Jun, "Central African Republic Mine Displays Stakes for Wagner Group's Future,"

applies same tactics in different states. This creates straight link between Moscow's employed military mechanism and economic gain. Furthermore, despite previously opposing arms deliveries from France, Russia gained permission to supply weaponry to Central African Republic, granted by the United Nations sanctions committee<sup>137</sup>, as Moscow used its standing place in United Nations. Therefore, one could argue, that similarly to the case in Mali Moscow uses its PMC to exploit the state, undermining its sovereignty, security and overall stability.

Taking into consideration the soft power tactic, Russia uses in Central African Republic it is quite similar to Mali's case. It uses media outlets, such as the Lengo Sengo radio station, created few weeks after PMS's arrival, it plays a major role, due to the fact that the population has a limited access to the internet and has high illiteracy numbers. Moscow uses such tools in order to promote Wagner's activities, who supposedly brings peace to the region and overall good image of Russia. Furthermore, in order to spreading the anti-western narrative, especially undermining the United Nations peacekeeping operation MINUSCA, it even went to lengths to orchestrate civil demonstrations. After such protests, video material and photos would be quickly spread through media outlets by Touadera's regime entities to show the alleged wish of people for MINUSCA to leave the country, which is directed not only to the overall population of CAR, but also to the West<sup>138</sup>. Furthermore, the main Russian narrative is perfectly presented in 2021 movie called "Tourist", which shows a Russian volunteer, that goes to Central African Republic to train state's military forces. However, not long after his arrival he has to fight the rebels. The movie portrays how Russians are willing to sacrifice themselves to fight for Africa's security and stability, while the solders with blue helmets, who supposedly present UN peacekeepers are show as useless and the West – as entity trying to regain influence<sup>139</sup>. The movie, together with other disinformation campaigns serves as an effort to sell the idea of Moscow being a saviour of Central African

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<sup>137</sup>Sidiropoulos, Elizabeth, and Chris Alden. "Russia in Africa — Post-Soviet Re-Engagement." Inside the Russia-Africa Matryoshka: Summitry, Geopolitics and Resources. South African Institute of International Affairs, 2019

<sup>138</sup> Lea Peruchon, "In the Central African Republic, a former propagandist lifts the veil on the inner workings of Russian disinformation" Forbidden Stories, November 21, 2024

<sup>139</sup> *IMDb "Tourist" 2021*

Republic. Yet, the actual situation is completely different, as reports of human rights violations in PMC’s operating zones have come to light<sup>140</sup>.

Unfortunately, the humanitarian crisis, once maintained by the French and UN peacekeeping operation, has been worsening since the beginning of Russia’s engagement in the state. While the situation in the capital, has been relatively stable, rest of the country is facing violence and hardships. Despite being one of the richest nations considering its natural resource reserves, Central African Republic was 191<sup>st</sup> out of 193 states in the 2022 Human Capital and Development Index<sup>141</sup> and as of data from January 2024, around 50% of people require critical humanitarian aid as they not only face high levels of poverty but even food shortages<sup>142</sup>. Furthermore, by the end of 2024, 469 892 people were internally displaced<sup>143</sup>, showing the impact of the continuation of violence, which lacks a response from its government. Figure No. 2 shows the growth of internally displaced people since the withdrawal of French troops in 2016.



Figure 2 Number of IDPs in Central African Republic; Source: Operational Data Portal <https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/caf>

With the worsening humanitarian crisis, the governments close relations with Russia have caused its fallout with France. The previous ally suspended its 12 million dollar aid and stopped

<sup>140</sup> ICoCA - International Code of Conduct Association, “MODERN MERCENARIES: THE WAGNER GROUP IN CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC - ICoCA - International Code of Conduct Association,” August 30, 2024

<sup>141</sup> United Nations, “Human Development Index,” Human Development Reports, n.d.

<sup>142</sup> “What’s Happening in the Central African Republic? | NRC,” NRC, n.d.

<sup>143</sup> “Country - Central African Republic,” n.d.

its direct cooperation with Central African Republic, as according to its former minister for Europe and foreign affairs Jean-Yves Le Drian Russia is exerting its control through military tools, which influences decision-making in CAR<sup>144</sup>. One could argue that the government of CAR has ceded a part of its sovereignty to Russia, which continues to further destabilize the state.

Overall, the case of Central African Republic further presents how Russia employs its military, economic and soft power tools to minimizing influence of the West, in the expense of CAR's stability and sovereignty. Most significantly, Moscow's military means increases its economic, political benefits, while its funded disinformation campaigns portray it as a saviour of Central African nation as well as undermining the United Nations peacekeeping operation. The overall situation in the state shows how Russia has no intentions to actually help the nation, even in the presents of a major humanitarian crisis. This is due to the fact, that Russia's interests are not related in any way to the goal of creation of stability, as it is way easier to ensure influence and exploitation over an unstable countries, rather than the stable and secure ones.

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<sup>144</sup> French Press Agency - AFP, "France Slams Russia's 'seizure of Power' in C. African Republic," Daily Sabah, June 18, 2021

## CONCLUSION

1. Dependency theory and Transimperialism highlight the dual characteristics of Russia's engagement in Africa. The framework emphasizes on use of globalization for one's benefits, while ensuring reliance of "periphery" states, thus impeding the development of economic and political institutions as well as distancing them from the Western nations. Russia's strategy is combined of projection of authority upon the region of engagement and economic pragmatism, which allows to perpetuate reliance of African states, thus continuing the cycle of inequity. Synthesising dependency theory and transimperialism allows one to understand that Russia's mechanisms of influence Africa's shatter belts are the most effective at the informal level, involving not governmental institutions but rather through proxies and elite networks.
2. The study of the historical context of Russia's engagement in Africa during the Cold War and post-Soviet era, provides evidence that Kremlin builds its strategy by leveraging the USSR's legacy. Russia adapts the strategy making it more flexible and interest-based rather than ideological for it to better suit the current geopolitical situation. Furthermore, it strategically prefers to build partnerships with states based that have estranged relations with the West due colonial grievances. Russia continues to use the old Soviet era's narrative, portraying itself as a counterbalance to the colonial West, an ally to Global South. Combining those narratives with diplomatic, economic and military means creates Russia's projection of authority upon those countries. This conclusion provides base to complement theoretical assumptions of Dependency theory, Transimperialism and define Russia's mechanisms of authority projection through 1) military cooperation (i.e. theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence); 2) economic agreements (i.e. theoretical assumptions and empirical evidence); 3) soft power tools (i.e. diplomatic instruments as theoretical assumptions and narrative as empirical evidence) these are the identified independent variables.
3. Case studies of Russia's engagements with Mali and Central African Republic demonstrates that Russia uses its place in international arena such as UN and spreads anti-wester and anti-colonial narrative including disinformation campaigns. Russia more actively engages in states that are already unstable and fragile countries as it easier to influence the governing elite of

those countries. This is the reason Wagner group appears to be the main non-official “foreign policy” tool of Moscow’s modus operandi in Africa’s shatter belts. The PMC helps the governing regimes to stay in power, while Russia political support legitimizes its ruling. In exchange African shatter belts transfer a part of their sovereignty to Russia. Moreover, Moscow gets access to extract natural resources in those countries, providing for it significant revenue. This leads to further destabilisation of the states with the already present humanitarian crises, pushing them away from regional organizations and Western assistance. Thus, weakened West influence, gained economic benefit, support in international arena as overall increased dependence on Russia are the dependent variables.

4. The identified independent variables are directly linked to the depended ones as military means and economic agreements directly increase Moscow’s financial benefits; while again military tools together with soft power mechanisms such as narrative projection and public diplomacy efforts weaken Western influence in Africa’s shatter belts; and again Russia’s used military means increase Mali’s and Central African Republic’s dependence as well as ensures support in international arena (specifically – beneficial votes in UN General Assembly). The main conclusion is that Russia’s engagement in Africa’s shatter belts (Mali and Central African Republic) minimizes Western influence and increases Russia’s economic and political benefits, at the price of the long-term stability and independence of analysed Africa’s shatter belts. The future researches should also include orthodox church involvement in the states as Russia’s soft power strategy becomes much more important in the current geopolitical context.

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