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Russia's Security Export: a Tool for Authoritarian Support in Africa

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Universiteit Leiden

**Russia's Security Export:
a Tool for Authoritarian Support in Africa**

MA International Relations

Global Conflict in the Modern Era

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Abstract

Now that Russia is rekindling relations with various African states through military cooperation, many are wondering what this means for democracy in Africa. Some say that through such cooperation, including arms supply and the use of private military and security companies, Russia is bolstering regimes for economic enrichment and to widen its sphere of influence. However, Russia will face several obstacles if it wants to promote autocracy effectively. This thesis will look into the cases of the Central African Republic and Mali to investigate how Russia deals with certain obstacles it encounters, in particular the issues of linkage and its reliance on proxies, in its attempt to provide authoritarian support in Africa. The research demonstrates that Russian autocracy promotion functions as a proactive tool to build linkage with the receiver states and that linkage is much more dynamic.

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Introduction

With the rise of big authoritarian powers such as Russia and China to the world stage, the idea that authoritarian regimes would promote their own form of governance gained traction over the past decade (Bader et al., 2010; Burnell & Slumberger, 2010). Autocracy promotion, external international efforts influencing the domestic political situation of a state in such a way that it bolsters and encourages authoritarian forms of government, saw a surge in new research (e.g. Jackson, 2010; Bader et al., 2010; Vanderhill, 2013; Bader, 2015; von Soest, 2015; Way, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015a; Tansey, 2016).

After the initial fear of an increase of autocratization worldwide by the support of authoritarian great powers (e.g. Tull, 2006), researchers came to the conclusion that in most cases, autocracy promotion was mainly a response to the threat of democratization that threatened one's own regime by spillover (von Soest, 2015). As such, a lot of research focused on autocracy promotion, with the aim to fend off democracy promotion, by authoritarian powers within their own neighbourhood. Therefore, research on Russia, too, predominantly investigated autocracy promotion within its own neighbourhood, especially within the former Soviet Union, in order to contain the threat of democracy spilling over to Russia (particularly with the expansion of the EU and NATO membership to countries considered Russia's sphere of influence) (e.g. Vanderhill, 2013; Way, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015a).

The theory of linkage developed by Levitsky & Way (2010) stresses the importance of strong ties (e.g. political, economic, military ties, and the cross-border flows of people and ideas) between countries for the effectiveness of promoting democracy; the same appears true for autocracy promotion (Tansey et al., 2017). As Russia plays a dominant role within its own region, enjoying extensive ties with the states around, it largely managed to provide authoritarian support to its neighbours and kept the push for democratization at bay.

In its quest to reassert itself as a global power, Russia has returned to the international stage and has set up ties with countries worldwide, so too with African states. Africa has become an interesting playground for big powers to exert their influence. Especially now that western powers such as the US and EU states are leaving and turning elsewhere, other powers seized the opportunity to expand their influence (Stronski, 2019). China, for example, as the big economic power, has committed to economic cooperation with various African states and has invested in developing projects across the continent. Although perhaps less extensive, Russia has also re-established ties with African states across the continent after its long absence since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, mainly in the form of military cooperation. This again

raised questions what this would mean for the state of democracy across the African continent (Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021). Especially with the presence of Wagner Group forces, a Russian private military and security company that has been vehemently linked to the Kremlin, deployed across the continent protecting African regimes, Russian autocracy promotion appears to have spread outside of Russia's own neighbourhood and is now applied in Africa (Reynolds, 2019). In this case, the threat of democratic reform spilling over to Russia is lacking and, as such, Russian motives for autocracy promotion are not just simply reactive democracy prevention. It appears to be much more proactively applied to advance Russian national interests, such as economic enrichment but also in order to build new alliances in multilateral organizations such as the United Nations (UN) in its quest for a multipolar world.

Nevertheless, there remains the issue of linkage, which is important for the effectiveness of Russian efforts to promote autocracy in Africa. Russia lacks the strong ties with African states that it did enjoy with states within its own neighbourhood, especially since its absence in Africa since the collapse of the Soviet Union. This poses an obstacle for Russian efforts, because it needs to re-establish such ties, but also because democratic powers have already established ties with these states in Russia's absence. Simultaneously, it appears that the Russian government has outsourced its presence in Africa to PMSC Wagner Group and, thus, relies heavily on its actions and reputation, which might pose another obstacle.

Therefore, the research question of this thesis is: ***How does Russia deal with obstacles it encounters in its effort to promote autocracy in Africa?*** This thesis aims to investigate how Russia deals with the abovementioned obstacles it faces in Africa that do not occur when providing authoritarian support within its own neighbourhood. It argues that Russia will need to overcome these obstacles if it wants to promote autocracy in African states effectively. By diving into the cases of the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, this research contributes to the field of autocracy promotion in an attempt to shed light on Russia's efforts in Africa and, thus, aims to fill the gap of autocracy promotion outside of one's own direct neighbourhood. This thesis will change the current understanding of autocracy promotion in two ways. First of all, it demonstrates that Russian autocracy promotion, albeit opportunistic, should be understood as a proactive tool for Russia to re-establish itself as a global power by pulling other states into its orbit, instead of just reactive democracy prevention in the case of threat. Secondly, it exemplifies the flexibility of linkage, as it appears to be much more dynamic, adapting to the circumstances and needs of the receiver state. It shows that linkage can actually be built by the provision of authoritarian support, instead of the other way around.

This thesis is structured in five chapters. The first chapter will discuss the existing literature to clarify the relevance of this research and lay bare the gaps that remain within the field. The second chapter addresses the theoretical framework in which the hypotheses, that will be tested in this thesis, will be introduced. This will be followed by a chapter on the used methodology. The fourth chapter contains the analysis in which the cases of the CAR and Mali will be discussed. The fifth and concluding chapter will summarize the findings, discuss the relevance of the outcomes and limitations of the research, and suggest areas for future research.

Literature Review

This chapter is built up in four sections. It starts with an introduction to the study of autocracy promotion within the wider field of regime change. As this thesis focuses on Russia's authoritarian support for African regimes, the second part will discuss Russia's as an authoritarian sponsor. The third part will address Russia's activity in Africa and make the link with autocracy promotion. The final section will indicate the contribution of this thesis to the field of autocracy promotion.

Autocracy Promotion

Autocracy promotion is understood in this thesis as external international efforts that influence the domestic political situation of a state in such a way that it bolsters and promotes authoritarian forms of government. As such, it is the opposite of democracy promotion, where external actors try to advance democratic rule in another country. This thesis takes a broad definition of the concept and, consequently, disregards the intentions and motivations of the influencing actor (for Tansey (2016), for example, this makes the difference between *autocracy promotion*, *autocratic sponsorship* and *unintended influences*).

Within the field of regime change, autocracy promotion has been ignored for a long time as the focus lied predominantly on democracy promotion (e.g. Carothers, 1999). Especially, after the cold war ended, democracy became seen as the norm and the form of governance all others should strive towards. However, with the rise and return of big authoritarian regimes such as Russia and China to the international stage, other models of governance materialized offering an alternative example for others to emulate, learn from or cooperate with (Gat, 2007; Tull, 2006).

As a result, scholars started to ask whether authoritarian powers were exporting their authoritarian models of governance to other states (Bader et al., 2010; Burnell & Schlumberger, 2010). Perhaps, just as democracies preferred to work together with other democracies, autocracies too would rather team up with fellow autocracies? Consequently, the past decade saw an increase in research diving into the international drivers of authoritarianism (e.g. Jackson, 2010; Bader et al., 2010; Vanderhill, 2013; Bader, 2015; von Soest, 2015; Way, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015a; Tansey, 2016). As such, there exist international actors, besides domestic factors, that stimulate authoritarian rule.

Why autocracies support fellow autocracies is mainly based on their own regime survival and the threat of democracy. Von Soest (2015) argues that authoritarian governments,

first and foremost, are concerned with keeping themselves in power. Therefore, a big motivation for promoting authoritarianism is to counter democratization that threatens one's own regime survival. Thus, in most cases autocracy promotion is not set out to create an ideational "authoritarian international", but is nothing more than democracy prevention (von Soest, 2015). Furthermore, in some cases, bolstering another regime can simply be an unintentional by-product of cooperation (Bader, 2015). In order to create more order within the field, Tansey (2016) made a typology distinguishing the intentions and motivations for providing autocratic support.

Several scholars looked at how authoritarian models of governance were transferred abroad. Some wrote about passive forms of transfer such as diffusion and cross-border learning, (Ambrosio, 2010; Ambrosio & Hall, 2017). Others pointed towards more active mechanisms through which models of autocracy are actively encouraged by foreign authoritarian regimes, the so-called black knights (Odinius & Kuntz, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015a; Way, 2015). Tansey (2016) identified four tools authoritarian powers can resort to when actively supporting a fellow autocrat: *financial support*, *security support*, *international diplomacy*, and *strategic advice*.

An important factor for both democracy and autocracy promotion has to do with linkage. Levitsky and Way (2010) stressed the importance of *linkage to the west* and, to a lesser extent, *western leverage* for effective regime change towards democracy. The former is defined as "the density of ties (economic, political, diplomatic, social, and organizational) and cross-border flows (of capital, goods and services, people, and information) between particular countries and the US and the EU" (Levitsky & Way, 2010: 43), and the latter as "governments' vulnerability to external democratization pressure" (Levitsky & Way, 2010: 40). They show that in the absence of linkage, leverage by democratic powers is rarely effective. This explains why democracy promotion was effective in countries with stronger ties to the EU or the US than countries without such ties. Tansey et al. (2017) show that the same is true for efforts of autocracy promotion; namely, in the case of high autocratic linkage between the sender and the receiving state, efforts to promote autocracy (or resist democracy) abroad are more effective. Furthermore, Vanderhill (2013) points out that the outside influence on domestic politics needs to correspond to the domestic situation. Thus, in order for democracy or autocracy promotion to work, the presence of domestic counterparts is vital. Moreover, Gratius (2022) shows that in the case of pressure from both democratic and autocratic powers, one's leverage can be rendered less effective when others offer support. The support of one power can then be substituted for another one and, thus, replace the linkage rendering the leverage less powerful. Therefore, too much pressure can also push a state towards opposing powers.

As both the perception of threat as well as a high level of linkage exists within the same region, most research has focused on autocracy promotion within the near abroad. Kneuer and Demmelhuber (2021), for example, coined the term *authoritarian gravity centre* (AGC) describing authoritarian regimes who hold a dominant position within their respective regions, influencing those around them in order to stabilize their neighbourhoods. As extensive ties and similarities exist between states within the same region, there exist a high form of *linkage* between these two, which seems vital when trying to impact one's domestic politics.

Nevertheless, especially with the rise of big authoritarian powers such as Russia and China to the international stage, it has become clear that autocracies are stepping outside of the comfort of their own neighbourhoods, supporting authoritarian rule worldwide creating greater networks of interlinked authoritarian regimes (Tansey et al., 2017). However, this particular phenomenon has been much less explored within the existing literature apart from a few studies (e.g. Gratius (2022) on Venezuela). This poses questions about how such powers deal with concepts such as linkage.

Russia as Authoritarian Sponsor

As this paper will focus on Russia's efforts to bolster autocratic rule across Africa, the following section will further look into Russia's history as an authoritarian sponsor.

Many scholars focused on Russia's active role as a supporter of fellow autocrats. Russia is the perfect example of an AGC as it dominates its neighbourhood, influencing other smaller states within the region through active autocracy promotion and modes of diffusion. Usually, there is a high level of linkage and power asymmetry between the AGC and the target states in which the AGC has the dominant role. Multiple authors have written about how Russia is bolstering autocratic rule in the former Soviet Union (Way, 2015; Tolstrup, 2015a), the Central Asian states (Jackson, 2010), and eastern European countries, both in authoritarian countries such as Belarus, as well as democratic countries like Hungary (Vanderhill, 2013; Ambrosio, 2021).

Russia's main aim in the near abroad is to stabilize its region by holding off the threat of democracy. As such, Russia can be classified within Tansey's (2016) typology as an *autocratic sponsor* intentionally bolstering autocracy for *democracy resistance*. In doing so, it made use of a wide range of tools including material support such as financial aid and military assistance to immaterial support such as diplomatic backing (for example by state visits or by congratulating the other incumbent after, probably rigged, elections to legitimize their contested

victory) and disinformation campaigns that influence public opinion. For example, Russia has funded political campaigns of Russia-minded incumbents during the elections, provided strategic advice, increased state visits to signal legitimacy, supported military crackdowns when uprisings occurred and controlled media outlets promoting their ally and discrediting the opposition (Vanderhill, 2013; Tolstrup, 2015a). Russia tried its best to make it seem as if its favoured candidate was the only option by convincing the public, demoralising the opposition and making sure elite defection among regime insiders looked unappealing (Tolstrup, 2015a). Furthermore, Russia has also occasionally sent military assistance to its allies when they were facing uprisings, as it did in Kazakhstan earlier this year in support of president Toqaeu (RFE/RL, 2022).

As such, it demonstrates that Russia made use of a total package of support in its own neighbourhood. However, there have also been accounts of Russia actively lending support to autocrats outside of its own respective neighbourhood. This is different as there lacks a direct threat to autocratic rule in Russia and, thus, motivation must be slightly different than in its own neighbourhood. Additionally, the tools to Russia's disposal might be different as well which might impact its tactics.

Gratius (2021) demonstrates how Russia supported Maduro's regime in Venezuela. Russia increased its economic and political cooperation to both protect its own economic and geopolitical interests as well as to counter sanctions issued at Venezuela by democratic powers, namely the US and the EU. As such, when linkage with Russia strengthened (along with China and Cuba), linkage with democratic powers decreased, making the push for democratization powerless (Gratius, 2022).

Thus, it appears that Russia has also been strengthening its ties with fellow autocrats across the globe, predominantly in pursuit of its own interests, such as building alliances in multilateral institutions, elite enrichment and countering democratization efforts by Western powers such as the US and the EU. Now it appears that Russia is also turning to Africa as it has become an interesting playing field since western powers such as the US and European states are leaving (Stronski, 2019).

Russia in Africa

Russia has increased its interest in Africa after its long absence since the end of the cold war. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, ties were minimal, for it was too occupied with its own domestic issues. Now that Russia is returning to the world stage with the power to exert

its influence abroad, and western powers are turning their attention elsewhere, Russia has jumped at the opportunity to fill this void and rekindled relations with African states. In autumn 2019, Putin also hosted the first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi, and it is intended to become a recurrent event to uphold their cooperation (Stronski, 2019; Sukhankin, 2020).

Russia's strategic goals in this relationship appear to be mainly based on economic interests and securing diplomatic support within multilateral institutions such as the UN. Its advances are mainly opportunistic, responding to the power vacuum created by the reduced interest of western powers in Africa (Stronski, 2019; Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021; Sukhankin, 2020).

Some scholars claim that Russia is building alliances among African states in order to counter the liberal world order led by its rival, the US, and that it promotes a multipolar one. To a certain extent, it is working since Russia gained the support of a large part of the African voting bloc within the UN General Assembly (Stronski, 2019; Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021). During the UN voting following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, 35 African states sided with Russia mainly by abstaining from voting (indirectly supporting Russia); now again in 2022, after the invasion of Ukraine, 27 African states have backed Russia in the UN (UNGA, 2014; UNGA, 2022).

The manner in which Russia is projecting its power on the continent is constraint by the tools at its disposal. As several authors indicate, Russia's military and economic power is limited, especially in comparison to the US and China. Russia's soft power tools are also sparse as they remain limited to Russia's neighbourhood. Stronski (2019) argues that Russia is, therefore, turning towards isolated countries in Africa, that do not seem to be of interest to other powers. He claims that the manner in which Russia is pursuing its foreign policy is based on "a clear desire to avoid becoming entangled in protracted conflicts, an eagerness to outsource risky or costly adventures to non-state actors, and an economical use of resources in pursuit of opportunities as they arise" (Stronski, 2019, p2). Sukhankin (2020) identified a *security export mechanism* upon which Russia's main strategy in Africa is based. This security export mechanism is based on three strategies: arms sales, "hybrid" security cooperation, often through the use of private military and security companies (PMSC) such as Wagner Group, and political/informational operations (Sukhankin, 2020).

Wagner Group is a Russian PMSC that became known during Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. There exists uneasiness about PMSCs in general as their employees are often seen as mercenaries and it raises questions of accountability. Russian PMSCs are even more controversial for they are not legal in Russia, however, they are tolerated by the government

(Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2020). Consequently, they “exist at the mercy of the authorities” (Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2020: p.4), meaning that they are, to a certain extent, controlled by the Kremlin.

Wagner Group in particular has been linked to the Kremlin for its strong ties to the GRU and the FSB. Wagner’s owner is assumed to be Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close friend of Russian President Putin. Prigozhin is a businessman with various companies, among them mining companies that have often been tied to Wagner’s activity. Prigozhin has also been linked to the Russian troll company Internet Research Agency (IRA), which was involved in the American presidential elections of 2016. Nevertheless, many claim that Wagner is used by the Kremlin as an extension of the Russian military that the government can plausibly deny. Therefore, it appears that wherever Wagner Group is involved, so is the Russian state (Reynolds, 2019).

Akinola and Ogunnubi (2021) postulate that the way Russia is pursuing its interests is by the use of what they call *sharp power*, manipulative diplomatic efforts by one country to interfere in the political domain of another. They claim that Russia poses a threat to democracy in Africa as it aims to win over the hearts and minds of the African elites by making authoritarian rule possible again (Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021).

Therefore, it seems that Russia is indeed providing authoritarian support to African incumbents. By doing so, it brings more states into its orbit, gaining more allies within multilateral organizations and creating a stronger front against western powers. As a result, democratization efforts are rendered less effective as Russia now offers an alternative: authoritarian rule.

Conclusion

It is assumed that Russia’s return to Africa comes paired with the provision of authoritarian support to incumbents across the continent, predominantly in the form of military support by deploying PMSCs such as Wagner Group. Russia is an experienced authoritarian sponsor, for it has repeatedly promoted autocracy within its own neighbourhood to keep the region stable and to prevent the spread of democracy that threatens regime survival. However, regime change somewhere in Africa does not pose a direct threat of spillover to Russia. Therefore, Russian motivations for promoting autocracy in Africa must be different. It appears Russia’s motives are based on opportunism, rooted in economic and geopolitical interests and a desire for gathering allies in its quest for a multipolar world order. As such, Russia does not only promote

autocracy in a responsive manner to hold off democratization. Instead, it uses autocracy promotion proactively to expand its sphere of influence in pursuit of its national interests.

Nevertheless, there remain some issues along the way for Russia to be effective at autocracy promotion, for the literature stresses the importance of linkage between the sender and receiver state. Within its own neighbourhood Russia already is the dominant power. In Africa, however, Russia lacks such ties since it largely left the continent after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Simultaneously, democratic powers have established ties extensively. Besides, now that Russia is rekindling relations it appears to mainly do so by outsourcing its activities to proxies whilst concurrently denying its involvement, which might also complicate Russia's efforts to build strong ties as Russia will not fully be in control. Therefore, this thesis aims to investigate how Russia deals with the aforementioned obstacles it faces in Africa that do not occur when providing authoritarian support within its own neighbourhood. It argues that Russia will need to overcome these obstacles if it wants to promote autocracy in African states effectively.

This thesis will contribute to the literature on autocracy promotion, focussing on Russia's efforts in Africa and, as such, aims to shed light on autocracy promotion outside of one's neighbourhood which has remained largely understudied. It will demonstrate that Russia's authoritarian support is not only based on democracy prevention to secure regime survival. Instead, it has become a tool through which Russia aims to re-establishes itself as a global power by pulling other states into its orbit. This changes the way Russian autocracy promotion is perceived in the literature from reactively countering the threat of democratization to proactively offering the alternative that is authoritarian rule, whilst profiting from it simultaneously. Additionally, it will exemplify that linkage turns out to be much more dynamic and adapts to the circumstances and needs of the receiver state.

Theoretical Framework

In its attempt to bolster authoritarian rule in African states, Russia will face several obstacles. Therefore, in order to achieve success in supporting authoritarian rule (and simultaneously counter democratization) Russia needs to overcome these obstacles. First of all, Russia has to build strong ties with the African receiver states to increase its linkage. Secondly, it will have to compete with democratic powers (such as France) that have already built up linkage in these states. Lastly, Russian dependency on PMSCs can cause difficulty as it will no longer be directly in charge. As they are the face of Russia in these African countries, problems brought on by these contractors can backfire on Russia. As such, Russia has to somehow manage to control them. In this chapter, based on the aforementioned literature, three hypotheses will be introduced that will be tested in this thesis.

Hypotheses

The theory of linkage developed by Levitsky and Way (2010) stresses the importance of ties between states if one state is trying to influence the internal politics of another state. The more linkage there is, the more likely it will be that authoritarian sponsorship leads to autocratic persistence. If Russia wants to effectively provide authoritarian support that leads to further autocratization or power consolidation of the regime in power, Russia will need to set up ties to increase the linkage. Russian linkage needs to become of such a nature that the government of the receiver state can stay in power by depending solely on Russia's assistance or when Russia's support becomes more important than the support of other powers. Therefore:

H1: Russia will seek to increase its ties with the receiver state.

Building further on the phenomenon of linkage, whilst Russia redrew its presence in Africa after the cold war other great powers have been increasingly dominant, exerting their power in African states. Especially, former colonial powers such as France have been active in African states that had been part of the French empire during colonial times. The ties between them often reflect a long historical bond, and they function as the dominant economic trading partners and security providers. These powers, with whom African states share a high level of linkage, hold leverage over these African governments and use it to push for democratization in these states. If Russia aims to be successful at bolstering authoritarian rule, its influence has to surpass

the influence of democratic powers or it has to somehow manage to reduce democratic linkage. Thus:

H2: Russia will compete with democratic powers for influence.

In its attempt to establish itself as a better partner to these countries than its democratic counterparts, Russia will want to build a good reputation in the receiver state. However, Russia's strategy might cause some difficulty in that regard. The strategy for authoritarian support in Africa diverges from the one Russia used in the near abroad; it relies predominantly on security export whilst outsourcing its activities to PMSCs, whereas in its neighbourhood Russia provided a wide range of support (security, economic, diplomatic support, etc.) and did so actively itself. In some cases, Russia contradict involvement in African states completely as it denies its ties to the PMSCs. It might be a smart move for, by outsourcing security and military activities, Russia can both cut down on costs as well as plausibly deny its involvement in such practices when necessary. However, such outsourcing can also have negative consequences. As Russia is not fully in control of their activities, they might become involved in undesirable situations for Russia, either by putting private over public interest or by committing severe human rights violations for example. Since they will be the face of Russia, such negative externalities can impact Russia's reputation. Consequently, these proxies can oppose Russia's attempt at successfully providing authoritarian support. Hence:

H3: Russia's use of proxies leads to negative externalities that can backfire on Russia.

Methodology

Plausibility Probe

This thesis assumes that in its efforts to provide authoritarian support to regimes in Africa, Russia will encounter certain obstacles that do not occur in its own neighbourhood. As existing research on this specific topic is limited, this thesis will aim for a plausibility probe. By using a plausibility probe the aforementioned hypotheses will be tested in two cases where Russia has been active. According to Eckstein (1975), “plausibility probes involve attempts to determine whether potential validity [of hypotheses] may reasonably be considered great enough to warrant the pains and costs of testing, which are almost always considerable, but especially so if broad, painstaking comparative studies are undertaken (Eckstein, 1975: 108)”. Therefore, the aim of this plausibility probe is to validate these hypotheses or to see how they need to be strengthened for future research.

The dependent variable in this research is Russia achieving success at becoming influential enough to impact the politics of the receiver state to bolster autocratic rule in African states. This is the case if an increase in autocratic traits in the receiver state after Russian involvement has occurred. This success will be dependent on Russia increasing its ties with these receiver states and, simultaneously, countering the impact of democratic powers’ leverage over the receiver state. Also, it will remain important for Russia to control its proxies in order to avert negative externalities that may backfire on Russia.

The independent variable of the first hypothesis is the increase in ties between Russia and the receiver state. In order to test this hypothesis, this thesis expects to see in the data that Russia will try to strengthen ties between itself and the receiver state; based on the literature, it will predominantly be based on security cooperation.

The independent variable of the second hypothesis is Russia’s competition with a democratic power that is also exerting power in the receiver state. To test this hypothesis, this thesis expects to find Russia competing with democratic powers for influence. Russia will want to replace the other power and, whilst doing that, both powers will probably try to discredit one another.

The independent variable of the third hypothesis is the occurrence of negative externalities as a result of Russia’s outsourcing of autocratic support (by bolstering the military capabilities of the receiver state) to PMSCs in the receiver states. This thesis assumes to see in the data that, due to a lack of oversight, severe violations will occur at the hands of these

companies which will reflect badly on Russia. Or it is expected that the proxies will put their own interests over those of the Russian state when they deviate.

Data Collection

Unfortunately, it is hard to access primary data on autocracy promotion, if it ever exists. As Tolstrup (2015b) argued, authoritarian support is often provided covertly and most agreements are coated in secrecy, which leads to data restraints. Whereas democracy promotion is often put forward as a foreign policy goal, no powers openly declare that they are hindering the democratic process and bolstering authoritarian rule. Moreover, Russia's involvement in Africa is predominantly characterised by the presence of PMSCs such as Wagner Group. This further complicates the access to raw data as Russian PMSCs do not officially exist and, therefore, official contracts are lacking, for the deployment of these actors is often obscured and ties to them are denied by all involved (Bukkvoll & Østensen, 2020).

As a result of this data deficit, this thesis is restrained to rely on secondary sources, such as news reports and the work of researchers that have investigated Russian activity across the African continent. This also accounts for the main limitations of this thesis, as the data available will not always be objective, but is written from a particular angle, mainly western.

Case Selection

The cases of the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali have been selected because these are countries wherein Russia is active, particularly by providing security services in the form of arms supply and the deployment of Wagner Group (CAR since 2017; Mali since 2021). Both countries suffer from unstable conflicts that threaten their security, and both states experience political instabilities with fragile governments at the helm; the CAR with a democratically elected president and Mali with a military junta that ousted the previous government.

Analysis

In this chapter, the aforementioned hypotheses will be tested in the cases of the CAR and Mali. The first section will address the case of the CAR; the second will explore the case of Mali.

Central African Republic (2017- present)

Case Introduction

Located at the heart of the African continent, the resource-rich country of the CAR has experienced a lot of tumult and instability over time. The political situation has been dire with the ousting of the regime of François Bozizé in 2013, which instigated violent conflict with multiple groups competing for influence. Following the elections of 2016, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, considered a peace-seeking reformer and with a French educational background, became the new democratically elected president of the CAR (Marten, 2019).

For its security, the CAR has mainly relied on the former colonial power France from whom it became independent in 1960. French troops had been deployed since 2013 and helped to gain control over Bangui, the capital of the CAR. The French operation ended in 2016 after the elections were held peacefully (BBC News, 2016). This left the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSCA, largely in charge of the CAR's security. Unfortunately, after the elections, a resurgence of violence occurred with large parts of the country under the control of insurgency groups (Bax, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2022b).

As the national armed forces (FACA) were unable to address the situation, both because of its own bad state and the issued arms embargo, president Touadéra appealed to the UN in 2017 to lift the arms embargo that had strained FACA in order for the forces to equip themselves. Following a meeting in October that year between president Touadéra and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Sochi, Russia offered to send its own light weapons, which was approved unanimously by the UN Sanction Commission (Marten, 2019).

This initiated the Russian-Central African cooperation as Russia's ties to the CAR prior to 2017 were minimal. Russian motives to become involved in the CAR are assumed to be of economic and geopolitical nature, and is based on preying on opportunities when other powers pull out. Thus, it is expected that Russia will try to fill the void left by the French and, from there on, expand its influence. Russia will simultaneously undermine democratization as it offers an alternative form of governance. This will not only help Russia curb the threat of democracy for itself, but it will generate new allies Russia needs in its quest to reassert itself as a global power.

Russia's growing influence

This section focuses on the first hypothesis: *Russia will seek to increase its ties with the receiver state*. In order to be successful at promoting autocracy in the CAR, Russia will have to set up and expand its ties with the CAR. If Russia is to effectively support the incumbent's government and to counter the democratization process in the country promoted by democratic powers, Russian linkage need to be of such a nature that the CAR government can stay in power by depending solely on Russia's assistance or when Russia's support becomes more important than the support of other powers.

Thus, after its appearance in 2017 in the CAR, Russia has expanded its presence in the country, as expected, by providing security support, albeit covertly. The Russian arms to equip the CAR national forces came paired with 170 so-called civilian trainers together with five uniformed military personnel, who were claimed to be training the national military and police forces as well as guarding building materials for Russian hospitals (Marten, 2019). The "civilians" turned out to be contractors of the infamous Wagner Group, whose presence accounts for around 2,000 troops in the CAR (Bax, 2021). These "civilian" trainers appeared to be involved in much more than just training FACA. Allegedly, they have fulfilled a commanding function over the FACA in active military operations for counterinsurgency, the protection of president Touadéra and his government, and the guarding of mining sites (Human Rights Watch, 2022b; Chegraoui et al., 2020). Therefore, they appear to hold a high position in the CAR's security system.

Although the operations of Wagner Group in the CAR have been reported by various countries and institutions (such as the EU, France, the US, the UN Panel of Experts on the CAR and the UN Working Group experts and special rapporteurs), the government of the CAR claims it has not hired the mercenary group and denies its presence in the country (Human Rights Watch, 2022b; Olivier, 2021). Russia, too, has consistently denied its ties to these Wagner forces. However, ties between Wagner Group's owner Prigozhin and Russian president Putin give away the blurring of Russian private and public interests. Additionally, Moscow has also sent Valery Zakharov, a former Russian military intelligence officer, to advise the president of the CAR. Zakharov, as Touadéra's national security adviser, is in charge of the training of the national forces and, thus, of the "civilian" trainers (Lister et al., 2019; Marten, 2019). Therefore, Zakharov forms a link between the Russian government, the CAR government and Wagner forces. Simultaneously, Zakharov's appointment, being in charge of national security and, therefore, directly involved in the CAR government, also demonstrates a strengthening of political ties between Moscow and Bangui, and portrays an increased dependence on Russia.

Apart from Russia's relationship with CAR's elites, Russia also enjoys a good reputation among the civilian population. In 2019, Russia helped broker a peace deal with 14 armed groups, which helped grow Moscow's status in the country. When a resurgence of violence broke out during the 2020 elections, it was due to the help of Russian combatants that the CAR troops were able to repress most rebel groups and reached most of their strongholds. As a result, Touadéra, who was re-elected (albeit under questionable circumstances), gained a boost in popular support in Bangui as the victory over the rebels was seen as a great achievement after twenty years of instability. Simultaneously, the Russians were perceived as liberators, which increased Russia's reputation in the country (Gbadamosi, 2022; Bax, 2021). In 2021, images of civilians and Central African gendarmerie and police forces wearing t-shirts with the imprint "je suis Wagner" surfaced signalling support for the Russian presence (Corbeaunews Centrafrique, 2021). Gratitude among civilians in Bangui for the Russians can further be sensed since groups honour the Russians with statues and flowers, and support Russia in their invasion of Ukraine (di Roma, 2022).

Russia's ties are predominantly of military and political nature. However, it could potentially play a vital role economically, albeit in a more indirect obscured way. Russia could provide the CAR, or at least its elites, with some form of economic enrichment through mining as the CAR is a country rich in natural resources. The ongoing instability has made it impossible for the state to take advantage of its riches. As pointed out by many, Wagner Group seems to be part of a greater corporate structure headed by Prigozhin with various other companies; among them mining companies. The arrival of Russian military support has come in exchange for mining permits allowing certain companies such as Lobaye interest (linked to Prigozhin) to exploit the country's natural resources (Lister et al., 2019). Some claim that these companies, with the help of Wagner contractors laundering gold and diamonds to conflict-free areas, have been circumventing the Kimberley process, the international agreement set out to curb illegal exports from war zones (Chegraoui et al., 2020). If this is true, both the CAR government and Wagner (and the Russian government too) can profit financially. As such, the regime might also become dependent on Russia financially. However, it remains a question whether this money would be used to stabilize the country or whether it will simply disappear into the pockets of the elites. Nevertheless, the financial gain could be used to consolidate power.

As Russian presence in the CAR has increased, so has the importance of the Russian language. Russian soft power has been mainly limited to Russia's direct neighbourhood and as such has been insignificant in Africa so far, especially since most of it is projected through the use of the Russian language on television. The Russian language has traditionally never held a

place in everyday Central African affairs (as opposed to French). However, speculations exist claiming that president Touadéra wants to install Russian as an official language next to Sango and French (Moloma, 2022a). The language is to be taught and made compulsory in schools and universities. Thus, if this measure is truly enforced and Russian language becomes more widely known in the CAR, Russian soft power could potentially increase and then be used to exert Russian influence.

Thus, Russian ties have increased significantly since its arrival in 2017. It has established itself as the main security provider with Wagner contractors entrenched in the national security field. In other domains, however, Russian influence remains limited. Russia may perhaps increase its power in the domain of economic support and soft power, although this remains speculative. Nevertheless, the ties between the CAR and democratic powers seem to dwindle as well, which might lead to more dependency on Russia (this will be further discussed in the next section). Therefore, the first hypothesis seems plausible.

Russia's competition with France

In this section, the focus will be on the second hypothesis: *Russia will compete with democratic powers for influence*. In order to truly be able to influence the politics of the CAR, Russia will need to challenge the presence of democratic powers, especially France who has played a dominant role throughout the CAR's history. France, as a democratic power, has pushed for democratic reform in the country. As long as France remains a high level of linkage with the CAR, it could use leverage to keep pushing for these reforms. Russia has to either become so important to the CAR that it surpasses French influence or it has to somehow manage to decline the influence of France. As such, this thesis expects to see Russia compete with France in order to counter the democratization process.

Russia's arrival in the CAR appears to be based on opportunism. When France began to reduce its military presence in the country since 2016, Russia jumped at the opportunity to fill this void and has now replaced France as CAR's main military and security ally (Marten, 2019). Now, Russia has become the main security provider to the CAR. This move directly increased Russia's linkage with the CAR, whilst simultaneously decreasing France's.

According to leaked documents, Russia, or more specifically, Prigozhin's operations, have pushed French-orientated politicians out of the CAR government and replaced them with Russians (Harding & Burke, 2019; Chegraoui et al., 2020). This points to a further incline of Russian influence, whilst decreasing France's at the same time.

Both Russia and the CAR took advantage of the anti-French sentiment in the country to promote themselves, as French withdrawal from the CAR partially had to do with the critique it received in the CAR. Due to the colonial history, Central Africans hold an antagonistic stance toward France. Due to the resurgence of violence despite French efforts to demilitarize, the anti-French sentiment in the country has grown. Russia has played into the old hostility by promoting itself as a power without a colonial history. Simply a lack of colonial history seemed enough for Central Africans to favour Russia. Whilst anti-French sentiment was growing, pro-Russian sentiment had been intensifying, especially since the successes after the 2020 elections which gave the Russians a liberator status (Bax, 2021). President Touadéra too used the French status to justify the Russian presence in the country. He critiqued the UN peacekeepers and French forces of being unable to oppress the insurgents and their focus on dialogue and human rights. Simultaneously, he argued that that is the reason why he brought in Russia, since they *can* actually fight these rebels (Gbadamosi, 2022).

The increase in anti-French sentiment has been linked to Russian disinformation campaigns. According to Facebook, both French and Russian disinformation campaigns have gone back and forth trying to discredit each other and promote themselves. The campaigns against France have been linked to the Russian “troll factory” IRA (Al Jazeera, 2020). Therefore, Russia could be co-responsible for France’s departure. By discrediting France online, its status further plummeted to which France decided to leave. However, the true effect of both campaigns remains unknown.

Apart from the troll campaigns, French and Russian political figures also throw accusations at each other. While the French president, Emmanuel Macron asserts that president Touadéra is a hostage of Wagner Group (Gbadamosi, 2022), the Russian security adviser to president Touadéra, Zakahrov, in turn, has claimed that the story of Wagner’s presence in the CAR was fabricated by the French media (Human Rights Watch, 2022b).

As Russia draws CAR further into its orbit with increased military links, this is also driving a wedge between CAR and the democratic powers. Although the CAR could now lean on Russia for its security, it remained economically dependent on democratic powers, including France. Therefore, Bangui is caught in a balancing game, being both dependent on Russian military support as well as French economic aid. However, as a result of Russian-French rivalry and the disavowed reliance on Wagner, powers that usually have supported the CAR in the past are pulling out. This led to France suspending its economic (and military) support to the CAR (AfricaNews, 2021). Therefore, it seems that Russian increasing ties appear to simultaneously push other powers away which further isolates the CAR, making it increasingly dependent on

Russia alone. The absence of economic support, however, will be felt in the CAR and, therefore, France will hold some leverage over the government. However, as mentioned in the previous section, Russia could perhaps indirectly replace this dependency by enriching the elites. Nevertheless, after France's departure in the domain of security, it now also pulls back economically.

Thus, it has become clear that the CAR has become the battleground of two powers, Russia and France. Russia has cunningly made use of the already existing anti-French sentiment to promote itself. Consequently, it seems Russia is gaining the upper hand for it has replaced France as the main security provider, and now with France suspending its economic support, it seems the CAR is becoming even more isolated and dependent on Russia. Therefore, Russia's increased linkage goes hand-in-hand with the decline of French linkage, rendering French leverage also less powerful. This will mean that the push for democratization will be much less strong as the CAR's linkage with and dependency on democratic powers dwindles. This points towards Russian success in replacing democratic power's linkage. Thus, it appears that the second hypothesis is plausible.

Proxies and Negative Externalities

This section will test the third hypothesis: *Russia's use of proxies leads to negative externalities that can backfire on Russia.* Using proxies is a smart move by Russia as it can plausibly deny accountability when things go wrong. Even better, it can deny being involved completely; as it repeatedly does. However, as nowadays Wagner Group and Russia are almost perceived as inseparable, Wagner's actions can still damage Russia's reputation when violations occur. Also, by outsourcing military support to a PMSC, Russia might encounter new obstacles when the blurred Russian public and private interests diverge. This thesis expects that the use of Wagner Group is both a blessing and a curse for Russia. It can help Russia to quickly build and expand its ties with the CAR, however, its actions can discredit Russia's status in the country as well as the association is so strong. Therefore, Russia will probably both profit and lose from using proxies in the CAR.

Thus, as already illustrated above, Wagner contractors play a significant part in bolstering the CAR security forces. Although denied by all parties involved, it seems clear that these privateers are present in the country, however, it remains vague what they exactly are doing there. Moreover, with the wide spread of "je suis Wagner" t-shirts among the national forces in Bangui, the PMSC's presence is undeniable (Corbeaunews Centrafrique, 2021).

As Wagner Group does not officially exist and contracts do not exist on paper, it remains difficult to pin down what its activities entail. On top of that, research into these activities do not seem to be appreciated and are considered as highly dangerous. In 2018, three Russian journalists who were investigating Wagner's presence in the CAR for their documentary were killed (Human Rights Watch, 2022b). The journalists had allegedly been working for Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a rich oil tycoon who is perceived as one of Putin's harshest critics (RFE/RL, 2018).

As mentioned before, Prigozhin's other businesses have received mining permits to extract natural resources in the CAR. Therefore, it is believed that Wagner provides security to the government mainly in return for access to these resources (Lister et al., 2019). However, as Prigozhin holds close ties to president Putin and the Kremlin, his enrichment could be linked to power consolidation at home. As such, Wagner has not only become a tool for Russia to use, but in return it could be that Prigozhin and Wagner Group are setting the Russian foreign policy agenda (Marten, 2019). The ties between Wagner Group and the Kremlin appear, therefore, to run a vicious circle; Wagner, despite its illegal status in Russia, is allowed to operate at the mercy of the Kremlin and, thus, is dependent on the government; the Russian government in turn is gaining significantly financially from Wagner and Prigozhin's activities in the CAR and are, therefore, also dependent on them. For the CAR, it seems that these structures are also playing a part in enriching the countries elites, which could lead to power consolidation in the CAR.

Apart from elites benefiting from Wagner Group's activities, it appears that the PMSC also enjoys the support among the local population, which is also visible by the spread of "je suis Wagner" t-shirts. Nevertheless, accusations of grave human rights violations across the country committed by the Russian privateers accumulate. According to Human Rights Watch (2022b), Wagner personnel is guilty of summarily executing, torturing and beating Central African civilians. Reports have also shown various cases of rape and sexual violence throughout the CAR (Human Rights Watch, 2022b; OHCHR, n.d.). As a result, stories of civilians who have experienced or witnessed such violations rebut Wagner's positive presence. This could in turn also backfire on Russia's reputations, since the link between the two continues to be made.

Furthermore, if the government of the CAR fails to denounce such abuses, and fails to identify and prosecute the perpetrators, this might instigate violence once again among the local populations as they are the main victims here. Additionally, Wagner contractors appear to conflate all Muslims with insurgents, mainly targeting the Fulani group, which could also

trigger new violence (Bax, 2021). Therefore, Wagner Group's initial positive reception could quickly change into new hostilities, reflecting bad on both governments.

Despite the occurrence of severe violations by Wagner group, however, Russia remains popular among the civilians (at least in Bangui), as can be seen from the aforementioned tributes still being paid to Russian (Wagner) forces. This is probably because the CAR government is controlling the narrative. In February 2021, the government banned access to news websites that expressed critique on Touadéra's government and the actions of Wagner Group as it was deemed to be "hate speech" and "fake news" about the security crisis (RSF, 2021).

Thus, by deploying Wagner Group in the CAR, Russia managed to pursue its own foreign policy goals, gaining influence in the country and enriching Russian and Central African elites, whilst being able to plausibly deny its direct involvement protecting the Russian state from accountability. However, the outsourcing of these objectives have not only led to the entrenchment of Wagner in the CAR's military, but also made Wagner a vital part of Russian financial gains. This could thus also work against Russia on the long term, becoming increasingly dependent on the PMSC itself. However, the use of Wagner Group, despite the countless horrific human rights abuses affecting civilians, has not negatively impacted Russia's reputation as tributes to Russia are still being paid today in Bangui. This is probably because of the government's control of the narrative, suspending news outlets that tell a different story. Therefore, as the use of proxies has not per se negatively impacted Russia, the third hypothesis is considered implausible.

Conclusion

It appears that Russia has indeed increased its linkage with the CAR. For its security, the country has become dependent on Russia's military support to oppress the insurgencies and to train FACA forces. In other domains, Russian ties could potentially be strengthened as well, however, this remains speculative. As it stands, the CAR still has to look for other partners, especially concerning financial aid, which means that linkage with democratic powers such as France or the EU could still last. Nevertheless, the first hypothesis is considered plausible.

By opportunistically filling the void after France was downsizing its troops in the CAR, Russia not only increased its own linkage, but also decreased France's. As French linkage shrinks, France's leverage is rendered less rigorous, which would normally be used to push for democratic reforms. The battle between Russia and France appears to play out in Russia's favour. As such, the second hypothesis turns out to be plausible as well.

Concerning Russian use of proxies in the CAR, it seems that Russian status remains untouched. Its presence turns out to be celebrated by the armed forces and civilians, as perceived by the presence of “je suis Wagner” t-shirts. Additionally, the part Wagner contractors played in military operations and quelling insurgencies boosted Wagner’s and, simultaneously, Russia’s image among the local population, despite the PMSC’s involvement in various severe human rights violations. As a result of the oppression of free press, this narrative is being held from the public leading to a continuation of support for Wagner. It seems that plausible deniability does work out for Russia and with the CAR’s elite happy (which remains the most important thing in autocracies) it seems that Russia through the use of proxies has mainly gained ground. Negative externalities did occur but appear to not have backfired on Russia. Therefore, the third hypothesis hints towards implausible.

The oppression of press signals a process of autocratization. With the increase of Russian linkage, it appears Russia support for authoritarianism is successful. Since Russia’s presence in the CAR the country has become increasingly autocratic with violent crackdowns and silencing of dissent. Currently, rumours exist claiming that the CAR government is aiming to change the constitution in order to make it possible for Touadéra to be elected for a third term (Moloma, 2022b; Moloma, 2022c). This implies a major setback for the democratic process of the CAR. It can also be interpreted as autocratic learning, as this has been one of Putin’s own strategies to consolidate power in Russia (and which has been copied by many of Russia’s allies).

It also appears that the CAR has changed its voting habit in the UN in support of Russia. In 2014, it voted against Russia following the annexation of Crimea, whilst it abstained from voting in 2022 after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (UNGA, 2014; UNGA, 2022). This further indicates Russia’s success.

Mali (2021-present)

Case Introduction

Mali has been the scene of political instability and protracted conflict during the past decade. Politically, Mali has been long unstable to say the least, for the country has endured three coups in the last decade. The last two coups were shortly after each other; president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta was ousted by the military in August 2020 following large-scale demonstrations; the government of interim president Bah N’Daw was removed from office by the military in May 2021 (Arieff, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2022). Since, Mali has been ruled by the

military junta headed by Colonel Assimi Goïta. The presidential elections had been scheduled for February 2022, however, the junta has been reluctant to go through with them and has remained in power, which led to international critique (International Crisis Group, 2022).

Next to the political turmoil, the west African country has suffered from insurgencies which led to a violent protracted conflict that has spread to the wider Sahel region involving multiple actors, such as Touareg rebels and multiple Islamic extremist groups. Mali has relied on military operations by former colonial power, France, of which it became independent in 1960. French troops had been present in Mali since 2013 who set up operation Barkhane to counter terrorism and insurgencies across several Sahel countries. Various other security operations have been active in Mali, such as the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, the European joint military task force, Takuba, a G5 Sahel task force and a European training mission, EUTM Mali, to train the national armed forces, FAMa (Arieff, 2020; International Crisis Group, 2022).

Whilst resentment towards and critique on the French grew, the military regime started to flirt with Moscow and talks of Wagner Groups deployment emerged (Rono, 2021). This led to international criticism, for Russia (and Wagner Group) were said to exploit the instability to profit from its natural resources whilst simultaneously posing a threat to democratic transition with the PMSC's forces coup-proofing the regime (Thompson et al., 2022). Additionally, supporting Mali's authoritarian government would lead to another ally for Russia to count on in multilateral organizations.

In order for Russia to be successful at providing authoritarian support, however, it is vital Russia becomes so important to Mali that the push for democracy by other forces is harmless. Therefore, Moscow has to increase its own linkage and render the leverage of other countries powerless. Simultaneously, Russia's reputation among the Malian population has to be good in order to provide legitimacy.

Russian Opportunism Once Again

This section will focus on the first hypothesis: *Russia will seek to increase its ties with the receiver state*. If Russia wants to successfully promote autocracy in Mali, Russia will have to increase its linkage with Mali. Russia is expected to offer military support to Mali during a time when other powers are leaving or downsizing. If ties with Mali increase to such an extent that it will no longer need the support of other powers, Russia will be able to counter the push for democratization.

Unlike the case of the CAR, rumours of the Malian government bringing in Wagner Group were already going around before they arrived in the country. When in 2021 France said to downsize its troops in Mali, the Malian junta accused France of abandoning them and rumours of hiring the Russian PMSC to fill the void materialized (Rono, 2021). Talks alone of bringing in Wagner was enough to flare up the international critique for by now Wagner Group holds a reputation of illegal mercenaries who exploit conflict-torn countries and prey on instability for their own benefit (Price, 2021; Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, n.d.). Nevertheless, the international pressure did not stop the Malian government from turning to the Russians, as the deployment of Wagner troops began in December 2021 (Thompson et al., 2022).

Once more, the Kremlin denies its involvement in the deployment of the Russian privateers, however, several indications (apart from Wagner's usual association to the Russian government) suggest Moscow's complicity. First of all, same as in the CAR, Russia has been providing weapons to equip the Malian armed forces. Allegedly, Wagner personnel is now training these forces. In 2016, talks of a bilateral military cooperation between Bamako and Moscow started and by 2019 the agreement was signed (Haidara, 2016; defenceWeb, 2019). Secondly, a plane belonging to the Russian Air Force was seen in Bamako delivering helicopters to Mali and speculations exist it also flew in the Wagner forces. This is nothing new, for the same airplane has reportedly been spotted and linked to other operations across Africa wherein Wagner Group was active such as the CAR and Libya (Tchoubar et al., 2022; Thompson et al., 2022). Thus, some evidence exists pointing to Moscow's engagement in Wagner Group's affairs in Mali.

There also exist some political ties between Russia and Mali. For example, Mali's minister of defence, Colonel Sadio Camara, studied in Moscow and allegedly enjoys close ties to the Kremlin (Shurkin, 2022). Although he was not placed in the government by Russia, Russia could exert its influence through this connection. Some even speculate that Russia was involved in the plotting of the coup since Camara, one of the two coup-plotters, and the other coup-plotter had returned from Moscow where they joined a military training just before the coup. However, members of the Russian government refuted the allegations (Ramani, 2020).

Russia not only enjoys the support of the Malian junta, but also receives support from the Malian population. On the streets, the presence of Russian flags gives away the contentment of Malians with the new Russian arrival (Le Roux, 2022; icimali.com, 2022). It is likely connected to the deterioration of the security situation despite French operations combined with

resentment towards the old colonial power. Consequently, Russia, as a new and non-colonial security provider, gives them new hope that things will change.

Thus, Russia has strengthened its ties with Mali, mainly in the form of military support. Also, political ties exist, and both among the government and the public Moscow enjoys a positive reputation. However, whether this linkage will be enough to truly have an impact on the country remains to be seen. Moreover, the public support for Russia might turn around as well when it turns out that they, too, are unable to bring peace. This is likely the case since the amount of Russian (Wagner) forces present in Mali is only a fraction of the amount of forces that were deployed by France and others (allegedly a few hundred as opposed to several thousand), which makes it unlikely they will be ever more successful (Shurkin, 2022). It, thus, seems that Mali will need to balance between powers if it truly wants to see the situation change, for Russia alone will not solve its troubles. Nevertheless, it appears the first hypothesis is plausible.

Russia vs. France part 2: What do other powers do?

In this section, the second hypothesis will be addressed: *Russia will compete with democratic powers for influence*. Allegedly Russia has some historical ties with Mali, however, in its absence after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, other powers remained a strong presence in the country. It is expected that, to successfully provide autocratic support, Russia will have to compete with democratic powers for influence. Especially France's influence, as the former colonial power and the main security provider in Mali in the recent past forms an obstacle for Russia. Therefore, similar to the case of the CAR, Russia will try to discredit France. However, there are many other powers that hold a stake in Mali and the instability in the Sahel, and that are also pressing for democratic reform. Does Russia also compete with them? Will Mali become isolated so it can only fall back on Russia?

As mentioned above, the Malian population welcomed Russia with open arms and even before Moscow's arrival people were rooting for the Russians. This pro-Russian sentiment, however, came paired with anti-French sentiment. Protesters took to the streets opposing the French forces deployed in Mali, whilst proclaiming their wish for Russian forces to replace the French (Le Roux, 2022). The anti-French sentiment has been linked to Russian disinformation campaigns that involve both social media platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp, but also Russian state media outlets such as Sputnik and Russia Today (Audinet, 2021). Also sources from within Mali were connected to these campaigns (Le Roux, 2022). As such, both Russia and the Malian junta have been exploiting this.

For Russia, it falls in line with its perceived strategy across the African continent. The discourse of the content mainly discredits France by focussing on its failed operations in the Sahel and its status as an exploitative colonial power. Ideas that the French are to blame for the situation as a whole due to its involvement in Libya, that France supports terrorists, and that France only exploits the natural resources of the Sahel region, instigate more resentment towards France (Audinet, 2021; Shurkin, 2022). Consequently, the Russian involvement seems like a breath of fresh air.

The Malian junta too exploited the sentiment present in Mali to legitimize their sovereignty (Shurkin, 2022; Thompson et al., 2022). Mali's interim president was supported by the democratic powers, whilst simultaneously the French operations only led to further destabilization. As such, the junta *had* to take control and with the help of the Russians will do what is best for Mali. This increases the public support for both Colonel Goïta as well as Russian presence (International Crisis Group, 2022). Nevertheless, this remains doubtful since the amount of violence has increased (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022), and Wagner group has a reputation to only profit from instability. As a result of the public support, the junta was easy to expel the French ambassador from Mali in January 2022 in response to French criticism (Thompson et al., 2022). Additionally, in March 2022, the Malian government banned several French media outlets after expressing critique; according to the junta it concerned false allegations (Bibbo, 2022). This only leads to further exclusion of the French, which of course is convenient for Russia.

As the anti-French sentiment was already rising before Russian involvement in Mali, it might be the case that Russia had already been attacking France online beforehand. As the anti-French sentiment formed one of the reasons why France was pulling out its troops, it can indicate that Russia itself was an accomplice for the French departure. As such, Russia then co-created the power vacuum that arose when France left in order to fill it itself.

On February 17, 2022, France announced in a joint statement with other EU countries, Canada and Sahelian partners that it has decided to pull out its troops which means the end of operation Barkhane and the Takuba task force (Élysée, 2022). As the French presence accounted for about 5,000 troops in Mali, this seems to be a blow to Mali's counterterrorism operations. However, with France gone, it appears that Russia has become Mali's number one ally to look at for its security. As such, Russia, albeit with a much smaller force of privateers, has replaced French military linkage.

Regarding the other powers present in Mali, it appears that Russia does not have to do much to reduce their influence. As aforementioned, the other EU countries and Canada also left

Mali. It appears that the deployment of Wagner Group has driven a wedge between Mali and other powers as well as they do not want to be associated with mercenaries. As for the regional powers, Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has posed economic and diplomatic sanctions on Mali in the beginning of 2022 after the junta suspended the presidential elections that were to take place in February, 2022 (Aubyn, 2022). In an attempt to push for political reform, the sanctions have only led to further isolation with the Malian junta being pushed further into the arms of Russia.

Thus, Russia has actively been discrediting France which played a role in the country's exit from Mali. However, it should be kept in mind that it is not because of Russia alone that the French hold a bad reputation in Mali (and other African countries) and left the country. French inability to bring stability to Mali and the wider Sahel region, together with its colonial history, has led to animosity among Malians. Russia is exploiting this sentiment cunningly in order to promote itself and push out France. By filling the void, Russia not only increased its own linkage, but also reduced France's. Additionally, the deployment of Wagner Group led to the departure of other democratic powers only playing into Moscow's hands. In an attempt to make a firm hand, both European countries and regional powers have simply played into Moscow's hands for it only cuts further ties with democratic powers and pushes Mali in the arms of the Russians. Their declining linkage will make their leverage less effective and, thus, democratic reform will most likely not occur any time soon. As such, it seems that the second hypothesis is plausible.

Proxies and Negative Externalities

This section will address the third hypothesis: *Russia's use of proxies leads to negative externalities that can backfire on Russia.* Wagner personnel has been present in the country since the end of 2021; as such, their presence has not been long (especially compared to the case of the CAR). Additionally, its deployment has been denied as expected. Nevertheless, based on the PMSC's reputation, it is expected that actions by Wagner Group could potentially harm Russia's status.

From the beginning, the Russian PMSC has enjoyed the support from the Malian population. During the anti-French demonstrations, along with pro-Russian signs and Russian flags, signs asking for and thanking Wagner Group were present (icimali.com, 2022). Consequently, it seems the Malians have high expectations of the Russian contractors or at least expect them to be an improvement of the French forces. Internationally, however, it is believed that Wagner Group will not resolve the security crisis, but will merely provide security to the

regime in return for access to Mali's natural resources (International Crisis Group, 2022; Thompson et al., 2022). This means nothing good for Mali's civilian population and so far, Wagner has been linked to grim incidents.

Wagner contractors are said to be part of Russia's and Mali's campaigns to discredit France. In April 2022, the French forces handed over an army base in Gossi to the Malian army as a result of the French withdrawal. Shortly after, Russian and Malian forces installed themselves on the base and allegedly staged mass graves near the base accusing the French of committing these killings on social media. Satellite images by the French military have debunked these claims and according to the French it is part of disinformation campaigns to further discredit France (Doxsee & Thompson, 2022).

According to Human Rights Watch (2022a), Wagner personnel has been linked to the killing of more than 300 people in Moura in central Mali. Allegedly, the massacre took place when the Malian armed forces, together with foreign troops, carried out summary executions in March 2022, claiming those killed were jihadists. However, among jihadists many innocent civilians were killed as well. According to witnesses, the Malian army was accompanied by white men that spoke a strange language and are believed to be Russians (Human Rights Watch, 2022a). Local media, however, mainly celebrated the victory of FAMa over terrorists; the killing of innocent civilians has not been mentioned (as can be seen from e.g. Traore, 2022). The aforementioned suspension of several French media outlets in March followed after they reported on these human rights violations by Malian and Russian forces (RSF, 2022), signalling strong censorship of media. Additionally, Mali has denied the UN the possibility to investigate what happened in Moura and Russia has blocked requests for impartial investigations into the Moura massacre at the UN Security Council (International Crisis Group, 2022; RFI, 2022).

Thus, despite international critique before Wagner's deployment as well as after the Moura massacre, Russia's reputation in Mali seems to remain intact as pro-Russia and pro-Wagner signs still appear at demonstrations. As such, it appears the third hypothesis is not plausible. The fact that the local newspaper *L'Essor* tells a entirely different story of what has happened in Moura and the suspension of French media outlets after their reporting on severe violations imply a further restriction on press freedom in which the regime controls the narrative that is fed to the civilian population. In that case, it will be difficult for such stories to come out publicly in the country. As a result, Wagner's and, consequently, Russia's status will stay intact.

Conclusion

It appears that Russia has increased its ties with Mali after the military cooperation in 2019, but especially since the deployment of Wagner Group started at the end of 2021. Russia has opportunistically stepped in after France started downsizing its troops and filled the void. However, it seems that Russia was also partially responsible for creating the same void. Once present in the Mali, other powers that shared linkage with Mali have been pushed out (or left willingly). As such, by increasing its own linkage, Russia managed to simultaneously isolate Mali by breaking its linkage with others, rendering their leverage less strong. As such, both the first and the second hypotheses seem plausible.

As for the third hypothesis, the presence of Wagner Group, despite being linked to grave human rights violations, has not impacted Russia's reputation. Therefore, it seems that the hypothesis is not plausible. The narrative appears to be controlled by the Malian government as in Mali itself, the focus lies on FAMA's victory over jihadists, whilst leaving out the summary executions of innocent civilians. This also falls in line with the censored French media.

This only points to the effectiveness of Russia's authoritarian support to the Malian junta. Since the military takeover, with Russian support, has become increasingly autocratic. Allegedly, political crackdowns have surged in the country with politicians expressing critique being detained and journalists being silenced (International Crisis Group, 2022). Ignoring the demands of ECOWAS and democratic powers to hold presidential elections and remaining in power only signals the autocratization taking place in Mali as well as Russia's growing influence.

In return for its military support, Mali sided with Russia during the 2022 UN general assembly voting following Russia's invasion of Ukraine (UNGA, 2022). However, it already backed Russia in 2014 (UNGA, 2014).

Conclusion

This thesis aimed to investigate how Russia deals with the perceived obstacles Russia faces when promoting autocracy in Africa. It argued that Russia needed to overcome the obstacles, that do not occur when providing authoritarian support within its own neighbourhood, if it wanted to effectively provide authoritarian support. The obstacles included the lack of linkage with the receiver states, the presence of strong linkage between democratic powers and the receiver states, and the outsourcing to proxies in its quest to overcome both.

In the analysed cases of the CAR and Mali, it appears Russia was successful at providing authoritarian support for both countries appear to have become increasingly autocratic. Both experienced an increase in suppression of press freedom and violence committed by government forces (alongside Wagner personnel). The talks of constitutional changes in the CAR signal an increase in authoritarian traits. As such, it seems Russia has managed to overcome the assumed obstacles.

Both cases show plausibility for the first and second hypotheses, and they appear to be somewhat intertwined. Russian increasing ties went hand in hand with the decline of France's. Interestingly, in the case of the CAR, it appears that Russia, once new ties were set up by its security export, resorted to more traditional forms of support such as political advisers. Perhaps the use of proxies only functioned as a smokescreen for Moscow to advance its interests whilst pulling Bangui into its orbit. In the case of Mali, Russia has not per se expanded its ties beyond the military domain, however, it has become one of Mali's few allies left. As such, the Malian junta is becoming more dependent on Russia as it has become isolated from all others.

The third hypothesis was considered not plausible as, despite the occurrence of violations committed by Wagner force, Russian reputation has remained unharmed in the countries. It seems that in both cases, this is largely due to censorship by the state, as media outlets reporting on such violations have been banned. Nevertheless, using Wagner Group only worked in Russia's favour, because, apart from plausible deniability, it led to the departure of other powers since they did not want to be associated with them. This further pushed them into Moscow's arms.

This thesis exemplifies that Russian autocracy promotion is not only used as a response to the threat of democracy. On the contrary, it is applied in a much more proactive manner as well, albeit opportunistically, to expand Russia's influence across the globe. Although Russia responded to the power vacuum that was created once French forces were leaving these countries, it did not have to step in and provide authoritarian support to keep the threat of

democracy at bay. Regime change in Africa will not lead to spillover in Russia. It stepped in because it saw the opportunity to expand its sphere of influence and seized it, which signals a much more proactive attitude instead of defensive. As such, it changes the way autocracy promotion is generally perceived, which is mainly as democracy prevention. This thesis further shows that authoritarian support was actually used to set up (autocratic) linkage, instead of the other way around. It demonstrates that linkage between countries appears to be much more dynamic and adapts to the circumstances and needs of a specific state. In the presence of Russia, French support was no longer necessary and, consequently, leverage was ineffective to the push for democratic reform. This also poses serious questions for democratization, because how can democratic powers use tools such as conditionality agreements to induce, for example, free elections and human rights standards when autocratic support blunt its effectiveness.

The thesis does contain a number of limitations. First of all, it relied heavily on secondary data. As aforementioned, this is largely due to the data deficit that exists within the field of autocracy promotion as deals are often done covertly. Also, Russia's utilization of Wagner Group further obscures involvement. Unfortunately, the reliance on secondary data clouds objectivity as the sources used show a specific western bias. The use of sources promoting a different view (e.g. Russian sources) would have led to a more complete picture, however, they need to be available. Secondly, the research also suffers from counterfactual problems, as we will not know what would have happened if Russia had not provided support. Although Freedom House indicates a significant decline of freedom in Mali, changing its status from *partly free* in 2020 to *not free* in 2021 (Freedom House, n.d.-a; Freedom House, n.d.-b), this is probably mainly the result of the two coups and not because of Russian involvement. Perhaps Mali would not have postponed the elections if it was still dependent on French aid; this, too, we will never know.

As this thesis aimed for a plausibility probe to test its hypotheses, it is particularly interesting for future research. First of all, as the first and second hypotheses appeared to be plausible in both cases. As such, they could be further explored and perhaps look into the dynamics of linkage as it appears to adapt. Secondly, the fact that the third hypothesis appeared to be implausible is also interesting, because it means that Wagner Group as the "face" of Russia in these states were co-responsible for successfully creating new linkage. Especially the reaction of democratic powers leaving in response to Wagner's presence is interesting, because it only plays into Russia's hands. Thirdly, this thesis has completely disregarded the regime types of the countries studied. Bader (2015) shows that Chinese economic cooperation specifically led to authoritarian consolidation in single-party regimes. As such, Russian military

support might also be more effective for a specific regime type and, therefore, more extensive research (also more quantitative research) could look into the effectiveness of bolstering the military apparatus for authoritarian consolidation.

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