

ISSUE BRIEF

Central African Republic: Ground Zero for Russian Influence in Central Africa

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Brief introduction to the country case and current dynamics

For almost forty years, Russia was absent from the Central African Republic (CAR) and did not figure prominently in the country's politics. Moscow's diplomatic outpost in Bangui, an imposing structure topped with antiquated communications gear, had been largely empty, and its minimal staff was completely disengaged from the local scene. In the 1970s, however, the building had been an active hub for Soviet diplomacy.

During his fourteen years in power, President Jean-Bedel Bokassa progressively opened the country to the Soviet Union.¹ Although he remained very close to the French political elite, Bokassa publicly accused France of keeping the country as a resource provider, thus denying military and economic independence.² Under the watchful eyes of the former colonial power, Bokassa developed diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, North Korea, Libya, Egypt, Romania, and China.³ When he became too embarrassing, however, France launched two 1979 military operations—Caban and Barracuda—to overthrow the man who had famously become emperor two years earlier.⁴ With Bokassa's fall, diplomatic relations with the

1 In a radio interview right after the 1966 coup, former President David Dacko declared that Bokassa publicly announced, in front of a gathering of French nationals in the capital Bangui, "I arrested President Dacko because he sold the country to the USSR, China and Israel...I took the country back to return it to France. Long live France." See: Alain Foka, "Ange-Félix Patassé et l'opération Barracuda (1&2)," Archives d'Afrique, Radio France Internationale, May 1, 2020, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/podcasts/20200502-ange-f%C3%A9lix-patass%C3%A9-et-lop%C3%A9ration-barracuda-12>; Alain Foka, "Jean-Bedel Bokassa," Archives d'Afrique, Radio France Internationale, YouTube video, February 4, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t7iv00491IQ>.

2 "Diplomatic Cable," French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 18, 1967; "Des Barracudas en Centrafrique (Barracudas in CAR)," Le Souvenir Français – Délégation Générale des Hauts-de-Seine, August 14, 2018, <http://www.souvenir-francais-92.org/2018/08/des-barracudas-en-centrafrique.html>.

3 "Diplomatic Cables for the Year 1978," French Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

4 INA Historie, "Rétro Bokassa," July 9, 2012, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aVq9qaNTWCg>; Matthieu Kairouz, "Ce Jour-là: le 21 Septembre 1979, la Chute de Bokassa 1er, Empereur de Centrafrique (That Day: September 21, 1979, the Fall of Bokassa 1st CAR Emperor)," *Jeune Afrique*, September 20, 2016, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/357904/politique/jour-21-septembre-1979-chute-de-bokassa-1er-empereur-de-centrafrique>.

Soviet bloc suddenly stopped, and contracts in the fields of defense and mining were canceled.⁵

With France maintaining strong influence in its former colony, the coup d'état has, over time, become the main avenue for accessing power. The threat of coup has, in the meantime, turned into bargaining power with CAR central power and its allies.⁶ Described as a phantom state, the country has been gripped by political instability and poverty, ranking 188 out of 189 in the 2019 Human Development Index.⁷ When a security and humanitarian crisis suddenly broke out in 2013, France deployed a military operation, Sangaris, in December 2013 to officially end widespread killings and prevent a possible genocide.⁸ However, the security situation never significantly improved. In 2020, myriad militia groups effectively control or exert influence over the country's rich and coveted resources, including oil, uranium, diamonds, gold, timber, and ivory.⁹ People continue to be murdered, abducted, tortured, looted, and arbitrarily detained on a daily basis, according to the United Nations.¹⁰ And, more than half of the population—about 2.5 million people—survives on emergency foreign aid.¹¹

Despite CAR's precarious situation, France announced the end of its military operation at the end of 2016, followed by the withdrawal in 2017 of US special forces sent into

eastern CAR to officially hunt down Joseph Kony, the leader of the Lord's Resistance Army.¹² This French and US disengagement turned out to be a major opportunity for Russia, which was seeking to advance its geopolitical and economic interests in the region.¹³ The Kremlin invited President Faustin-Archange Touadéra to Russia in 2017. At the time, his regime was deeply vulnerable to threats of coup and lacked support on the national, regional, and international political scenes.¹⁴ In exchange for presidential protection, military training, and weapons, CAR surrendered a great part of its sovereignty to pro-Kremlin security emissaries.

Identifying the major players: key pro-Russian political parties and figures

When Russia first ventured into CAR in January 2018, Moscow deployed the Wagner Group, "Russia's shadow army's state-run structure," led by Saint Petersburg oligarch Yevgeny Viktorovich Prigozhin.¹⁵ Dispatched in dozens of African countries, the Wagner Group has been tasked with implementing the Kremlin's foreign policy and deploying aggressive tactics, such as industrial-scale manufacturing of fake news, intimidation of journalists and political opponents, election interference, political

5 Ndjoni Sango, "RCA-Russie: l'Historique des Relations Bilatérales (CAR-Russia: History of Bilateral Relations)," *Ndjonisango.com*, October 24, 2019, <https://ndjonisango.com/2019/10/24/rca-russie-lhistorique-des-relations-bilaterales/>; Interview with a leader of political party in Bangui, CAR, February 2020.

6 Nathalia Dukhan, "Splintered Warfare II: How Foreign Interference is Fueling Kleptocracy, Warlordism, and an Escalating Violent Crisis in the Central African Republic," *Enough Project*, November 2018, https://enoughproject.org/wp-content/uploads/SplinteredWarfare2_Enough_Nov2018-web.pdf.

7 "Central African Republic: Anatomy of a Phantom State," *International Crisis Group*, December 13, 2007, <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/central-african-republic-anatomy-of-a-phantom-state.pdf>; "Human Development Index 2019," *United Nations Development Programme*, <http://www.hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/CAF>.

8 "La Centrafrique est-elle au Bord du Genocide? (Is the Central African Republic on the Verge of Genocide?)," *Radio France Internationale*, November 21, 2013, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20131121-rca-centrafrique-seleka-djotodia-misca-fomac-genocide>.

9 Dukhan, "Splintered Warfare II"; "Final Report of the Panel of Experts in Accordance with Paragraph 4 of Resolution 2454(2019)," *UN Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic*, December 14, 2019, <https://undocs.org/S/2019/930>.

10 "Plan de Réponse Humanitaire: République Centrafricaine—Cycle de Programmation Humanitaire 2020 (Humanitarian Response Plan: CAR—Humanitarian Programming Cycle 2020)," *UN Office for the Coordination Humanitarian Affairs*, December 2019, <https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/en/operations/central-african-republic/document/car-humanitarian-response-plan-2020>.

11 "À Propos d'OCHA CAR (About OCHA CAR)," *UN Office for the Coordination Humanitarian Affairs*, accessed April 20, 2020, <https://www.unocha.org/central-african-republic-car/propos-docha-car>.

12 Ledio Cakaj and Kristof Titeca, "Bye-Bye, Kony? The Lord's Resistance Army After the U.S.-Ugandan Withdrawal," *Foreign Affairs*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-africa/2017-05-31/bye-bye-kony>.

13 Christian Bader, "RCA: Initiatives Russes (Russian initiatives in CAR)," leaked diplomatic cable, French Embassy in CAR, February 2018; "Centrafrique/Russie, les Révélations de Mondafrique sur la Rencontre de Sotchi," *Mondafrique*, April 1, 2019, <https://mondafrique.com/centrafrique-russie-les-revelations-de-mondafrique-sur-la-rencontre-de-sotchi/>.

14 President Touadéra met Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov in Sochi, Russia, on October 9, 2017. See: *MIR Magazine*, "Russie-Afrique: la Visite du Président Faustin-Archange Touadéra en Russie le 9 Octobre 2017 (Russia-Africa: Faustin-Archange Touadéra tour in Russia)," October 12, 2017, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fdQLDCyBZiE>; Bader, "RCA: Initiatives Russes"; Interviews with several politicians, political leaders of armed groups, and foreign diplomats between 2017–2019 in Bangui, CAR, and Paris, France.

15 Kimberly Marten, "Russia's 'Private' Military Companies: The Example of The Wagner Group," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 28, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/events/online-event-russias-private-military-companies-example-wagner-group>; "Putin Chef's Kisses of Death: Russia's Shadow Army's State-Run Structure Exposed," *Bellingcat*, August 14, 2020, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>.

engineering, and clandestine military operations.¹⁶ In CAR, a pro-Kremlin appointed CAR presidential security advisor, Valery Zakharov, has been charged with consolidating CAR-Russia “friendship.”¹⁷ As a result, the Wagner Group has mainly focused its efforts toward the following.

- **The holding of “peace negotiations” with fourteen armed groups on behalf of the Central African president.** In early February 2019, an agreement was concluded in Khartoum, Sudan. Sponsored by Prigozhin, the mediation process obtained political support from Omar al-Bashir’s Sudan, a Russian regional ally.¹⁸ Through this agreement, Wagner had several objectives: to position Russia as a dealmaker in a conflict that Western powers have failed to meaningfully resolve, to consolidate Russian investments and contracts in CAR by ensuring Touadéra’s reelection in 2020, to obtain the support of leaders of armed groups so that the population living in areas under their control would vote for Touadéra, and to agree on terms that would allow Wagner’s companies—and, sometimes, Chinese entrepreneurs—to access and exploit

natural resources in rebel-controlled areas.¹⁹ Five months after the signature, however, the United Nations warned that between fifty and seventy violations of the agreement were observed every week, and violent clashes regularly erupted between government forces and armed militias, revealing a failure to reach a global agreement with armed groups.²⁰

- **The creation of a network of political allies faithful to President Touadéra and the CAR-Russia partnership.** Prime Minister Firmin Ngrebada is the pro-Kremlin political figure in the CAR government and the main architect of the CAR-Russia partnership.²¹ In November 2018, just three months before the Khartoum agreement was signed, Zakharov supported the official creation of the president’s political party, the United Heart Movement (“Mouvement Coeurs Unis,” or MCU).²² Former Prime Minister Simplicie Sarandji and Touadéra’s nephew, Bertrand Arthur Piri, are both key figures of the MCU and instrumental to Russia’s grip on CAR sovereignty.²³ With the Khartoum agreement, Zakharov was hoping to quickly

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- 16 Mathieu Oliver, “Russia’s Murky Business Dealings in the Central African Republic,” *Africa Report*, August 23, 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/16511/russias-murky-business-dealings-in-the-central-african-republic/>; Luke Harding and Jason Burke, “Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa,” *Guardian*, June 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.
- 17 Zakharov, a former member of the Russian intelligence services and a member of the Saint Petersburg Police, is now working as security advisor to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in CAR. Harding and Burke, “Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa.”
- 18 The Patriotic Front for the Renaissance of the CAR (FPRC) led by sanctioned individuals Nourredine Adam and Abdoulaye Hissène, the CAR Patriotic Movement (MPC) led by Mahamat al-Khatim, the Union for Peace in CAR (UPC) led by Ali Darassa, and the anti-Balaka led by US-sanctioned individual Maxime Mokom had regular contacts with Zakharov prior to and after the signature of the agreement. While the peace agreement was under negotiation in Khartoum in 2019, M-Invest—a company linked to the Wagner Group—reportedly developed a repression plan executed by the Bashir regime that aimed to quell the protest movement in Sudan. On June 3, 2019, around one hundred civilians were brutally killed by the Rapid Response Forces (RRF). In July 2020, the US Treasury imposed sanctions against M-Invest for being owned or controlled by Prigozhin. The US Treasury considered that “Prigozhin’s role in Sudan highlights the interplay between Russia’s paramilitary operations, support for preserving authoritarian regimes, and exploitation of natural resources.” See: Andrew McGregor, “Russian Mercenaries and the Survival of the Sudanese Regime,” Jamestown Foundation, February 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/russian-mercenaries-and-the-survival-of-the-sudanese-regime/>; Tim Lester, Sebastian Shukla, and Nima Elbagir, “Fake News and Public Executions Show a Russian Company’s Plan for Quelling Protests in Sudan,” CNN, April 25, 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/25/africa/russia-sudan-minvest-plan-to-quell-protests-intl/index.html>; “Treasury Targets Financier’s Illicit Sanctions Evasion Activity,” US Department of the Treasury, press release, July 15, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1058>.
- 19 Interviews with several foreign diplomats based in Cameroon, CAR, and France, 2019 and 2020; Russia and China have shown pragmatic reasons to join forces and advance their interests together. Bader, “RCA: Initiatives Russes.” The “Sino-Russian partnership” has been observed in CAR when the two countries join forces to face Western interference and expand their economic interests. See: Aldo Ferrari and Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, “Russia and China: Anatomy of a Partnership,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, May 3, 2019, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/russia-and-china-anatomy-partnership-23001>.
- 20 “En RCA, Entre 50 et 70 Violations de l’Accord de Paix Sont Rapportées Chaque Semaine (ONU) (In CAR, Between 50 and 70 Violations of the Peace Agreement are Reported Every Week),” United Nations, June 2019, 20, <https://news.un.org/fr/story/2019/06/1046021>; “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2507 (2020),” United Nations Security Council, July 8, 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/662>.
- 21 Pacôme Pabandji, “Centrafrique: Qui est Firmin Ngrebada, l’Homme du Rapprochement Moscou-Bangui (CAR: Who is Firmin Ngrebada, the Man of the Moscow-Bangui Rapprochement),” *Jeune Afrique*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/556971/politique/centrafrique-qui-est-firmin-ngrebada-l-homme-du-rapprochement-moscou-bangui/>.
- 22 In September 2018, Valery Zakharov invited members of the parliament close to Touadéra and MCU members to a private event called “Khartoum Declaration of Understanding—A Step Toward Peace.”
- 23 “Centrafrique: Qui Aide à Contrer l’Influence de Bozizé? (CAR: Who Helps to Counter Bozizé’s Influence?)” *Jeune Afrique*, May 26, 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/988201/politique/centrafrique-qui-aide-touadera-a-contrer-l-influence-de-bozize/>.

expand the number of MCU members and increase the party's geographical presence, particularly in areas controlled by armed groups.²⁴ He also tried to convince opposition political parties and members of parliament to rally around the president's party, while removing those who would get in his way.²⁵ By the end of 2018, the three most important political figures of the country (the president, the prime minister, and the president of the parliament) were pro-Russia. Benefiting from the lack of institutional blockages, a CAR-Russia defense agreement was ratified, and mining-concession contracts were granted to Russian mining companies with ties to Prigozhin's group.²⁶

- **The training and backing of national forces to regain control of the country's territory and strategic resources.** Only a few months after Russia's shadow army was established in CAR, Russian advisors initially sought to conclude bilateral deals with armed groups' leaders, with the aim of exploiting strategic resources such as uranium, oil, diamonds, gold, and other strategic minerals. Confronted with serious blockages, they progressively shifted efforts toward the training and deployment of national forces to regain control of areas under armed groups' control.

- **The support of militias to combat anti-Touadéra plans, at the cost of human lives.** In the shadow of the Khartoum negotiations, and with the backing of pro-French actors, several armed groups made plans to overthrow president Touadéra and weaken Russia's presence, with the leadership of the Patriotic Front for the Renaissance of the CAR, or FPRC.²⁷ To counter these threats, Touadéra and Zakharov supported three armed groups led by Hamza Toumou Deya, Herbert Djono Gontran Ahaba, Arnaud Djoubaye Abazène, and Moustapha Maloum (alias Zakaria Damane), with the aim of eradicating the FPRC and regaining control of a strategically important region for Russian expansionism—the areas bordering the Darfur region of Sudan.²⁸ For nearly a year, starting in September 2019, regular attacks took place in northeastern CAR between militia groups backed by regional mercenaries, which resulted in the killing of dozens of civilians.²⁹ With a weakened FPRC, “a number of local leaders of armed groups that are (now) controlling areas in the north-eastern part of the country have been campaigning for Touadéra's reelection,” the UN Panel of Experts on CAR observed.³⁰ In addition, Zakharov has tried to convince traditionally pro-French armed groups to force the people living in the areas they control to vote for Touadéra, in return for prestigious positions and a guarantee of amnesty.³¹

24 As of November 2019, MCU has put in place offices in ten out of sixteen prefectures, including in areas controlled by armed groups. “Centrafrique: Où en Est le Parti du Président Touadéra, un an Après sa Création? (CAR: Where is President Touadéra's Party at One Year After Its Creation?),” Radio France Internationale, November 12, 2019, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20191112-centrafrique-mcu-parti-president-touadera-an-apres-creation>.

25 Zakharov allegedly played a central role in buying the votes of members of parliament in order to replace the president of the parliament, Karim Meckassoua, who was seen as a pro-French politician. Laurent Ngon-Baba, a pro-Touadéra and MCU member, was appointed in October 2018. “Centrafrique: Laurent Ngon-Baba élu Président de l'Assemblée Nationale (CAR: Laurent Ngon-Baba Elected President of the National Assembly),” *Jeune Afrique*, October 29, 2018, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/655219/politique/centrafrique-laurent-ngon-baba-elu-president-de-lassemblee-nationale/>.

26 “Débat Général Suivi de Vote sur le Projet de loi Autorisant la Ratification de l'Accord de Coopération Militaire entre la RCA et la Fédération de Russie (General Debate Followed by Vote on the Bill Authorizing the Ratification of the Military Cooperation Agreement between the CAR and the Russian Federation),” CAR National Assembly, December 13, 2018, <http://www.assembleenationale-rca.cf/debat-general-suivi-de-vote-sur-le-projet-de-loi-autorisant-la-ratification-de-laccord-de-cooperation-militaire-entre-la-rca-et-la-federation-de-russie/>; Lobaye Invest is reported to be a subsidiary of a larger Russian business group founded by the oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has close ties with President Vladimir Putin. Decrees granting mining permits to Lobaye Invest are available at the CAR Finance Ministry website: <http://www.finances-budget.cf/documents/permis-d-exploitation>.

27 In August 2018, armed groups' leaders had voiced twelve non-negotiable grievances, including the cancellation or the review of the military-cooperation contracts signed between the CAR government and Russia and South Africa. See: Fridolin Ngoulou, “Centrafrique: les 12 Revendications non Négociables des Groupes Armés pour la Prochaine Concertation (CAR: The 12 Non-Negotiable Grievances of Armed Groups for the Next Concertation),” *Centrafrique Presse*, August 21, 2018, <https://www.centrafrique-presse.info/article/12202/nouvelles-nationales-sur-rjdh>; Nathalia Dukhan, “State of Prey: Proxies, Predators, and Profiteers in the Central African Republic,” *Sentry*, October 2020; “Martin Koumtamadji,” United Nations Security Council, April 20, 2020, <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/martin-koumtamadji>.

28 Movement of Central African Liberators for Justice (MLJC), Patriotic Rally for the Renewal of the Central African Republic (RPRC), Party to Rally the Central African Nation (PRNC); Dukhan, “State of Prey.”

29 “Communiqué De Presse Du Bureau Du Procureur Spécial Près La Cour Pénale Spéciale (Press Release of the SCC Special Prosecutor),” CAR Special Criminal Court, May 8, 2020, <https://www.cps-rca.cf/actualites/Communique-De-Presse-Du-Bureau-Du-Procureur-Special-Pres-La-Cour-Penale-Speciale/43/>; Dukhan, “State of Prey.”

30 “Final Report of the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic Extended Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2507 (2020),” United Nations Security Council, July 8, 2020, <https://undocs.org/S/2020/662>.

31 Dukhan, “State of Prey.”



Visitors examine Kalashnikov weapons during the Russia-Africa Economic Forum Exhibition on the sidelines of the Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum in Sochi, Russia, October 24, 2019. *Photo credit: Sergei Chirikov/REUTERS.*

- The building of alliances with influential figures of the CAR political crisis.** Zakharov reportedly traveled several times to Benin to meet with former President Michel Djotodia, a Russian speaker and key figure of the Séléka coalition that overthrew President Francois Bozizé in 2013.³² In exile in Benin since 2014 and appointed ambassador for peace, Djotodia has remained an honorary leader of two armed groups that formed after the dismantling of the Séléka coalition: FPRC and the Union for CAR Renewal (RPRC).³³ Since 2015, he also remains an

influential member of the political and military anti-Touadéra alliance between the FPRC and anti-Balaka militias faithful to Francois Bozizé, also known as the “Nairobists.”³⁴ Despite this, Djotodia was officially invited to CAR in January 2020 with all the honors of a former head of state.³⁵ This happened just three weeks after former President Bozizé, in exile for seven years, made a surprise return to CAR, trying to ensure his participation in the 2020 presidential election.³⁶ While there are allegations that this return was sponsored by pro-French actors and used as a

32 Bader, “RCA: Initiatives Russes.”

33 Dukhan, “Splintered Warfare II.”

34 Nathalia Dukhan, “The Central African Republic Crisis,” GSDRC, University of Birmingham, March 2016, https://www.gsdr.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/CAR_Jan2016.pdf.

35 “3-D Chess with Ex-Presidents Back in War-Torn Central Africa Ahead of Polls,” *France 24* and AFP, January 16, 2020; “En Centrafrique, un Billard à Trois Bandes Lourd de Périls à un an de la Présidentielle.”

36 Ibid.

tactic to weaken Touadéra's reelection, others have considered Djotodia's official return a Russian tactic to counter the French strategy.³⁷ Since September 2020, the man who drove out the Bozizé regime, with Touadéra as prime minister, has been called to lead a so-called reconciliation campaign in an attempt to rally support for President Touadéra, just three months before the elections.³⁸

- **An attempt to change the constitution to secure Touadéra's grip on power and to secure contracts obtained during his first presidential term.** Worried they would lose control of the votes, the CAR regime and its Russian allies sought to cement their control over the electoral process. By bribing lawmakers and citing *force majeure* stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic, MCU aimed to indefinitely extend the presidential mandate and lawmakers' terms through a constitutional amendment.³⁹ The regime was confident that the Constitutional Court would make a decision favorable to the Central African president. However, the court surprisingly rejected the amendment.⁴⁰ In fact, the day before the decision was publicly announced, France officially announced that it was granting the court an aid package worth ninety thousand euros (\$100,000), revealing French interference in the process.⁴¹

Building networks of influence: evidence for the pro-Russian activities of key actors

On October 7, 2017, the first high-level meeting was held between President Touadéra, his chief of staff Ngrebada, and Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov, in Sochi, Russia. Even though the meeting remained confidential, its content was leaked in 2019.⁴² The Kremlin obtained an exemption to the arms embargo by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) to deliver arms and deploy Russian-military weapons trainers in CAR two months later. At that moment, no one could predict that Russia had a more ambitious plan that covered political, security, economic, and social areas, but also a broader geopolitical agenda in central Africa.⁴³ In May 2018, Vladimir Putin officially met President Touadéra in Russia, formalizing CAR-Russian relations at the highest political level.⁴⁴

To strengthen Russian influence in CAR, Wagner Group's Russian advisors chose a conquering approach, and maintained very blurred lines between public and private-sector initiatives.

- **The registration of private companies linked to the Wagner Group, led by Yevgeny Prigozhin.** Sewa Sécurité Services (SSS), a private company registered in CAR in November 2017, became the legal framework through which one hundred and seventy-eight Russian trainers were officially authorized to deploy and to train CAR soldiers on how to handle the weapons delivered by Russia.⁴⁵ The company also obtained the presidential security

37 Dukhan, "State of Prey."

38 "Présidentielle en Centrafrique: Michel Djotodia, l'Homme de Touadéra? (CAR Presidential Election: Touadéra's Men?)," *Jeune Afrique*, September 11, 2020.

39 Ibid.; Ndjoni Sango, "RCA : Le Projet de Prorogation des Mandats Présidentiel et Législatif Défendu par Mapenzi et Dimbelet (CAR: Mapenzi and Dimbelet Back Plan to Extend Presidential and Legislative Mandates)," April 18, 2020, <https://ndjonisango.com/2020/04/18/rca-le-projet-de-prorogation-des-mandats-presidentiel-et-legislatif-defendu-par-mapenzi-et-dimbelet/>.

40 "Avis N° 015/CC/20 du 05 Juin 2020 Relatif à la Révision de Certaines Dispositions de la Constitution du 30 Mars 2016 (Ruling No.015/CC/20 Dated June 5, 2020 Concerning Amendments to the Constitution of March 30, 2016)," CAR Constitutional Court, June 5, 2020.

41 Embassy of France in Bangui, "La France Soutient le Processus Électoral en Centrafrique" (France Backs CAR Electoral Process)," Facebook post, June 4, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ambafrance.rca/posts/2995663057137581>.

42 On October 7, 2017, a high-level meeting was held in Sochi between Central African and Russian officials. The discussions mainly focused on presidential security, the delivery of arms and military trainings, airports to facilitate Russian movements and the import of heavy equipment, the creation of mining and security companies, a favorable banking and customs system, road access between Sudan and the CAR territory, and a system of information. Source: "Centrafrique/Russie, les Révélations de Mondafrique sur la Rencontre de Sochi."

43 Arnaud Kalika, "Le 'Grand Retour' de la Russie en Afrique? (Russia Big Return in Africa)," Institut Français des Relations Internationales, April 2019, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/kalika_russie_afrique_2019.pdf; Bader, "RCA: Initiatives Russes."

44 "RCA: le Président Touadéra en Russie sous le Signe du Rapprochement Économique (CAR: President Touadéra in Russia and the Economic Rapprochement)," Radio France Internationale, May 25, 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180525-rca-president-touadere-russie-rapprochement-economique>.

45 Irina Dolinina, et al., "The Chief's Global Footprint," Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, December 17, 2019, <https://www.occrp.org/en/investigations/the-chiefs-global-footprints>.

contract, and the number of “trainers” quickly grew to several hundred.⁴⁶ Lobaye Invest, a private company registered in CAR in October 2017, obtained several mining licenses between 2018 and 2019, including in rebel-controlled areas.⁴⁷ Evgueni Khodotov, the company’s director, is a member of a Saint Petersburg veterans’ group and chief executive officer (CEO) of M-Finance, whose operations are very similar to those of Evro Polis, the Prigozhin-linked company receiving profits from oil and gas assets in Syria.⁴⁸ In September 2020, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) announced, “increased pressure against the network of Kremlin-connected Russian operative Yevgeniy Prigozhin by targeting eight individuals and seven entities, including Lobaye Invest, that work to advance Russia’s influence in the CAR.”⁴⁹

- **To create “positive ground” necessary for the expansion of Russian interests**, pro-Kremlin advisers sponsored a series of humanitarian, social, and cultural initiatives, sometimes financed by private companies such as Lobaye Invest, and other times by the Russian embassy.⁵⁰ For example, social and cultural initiatives obtained Russian funding to organize a “Miss Centrafrique” beauty contest, a youth soccer event, donations of sport equipment to a school, donations of equipment to media, humanitarian assistance including food distribution and the building of mobile hospitals in rebel-controlled areas, and a new radio station called “Lengo Songo, 98.9 FM,” which means “Build Solidarity.” Also, Bangui University and other schools are planning to teach Russian as a foreign language in the future.

- **Media have quickly been used as very effective pro-Russia propaganda tools** to promote Russian and government initiatives.⁵¹ The country’s media sector faces serious financial difficulties, which can make it easier for Russia to obtain favorable coverage of its activities. Some media outlets—such as *Le Potentiel*, *Les Collines de l’Oubangui*, *Njoni Sango*, and *Le Confident*—have been receiving Russian financial support. In addition, Wagner ensured the weekly distribution of leaflets that glorify MCU and Russian actions, while spreading anti-French and anti-colonial ideas (for instance, via *Nouvelles+*).⁵²
- In just a few months, though, **Russia progressively adopted a heavy-handed approach aimed at repressing anti-government and anti-Russian activity**. Russian advisors developed very repressive tactics to threaten opposition through CAR state institutions and the national armed forces. As an illustration, three Russian journalists who travelled to CAR to investigate the activities of the Wagner Group were reportedly murdered at the end of 2018. While Moscow claims that the journalists were killed during a robbery, an investigation led by the Dossier Center concluded “that military instructors employed by Yevgeny Prigozhin’s ‘Company’ are most probably involved in the murder, while the said ‘Company’ is purposefully seeking to thwart the independent investigation.”⁵³

46 By September 2018, a confidential note suggested that there were seven hundred and forty-five Russian security advisors deployed in CAR, among which five hundred were mobilized to secure the presidential palace and the president’s residency.

47 “Mining Decrees Allocated to Lobaye Invest,” CAR Finance Ministry, 2018, <http://www.finances-budget.cf/documents/permis-d-exploitation/permis-miniers>.

48 Charles Bouessel and Emre Sari, “Pourquoi Vladimir Poutine Avance ses Pions en Centrafrique (Why Vladimir Putin is Setting Foot in the Central African Republic),” *L’Obs*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/monde/20180504.OBS6191/pourquoi-vladimir-poutine-avance-ses-pions-en-centrafrique.html>.

49 “Treasury Increases Pressure on Russian Financier,” United States Department of the Treasury, press release, September 23, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1133>.

50 Patricia Huon and Simon Ostrovsky, “Russia, the New Power in Central Africa,” *Coda Story*, December 19, 2018, <https://codastory.com/disinformation/russia-new-power-central-africa/>.

51 Saber Jendoubi, “Panorama de la Presse Centrafricaine. Entre Pauvreté et Politique d’Influence (Panorama of the Central African Press. Between Poverty and Politics of Influence),” Notes de l’Ifri, October 2019, https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/jendoubi_presse_centrafrique_2019.pdf.

52 *Nouvelles+* website: <https://nouvellesplus.com/>; Interview with a source claiming a group of Central Africans are paid by Russian operatives, who they identify as “Wagner,” to ensure the distribution of leaflets and the installation of posters on walls in Bangui, 2020.

53 “Russian Journalists in Africa Were Killed in ‘Robbery,’ Investigators Say,” *Moscow Times*, January 13, 2020; According to the investigators of the Dossier Center, “the murder had been planned in advance, those who carried out the murder were familiar with the victim’s itinerary, the murder was premeditated, the killers were professionals.” Full investigation: “Final Report on the Murder of Orkhan Dzhemal, Aleksandr Rastogruiev and Kirill Radchenko in the Central African Republic,” Dossier Center, <https://dossier.center/car-en/>.



Prospectors work at an open-pit at the Ndassima gold mine, near Djoubissi north of Bambari May 9, 2014.

Photo credit: REUTERS/Siegfried Modola.

- **Russian advisors also encouraged the creation of a political organization called “The Sharks of CAR Movement.”** This movement aimed to create a feeling of fear among political opponents, the media, and members of armed groups, and to counter a pro-French political movement called È Zîngo Bîanî. In a written communiqué published in June 2019, the general coordinator of the movement publicly announced that “(the movement) thanks our Russian friends for their endowments in surveillance and deterrence materials, namely: drones, electric prods

and electric discharge rings to make [sic] power-hungry powerless and sterile.”⁵⁴ The movement was dismantled by President Touadéra after French diplomatic warnings.⁵⁵

- In this context, **France has been seen as a potential spoiler, and a key obstacle to Russian expansion in CAR and elsewhere in Africa.** Russian advisors quickly fueled anti-French and general anti-West rhetoric to create cleavage between the former colonial power and Russia, “the savior.”⁵⁶ Russian

54 “Communiqué de Presse No 33: Large Diffusion (Presse Release No. 33: Broad Diffusion),” Mouvement des Requins de Centrafrique, June 6, 2019.

55 “Centrafrique/France: Touadéra Ordonne la Dissolution de sa Milice Dénommée ‘les Requins’ Suite aux Injonctions de Parly (CAR-France: Touadéra Orders the Dissolution of its Militia Known as ‘the Sharks’ Following Parly’s Injunctions),” *Letsunami.net*, July 13, 2019, <https://letsunami.net/index.php/2019/07/13/centrafrique-france-touadere-ordonne-la-dissolution-de-sa-milice-denommee-les-requins-suite-aux-injonctions-de-parly/>.

56 Lobaye Invest, “Lion and Bear: A Cartoon that Tells the Story of the Lion of the Central African Republic, the Bear of Russia and Their Friendship,” July 18, 2019, YouTube video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=NCZOYSyWVhk. The cartoon was initially posted by a YouTube account named “Lobaye Invest” which has been changed and is now named “Улыбаемся Машем,” meaning “We smile Masha.”

advisors sponsored the activities of so-called “pan-Africanist” movements—one led by firebrand Kemi Keba, and another led by Harouna Douamba, both virulently opposed to France and its activities in Africa—while promoting Russia’s good intentions for the African continent.⁵⁷

Consequences and implications for US-Africa and EU-Africa relations, as well as future regional and international cooperation

Far from breaking with France’s politics in its former colonies, Russia’s strategy in Africa is revealing a return of the Soviet strategy, illustrated by what a Soviet Africanist wrote: “is, while recognizing the sovereignty of these (African) countries, to maintain indirect control over them and to continue their exploitation.”⁵⁸ Learning from its 1979 experience, Russia is now seeking to maintain a grip on CAR’s central power and avoid a coup that could brutally end its prospects. By maneuvering to get the current Central African president reelected by the end of 2020, Russia has sought to keep and protect security and mining contracts. It is also sending a strong signal to the international community that Russia’s presence in CAR, and elsewhere on the African continent, should be expected to last for the long term.

The United States under President Donald Trump has shown disinterest in asserting itself in Africa. In CAR, this was illustrated by the withdrawal of US troops in 2017 and the delay in appointing a US ambassador in 2018. This precisely coincided with Russia’s first foot in the country. This US disengagement created a vacuum Russia has exploited to quickly grow its influence throughout the African continent. Since 2016, Russia has been building and strengthening a pro-Russian belt composed of Libya,

Egypt, Sudan, CAR, Angola, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Madagascar, and others. Russian enterprises linked to the Wagner Group have worked to subvert the countries’ sovereignty and strengthen Russia’s economic interests. While the Kremlin can count on an alliance of convenience with China, including in countries like CAR, it has been strengthening its positions in international political affairs by effectively using its veto at the UN Security Council (UNSC).⁵⁹ With the aim of supporting the Kremlin’s foreign policy, Russia has also been bringing a growing number of countries into its sphere of influence to effectively direct the votes of allied countries in the General Assembly of the United Nations (e.g., regarding CAR, the Abkhazia conflict, and Kosovo’s status).⁶⁰ This strategy of expansionism has, so far, proven effective in disrupting the US-backed liberal order in Africa.

In CAR, the United States has opted for “soft-power” measures. The US State Department has supported existing stabilization instruments such as the UNSC sanctions, the UN stabilization mission in the CAR (MINUSCA), the African Union mediation process that led to the signing of the Russian-sponsored Khartoum agreement, development projects (including in the mining sector), military trainings, donations of military equipment to the CAR government, and investments in conservation areas. Most of these efforts have aimed not only to maintain a presence in the country and gather information, but to limit Russian expansion in the country. This approach has, however, had limited results so far.

On the other hand, Russia has been facing French resistance. As CAR’s former colonial power and with great influence, France is determined to bring the country back into its fold. As a result of this struggle for influence, and for the control of strategic minerals, Russia and France are engaged in hybrid warfare by which local and regional actors are used as proxies to advance their

57 “République Centrafricaine: Lettre Ouverte du Président de l’ONG Internationale ANA Harouna Douamba à Jean Yves LeDrian, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères de la France (Open Letter from the President of the International NGO ANA Harouna Douamba to Jean Yves LeDrian, French Minister of Foreign Affairs),” *L’occident Info*, October 4, 2018, <https://loccident.info/politique/republique-centrafricaine-lettre-ouverte-du-president-de-long-internationale-ana-harouna-douamba-a-jean-yves-ledrian-ministre-des-affaires-etrangees-de-la-france/>; Eric Ngarba, “Nous Sommes Venu en Centrafrique pour Instaurer le Procès du Peuple Contre la Françafrique” Kemi Seba (‘We Came to CAR to Institute the People’s Trial Against Françafrique,’ Kemi Seba),” *Ndjonisango*, December 11, 2018, <http://ndjonisango.com/politique/politique-politique/nous-sommes-venu-en-centrafrique-pour-instaurer-le-proces-du-peuple-contre-la-francafrique-kemi-seba/>; Urgences Panafricanistes, an NGO led by Kemi Seba: <https://www.facebook.com/UrgencesPanafricanistes/>; An international NGO called ANA with a headquarter in Ivory Coast: <http://ong-ana.org/centrafrique/>.

58 Goncharov, “New Forms of Colonialism in Africa,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 1, 4, December 1963, 469, quoted in: Charles B. McLane, “Soviet Doctrine in the Military Coups in Africa,” 1966, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/002070206602100302>.

59 Liy Ying, “Strategic Partnership or Alliance? Sino-Russian Relations from Constructivist Perspective,” *Asian Perspective* 42, 3, 2018, 333–354.

60 Ngrebada’s emissaries travelled to Abkhazia, a territory recognized as a country by only seven states, including Russia, but none of the Western bloc countries. The objective of the meeting was to obtain from the CAR government the official recognition of the Republic of Abkhazia, but for unknown reasons, President Touadéra did not proceed. Similarly, CAR formally withdrew the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state in July 2019. This decision should be understood in light of the close partnership that exists between Russia and Serbia, which includes a military agreement.



Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with President of the Central African Republic Faustin Archange Touadera.
Photo credit: Kremlin.

respective agendas.⁶¹ An existing bloody conflict has turned into an even deadlier war. Heavy weapons have recently surfaced—including anti-personnel missiles, anti-tank missiles, and surface-to-air missiles—revealing an escalating security and humanitarian crisis, with deadly consequences.⁶² While civilians lose their lives on a daily basis, it is not to gain their freedom, but to find out to whom they will have to pledge allegiance in the future, and who will benefit from their rich resources.

Policy recommendations

What the United States and the EU should do to combat the hijacking of CAR's state and national sovereignty

- The US Department of State and EU member states should end support for the implementation of the Russian-sponsored Khartoum accord. With the backing of the international community, successive agreements have been negotiated and signed between the central government and armed groups. In fourteen years, the number of armed groups joining the negotiating table has multiplied by five. Experts and analysts have long warned about the failure of

61 Dukhan, "State of Prey."

62 Ibid.

these mediation processes, which have not brought peace. They have instead fueled corruption, the war economy, and a judicial system that benefits the powerful at the expense of the broader population.

- The United States should take a leading role, alongside the EU, to foster a new framework for multilateral negotiations focused on providing solutions to the drivers of the international conflict. In this process, criminal actors and mercenary groups should not be legitimized as political interlocutors. The ultimate goal of this mediation should be focused on addressing the root causes of the conflict.
- The United States and the EU should more effectively support the holding of democratic elections by deploying a vigorous audit by an independent body of the entire electoral process and countering the interference of malign actors. The United States and the EU should be prepared to collectively suspend their recognition of the CAR government's legitimacy, and to shift political and funding priorities in the country if the process is marred by massive fraud. France and Russia's interference in the electoral process should be adequately monitored.
- The US Department of the Treasury and EU finance ministries should urgently address CAR's war economy and the growing footprint of transnational criminal networks. The United States and EU should support investigations and, if appropriate, impose additional targeted network sanctions on individuals and entities. Chad, Cameroon, the Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Sudan—along with France, the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland, and Belgium—are just some of the main countries with regional or financial ties to CAR that can trace and seize the proceeds of corruption and financial crimes. International banks with correspondent ties to CAR-based banks should also conduct enhanced customer due diligence, and financial units should require banks and financial institutions to submit suspicious-activity reports.
- The United States and the European Union should more effectively combat the trafficking in conflict diamonds and gold from CAR. Russia holds the rotating chair of the Kimberley Process, a group of countries established to curb the trade in diamonds that benefit armed groups, for 2020 and 2021. The CAR was blacklisted by the process in 2013, but the embargo was partly eased three years later with the establishment of "green zones." Russia has sought to entirely lift the ban on CAR diamonds, despite an alarming security situation for the people and the diamond miners. The United States and the EU should exert pressure and take a leading role in preventing foreign actors from benefiting from the pillaging of CAR's diamonds with the complicity of CAR ruling networks—particularly during the next fifteen months, when Russia will be able to establish the agenda and priorities for the initiative. On conflict gold more particularly, the EU should ensure the effective implementation of its new conflict-minerals legislation, which comes into force in January 2021, with a focus on ending the trafficking of gold from Central African conflict zones to the EU. Both the diamond and gold industries should ensure their companies are performing necessary due diligence and identifying illicit materials from their value chains.
- The United States and the European Union should more effectively support the Special Criminal Court, as well as relevant US and EU judicial authorities (when European or US citizens are involved), to investigate, prosecute, and arrest individuals responsible for gross human-rights violations, as well as financial crimes. The EU should strengthen information sharing with the Special Criminal Court, as well as provide police support to arrest individuals placed under arrest warrants. These various jurisdictions have so far developed their own investigations, lacking good communication toward the Central Africans about their strategy in the justice sector. As a result, justice supported by international actors has been perceived as politically oriented and deeply unfair. The United States should play a leading role, along with the EU, in supporting the development of a strategy in the CAR justice sector and ensure its broad communication.
- The United States and the EU should more effectively encourage the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to impose conditions on any budgetary aid and funding, with the aim of fighting corruption and the hijacking of CAR's treasury by political elites and their foreign allies. Preconditions should include benchmarks in the field of transparency, governance, and the fight against corruption in strategic sectors, such as natural resources, defense, security, finance, and justice.

- The United States and the EU should request an independent evaluation of the UN mission in the CAR (MINUSCA) and take a leading role at the UN Security Council to deeply review its mandate. The United States contributes 25 percent of MINUSCA's annual budget, which puts the US government in a strong position to hold MINUSCA accountable. According to independent analysts, the UN mission's activities in the country do not end the root causes of the conflict. Rather than providing solutions for ending the conflict and effectively combating the drivers of violence, the international community provides solutions to the consequences of the war.
- To counter disinformation efforts fueled by the CAR government and pro-Kremlin emissaries, the United States and the EU should significantly increase their support for independent non-governmental and media organizations, as well as academics. Distilling fake news in a context of chronic illiteracy and rampant poverty is leading to devastating and long-term consequences.

Nathalia Dukhan is a Senior investigator for The Sentry and an expert of the Central African Republic. In the past ten years, her research focused on the economic and financial drivers of CAR sectarian violence, as well as geostrategic issues. She has more particularly been investigating networks involved in natural resources trafficking (timber, ivory, gold, and diamonds) and the illicit international trade. Nathalia has authored several reports and articles focused on CAR, among which: "State of Prey: Proxies, Predators and Profiteers" (The Sentry, 2020), "Fear Inc: War Profiteering" (The Sentry, 2018), Splintered Warfare I&II (Enough Project 2017, 2018), "Dangerous Divisions and the Threat of Secession" (Enough Project, 2017), the CAR Crisis (University of Birmingham-GSDRC, 2016). Nathalia's investigation also led to the publication of the Global Witness' report "Blood timber" (2015). Nathalia has lived in the Central African Republic from 2010 to 2013, she later established in Cameroon, from where she continued to regularly visit CAR.



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