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Russian Policy of Securitization in Africa: Features of Perception

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Abstract. The study focuses on the perception of the Russian military presence in Africa. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a long break in Russian-African relations, linked to Russia's priority of establishing a dialogue with Western countries. Largely as a result, Russia managed to avoid getting involved in conflicts and maintain respectful relations with African countries. In recent years, however, Russia's "return" to Africa has revitalized Moscow's interests in the region. One of the key elements of this process has been the intensification of the activities of Russian private military companies (PMC) on the continent. This, in turn, is the relevance of the present study. The study conducted a qualitative content analysis of the publications of the most quoted media sources in African countries where Russian private military companies have been observed: Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan and Mali from 2018 to 2021. Based on an analysis of the African media, it can be seen that the first experiences with the arrival of Russian PMCs were initially accompanied by a predominantly neutral-negative tone in the local media. Later, however, there was a shift from neutral to positive, particularly in the case of Mali. It was also found that the framing of the Russian presence in African countries with experience of interaction with Russian PMCs is changing from a purely local context (struggle for resources, protection of the regime, etc.) to a more global one, implying that Africa is an arena of confrontation between major world powers. It is shown that the experience of Russian involvement in conflict resolution plays an important role in shaping a positive image of the Russian "military" presence in Africa. Thus, the transfer of significant areas under central government control, first in Syria and then in the Central African Republic after the appearance of the Russian military in these countries, is associated by Africans with the achievement of stability, which is in demand in African societies. Another important indicator on which positive perceptions are based is the perception of a crisis in relations between France and Africa.

Key words: Africa, Russian foreign policy, private military companies, African media, armed conflicts

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Российская политика секьюритизации в Африке: анализ африканских СМИ

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Аннотация. Рассмотрено восприятие российского «военного» присутствия в Африке. На 1990-е и начало 2000-х гг. пришелся длительный перерыв в российско-африканских связях, связанный с приоритетным для России выстраиванием диалога со странами Запада. Во многом благодаря этому России удалось избежать вовлечения в конфликты и сохранить уважительные отношения с африканскими странами. Однако российское «возвращение» в Африку вновь актуализировало интерес к региону со стороны Москвы. Одним из значимых элементов данного процесса стала активизация деятельности российских частных военных компаний (ЧВК) на континенте, что, в свою очередь, обусловило актуальность исследования, в рамках которого был проведен качественный контент-анализ публикаций наиболее цитируемых СМИ тех африканских стран, где была замечена активность российских ЧВК: Центральноафриканской Республики (ЦАР), Мозамбика, Судана и Мали в период с 2018 по 2021 г. Отмечается, что первый опыт привлечения российских частных военных компаний на первоначальном этапе сопровождался преимущественно нейтрально-негативным тоном со стороны местных СМИ. Однако впоследствии он сменился нейтрально-положительным, что стало особенно заметно на примере Мали. Также было выявлено, что фреймирование российского присутствия в африканских странах, имеющих опыт взаимодействия с российскими частными военными компаниями, меняется от сугубо локального (борьба за ресурсы, охрана режима и т. д.) до более глобального контекста, выражающегося в выстраивании медийного образа Африки как арены противостояния крупных мировых держав. Показано, что важную роль в формировании положительного образа российского «военного» присутствия в Африке играет опыт российского участия в урегулировании конфликтов. Так, переход под контроль центрального правительства значительных территорий сначала в Сирии, а затем в ЦАР после появления в этих странах российских военных ассоциируется у африканцев с достижением стабильности, на которую есть запрос в африканских обществах. Другим важным показателем, на котором выстраивается позитивное восприятие, является ощущение кризисности в отношениях между Францией и Африкой.

Ключевые слова: Африка, российская внешняя политика, частные военные компании, ЧВК, африканские СМИ, вооруженные конфликты

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Introduction

The Soviet Union's relations with African countries began during the colonial period when Russia made a significant contribution to

the struggle of several African countries for independence. Subsequently, the Soviet Union provided significant support to African countries. After the dissolution of the USSR,

the new Russian authorities focused on addressing internal issues, and Moscow's interest in Africa declined sharply (Korendyasov, 2016, p. 211). The prolonged hiatus in Russian-African relations in the 1990s and early 2000s is often explained by the lack of interest in Africa during the Boris Yeltsin era, when building dialogue with Western countries was an unquestionable priority for the Russian authorities (Deych & Korendyasov, 2009; Streltsov, 2014; Abramova, 2017; Borishpolets, 2019).

At the same time, Russia's policy towards Africa took a more pragmatic turn after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Instead of adhering to communist ideology, Russia began to follow its own interests. Abandoning messianic ideas forced Russia to reconsider the foundations of its foreign policy (Vasil'ev, 2011). Russia shifted its policy focus to bilateral relations, with the economic component becoming central and expanding as the country emerged from the crisis and improved its foreign economic relations.

Russia managed to maintain respectful relations with African countries. Of course, during the two and a half decades when Africa occupied a peripheral position in the hierarchy of Russian foreign policy interests, the Soviet positions in the region were lost. On the other hand, Russian inaction in Africa in the 1990s and 2000s did not lead to a negative reaction from the local population and elites towards Russia, as observed in relation to other superpowers (Sautman & Hairong, 2009; Samy, 2010; Koepf, 2012). Moreover, the Russian official discourse finds understanding and audience in Africa. For example, Moscow's attempts to use the narrative of anti-colonialism.¹

¹ See: Joint statement on the results of political consultations of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the "troika" of the African Union — the Republic of South Africa, the Arab Republic of Egypt and the Democratic Republic of the Congo // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. July 8, 2020. (In Russian). URL: [https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/](https://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/za/-/asset_publisher/mNKyBR4ugevQ/content/id/4212782)

Another important factor is the growing demand for diversification of external relations, which is becoming increasingly important for African countries. Sensing the increased interest in Africa from the global community, local elites are trying to free themselves from the exclusive 'patronage' of external powers and are trying to provoke competition between major global players on their territory (Korendyasov, 2016, p. 211).

For Russia, the value of Africa rose sharply in the late 2010s, especially after the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, when Vladimir Putin, intending to restore Russia's status as a 'great power,' challenged the unipolar system of international relations.² The operation of the Russian Aerospace Forces (VKS) in Syria was intended to demonstrate the seriousness of the Russian leader's intentions. The subsequent Russia — Africa summit in Sochi in 2019, which expressed the goal of expanding cooperation with African countries, also contributed to strengthening the country's position on the international stage (Korendyasov, 2020).

The deterioration of relations between Russia and its traditional foreign policy partners, represented by Western countries, since 2014 has led (at least at the declarative level) to a "turn to the East" for Russia (Karaganov & Makarov, 2015; Korolev, 2016; Blakkisrud, 2018). Examples of this include

[maps/za/-/asset_publisher/mNKyBR4ugevQ/content/id/4212782](https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/4212741) (accessed: 17.11.2021); Speech and answers to media questions by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov during a press conference following the results of political consultations of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation and the "troika" of the African Union (South Africa, ARE, DRC) in the format of a videoconference // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. July 8, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/-/asset_publisher/xK1BhB2bUjd3/content/id/4212741 (accessed: 17.11.2021).

² Plenary session of the Russia — Africa Economic Forum // President of Russia. October 23, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61880> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

the intensification of Russian policy in the Middle East and North Africa (Berthelot, 2017), participation in the military campaign in Syria, as well as Moscow's increased activity towards Africa, including through the involvement of Russian private military companies (PMC) and the so-called "Kalashnikov diplomacy."³

Thus, three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia is again strengthening its influence on the African continent, according to observations by the international research community. The political, partly economic, and particularly military presence of the Kremlin is growing both in North Africa and in the Sahel region.⁴ At the same time, it should be noted that Russia's "return" to Africa does not yet have a systematic character and is often dictated by situational considerations (Korendyasov, 2016, p. 206).

A Convenient Region

The value of Africa as a region where Russia could potentially increase its military presence will only continue to grow. Analyzing Vladimir Putin's twenty-year tenure in power, Professor Dmitry Travin of the European University in St. Petersburg notes that conflicts

are an integral part of contemporary Russia. Moreover, conflicts provide a favorable environment for the Russian leader: they not only do not undermine V.V. Putin's position, but, on the contrary, strengthen it.⁵ While during his first two presidential terms we witnessed mainly internal conflicts, during his tenure as prime minister and his third presidential term, the concept of conflict as a tool for political power gained a new dimension — the foreign policy dimension.⁶

This, in turn, makes Africa an increasingly attractive region for Russian securitization policy. On the one hand, the region is abundant with conflicts and has been in a state of permanent political turbulence in recent years. On the other hand, the international community's interest in Africa is much lower compared to the Middle East and North Africa, which understandably causes greater concern from the European Union. All this creates favorable conditions for possible Russian penetration into African countries.

Moreover, regional elites in African countries also sense the potential benefits of the current political moment. In this regard, Moscow's narrative of "stability" and "state sovereignty," which in the discourse of Russian authorities in the 2010s increasingly opposed Western narratives of "human rights" and "democratization" (Issaev & Shishkina, 2020), has become more in demand among authoritarian leaders not only in the Middle East but also in Africa. Moreover, in Syria, Russia was able to vividly demonstrate its readiness and ability to protect its friendly regime, which sharply contrasted with the United States' unwillingness to support their friendly regimes, such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt or Z.A. Ben Ali in Tunisia in 2011 which was perceived by many in the region as betrayal.⁷

³ Standish R. Putin's Kalashnikov diplomacy gets a win in Egypt // *Foreign Policy*. February 10, 2015. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/02/10/putins-kalashnikov-diplomacy-gets-a-win-in-egypt-sisi-moscow-curasian-union/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁴ See: Arnold T. D. Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya // *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. September 23, 2020. URL: <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/exploiting-chaos-russia-libya> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Feuer S., Borshevskaya A. Russia Makes Inroads in North Africa // *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. November 2, 2017. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russia-makes-inroads-north-africa> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Nadhif A. Russia Steps up Vaccine Diplomacy in Maghreb, North Africa // *Al Monitor*. April 1, 2021. URL: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/russia-steps-vaccine-diplomacy-maghreb-north-africa> (accessed: 17.11.2021). See also: (Balhul, 2015; Slaski, 2018; Stronski, 2019; Nkuna & Shai, 2021).

⁵ Travin D. Will Putin's System Exist until 2024? *St. Petersburg* : Norma publ., 2016. P. 237. (In Russian).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See: Israel Shocked by Obama's "Betrayal" of Mubarak // *Reuters*. January 31, 2011. URL: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-israel-usa->

African leaders and elites have repeatedly spoken positively about Moscow. For example, at the Russia — Africa Summit in Sochi in October 2019, President of Burkina Faso, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, invited Russia to participate in the summit of the regional organization *G5 Sahel* in Ouagadougou, highly appreciating Russia's role in the fight against terrorism.⁸ For his part, President of Mauritania, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, also in Sochi, praised Russia for its non-interference in the internal affairs of African countries and called for joint Russian-African resistance to interventionism.⁹ Two years earlier, in 2017, during his visit to Russia, Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir, who was pursued by the International Criminal Court for war crimes and genocide, openly called on Moscow to protect his country from the United States.¹⁰

In addition, African experts also extensively discuss the “Russian return to Africa.” For example, according to Nigerian researcher A. Ogunnoiki, Russian-African cooperation is evident in the military, economic, and technological spheres. However, as A. Ogunnoiki points out, Africa is not a priority for Russian foreign policy compared to Europe, where Russia has economic interests, and the Middle East, where Russia is an important geopolitical player.

idUSTRE70U53720110131 (accessed: 17.11.2021); Mubarak claims Obama ‘does not understand Egyptian culture’ // *The Guardian*. February 4, 2011. URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/feb/04/mubarak-stands-fast> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁸ The President of Burkina Faso invited Putin to take part in the meeting of the “Sahel Five” // TASS. October 24, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/7039208> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁹ President of Mauritania: Russia and Africa must resist interference in the affairs of states // TASS. October 24, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/7040556> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹⁰ Cafiero G. Sudan: A key area in US — Russia competition // *The Middle East Institute*. July 1, 2021. URL: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/sudan-key-area-us-russia-competition> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

Moscow's presence on the African continent is not as prominent (Ogunnoiki, Ani & Iwediba, 2022). On the other hand, researcher L. Ngcayisa from South Africa emphasizes that the main sphere of Russian-African trade is weaponry: Russia is the leading supplier of weapons to African states. Unlike Western countries, Russia imposes no political conditions and is ready to cooperate with any African regimes, making it a more attractive partner (Ngcayisa, 2019). Researchers V.M. Nkuna and K.B. Shai from the University of Limpopo in South Africa argue that Africa is an important connecting element in Moscow's geopolitical course, aiming to establish a multipolar world in contrast to the unipolar world dominated by the United States. Therefore, Africans themselves see Russia as an opportunity to balance between multiple centers of power without being dependent on a single geopolitical actor (Nkuna & Shai, 2021).

Overall, the Kremlin's official position on Africa is largely in line with Moscow's anti-Western rhetoric on many aspects of foreign policy. The main idea that appears in the speeches of Russian officials is the destructive, neocolonial role of the West in African countries, which is contrasted with the Russian approach based on the principles of equal cooperation and non-interference. For example, in an interview with RIA Novosti, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Vershinin stated that Russia, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, provides and will continue to provide military assistance to African countries. He also defined the principle of Russian-African relations as “African problems require African solutions.”¹¹

Russia also enjoys popularity among a segment of the African population that views French counterterrorism operations as a cover for neocolonialism. Researchers suggest that

¹¹ Sergey Vershinin: The situation in Syria is stable, but explosive // RIA Novosti. January 4, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://ria.ru/20210104/vershinin-1591914473.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

this can be explained by historical memory, not only of France as a colonial power, but also of the Soviet Union as an anticolonial force and friend of African countries (Maślanka, 2020). For example, after the military coup in Mali in August 2020, protesters were seen waving Russian flags in the main square of Bamako and holding placards with pro-Russian slogans.¹² Similar scenes were observed in January 2022 in the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou, where demonstrators protesting against President R.M. Kaboré greeted each other with Russian flags.¹³

Africa is therefore a convenient region for Russia. Political instability, Western failures in counter-terrorism, and prevailing anti-Western and anti-French sentiments provide Russia with opportunities to strengthen its positions on the continent. For instance, Russia has signed intergovernmental agreements on military-technical and defense cooperation with all member countries of the G5 Sahel, which involve arms supplies and military personnel training. The total value of heavy weaponry deliveries to these countries in 2017—2018 exceeded 80 million USD, according to SIPRI estimates.¹⁴ Russian military instructors and advisors are also present in some of these countries.¹⁵

Moreover, Russia already has experience of cooperating with African countries in the

field of security. One of them is the Central African Republic (CAR), where Moscow provides military-technical assistance to stabilize the situation in the country and where PMCs operate. The established format of interaction between Russia and CAR satisfies both sides. During a meeting in 2019 with President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, Vladimir Putin characterized CAR as a “promising partner for Russia on the African continent.”¹⁶

In this respect, those African countries that are immersed in a state of permanent socio-political instability become desirable partners for Russia. For such countries, the developed cooperation algorithm applied in the CAR (political agreements, arms supplies in exchange for access to natural resources for Russian companies, armed protection of their interests by PMCs) could be implemented. Moreover, this would not require significant state investments and would not significantly burden the federal budget.

Methods and Data

Thus, taking into account the dissemination of securitization policy by Russia in African countries, typically in the form of PMCs, the main objective of this study is to analyze the formation of the image of Russian PMCs (using the example of the most best-known and most frequently mentioned company, both in Russian and African mass media, Wagner PMC) in the media space of African countries.

To achieve this goal, we analyzed a dataset of West African media from spring 2018 to autumn 2021, resulting in a sample of 92 sources that mentioned the activities of Russian PMCs (in the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan, and Mali). Specifically, we selected materials from the

¹² Ramani S. Why Russia is a Geopolitical Winner in Mali’s Coup // Foreign Policy Research Institute. September 16, 2020. URL: <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/why-russia-is-a-geopolitical-winner-in-malis-coup/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹³ Military mutiny and the arrest of the president. What is happening in Burkina Faso // TASS. January 24, 2022. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/1350695> (accessed: 18.02.2022).

¹⁴ See the statistics for 2017—2018 posted on the website of this organization: Trade Registers // SIPRI. URL: http://armstrade.sipri.org/armstrade/page/trade_register.php (accessed: 12.08.2022).

¹⁵ Korendyasov E. N. Sahel: Jihadists are on the offensive again. What to do? // Institute for African Studies RAS. January 22, 2020. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.inafran.ru/node/2141> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

¹⁶ Putin: Russia will support the efforts of the CAR leadership to stabilize the situation in the country // TASS. October 23, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/politika/7035427> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

electronic media of the aforementioned countries: *Corbeau News* (Central African Republic), *Centrafrique Press* (Central African Republic), *Radio Ndeluka* (Central African Republic), *Al Racoba* (Sudan), *Sudanese Online* (Sudan), *Al Nilin* (Sudan), *Carta de Moçambique* (Mozambique), *Club of Mozambique* (Mozambique), *Portalmoz News* (Mozambique), *MaliWeb* (Mali), *A Bamako* (Mali), *Koulouba* (Mali), *Malizine* (Mali), *Studio Tamani* (Mali). The sample included the most cited open-access electronic publications in French, Arabic, and Portuguese languages that mentioned Russian private military companies. This was because the high citation rate of a resource served as an important criterion for selecting publications since broad audience coverage determines the degree of formation of the media image of a particular phenomenon.

The chronological framework of the study was limited to the period from spring 2018 to autumn 2021. This was because the first mentions of Russian private military companies' presence in Africa date back to spring 2018, when reports of PMC deployment to the Central African Republic appeared. The upper limit, on the other hand, is determined by the latest episode at the time of writing this article, related to the deployment of Russian PMCs in Mali in autumn 2021. During the data collection of media materials, we found that the frequency of mentions of Russian private military companies in intra-African publications was episodic. In contrast to some international media, which pay considerable attention to the Russian military presence in Africa, African media did not mainstream this topic and only discussed it for a limited period, usually during their appearance in a specific country. Thus, the chronological framework varied for each country: for the Central African Republic, it was the period of spring to summer 2018, as well as summer to autumn 2021; Mozambique (December 2019 to

October 2021); Sudan (January to September 2021); and Mali (September to October 2021). The total number of mentions was 92 (Mali — 40, Central African Republic — 19, Sudan — 18, Mozambique — 15).

Official Position

To better understand the trends emerging in African countries, it is necessary to consider how Russia itself frames its presence there. The position of the Russian Foreign Ministry regarding PMCs, including those on African soil, is characterized by a complete denial of the official authorities' involvement. It is usually argued that “their activities are not provided for by the legislation of the Russian Federation.”¹⁷ At the same time, however, the existence of such structures and their presence in African countries is not denied. For example, the statement of Foreign Minister S.V. Lavrov in September 2021 regarding the appeal of the Malian authorities to a Russian PMC to assist in the fight against terrorists confirms the fact of their presence in the country: “Since the Malian authorities have assessed their own capabilities as insufficient without external support, and since external support is dwindling from those who promised to help eradicate terrorism, they turned to a private Russian military company.”¹⁸

A similar position was voiced two months later during the meeting of the Russian Foreign Minister with his Malian counterpart A. Diop in November 2021, where S.V. Lavrov admitted the possibility of concluding contracts between the Malian leadership and PMCs created by Russian citizens: “They conclude

¹⁷ Briefing by the official representative of the Russian Foreign Ministry M.V. Zakharova, Moscow, December 24, 2020 // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. December 24, 2020. (In Russian). URL: https://archive.mid.ru/web/guest/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4513474 (accessed 17.11.2021).

¹⁸ Lavrov explained Mali's appeal to the Russian PMC by the fight against terrorists // Interfax. September 25, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.interfax.ru/world/793599> (accessed: 11.17.2021).

contracts independently. If these agreements are signed with the legitimate governments of sovereign states, I don't understand what is wrong with that."¹⁹

Official statements on the situation in the CAR also do not deny the presence of Russian PMCs on the territory of this country and allow the use of such terms as "Russian instructors": "A group of Russian instructors was sent to the CAR in response to the request of the Central African leadership and with the knowledge of the UN Security Council Sanctions Committee 2127."²⁰

In some cases, journalists' statements about the presence of the Russian military in conflict zones are described as a planned anti-Russian media campaign that has nothing to do with the real state of affairs.²¹ Regarding Mozambique, Russian Ambassador A. Surikov refuted the statements of the Portuguese journalist about the presence of representatives of Russian PMCs and noted that "the relations between the two countries are at such a level of mutual understanding that Mozambique can always count on cooperation with Russia in those forms and volumes in which it considers it necessary and possible to develop it."²²

Finally, it has recently become a signature tactic of Russian officials to draw parallels

between Russian PMCs' activities and those of the Western "mercenaries." In this regard, the emphasis is put on the fact that this kind of practice was introduced by Western countries, which is why appeals to the inadmissibility of similar actions by Russian PMCs are groundless. After the meetings in Paris in the "2+2" format (meetings of the heads of the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense of Russia and France) S.V. Lavrov noted: "As far as PMCs are concerned, we have cited facts indicating that this 'phenomenon' was born not in Russia, but in the West. We have listed examples these PMCs, which 'sprawl' from the USA, Great Britain, and France. There are a great many of them. The scale of the 'work' carried out by our Western colleagues is not comparable to what is being done by private military companies created Russian citizens."²³

Thus, it is worth noting that unequivocal rhetoric regarding the presence of Russian PMCs in African countries with there is no side of Moscow. On the one hand, there are official statements coming from Russia that Russian PMCs in African countries do not exist in principle. On the other hand, in situations where their existence is impossible to deny, Russia recognizes its PMC's presence in one or another country, but tries to dodge responsibility for their actions, noting that this is the area of coordination between governments and companies themselves. Finally, there are arguments referring to the global experience of introducing PMCs into conflict zones. In this case, reference is often made to Western countries, i.e. this practice is presented as a variant of the norm in international politics.

¹⁹ Speech and answers to media questions by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov during a joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mali A. Diop on the results of negotiations, Moscow, November 11, 2021 // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. November 11, 2021. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1785824/ (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²⁰ On the anti-Russian publication in the American press regarding Russian assistance to the Central African Republic // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. July 14, 2021. URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1767745/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Interview of the Ambassador of Russia in Mozambique to the Portuguese news agency // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. April 7, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1419376/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²³ Speech and answers to media questions by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation S. Lavrov during a joint press conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mali A. Diop on the results of negotiations, Moscow, November 11, 2021 // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. November 11, 2021. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1785824/ (accessed: 17.11.2021).

African Perception

However, as our analysis of the African media has shown, the representation of Russian PMCs differs from the official position of Russia. In particular, the way in which the objectives of Russian PMCs in African countries are stated, the tone of the description of their activities and the framing of the context are important.

Russian PMCs have been appearing in the CAR media since 2018. Most of the publications on this topic in the Central African press fall into two periods: spring-summer 2018 (when the Russians first arrived in the CAR), and summer-autumn 2021 (when reports of the death of the Russians and abuses on their part began to appear).

The Central African media focus mainly on mining industry and control of resources.²⁴ The protection of the president and the training of his guards are frequently mentioned.²⁵ Negative connotations to media reports are given by such statements as “doing dirty work” or “robbery of the population under the pretext of fighting insurgents.”²⁶ At the same time, there is no narrative of ensuring security or combating terrorism as such.

²⁴ See: Centrafrique: la rupture touaderanienne a l'épreuve de la gestion du pouvoir // Corbeau News. 17 septembre 2018. URL: <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/centrafrique-la-rupture-touaderanienne-a-lepreuve-de-la-gestion-du-pouvoir/> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Centrafrique: Moscou met le cap sur l'or et les diamants // Corbeau News. 18 juillet 2018. URL: <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/centrafrique-moscou-met-le-cap-sur-lor-et-les-diamants/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²⁵ Centrafrique: la garde rapprochée russe du président Touadéra // Centrafrique Press. 16 avril 2018. URL: <https://www.centrafrique-presse.info/article/11843/centrafrique-la-garde-rapprochee-russe-du-president-touadera> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²⁶ RCA: les mercenaires russes de la société Wagner se renforcent à kouï, dans le Nord-ouest // Corbeau News. 15 août 2021. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20210920204348/https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.com/rca-les-mercenaires-russes-de-la-societe-wagner-se-renforcent-a-koui-dans-le-nord-ouest/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

Unsurprisingly, the tone of the Central African press towards Russian PMCs ranges from neutral to negative (we did not manage to find a single publication that viewed the activities of Russians positively). Some media accuse the PMC of supporting a “corrupt and authoritarian president,” “brutality against the civilian population,” and “plundering the country’s natural resources under the pretext of ensuring security.”²⁷ In 70% of publications contain collocations “Russian mercenaries” or “mercenaries from Wagner.”²⁸

Similar trends can be seen in the Sudanese media. In this case, the most frequent mentions fall on local narratives: “promoting the political interests of the Kremlin” and “restoring the Russian geopolitical influence” along with “the protection of the political regimes of African countries” and “the suppression of anti-government protests.”²⁹

²⁷ République centrafricaine: le fléau des mercenaires // Corbeau News. 11 février 2019. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200807155539/https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.com/republique-centrafricaine-le-fléau-des-mercenaires/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ See: Akhirhum Mali: Intishar Murtazaqat Wagner fi Duwal Ifriqiyyah Yathiru-l-Qalaq [Finally, Mali. The role of Russia mercenaries raises concerns] // Al Rakoba. September 26, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.alrakoba.net/31618841/%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%86%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84/> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Jeish Dhall Butin: al-Murtazaqah al-Rus Yadkhulun al-Hurub al-Ifriqiyyah [Putin’s shadow army: Russian mercenaries enter African wars] // Sudaress. July 2, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.sudaress.com/alrakoba/31583088> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Nushata’ Sudaniin: Tawarrat Murtazaqat Wagner fi Qam’ al-Taharrakat al-Salafiyyah al-Akhirah [Sudanese activists: Russian mercenaries took part in suppressing the recent protests] // Al Rakoba. April 11, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.alrakoba.net/31550315/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B7-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9>

The fight against terrorism is mentioned only once.³⁰

In early 2019, there were reports of the participation of Wagner PMCs in a civil standoff in Sudan, when they sided with President Omar al-Bashir. The Russians' role included training members of the Sudanese security forces and protecting the president. At the time, however, there was no mention of the presence of Russian PMCs in the Sudanese media.

The Sudanese media started talking about the involvement of Russian PMCs in the conflict after the overthrow of the O. al-Bashir regime in April 2019.³¹ Moreover, according to Sudanese press reports, they remain in Sudan to this day. After O. al-Bashir was removed from power, they simply changed employers: Sudanese military leader M. Hamdan, deputy head of the Transitional Military Council, is suspected of having links with “Russian mercenaries.”³² In addition, the Sudanese press is actively following the activities of PMCs in other African countries, hinting at the undesirability of its presence in Sudan. As expected, the tone of publications in the Sudanese media is mostly negative, less often

%82%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%86%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82/ (accessed: 17.11.2021).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ President al-Bashir was overthrown in Sudan. What are the risks of a change of power in the country for Russia // RBC. November 4, 2019. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/11/04/2019/5caf00219a7947c0b92dc7c4> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

³² Al-Sabab Murtazaqah Rus: Nashit Siyasi Yakshaf Asbab Ibtidaihi ‘an Hemetti [The reason is the Russian mercenaries. A political activist uncovers why he stopped supporting Hemetti] // Al Rakoba. April 11, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: https://www.alrakoba.net/31616857/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A8-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3-%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%B7-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%B4%D9%81-%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%A8%D8%A7/?__cf_chl_captcha_tk__=TQiC4YSz4JfnvVdRGVz9Q5Rp5uvhTpY9omKNGligl7c-1635505166-0-gaNycGzNCv0 (accessed: 17.11.2021).

neutral. The use of the phrase “Russian mercenaries” reaches 50%, while such phrases as “Russian paramilitary formations,” “Russian PMCs” and even “Wagner’s army” appear.³³

The Sudanese example is also interesting because despite the Russian support Omar al-Bashir still failed to remain in power. Subsequently, after his overthrow, the Sudanese media not only started talking about the Russian “military” presence in the country, but also creating a negative image of the Russians by covering their role in suppressing political opponents of the Sudanese ex-president. Starting in 2019, such narratives began to appear in the media as “Wagner mercenaries participated in the suppression of recent peaceful movements” or “Wagnerites” are accused of crimes against civilians.”³⁴

³³ See: Akhirhum Mali: Intishar Murtazaqat Wagner fi Duwal Ifriqiyah Yathiru-l-Qalaq [Finally, Mali. The role of Russia mercenaries raises concerns] // Al Rakoba. September 26, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.alrakoba.net/31618841/%D8%A2%D8%AE%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%85-%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%86%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84/> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Jeish Dhall Butin: al-Murtazaqah al-Rus Yadhkhalun al-Hurub al-Ifriqiyah [Putin’s shadow army: Russian mercenaries enter African wars] // Sudaress. July 2, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.sudaress.com/alrakoba/31583088> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Nushata’ Sudaniin: Tawarrat Murtazaqat Wagner fi Qam’ al-Taharrakat al-Salafiyyah al-Akhirah [Sudanese activists: Russian mercenaries took part in suppressing the recent protests] // Al Rakoba. April 11, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.alrakoba.net/31550315/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B7-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%86%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

³⁴ Nushata’ Sudaniin: Tawarrat Murtazaqat Wagner fi Qam’ al-Taharrakat al-Salafiyyah al-Akhirah [Sudanese activists: Russian mercenaries took part in suppressing the recent protests] // Al Rakoba. April 11, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.alrakoba.net/31550315/%D9%86%D8%B4%D8%B7%D8%A7%D8%A1-%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B7-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%86%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

Quite often, the African media reports run counter to Russia's official statements about the complete absence of PMCs on the continent. While Ambassador A. Surikov refutes the statements of Western journalists about Russian PMCs in Mozambique,³⁵ local media not only mention them, but also provide specific media content related to the fight against terrorists and rebels.³⁶

In 2018, reports emerged that the Wagner group was operating in Mozambique, where attacks by Islamist militants had taken place in the Cabo Delgado region. As in the case of the Central African Republic, the Mozambican press perceived the activities of Russian PMCs rather warily (the tone is mostly neutral, sometimes negative). However, unlike in the Central African Republic, where the Russians were accused of intentional atrocities, in Mozambique the main problem was the inefficiency of the "Wagnerites": according to

%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%B7-%D9%85%D8%B1%D8%AA%D8%B2%D9%82%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%BA%D9%86%D8%B1-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%82/ (accessed: 17.11.2021).

³⁵ Interview of the Ambassador of Russia in Mozambique to the Portuguese news agency // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. April 7, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://www.mid.ru/ru/detail-material-page/1419376/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

³⁶ See: Guerra em Cabo Delgado: FDS e insurgentes reivindicam vitórias em combate // PortalMoz News. October 21, 2019. URL: <https://portalmoznews.com/2019/10/guerra-em-cabo-delgado-fds-e-insurgentes-reivindicam-vitorias-em-combate.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Recurso a empresas militares privadas para combater a insurgência em Cabo Delgado: sem transparência e com resultados desastrosos — CIP // Carta de Moçambique. December 14, 2020. URL: <https://cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/6780-recurso-a-empresas-militares-privadas-para-combater-a-insurgencia-em-cabo-delgado-sem-transparencia-e-com-resultados-desastrosos-cip> (accessed: 17.11.2021); In push for Africa, Russia's Wagner mercenaries are 'out of their depth' in Mozambique — The Moscow Times // Club of Mozambique. November 20, 2019. URL: <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-the-moscow-times-147483/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

the local media, "Russian soldiers" who felt "out of place" in "Mozambican jungle," suffered a series of defeats from Islamists and sustained heavy casualties.³⁷ Some media have speculated that Wagner's competitors from other countries (for example, PMCs from neighboring South Africa) would have done a much better job.³⁸ In terms of how Russian PMCs are referred to in the Mozambican media, not only is the term "Russian mercenaries" dominant, but more specific terms such as "Russian soldiers" or "shadow soldiers" also appear.³⁹

³⁷ See: Guerra em Cabo Delgado: FDS e insurgentes reivindicam vitórias em combate // PortalMoz News. October 21, 2019. URL: <https://portalmoznews.com/2019/10/guerra-em-cabo-delgado-fds-e-insurgentes-reivindicam-vitorias-em-combate.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Recurso a empresas militares privadas para combater a insurgência em Cabo Delgado: sem transparência e com resultados desastrosos — CIP // Carta de Moçambique. December 14, 2020. URL: <https://cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/6780-recurso-a-empresas-militares-privadas-para-combater-a-insurgencia-em-cabo-delgado-sem-transparencia-e-com-resultados-desastrosos-cip> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

³⁸ In push for Africa, Russia's Wagner mercenaries are 'out of their depth' in Mozambique — The Moscow Times // Club of Mozambique. November 20, 2019. URL: <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-the-moscow-times-147483/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

³⁹ See: Guerra em Cabo Delgado: FDS e insurgentes reivindicam vitórias em combate // PortalMoz News. October 21, 2019. URL: <https://portalmoznews.com/2019/10/guerra-em-cabo-delgado-fds-e-insurgentes-reivindicam-vitorias-em-combate.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Recurso a empresas militares privadas para combater a insurgência em Cabo Delgado: sem transparência e com resultados desastrosos — CIP // Carta de Moçambique. December 14, 2020. URL: <https://cartamz.com/index.php/politica/item/6780-recurso-a-empresas-militares-privadas-para-combater-a-insurgencia-em-cabo-delgado-sem-transparencia-e-com-resultados-desastrosos-cip> (accessed: 17.11.2021); In push for Africa, Russia's Wagner mercenaries are 'out of their depth' in Mozambique — The Moscow Times // Club of Mozambique. November 20, 2019. URL: <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-the-moscow-times-147483/>

As for framing the presence of Russian PMCs in African countries, then in all the cases considered above, it is given a purely local context. In this case the activities of Russian PMCs are usually limited to plots such as “robbery of resources,” “protection of the regime” or the implementation “mercenary oil operations.”⁴⁰

Thus, the first attempts by the Russian “military” presence in Africa were presented in local media as purely local initiatives of the Kremlin or African ruling regimes. At the same time, in the perception of the African media, PMCs were clearly associated with the Russian leadership and perceived as practically identical phenomena. Thus, the same media, when covering negotiations at the invitation of Russian PMCs, could simultaneously characterize them as negotiations of the local government with Wagner or with the Russian government.⁴¹

mozambique-the-moscow-times-147483/ (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁴⁰ See: Centrafrique: la rupture touaderanienne a l'épreuve de la gestion du pouvoir // Corbeau News. 17 septembre 2018. URL: <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/centrafrique-la-rupture-touaderanienne-a-lepreuve-de-la-gestion-du-pouvoir/> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Centrafrique: Moscou met le cap sur l'or et les diamants // Corbeau News. 18 juillet 2018. URL: <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/centrafrique-moscou-met-le-cap-sur-lor-et-les-diamants/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁴¹ See: Centrafrique: la garde rapprochée russe du président Touadéra // Centrafrique Press. 16 avril 2018. URL: <https://www.centrafrique-presse.info/article/11843/centrafrique-la-garde-rapprochee-russe-du-president-touadera> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Centrafrique: Moscou met le cap sur l'or et les diamants // Corbeau News. 18 juillet 2018. URL: <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/centrafrique-moscou-met-le-cap-sur-lor-et-les-diamants/> (accessed: 17.11.2021); In push for Africa, Russia's Wagner mercenaries are 'out of their depth' in Mozambique — The Moscow Times // Club of Mozambique. November 20, 2019. URL: <https://clubofmozambique.com/news/in-push-for-africa-russias-wagner-mercenaries-are-out-of-their-depth-in-mozambique-the-moscow-times-147483/> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Jeish Dhall Butin: al-Murtazaqah al-Rus Yadhkhalun al-Hurub al-Ifriqiyyah [Putin's shadow army: Russian mercenaries enter African wars] //

The attention of the Malian press to Russian PMCs began to grow rapidly in September 2021, when information emerged about possible cooperation between the transitional authorities of Mali and Wagner in the fight against Islamist groups operating in the north of the country. We managed to find a number of publications regarding the Wagner group in the Malian media. Unlike the Central African Republic, Mozambique and Sudan, the Malian press published a large number of articles positively assessing the prospects for the activities of Russian PMCs in the country. Moreover, in this case even the word “mercenaries” is used quite rarely; more neutral terms are more common, such as “Russian private company,” “military company” or “security company.”⁴²

The Malian media are dominated by narratives of securitization (“providing

Sudaress. July 2, 2021. (In Arabic). URL: <https://www.sudaress.com/alrakoba/31583088> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Mauvaise nouvelle pour Macron: la Russie confirme le projet de partenariat militaire avec l'armée malienne // MaliWeb. 26 septembre 2021. URL: <https://www.maliweb.net/politique/mauvaise-nouvelle-pour-macron-la-russie-confirme-le-projet-de-partenariat-militaire-avec-larmee-malienne-2945538.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Moscou, Wagner et le Mali: la diplomatie russe met les points sur les «i» // MaliJet. 30 septembre 2021. URL: http://malijet.com/les_faits_divers_au_mali/lettres_ouvertes_mali/262101-moscou%2C-wagner-et-le-mali-la-diplomatie-russe-met-les-points-sur.html (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁴² See: Barkhane, Wagner... Le ton monte entre la France et le Mali // MaliWeb. 29 septembre 2021. URL: <https://www.maliweb.net/politique/barkhane-wagner-le-ton-monte-entre-la-france-et-le-mali-2946029.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021); Moscou, Wagner et le Mali: la diplomatie russe met les points sur les «i» // MaliJet. 30 septembre 2021. URL: http://malijet.com/les_faits_divers_au_mali/lettres_ouvertes_mali/262101-moscou%2C-wagner-et-le-mali-la-diplomatie-russe-met-les-points-sur.html (accessed: 17.11.2021); MNLA — Wagner: qui est plus mercenaire que l'autre? // Koulouba. 1 octobre 2021. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20211001105918/http://koulouba.com/crise-malienne/mnla-wagner-qui-est-plus-mercenaire-que-lautre> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

security,” “guaranteeing security,” “helping resolve the security crisis”) and counterterrorism (“helping the war on terrorism,” “fighting jihadists”).⁴³ At the same time, the security of the ruling elite and the expansion of Russia’s influence are also mentioned (albeit much less frequently) in the material collected by the Malian media.

In the case of Mali, the framing of the Russian presence in Africa shifts towards a more global context. The media in the Central African Republic, Mozambique and Sudan covered internal problems and mainly a bilateral format of interaction with Russia. There were mentions of other countries, including France, but they were more of a reference than an attempt to oppose, say, Russia. In the case of Mali, on the other hand, references to the domestic component are already disappearing, and instead the image of the country appears as an arena of confrontation between major powers. The appeal to third parties, especially France, is also striking.

A glance at the Malian press reveals a large number of pro-Russian and anti-Western publications linked to the activities of the PMCs. The Wagner group in particular, and Russia in general, are juxtaposed to France and Western countries, which many Malian journalists believe have not been up to the task of fighting terrorism in Mali. The positive perception of Russia in this case is subjective and defined by a fatigue from France’s policy in this territory. Mali is actually presented as

an arena of confrontation between two major international players, a trend that appeared three years after the first reports of the activities of Russian PMCs in African countries appeared.

Narrative of Stability

One of the trends that can be traced in the coverage of the activities of Russian PMCs in Africa is a change in the tone of publications in a positive direction. There are several explanations for this phenomenon. First of all, the negative tone in describing the presence of Russian PMCs in the Central African media could be attributed to it being the first experience of attracting Russian PMCs on the continent. In this regard, it is quite expected, especially given the negative events that accompanied the experience of their presence in the CAR, that the media presented these topics mainly with negative connotations (in particular, articles were published with such headlines as: “The mafia rules the country, the Russian convoy has just arrived at the oil field in Birao,”⁴⁴ “Moscow has headed for gold and diamonds,”⁴⁵ etc.).

Negative representations, based on the initial poor experiences of African countries with Russian PMCs, were observed in the CAR in 2018, as well as in Mozambique and Sudan. However, the Malian media only began demonstrating a neutral-to-positive perception of the Russian military presence in 2021. It is worth noting that during the appearance and stay of Russian PMCs in the CAR, Mozambique, or Sudan, there were few

⁴³ See: Moscou, Wagner et le Mali: la diplomatie russe met les points sur les «i» // MaliJet. 30 septembre 2021. URL: http://malijet.com/les_faits_divers_au_mali/lettres_ouvertes_mali/262101-moscou%2C-wagner-et-le-mali-la-diplomatie-russe-met-les-points-sur.html (accessed: 17.11.2021); Mauvaise nouvelle pour Macron: la Russie confirme le projet de partenariat militaire avec l’armée malienne // MaliWeb. 26 septembre 2021. URL: <https://www.maliweb.net/politique/mauvaise-nouvelle-pour-macron-la-russie-confirme-le-projet-de-partenariat-militaire-avec-larmee-malienne-2945538.html> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁴⁴ Centrafrique: mafia au sommet de l’État, un convoi russe vient d’arriver sur un site pétrolier à Birao // Centrafrique Press. 8 mai 2018. URL: <https://web.archive.org/web/20201022143452/https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.com/centrafrique-mafia-au-sommet-de-letat-un-convoi-russe-vient-darriver-sur-un-site-petrolier-a-birao/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

⁴⁵ Centrafrique: Moscou met le cap sur l’or et les diamants // Corbeau News. 18 juillet 2018. URL: <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.org/centrafrique-moscou-met-le-cap-sur-lor-et-les-diamants/> (accessed: 17.11.2021).

references to the experiences of the first countries where they operated. This partly explains the persistence of the negative image, as the positive aspects of their presence remained unknown and were poorly covered in the media.

Nevertheless, since the emergence of Russian PMCs in the Central African Republic in 2018, their activities have received considerable attention in Africa. This has been influenced by the widespread presence of Western mass media on the continent. In other words, despite the initial negative assessments of Russian PMCs in the CAR and the predominantly negative coverage by Western media, the perception of Russian PMCs in African countries began to change for the better after three years of their military presence.

The positive experiences in the Central African Republic and Syria played a crucial role in shaping a more positive image of Russian PMCs in Africa. The ability of the Russian military to achieve desired results was a significant factor. A. Kudize, the former head of the Association of Journalists of Niger, noted that due to the Russian presence in the CAR, the territory controlled by the Touadera government has tripled.⁴⁶ A similar sentiment can be observed regarding Bashar al-Assad's regime after the arrival of Russian forces. Former Malian President D. Traore also highlighted that due to Russian involvement in conflict resolution in Syria and the Central African Republic, Africans have more confidence in Russia's actions than in the West.⁴⁷

Another important factor to consider is the increased demand for security among Africans in recent years, regardless of the cost. The narrative of stability is gaining relevance among African elites, with Russian President's emphasis on it (Issaev & Shishkina, 2020).

⁴⁶ L. Issaev's interview with A. Kudize in Niamey, Niger (October 23, 2021).

⁴⁷ L. Issaev's interview with D. Traore in Bamako, Mali (October 21, 2021).

Under the pretext of ensuring stability in the Sahel region, Russian authorities are offering their securitization services to African leaders. This is particularly significant given the ongoing socio-political turbulence in Africa over the past decade. S. Kone, the chairman of the international committee of the National Transitional Council of Mali, noted that ensuring security is the country's unconditional priority at present.⁴⁸ M. Kulbu, the deputy director of the Arab African Cultural Institute in Bamako, highlighted that one of the most prominent requests from Africans is the need for stability.⁴⁹ Similarly, A. Sankara, the deputy of the Burkina National Assembly, summarized that stability undeniably comes with Russia.⁵⁰

Global Agenda

Another explanation for the improvement in tone regarding Russian PMCs can be attributed to the re-evaluation of Russia's role in global politics, including African affairs, by Africans themselves. This shift took place towards the end of the second decade of the 21st century, and more specifically in the early 2020s. During this period, the image of Russia as a guarantor of global security began to spread, and African countries showed a willingness to engage with Russia politically.

The cooperation between the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and Sudan with Russian PMCs began in 2018 when Russia, already recognized as a superpower, had not yet shown a consistent interest in Africa. However, the Russia — Africa summit held in Sochi at the end of 2019 served as a signal to African elites that Russia intended to intensify its policies on the continent.

⁴⁸ L. Issaev's interview with S. Kone in Bamako, Mali (October 18, 2021).

⁴⁹ L. Issaev's interview with M. Kulbu in Bamako, Mali (October 20, 2021).

⁵⁰ L. Issaev's interview with A. Sankara in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso (October 27, 2021).

This had two significant consequences. Firstly, it shifted the perception of Russian PMC activities in Africa from addressing purely local problems of specific countries to addressing global issues of international security. Secondly, it re-established Russia as a major international player in the eyes of African elites.

This, in turn, again actualized the discourse about the geopolitical rivalry of the great powers for influence in Africa. It is not surprising that the topic of Russian PMCs in Africa began to be actively juxtaposed by the Africans themselves to the French presence on the continent. Professor of the Abdou Mumuni University in Niamey A. Ismaol noted that “The Russian presence in the region is preferable to the French one, since it is more in the interests of the African peoples.”⁵¹ As an example, he cited the French project to create a General Organization of the Sahara region, providing for the granting of autonomy/independence to the Tuareg. While the Russian “return” to Africa is associated with “an attempt to prevent the actions of Paris to decompose the region and revise the existing borders.”⁵²

In other words, one of the important pillars on which the positive perception of Russian PMCs in Africa stands is a crisis in the French African relations and a rather painful attempt to revise them. According to A. Ismaol, the specifics of Russian-African relations at the present stage lies in the fact that they “are not built on any objective indicators indicating the strengthening of relations between countries (for example, on close economic ties), but are based on emotions. These emotions caused, on the one hand, by disappointment in relations with French, and, on the other hand, nostalgia for the experience of the Soviet-African interactions.”⁵³

⁵¹ L. Issaev’s interview with A. Ismaol in Niamey, Niger (October 24, 2021).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

Conclusion

The late 2010s were marked by the “Russian return” to Africa, but this process has not yet taken on a systemic character and is subject to the influence of situational considerations. At the same time, the socio-political instability on the continent, which has become permanent in the last decade (Issaev, Korotayev & Fain, 2021), opens a window of opportunity for Russia in Africa in terms of providing securitization services. In this area, Russian positions seem to be very competitive, in contrast to, say, trade and economic ones. This allows us to assume that the policy of securitization will be the main Russian return to the continent.

In this regard, we made an attempt to study the perception of the Russian “military” presence in Africa by the African media on the example of the Central African Republic, Mozambique, Sudan and Mali. The study showed that the image of Russian PMCs in African countries has changed over the past four years since the first mention of the Russian “military” presence in the Central African Republic in the spring of 2018. If in the first half of 2018 the activities of Russian PMCs were covered mainly in a negative-neutral manner, then over time the perception changed in favor of a neutral-positive.

As our analysis has shown, this phenomenon can have several explanations. Firstly, the negative tone in describing the presence of Russian PMCs in the Central African media was associated with the first experience of attracting Russian PMCs on the continent. The negative events tied to their activities received appropriate coverage in the media. Secondly, it is the presence of Russian PMCs in the CAR that their activities have received significant publicity in other African countries. This was largely due to the Western media. Their vision of the Russian military presence in African countries was predominantly negative, but considering anti-Western sentiments in Africa, they ironically

contributed to Russia becoming a desirable partner in securitization issues.

In addition, in the global context, we have identified the following: the significant Russia — Africa summit in Sochi in 2019, as well as the successes of the Faustin-Archange Touadera government in the Central African Republic with the support of Russian PMCs, led to Russia being presented in the African media as a major international player. The Russian “military” presence in the region started to be portrayed not only as a solution to local problems of specific countries but also as a means of addressing global issues related to

ensuring international security on the continent.

An important aspect of the perception of the Russian “military” presence in the African media in recent years is the comparison and opposition to Paris. The coverage of Russian PMCs’ activities in Africa is increasingly associated with the negative portrayal of France’s policies. Meanwhile, the Russian presence is depicted as a key factor in achieving stability and maintaining sovereignty, while the French involvement is characterized as destructive, leading to destabilization and state disintegration.

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