



Exporting Instability

Russia's Strategic Resurgence in Africa and the
Exploitation of African Youth for the War in Ukraine

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Executive Summary

Since the early 2000s, and sharply since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Moscow has rebuilt its presence across Africa through diplomatic expansion, security-for-resources deals, and Africa Corps deployments that have filled the vacuum left by Western withdrawal from the Sahel. That strategy has succeeded despite, not because of, African public opinion: Afrobarometer's most recent continent-wide survey finds that only 36% of Africans view Russia's influence positively, the lowest rating of any major external power measured, with opinion trending further negative as engagement deepens. Russia's foothold rests on elite capture and institutional vacuum rather than popular demand.

The human cost of that strategy is substantial and rising. As of May 2026, many sources documented in this paper place the figure at no fewer than 2,965 African nationals from 36 countries who had fought or were fighting for Russia, a figure every credible source treats as an undercount. Recruits are promised civilian jobs, signed to Russian-language contracts many cannot read, and deployed to the front line within weeks of arrival; confirmed fatality rates exceed one in five. Despite this scale, accountability has been minimal: of the 36 documented source countries, only five, Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Cameroon, have addressed the issue publicly at ministerial level. Egypt, independently identified as the single largest source of recruits, has said nothing.

The implications of this extend well beyond Africa. Mining concessions help finance Russia's war economy around Western sanctions; African abstentions at the United Nations provide diplomatic cover; and the recruitment pipeline itself is a direct structural response to Russia's mounting battlefield casualties. Migration pressure and jihadist expansion toward coastal West Africa mean this is a European security problem with an African front, not a distant one.

This paper draws on Key Informant Interviews conducted in Nigeria, Kenya, and the Sahel; a previously unpublished recruitment contract; conflict-event data; and Afrobarometer's Round 10 survey of 38 African countries. It recommends that African governments treat recruitment as state-organised trafficking rather than irregular migration and act on their Palermo Protocol obligations; that European and international partners match Russia's soft-power investment, coordinate counter-disinformation efforts, and engage the ICRC on behalf of African nationals held in Russia; and that multilateral democratic institutions, led by the Community of Democracies, convene a joint diplomatic response to African governments' silence and establish a single, authoritative tracker of recruitment figures.

List of Acronyms

ACF/FBK –Anti-Corruption Foundation (Russian: Фонд борьбы с коррупцией)
ACLED –Armed Conflict Location & Event Data
ACSS –Africa Center for Strategic Studies
AES –Alliance of Sahel States (Alliance des États du Sahel)
AFP –Agence France-Presse
AI –Artificial Intelligence
AU –African Union
BBC –British Broadcasting Corporation
CAR –Central African Republic
CDD-Ghana –Ghana Center for Democratic Development
CFA (Franc) –Communauté Financière Africaine
CSIS –Center for Strategic and International Studies
DIIS –Danish Institute for International Studies
EAC – East African Community
ECOWAS –Economic Community of West African States
EPRS –European Parliamentary Research Service
EU –European Union
EUMPM –European Union Military Partnership Mission
EUTM –European Union Training Mission
EWA – Eye on West Africa
FIDH –International Federation for Human Rights (Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l’Homme)
FOI –Swedish Defence Research Agency (Totalförsvarets forskningsinstitut)
FPRI –Foreign Policy Research Institute
HRW –Human Rights Watch
ICC –International Criminal Court
ICRC –International Committee of the Red Cross
IGAD –Intergovernmental Authority on Development
ISS –Institute for Security Studies
JNIM –Jama’at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims)
KII – Key Informant Interview
KNUST –Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology
KPI – Key Performance Indicator
MFA –Ministry of Foreign Affairs
MINUSMA –United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali
NATO –North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PBS –Public Broadcasting Service
PISM –Polish Institute of International Affairs
PMC –Private Military Company
SADC –Southern African Development Community
SEZ –Special Economic Zone
UAE –United Arab Emirates
UK –United Kingdom
UN –United Nations
US/USA –United States (of America)
USAID –United States Agency for International Development
WADEMOS – West Africa Democracy Solidarity Network
YDN –Youth Democracy Network

1. Introduction

In February 2025, a Russian entrepreneur registered in Kaliningrad Oblast signed a \$50,000 contract with a West African journalist. The deliverable was not an article. It was an advertising campaign, targeted at job-seeking communities and university students across five West African countries, promoting employment at a Special Economic Zone that independent investigations have since identified as a site of coerced labour and drone manufacture for the war in Ukraine. That contract, obtained in the course of this research and reproduced in Annex 1, is a small and unusually concrete artefact of something much larger: a sustained effort by the Russian state to convert African economic desperation into manpower for a war more than six thousand kilometres from the recruits' homes.

Russia's presence on the continent is not a recent development. Moscow was one of the most consequential external actors in Africa during the Cold War, arming and financing liberation movements and socialist governments from Algeria to Angola. The dissolution of the Soviet Union fundamentally disrupted these relationships. Throughout the 1990s, Russia's domestic political and economic crises substantially reduced its diplomatic, military and economic engagement across Africa. What has happened since the early 2000s, and especially since 2022, is not the birth of a new relationship but the calculated revival of an old one, rebuilt through military cooperation agreements, mercenary deployments, mineral concessions, and grain and debt diplomacy, and accelerated sharply once the full-scale invasion of Ukraine left Russia isolated in Europe and in need of alternative markets, minerals, diplomatic cover, and, this paper argues, soldiers.

This paper argues that the recruitment of African migrants, students, and young professionals into that war is not a side effect of Russia's Africa strategy but one of its central purposes and most damaging consequences. As of May 2026, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs had documented nearly 3,000 African nationals from 36 countries who had fought or were fighting for Russia, as it includes only those identified. Confirmed fatality rates among these recruits exceed one in five; most are deployed to the front line within weeks of arrival; and a largely unremarked cohort of African women has been documented in coerced labour conditions manufacturing the drones used against Ukrainian cities. This is happening despite, not because of, African goodwill toward Russia: Afrobarometer's most recent continent-wide survey finds that only 36% of Africans view Russia's influence positively, the lowest rating of any major external power measured, with opinion moving further negative the deeper Russia engages.

Drawing on Key Informant Interviews conducted in Nigeria, Kenya, and the Sahel; a previously unpublished recruitment contract; ACLED and Global Terrorism Index conflict data; and Afrobarometer's survey, this paper traces that story from its geopolitical origins to its human cost. Section 3 sets out Russia's return to Africa, from Soviet-era retreat to Putin-era resurgence. Section 4 examines what Russia offers African states, why it has found buyers, and what the resulting security vacuum has cost. Section 5 presents survey evidence on how Africans actually perceive Russia and its war. Section 6—the empirical core of the paper—documents the scale, mechanics, and gendered dimensions of the recruitment pipeline itself. Section 7 draws out the implications for African democratic governance, and Section 8 concludes with recommendations for African governments, regional institutions, and international partners, including an underexplored case for Nordic re-engagement with the continent.

2. Methodology

This policy brief employs a mixed-method research design combining systematic literature review, quantitative data analysis, conflict event tracking, and qualitative field interviews. The literature review draws on peer-reviewed academic scholarship, think-tank and policy reports, and investigative journalism covering Russia's Africa engagement, mercenary operations, disinformation campaigns, foreign fighter recruitment, and democratic governance trends. Key institutional sources include the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS), the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, the Community of Democracies, CSIS, DIIS, ACLED, FIDH, and HRW, among others. Russian-language investigative sources- Novaya Gazeta Europe, Meduza, iStories, and Verstka- are used to document recruitment mechanisms from within Russia. To ensure an African perspective, the study also draws on African-led sources and institutions, including CDD-Ghana and the Institute for Security Studies (ISS).

The study draws on Afrobarometer Round 10 (2024/2025)- the most current cross-national survey dataset on African public opinion, covering 38 countries to examine citizen perceptions of Russia's influence, attitudes toward authoritarian rule, and democratic preference trajectories. Conflict event data from ACLED and the Global Terrorism Index (Institute for Economics and Peace) tracks political violence trends in countries with significant Russian military engagement from 2013 to 2026, enabling direct before-and-after comparisons across phases of Russian intervention in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, CAR, Libya, and Sudan.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with a purposive sample of civil society leaders, activists, and regional security and governance analysts during the fellowship period (June and July 2026). Interview subjects include a Nigerian human rights activist with direct expertise in Russia's recruitment of African nationals; a Kenyan civil society analyst with knowledge of the Kenyan recruitment case; and a Sahel-based security expert with ground-level experience of Russian operations in Burkina Faso and the wider Sahel region. A researcher affiliated with the Anti-Corruption Foundation (ACF/FBK) also contributed insights on Kremlin financing structures. All KII data is anonymised unless explicit consent for named attribution was given.

2.1 Limitations

Russia's deliberate opacity means documented figures for recruitment numbers, disinformation campaigns, and civilian casualties are almost certainly undercounts; all such figures are treated as minimum estimates throughout this paper. Access to primary sources in AES countries- Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger- is severely constrained by military-imposed restrictions on civil society activity and press freedom; notably, Niger refused to allow Afrobarometer to conduct a Round 10 survey altogether. Despite multiple outreach attempts, responses were not received from the governments of Ghana and Kenya, whose official positions are therefore drawn from parliamentary records and public ministerial statements rather than direct engagement. Obtaining information directly from Russian government or state-affiliated sources proved equally difficult, though a researcher affiliated with the Anti-Corruption Foundation, a credible Russian civil society organisation operating in exile, provided relevant insights on the Kremlin's internal financing and operational structures.



3. Russia's Return to Africa: From Soviet Retreat to Resurgence

Moscow's engagement with Africa did not begin with Putin. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was one of the most consequential external actors on the continent, providing ideological solidarity, military support, and development assistance to liberation movements and socialist governments across sub-Saharan Africa.¹

For instance, Egypt was the Soviet Union's most important Cold War ally on the continent. It built its military almost entirely on Soviet platforms between 1955 and 1972, receiving an estimated \$1.16 billion in Soviet arms and hundreds of Soviet military advisers before President Sadat's realignment with Washington.² Of course, that relationship has since been substantially revived: under President Sisi, Russia was again Egypt's largest arms supplier for most of 2016-2021, overtaking the United States. Guinea was another example. Sékou Touré's government, in Western accounts, was "the Kremlin's first success story in Africa", granting Soviet naval and air access at Conakry within a year of independence in 1958, a foothold that lasted through the 1970s until the death of Sékou.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ended this relationship abruptly. The Russian Federation, consumed by domestic economic collapse and the disorientation of post-imperial transition under President Boris Yeltsin, closed embassies across Africa, halted foreign aid programmes, and withdrew from the continent almost entirely. From a presence spanning dozens of countries and partnerships across ideology and security, Russia receded to near-invisibility on the African stage through most of the 1990s.³ African governments that had depended on Soviet support found themselves without a patron, often mid-conflict and mid-development programme.

¹ See: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/331019772_Russia_in_Africa_A_Search_for_Continuity_in_a_Post-Cold_War_Era

² See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/09/egypt-russia-great-power>

³ See: <https://rpubl.com/story/2020/09/14/politics-and-security/a-changing-dynamic>

3.1 Putin's Recalibration and 2022 Ukraine Invasion as Accelerant

The 21st century brought a systematic recalibration. From the early years of Vladimir Putin's presidency, Russia began rebuilding its international profile through a multi-dimensional foreign policy that leveraged historical Soviet goodwill to re-engage former partners. Africa was not the initial priority. Russia's first post-Cold War foreign policy focus was on the "near abroad" and on managing its relationship with NATO and the West, but the continent was never fully out of Moscow's strategic calculus.⁴ Putin's 2006 visit to South Africa, the first by a Russian president since the Soviet era, marked the beginning of renewed diplomatic engagement.⁵ Through the 2000s and early 2010s, Russia gradually rebuilt its diplomatic presence, signed military cooperation agreements, and began positioning its state-owned companies in African energy and mining sectors.

The 2014 annexation of Crimea and the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions with unprecedented scope, accelerated this reorientation. Facing economic pressure and diplomatic isolation from Europe and North America, Russia, under urgent pressure, actively sought to identify alternative economic and political relationships with Africa, serving as huge markets for arms sales, energy partnerships, access to its critical minerals, and diplomatic cover at international forums, including the United Nations. African states' widespread abstentions on UN resolutions condemning the 2022 invasion of Ukraine⁶, coupled with the reluctance of many governments to openly challenge or seek accountability for Russia's actions, are indicative of political and diplomatic relationships cultivated through years of Russian engagement across the continent. Despite Western sanctions, Russia has remained economically resilient, and the growing economic ties with partners in Africa and Asia have helped cushion the impact of sanctions.⁷ More fundamentally, the African manpower pool, as this paper will demonstrate, became a solution to Russia's mounting military casualty problem.⁸

3.2 The Russia-Africa Summits: Advancing Russia's Geopolitical Agenda in Africa

The October 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi was the most visible institutional expression of this strategic reorientation. More than 40 African heads of state attended, and the summit produced a series of bilateral agreements on trade, security, and political cooperation.

⁴ See: <https://freepolicybriefs.org/2024/09/23/russia-influence-africa/>

⁵ See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2006/9/5/putin-in-historic-south-africa-visit>

⁶ Although the resolution was supported by 141 member states across all regions, as shown by the infographic below, African countries were split in their voting, with 28 countries voting in favour, 1 voting against, 17 countries abstaining, and 8 not participating at all. See: <https://developmentreimagined.com/africanvotesonukraine/>

⁷ See: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/russia-s-growing-influence-in-africa-calls-for-more-balanced-partnerships>

⁸ See: Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2026, June 9). Russia's Deceptive War Recruitment Ensnarers Africans. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-deceptive-war-recruitment-ensnares-africans/>

The second Russia-Africa Summit, held in St Petersburg in July 2023, was politically significant for a different reason: it came 17 months after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and against the backdrop of deepening international isolation following the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant for President Putin, demonstrating that Russia retained global relationships and could not be diplomatically quarantined. Putin pledged to substitute Ukraine's grain exports with Russian supplies, including the provision of 25,000 to 50,000 tonnes of wheat free of charge⁹ to six African countries, including Burkina Faso, Mali, Zimbabwe, Somalia, the Central African Republic, and Eritrea.¹⁰ These deliveries were completed in February 2024.¹¹ He also announced that Russia had written off \$23 billion in African sovereign debt.¹² However, most of this figure consisted of uncollectible, Soviet-era military loans, making the announcement more of a symbolic political statement than a sudden financial windfall, and its implementation has remained very opaque. Another important signal of Africa's growing importance to Moscow was the adoption of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept in March 2023. For the first time, the document included a dedicated section on Africa, moving beyond earlier versions that gave the continent only limited attention.¹³

3.3 Diplomatic Expansion and Russian Footprint

The most structurally significant indicator of Russia's commitment is the deliberate redeployment of its diplomatic corps. In February 2026, Foreign Minister Lavrov confirmed that Russia had cut its European diplomatic presence by 120- 150 staff, relocating approximately 90% to Africa to reopen around ten embassies, bringing Russia's total African presence to a projected 49 posts- near-complete continental coverage.¹⁴ Recent openings illustrate the pace: embassies reopened in Burkina Faso and Equatorial Guinea (2024); a first-ever embassy was established in South Sudan (December 2025); openings announced in Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Liberia, Togo, Comoros, and Niger. Russia is also expanding the number of trade missions across Africa. At the moment, Russia's trade with Africa reached \$27 billion in 2024, up from \$18 billion in 2022.¹⁵

Russia currently ranks sixth globally in total diplomatic posts with 230, behind China (274), the United States (271), Turkey (252), Japan (251), and France (249), and just ahead of the UK (225). In Africa specifically, China leads with 60 posts (in every capital except for Eswatini), and the United States has 56.¹⁶ But the trajectory is what matters: Russia is the only major power conducting a deliberate, announced, and structurally resourced reorientation of its diplomatic corps away from Europe and toward Africa, which is a foreign policy pivot of historic proportions, happening in plain sight.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate both the comparative picture of geopolitical actors' diplomatic presence and the historical trend of Russia's own expansion.

⁹ See: <https://theconversation.com/russia-africa-summit-putin-offers-unconvincing-giveaways-in-a-desperate-bid-to-make-up-for-killing-the-ukraine-grain-deal-210330>

¹⁰ See: <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/russia-promises-africa-50-000-tons-of-free-grain-/7200171.html>

¹¹ See: <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/russia-says-it-shipped-200000-tonnes-free-grain-six-african-countries-2024-02-20/>

¹² See: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/economy/putin-says-russia-wrote-off-23b-in-african-debt/2956814>

¹³ See: https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/

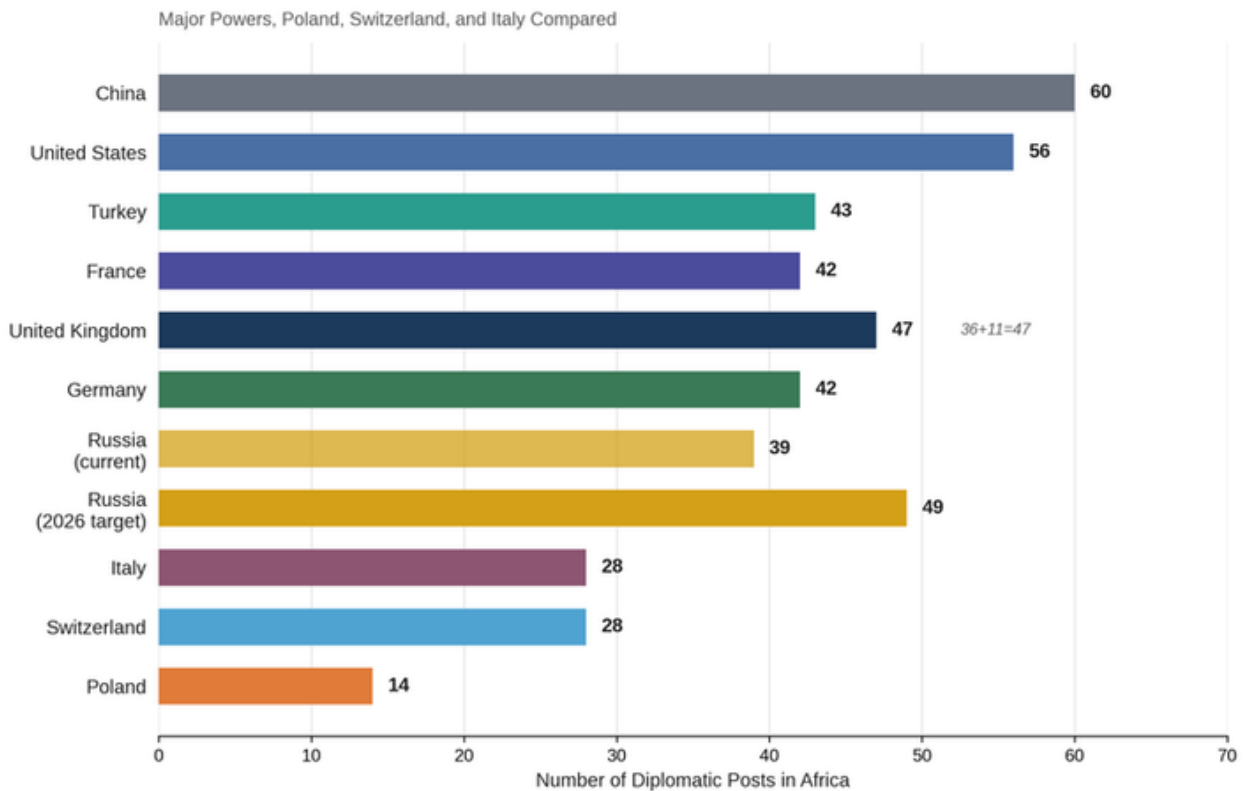
¹⁴ See: <https://russiaspivottoasia.com/russia-to-open-seven-new-embassies-in-africa-by-2026-details-analysis/>

¹⁵ See: <https://tass.com/politics/2044593>

¹⁶ See: <https://globaldiplomacyindex.lowyinstitute.org/>

Figure 1

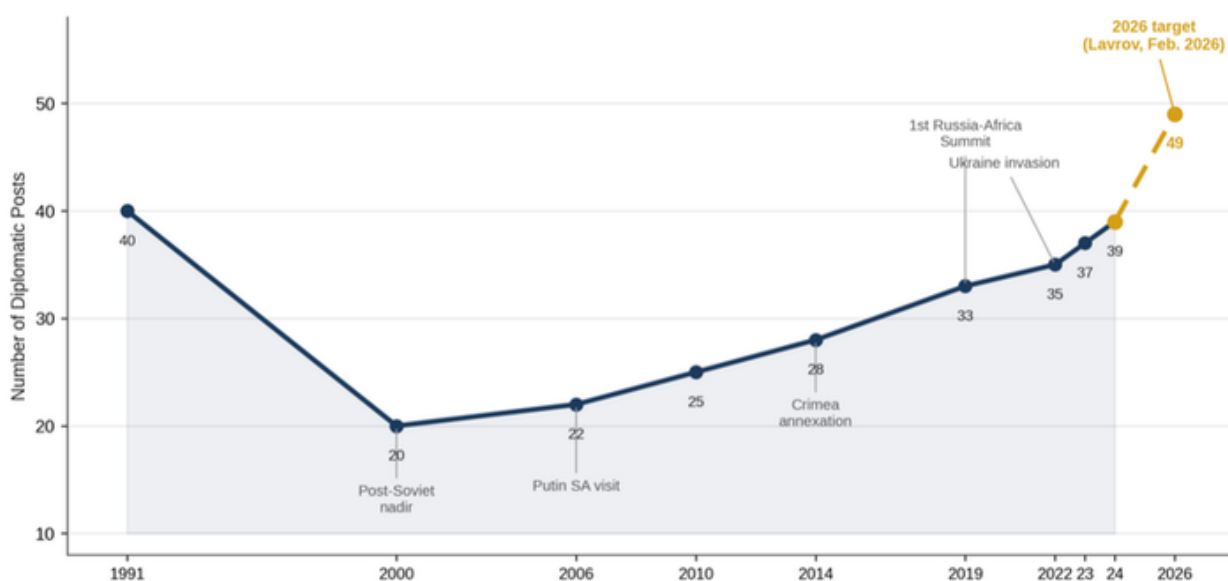
Diplomatic and Development Presence in Africa



Sources: China, US — Lowy Institute (2024). Turkey — FM Çavuşoğlu via Daily Sabah. France — French MFA official page. United Kingdom — UK FCDO 'Posts Overseas' dataset (Apr. 2024); 36 embassies/high commissions + 11 consulates. Germany — German Federal Foreign Office (Auswärtiges Amt), 42 resident embassies in Africa (list of diplomatic missions, 2025). Russia — BORN News Agency (Feb. 2026), citing FM Lavrov. Switzerland — Federal Council, Africa Strategy 2025–28 (20 Dec. 2024); 18 embassies + 10 cooperation offices. Italy — Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI), 28 principal missions in Africa. Poland — Institute of New Europe, citing Polish MFA. Compiled by the author.

Figure 2

Russia's Diplomatic Expansion in Africa (1991–2026)



Sources: Russian MFA statements; BORN News Agency; Lavrov press conferences (Feb. 2026); compiled by author.



4. How Russia Builds Influence- and Exploits the Vacuum

Russia's resurgence in Africa rests on a deceptively simple proposition: where Western and multilateral partners often tie assistance to governance reforms, democratic conditionality, and institutional processes, Russia offers rapid security support, political backing for regime survival, and a partnership largely free of governance conditions or normative judgement. This section examines what Russia actually offers African states and societies, why this offer has found willing 'buyers' across a continent grappling with insecurity and institutional fragility, and what this bargain has ultimately cost in governance, sovereignty, and the lives of citizens recruited to fight Russia's war.

4.1 What Russia Offers in Africa

Russia's toolkit in Africa is best understood not as a single strategy but as a basket of low-cost, high-visibility instruments, each calibrated to a specific vulnerability. Unlike China's resource-intensive model of trade, infrastructure, and development finance, Russia- constrained by its own war economy and Western sanctions- has built influence primarily through security cooperation, resource-for-protection arrangements, debt and grain diplomacy, and an increasingly sophisticated information operation.¹⁷ Russia has signed military cooperation agreements with 43 African countries as of November 2023, ranging from broad political agreements to specific weapons supply, military training, and access to ports and air bases.¹⁸ At the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit, Rosoboronexport (Russia's state military export intermediary) signed contracts totalling \$4.5 billion with African nations in a single week.¹⁹ In providing 40% of weapons sales to Africa, Russia was the continent's major arms supplier between 2018 and 2022, followed by the USA (16%), China (9.8%), and France (7.6%).²⁰

¹⁷ See: Lindén, K. (2023). Russia's Relations with Africa: Small, Military-Oriented, and with Destabilising Effects. FOI Studies in African Security, Swedish Defence Research Agency; Afrobarometer. (2026, February 27). Popular Perceptions of Russia Lag, Even as Its Influence Grows Across Africa. Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 1139, p.1.

¹⁸ See: <https://epthinktank.eu/2024/02/13/russia-in-africa-an-atlas/russia-africa-military-agreements-and-arms-trade-and-recent-coups/>

¹⁹ See: <https://orionpolicy.org/russias-growing-military-footprint-in-africa-arms-deals-and-defense-cooperation/>

²⁰ See: Ibid

The security and mercenary instruments are the most consequential at the ground level. Following the 2023 mutiny and death of Yevgeny Prigozhin²¹, the Wagner Group was formally absorbed into Russia's Ministry of Defence and rebranded as Africa Corps²², operating in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Madagascar²³, Mali, Niger, and Sudan. As of early 2026, as many as 2,500 Russian personnel were deployed in Mali alone.²⁴ Russia has since expanded to Equatorial Guinea and Togo, the latter signing a military cooperation agreement in 2025 that reportedly provides for port access.²⁵ These deployments typically provide regime protection, military training, and political consulting, including services that junta leaders facing legitimacy crises and active insurgencies have found difficult to refuse.²⁶

The security relationship is rarely paid for in cash. It is paid for in mineral concessions. In April 2025, Burkina Faso's Council of Ministers awarded Russia's Nordgold an 85% stake in the Niou gold deposit, expected to yield over 20 tonnes of gold across an eight-year licence.²⁷ In the Central African Republic, Wagner-linked Midas Resources holds preferential access to the Ndassima gold mine, with estimated reserves of \$2.8 billion.²⁸ In Sudan, leaked central bank data suggest that more than 32 tonnes of gold- worth an estimated \$1.9 billion- went unaccounted for in a single year, with Wagner-linked smuggling identified as the primary suspected channel.²⁹ Mali has expanded joint ventures with Russia across uranium and gold, including a planned gold refinery in Bamako with a 200-tonne annual processing capacity, while Niger has approached Russia's state nuclear corporation, Rosatom, about a uranium concession previously held by France's Orano.³⁰ As one Washington Institute researcher has observed, this exchange of mercenaries for mining rights does more than entrench Russian political influence; it provides Moscow with a mechanism to circumvent international sanctions and help finance the war in Ukraine.³¹ The toolkit deployed in Bamako and Ouagadougou is not separate from the war in Kyiv and Kharkiv. It helps pay for it.

Alongside security and resources, Russia has invested in debt relief and diplomatic theatre. At the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg, held while an ICC arrest warrant hung over Putin, Russia announced the write-off of \$23 billion in African sovereign debt and pledged free grain shipments to six countries as compensation for its withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative³²

²¹ See: <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2023/08/why-yevgeny-prigozhin-had-to-die>

²² See: https://www.pism.pl/webroot/upload/files/Raport/PISM%20Report%20Africa%20Corps_.pdf

²³ See: <https://afrinz.ru/en/2026/05/madagascar-s-defence-minister-speaks-about-prospects-for-military-co-operation-with-russia/>

²⁴ See: https://www.congress.gov/crs_external_products/IF/PDF/IF12389/IF12389.10.pdf

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad1139-popular-perceptions-of-russia-lag-even-as-its-influence-grows-across-africa/>

²⁷ See: <https://www.ecofinagency.com/mining/0205-46716-gold-burkina-faso-turns-to-russian-nordgold-to-slumping-production>

²⁸ See: <https://theoregongroup.com/commodities/gold/russias-military-scramble-for-african-critical-minerals/>

²⁹ See: The Oregon Group (2024), op. cit.

³⁰ See: The Voice of Africa. (2025, September 13). Russia Deepens Footprint in Africa With Mali Energy and Mining Deals. <https://thevoiceofafrica.com/2025/06/25/russia-deepens-footprint-in-africa-with-mali-energy-and-mining-deals/>; Africa Defense Forum. (2025, February 11). Struggling to Defeat Terrorists, Sahel Nations Squeeze Mining Companies for Cash. <https://adf-magazine.com/2025/02/struggling-to-defeat-terrorists-sahel-nations-squeeze-mining-companies-for-cash/>

³¹ See: Africa Defense Forum (2025), op. cit.

³² See: Al Jazeera. (2023, July 28). Putin Promises Grains, Debt Write-Off as Russia Seeks Africa Allies. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/28/putin-promises-grains-debt-write-off-as-russia-seeks-africa-allies>

These gestures generate outsized diplomatic returns: African abstentions, rather than condemnations, on UN resolutions concerning Ukraine. Russia is simultaneously pursuing structured institutional partnerships with ECOWAS, the EAC, SADC, and other regional bodies as part of its 2023-2026 Russia-Africa Partnership Action Plan. It is now seeking influence at the regional architecture level even as it backs the AES states that have walked out of those very institutions.³³



4.2 Why it Found Buyers: Grievance, Disinformation, the Pan-Africanist Icon and the Vacuum Left by Others

Russia's influence toolkit would not have generated the traction it has without a set of critical enabling conditions- conditions it neither created in full nor merely exploited passively. Russia has been simultaneously a beneficiary and an accelerant of the instability it profits from: finding pre-existing grievances and institutional failures, then deepening them through a disinformation and narrative-building apparatus that the Africa Center for Strategic Studies has identified as active in about 28 African countries, with deliberate efforts to undermine democratic institutions documented across the continent. Four enabling conditions are particularly significant, and in each case Russia's role has been both opportunistic and causal.

The first is the anti-French grievance in Francophone Africa rooted in decades of post-colonial economic and military arrangements, and real enough to require no foreign amplification to exist. For decades, CFA franc member countries were required to deposit up to 50% of their foreign exchange reserves with the French Treasury, French representatives sat on the boards of African central banks, and all currency notes and coins were produced in France.³⁴ Pro-democracy movements including Y'en a Marre in Senegal and Le Balai Citoyen in Burkina Faso described this as structural colonial economic control. Niger's junta leader articulated the sentiment plainly: "Currency is a sign of sovereignty... it is no longer acceptable for our states to be France's cash cow."³⁵ While West African CFA countries were partially released from the reserve deposit requirement in 2019, the reforms went largely unnoticed by mainstream society. Into this grievance, carefully cultivated over decades, Russia has poured industrial quantities of propaganda, inserting itself as the anti-colonial alternative: ideology-free, non-interfering, and offering what France never did- unconditional security partnerships and the language of African sovereignty.

³³ See: https://x.com/ecowas_cedeao/status/2002482059265053087

³⁴ See: Brookings Institution. How the France-Backed African CFA Franc Works as an Enabler and Barrier to Development. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-the-france-backed-african-cfa-franc-works-as-an-enabler-and-barrier-to-development/>

³⁵ See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/2/23/burkina-faso-mali-and-niger-debate-exiting-cfa-zone>

The second enabling condition is the gap between democratic aspiration and democratic delivery. This gap must be stated precisely, because Russia's disinformation machine deliberately distorts it. Africans have not abandoned democracy. Afrobarometer Round 10 (2024/2025) finds that two-thirds (66%) of Africans still prefer democracy over any other system of government, and large majorities continue to reject one-man rule (80%), one-party rule (78%), and institutionalised military rule (66%).³⁶ Among African youth aged 18-35, 64% prefer democracy, and 65% reject military rule. But the same data reveals a critical vulnerability: more than half of all Africans (53%) are willing to accept a military takeover if elected leaders abuse power, and among youth this conditional tolerance is higher still.³⁷ Across 30 countries tracked since 2011, opposition to military rule has weakened by 11 percentage points overall- and by 40 percentage points in Mali and 36 percentage points in Burkina Faso.³⁸ These are not countries that have rejected democracy. They are countries where populations have lost faith in democracy's ability to deliver security and dignity. Russia has exploited this gap- but it has also actively deepened it by backing leaders who suppress civil society, free press, and electoral institutions that could have helped democracy deliver.

This narrative has found its most potent vehicle not in any official Russian messaging, but in the cult of personality built around Burkina Faso's junta leader, Captain Ibrahim Traoré. Since late April 2025, social media platforms across sub-Saharan Africa have been flooded with AI-generated deepfakes. In these videos, global celebrities and public figures such as Beyoncé, Rihanna, Selena Gomez, and most recently Pope Leo are shown praising and portraying Ibrahim Traoré as a pan-African icon, resisting Western imperialism. In these videos, Traoré is shown leading a developmental revolution in Burkina Faso. Burkina Faso is presented in pro-Traoré social media content as a new model of African sovereignty: expelling French troops, reclaiming resources, redirecting national wealth to health and education. The reality documented in this paper is the opposite: 15,106 fatalities in Traoré's first 24 months, 70% of the country outside government control, and a humanitarian crisis displacing two million people.³⁹ Yet the narrative has penetrated deeply. Solidarity protests in support of Traoré swept major African cities on April 30, 2025, following an alleged coup attempt- demonstrations in Accra, Ouagadougou, London, and beyond, with thousands marching under pan-Africanist slogans. Prominent African musicians and influencers amplified the message: Ghanaian artist Sarkodie's "God protect Ibrahim Traoré" statement circulated widely, and content creator Wodemaya shared a direct message from Traoré to his followers.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, AI-generated images falsely depicted mass demonstrations in Nairobi, Harare, and New York's Times Square, and deepfake audio mimicking Rihanna and Beyoncé endorsing Traoré circulated widely. The campaign has successfully made authoritarian military rule look like liberation and very appealing, especially to the youth.

³⁶ See: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/feature/flagship-report/>

³⁷ See: Ibid.

³⁸ See: <https://www.afrobarometer.org/feature/flagship-report/>

³⁹ <https://cddgh.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Vol.-20-no.-4-Burkina-Fasos-web.pdf>

⁴⁰ Facebook / Music Head Africa. (2025). 'God Protect Ibrahim Traoré'- Sarkodie Speaks in Solidarity. <https://www.facebook.com/musicheadafrica/posts/god-protect-ibrahim-traore-sarkodie-speaks-in-solidarity-with-africa-president-o/730022262695525/>; Wodemaya / Facebook. (2025). A Message from His Excellency Ibrahim Traoré. <https://www.facebook.com/Wodemaya/posts>

This amplification accelerated sharply after the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit.⁴¹ One widely circulated fabrication claimed Burkina Faso had unilaterally erased \$4.5 billion in debt overnight.⁴² In fact, Russia's methods of disinformation campaigns are nearly always accompanied by efforts to interfere in elections to keep Moscow-friendly regimes in power, to support their extended tenures in office beyond constitutionally mandated term limits, or to validate coups.⁴³

The third enabling condition is the legitimacy and credibility crisis of the regional bloc and the fragmentation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). ECOWAS suspended Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and imposed sanctions on them following the coups between 2020 and 2024 as per its supplementary protocol on democracy and good governance and zero tolerance for unconstitutional changes in government. Yet the same bloc took no comparable action against Togo's controversial 2024 constitutional shift from a presidential to a parliamentary system which was widely deemed as an "institutional coup d'état" designed to keep President Faure Gnassingbé and his family in power indefinitely⁴⁴; or against Côte d'Ivoire, where President Ouattara claimed a constitutional reset to run for a third term and is now in his fourth term⁴⁵; or against Guinea-Bissau, which unconstitutionally dissolved parliament and postponed national elections for three consecutive times.⁴⁶ Sahel junta leaders signed a new pact to create the Alliance of Sahelian States (AES) "of the peoples, instead of an ECOWAS whose directives and instructions are dictated to it by powers that are foreign to Africa."⁴⁷ Russia capitalised on this narrative through coordinated propaganda, selectively presenting ECOWAS sanctions as Western-directed punishment while ignoring the AES juntas' own democratic and economic failures. Notably, Russia did not merely observe the ECOWAS fracture: it materially backed the juntas that walked out, providing the security guarantees and diplomatic cover that made their isolation survivable. The AES formation in September 2023 and the ECOWAS withdrawals in January 2024 happened with Russian backing, Russian media amplification, and Russian political support. Russia was not a bystander to this fracture. It was an architect.⁴⁸

The fourth enabling condition is the emergence of a multipolar international order. For much of the post-Cold War period, African governments that seized power unconstitutionally, suppressed dissent, or manipulated elections faced a reasonably predictable menu of consequences from Western and multilateral partners: suspended aid, frozen accounts, diplomatic isolation, and conditionality attached to any resumption of support. That predictability has broken down. Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, and Gulf states now offer military cooperation, infrastructure finance, and diplomatic cover with no governance conditions attached, and are frequently willing to extend recognition and support to governments that Western partners have suspended or sanctioned.

⁴¹ See: <https://disinfo.africa/deepfakes-and-propaganda-used-to-glorify-burkina-fasos-tractor%C3%A9-83bf59499714>

⁴² See: <https://www.reuters.com/fact-check/burkina-faso-has-external-debt-theres-no-evidence-it-was-paid-off-march-2025-04-16/>

⁴³ See: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-interference-undermine-democracy-africa/>

⁴⁴ See: <https://constitutionnet.org/news/op-ed-did-togos-constitutional-reforms-entrench-presidents-power>

⁴⁵ See: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2025-12-08/ivory-coast-swears-in-ouattara-for-another-five-year-term?embedded-checkout=true>

⁴⁶ See: <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/report/guinea-bissau/november-2024>

⁴⁷ See: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/7/6/niger-mali-and-burkina-faso-military-leaders-sign-new-pact-rebuff-ecowas>

⁴⁸ See: <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/russia-and-the-ecowas-exodus-a-new-energy-crisis>

For a junta facing the traditional consequences of a coup, this is not a marginal alternative- it is an escape route from accountability altogether. The appeal is not primarily ideological. It is transactional: in the sense that authoritarian government that has fallen short of democratic governance standards no longer has to answer for it, because there is almost always another patron willing to provide solidarity, financing, or security assistance without asking. Russia has been particularly effective at packaging this transactional reality in the language of anti-colonial solidarity, but the underlying appeal- replicated by China's non-interference principle and the transactional engagement of Gulf states documented in Section 4.3- is structural rather than specific to Russia. It is a feature of the current international system.⁴⁹

4.3 The Security Vacuum: Who Left, Who Arrived, and What Followed

Between 2022 and 2024, the central Sahel experienced one of the most dramatic reversals of a security architecture in modern African history. France, the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union- which together had maintained tens of thousands of personnel and a multi-billion-dollar security apparatus across Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger- were expelled or withdrew in rapid succession. Table 1 documents the departures. Table 2 documents what arrived in their place.

Table 1: Western and Multilateral Forces Expelled or Withdrawn from the Sahel (2022-2024)

Country	Mission / Force	Personnel	Departure
France (Mali)	Operation Barkhane	5,000	Aug. 2022
UN (Mali)	MINUSMA (13,289 peacekeepers)	13,289	Dec. 2023
Germany (Mali)	MINUSMA contribution	1,000	Dec. 2023
EU (Mali)	EUTM Mali training mission	Expelled	Expelled 2022
Nordic states (Mali)	MINUSMA contributors (Sweden, Denmark)	Several hundreds	2023
France (BF)	Special Forces Sabre	0	Feb. 2023
EU (BF)	EUTM Burkina Faso	Suspended	Suspended 2023
United States (BF)	Security cooperation ended	Ended	2023
France (Niger)	Barkhane / Sabre	1,500	Dec. 2023
United States (Niger)	Air Base 101 Niamey + \$110M Agadez drone facility	1,000	2024
Germany (Niger)	Counter-terrorism support	110	2024
Italy (Niger)	Military contingent	65	Aug. 2023
EU (Niger)	EUMPM Niger training mission	-	Ended 2024

Sources: French Defense Ministry; UN Security Council; US Department of Defense; Al Jazeera; compiled by author.

⁴⁹ See: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2026, February 26), Russia in Africa: Examining Moscow's Influence and Its Limits; see also Section 4.3 of this paper for the comparative table of non-Western actors offering unconditional engagement to Sahelian juntas.

Table 2: New Security Actors in the Sahel Following Western Departures (2022-2025)

Actor	Instrument	Countries	Nature of Engagement
Russia / Africa Corps	Troops, military training, political consulting	Mali (~2,500), Burkina Faso, Niger, CAR, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, Togo	Security-for-mining-concessions model; 43 military cooperation agreements signed across Africa as of Nov. 2023
Turkey / Baykar	Bayraktar TB2 and Akıncı drones; SADAT PMC (reported)	Mali (17+ TB2s, Akıncı), Burkina Faso (TB2, Akıncı), Niger (TB2), Chad	30+ security agreements in West Africa; no governance conditions; drone sales at \$1.8B in 2024
Iran	Diplomatic support, oil exports, refinery plans, security assistance	Burkina Faso (8 cooperation agreements Oct. 2023), Niger, Mali	Framed as anti-colonial solidarity; praised coups as strikes against neocolonialism
Gulf states (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar)	Investment, diplomatic engagement, arms financing	East Africa (UAE: \$47B projects); Sahel juntas diplomatically engaged by Saudi Arabia, Qatar	Transactional; maintain ties with both pro- and anti-coup governments; no democracy conditionality
China	Arms, infrastructure, diplomatic support	Multiple AES and ECOWAS states Builds a new headquarters and hands over to ECOWAS in 2026; same with the Africa Union.	Non-interference principle; no governance conditionality
Russia		Signs a new MoU with ECOWAS in April 2026; MoU signed with AU in 2019.	

Sources: Congressional Research Service (April 2026); Atlantic Council (2025); Gulf International Forum (2024); Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2026); compiled by author

The replacement of Western and multilateral forces by this diverse set of actors is analytically significant in two ways. First, not one of these replacement actors is oriented toward democratic governance, civilian accountability, or human rights. Turkey's drone sales carry no governance conditions and have been deployed in strikes that human rights organisations have documented causing mass civilian casualties in Burkina Faso and Ethiopia.⁵⁰ Iran explicitly praised the coups as victories against neocolonialism and has deepened economic and security ties with the AES juntas.⁵¹ Gulf states maintain transactional relationships with both coup and non-coup governments, prioritising access to infrastructure and minerals. Russia's model has already been documented. The result is an Africa policy landscape in which the departure of democracy-promoting actors has been filled entirely by actors for whom democratic governance is, at best, irrelevant.

⁵⁰ See: <https://warontherocks.com/turkeys-drone-industry-at-a-strategic-crossroads/>; <https://turkishminute.com/2025/07/25/turkeys-drone-industry-fuels-african-conflicts-expands-geopolitical-reach/>

⁵¹ See: <https://gulfif.org/coups-and-cooperation-the-gulf-monarchies-and-irans-sahel-strategy/>

However, it must be stated that European missions remain open in all three AES capitals, and EU officials have signalled interest in renewed engagement outside the security sector, although that interest has not translated into formal cooperation, and if anything, deteriorated further: in July 2026, Burkina Faso expelled two EU diplomats from its Ouagadougou delegation, prompting the EU to summon Burkina Faso's ambassador in Brussels and threaten retaliatory measures.⁵²

Second, and more structurally important: Russia holds a perverse incentive that the others do not. Turkey, Iran, and the Gulf states all benefit from a degree of stability-stable governments also buy more drones, honour more contracts, and attract more investment. Russia's model is different. Mining concessions, Africa Corps deployments, and political dependence all flow from junta vulnerability- and junta vulnerability is a function of an unresolved insurgency. Russia has little incentive to resolve the insecurity and every incentive to remain indispensable. The more territory al-Qaeda affiliated JNIM controls, the more the junta needs Moscow. Analysts at the Carnegie Endowment describe the resulting bargain in blunt terms- Africa Corps' mandate, in practice, is to "protect the junta and protect the mines."⁵³ It is a closed loop, and the populations paying the price in lives and freedoms are not a party to it.

It should also be noted that these arrangements vary by country and are not always the straightforward concession-for-security exchange they are often portrayed to be. In Mali, a 2025 investigation by The Sentry found that President Assimi Goïta had personally blocked Wagner and Africa Corps from obtaining formal mining licences, and that Russian forces have instead been paid substantially through the junta's own tax and royalty revenue from other mining operators- a less direct but no less real form of dependency. In the Central African Republic and Sudan, by contrast, Wagner-linked entities have secured direct concessions over gold and diamond assets. What holds across cases is not a uniform payment mechanism but a uniform incentive structure: Russia's revenue stream, however it is routed, depends on the continued survival and gratitude of a junta whose survival in turn depends on continued insecurity.⁵⁴

In Mali

The evidence that this model has made Africa's security worse, not better, is now unambiguous. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies recorded 22,307 fatalities linked to militant Islamist groups in Africa in 2025, a record high, and a 60% increase over the 2020-2022 period. The Sahel has held the designation of the most lethal theatre of militant Islamist violence in Africa for four consecutive years, accounting for 55% of all militant Islamist group-linked fatalities on the continent.⁵⁵

⁵² See: Brussels Signal (2026, July), EU summons Burkina Faso ambassador over 'unjustified' expulsion of diplomats; European Commission, International Partnerships- Burkina Faso, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/burkina-faso_en

⁵³ See: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2026, February 26), Russia in Africa: Examining Moscow's Influence and Its Limits, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2026/02/russia-role-west-southern-africa-junta-wagner-africa-corps>

⁵⁴ See: Reuters/Yahoo News (2026), Report spotlights tensions in Mali military over Wagner mercenaries, citing The Sentry investigation; see also CSIS (2025, December 23), Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali.

⁵⁵ See: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/en-2025-mig-10-year/>

Today, the central Sahel region (primarily Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger) is widely recognized as the world's epicenter of terrorism.⁵⁶ The region now accounts for more than half of all terrorism-related deaths globally.⁵⁷ By September 2025, JNIM had encircled Bamako in a fuel blockade so severe that schools closed, embassies urged evacuations, and the country's land-based fuel corridors became militarised supply lines.⁵⁸ The pressure to negotiate with JNIM has grown so intense that the group's social codes have begun penetrating the capital itself: AFP correspondents observed gender-segregated seating enforced at Bamako's bus stations, with women required to cover their hair- a visible daily reminder that Russia's security partnership has not delivered what it promised.⁵⁹ Rather than reversing this deterioration, there is substantial evidence that Russia's private military partners have themselves become a source of insecurity for civilian populations. Wagner Group and, more recently, its successor, Africa Corps, have been implicated in systematic human rights abuses and possible war crimes, particularly in Mali. Operating alongside military juntas under the banner of counterterrorism, these forces have been accused of carrying out mass extrajudicial executions, indiscriminate airstrikes, torture, sexual violence, and intimidation campaigns amplified through social media. The most notorious example occurred in March 2022, when Malian soldiers and Wagner operatives reportedly executed approximately 500 civilians during a five-day operation in the village of Moura. Similar incidents have since been documented in other parts of Mali, reinforcing concerns that Russia's security model has not only failed to reduce violence but has also contributed directly to civilian suffering.⁶⁰

In Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, comparative data assembled by the author from ACLED tell the same story. Under President Kaboré's final 14 months in office in 2022, the country recorded 2,076 security incidents and 2,788 fatalities; under Damiba's eight-month military tenure, incidents fell slightly, but fatalities rose to 2,914; under Traoré's first 24 months, incidents nearly doubled to 4,189 while fatalities surged more than fivefold to 15,106. In 2023 alone, over 8,000 people were killed, nearly double the 2022 figure.⁶¹

More recent figures confirm the deterioration continues. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies attributes 2,121 civilian deaths to Burkinabè security forces since the coup- a 132% increase over the pre-coup period- and assesses that the military operates freely in as little as 30% of the country.⁶² The justification for military rule was the restoration of security.

⁵⁶ See: <https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/violent-extremism-sahel>

⁵⁷ See: <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-terrorism-index-2025>

⁵⁸ See: <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2025/12/the-siege-of-bamako-how-an-al-qaida-linked-terrorist-group-threatens-west-africas-security-order/>

⁵⁹ See: https://seneweb.com/en/news/International/genocide-des-herero-et-nama-la-namibie-redemande-reparation-a-lallemagne-lors-de-la-premiere-commemoration_n_471750.html

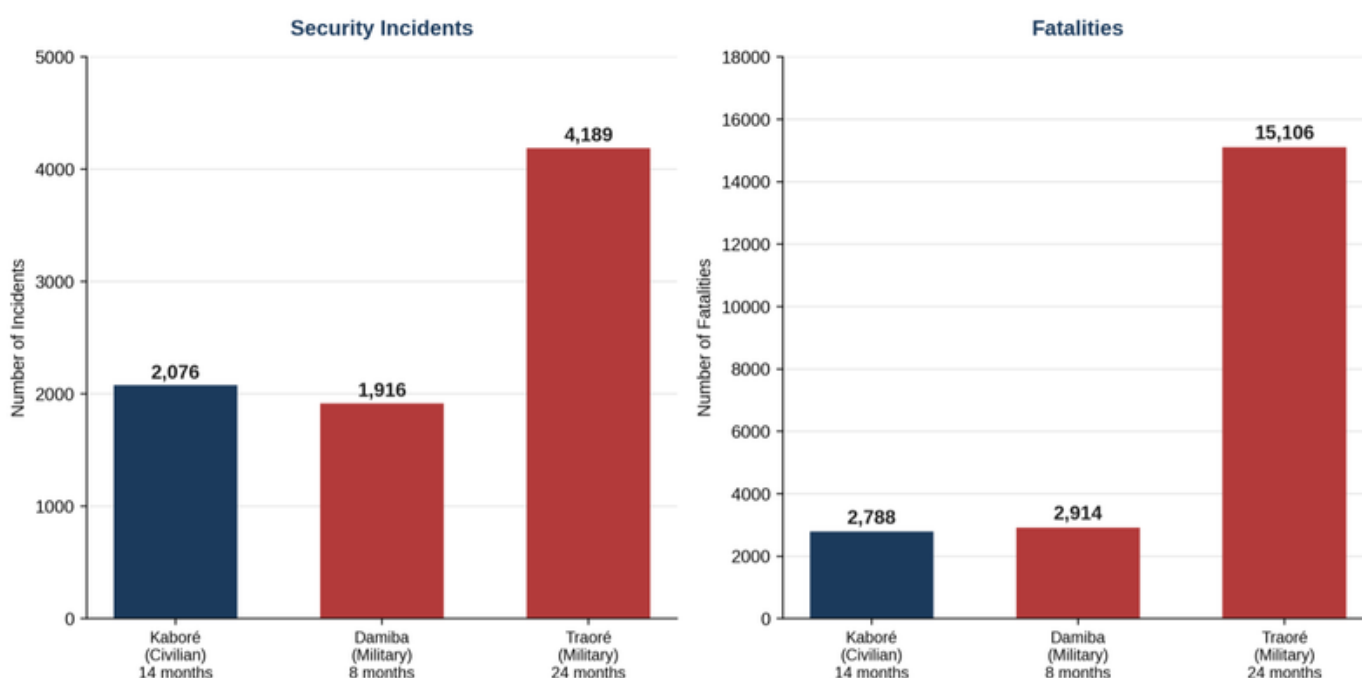
⁶⁰ See: <https://www.csis.org/analysis/massacres-executions-and-falsified-graves-wagner-groups-mounting-humanitarian-cost-mali>

⁶¹ See: Yeboah, E. (2024, September). Burkina Faso's Prolonged Transition: Failed Promises and Governance Shortcomings. CDD-Ghana Briefing Paper, Vol. 20, No. 4, p.3. Source data: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). Kaboré: Nov. 2020-Jan. 2022 (14 months); Damiba: Jan.-Sept. 2022 (8 months); Traoré: Sept. 2022-Aug. 2024 (24 months). In 2023, deaths exceeded 8,000- nearly double the 2022 figure.

⁶² See: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/security-narratives-burkina-faso/>

Figure 3

Security Incidents and Fatalities in Burkina Faso by Government Type (2020–2024)



Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), compiled by the author. See: Yeboah, E. (2024). Burkina Faso's Prolonged Transition: Failed Promises and Governance Shortcomings. CDD-Ghana Briefing Paper, Vol. 20, No. 4. Kaboré: Nov. 2020–Jan. 2022 (14 months); Damiba: Jan.–Sept. 2022 (8 months); Traoré: Sept. 2022–Aug. 2024 (24 months).

The military government's own record, sustained and deepened by its Russian security partnership, is the strongest available evidence against that justification. Instability is not a byproduct of the Russia model in Africa. For Russia, it is the business model. Two mechanisms, not mere correlation, support this claim. First, Wagner and Africa Corps personnel have themselves been directly implicated as perpetrators of violence against civilians, not merely bystanders to a security failure with unrelated origins- most notably the March 2022 Moura massacre described above, in which Malian soldiers and Wagner operatives allegedly executed some 500 civilians directly. Second, the sequencing in Burkina Faso is difficult to explain on any account other than the security partnership itself: fatalities rose sharply under Traoré's Russian-aligned government relative to both his civilian and his non-Russian-aligned military predecessors, using the same ACLED methodology applied consistently across all three periods. A counter-narrative circulates, chiefly through Russian state media and aligned commentators, holding that the deterioration is in fact fomented by frustrated Western powers seeking to punish Sahelian governments for choosing Russia. This paper finds no credible evidence for that claim, and notes that it originates from, and is amplified by, the same disinformation apparatus documented in Section 4.2.

This continued deterioration of the security environment has coincided with an increasingly securitized approach to domestic governance. Beyond counter-insurgency operations, the military authorities have progressively expanded security measures affecting segments of civil society and religious actors perceived as potential sources of influence outside state control.

One illustration is the case of Dr. Kindo, a prominent Sunni Islamic scholar who spent more than two decades pursuing religious studies in Saudi Arabia. Following his reported abduction by state security agents, authorities subsequently suspended several Islamic associations, closed a number of mosques, and arrested individuals associated with these religious networks. Human rights organizations and domestic observers have raised concerns that these measures extend beyond legitimate counter-terrorism objectives and reflect a broader pattern of restrictions targeting independent religious and civic actors.

Official narratives have increasingly linked certain foreign-funded religious networks (particularly those associated with Gulf countries) to concerns over radicalization and violent extremism. These narratives gained further prominence following a widely publicized interview conducted by a journalist affiliated with a Saudi-funded media outlet with leaders of the jihadist group JNIM after attacks in neighbouring Mali. Although the interview took place outside Burkina Faso, it reinforced official security narratives portraying some transnational religious networks as potential vectors of extremist influence and was subsequently cited by critics as contributing to a more restrictive domestic security environment.

4.4 What It Cost: Sovereignty Traded for Survival

The institutional cost of this bargain extends well beyond the battlefield. Civic space has narrowed sharply: Afrobarometer trend data show that the share of Burkinabè citizens who report being 'careful what they say' rose from 68% in 2019 to 73% in 2022, while those who feel free to express their views fell from 70% to 57% over the same period- a shift recorded just three months into Traoré's rule, meaning the true decline is almost certainly steeper.⁶³ Media suspensions, the forcible conscription of magistrates and journalists to frontline military operations, and the arrest of foreign correspondents have followed.⁶⁴

By mid-2026, these developments had begun to move beyond a series of ad hoc security measures toward a more formalized legislative framework. On 20 June 2026, Burkina Faso's Transitional Legislative Assembly unanimously adopted a new Law on Religious Freedoms comprising 110 articles. Officially, the legislation aims to strengthen national cohesion, clarify the application of state secularism (*laïcité*), and reduce the risks of religious radicalization and sectarian tensions.

However, the law significantly expands the state's regulatory authority over religious activities. It introduces tighter rules governing public religious gatherings and establishes broader administrative powers over the registration and operation of religious associations. Supporters present these measures as necessary safeguards against violent extremism and external influence. Critics, however, argue that the legislation substantially increases executive discretion over religious life and may constrain the autonomy of religious communities and faith-based civil society organizations, particularly those with longstanding educational and humanitarian links to Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia.

⁶³ See: Yeboah (2024), op. cit., p.7. Source data: Afrobarometer Rounds 7/8/9.

⁶⁴ See: Human Rights Watch. (2024, June 20). Burkina Faso: Junta Again Suspends TV News Broadcasts. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/06/20/burkina-faso-junta-again-suspends-tv-news-broadcasts>; Yeboah (2024), op. cit., pp.5-

None of this has delivered the security or sovereignty it promised. What it has delivered is a deeper entanglement: juntas dependent on Russian protection to survive the instability their own governance failures helped produce, and populations whose disillusionment with France has been redirected through gold concessions, deepfakes, and a Pan-Africanist veneer- into uncritical tolerance for a different external patron. It is this entanglement, and the manpower it ultimately demands, that the next sections examine in detail.

5. Perceptions of Africans About Russia

5.1 What Africans Think of Russia: The Continental Picture

The most comprehensive and current data on how Africans view Russia comes from Afrobarometer Round 10 (2024/2025), across 38 African countries. The headline finding is striking: despite Russia's decade-long investment in diplomatic expansion, military partnerships, debt relief, grain diplomacy, and industrial-scale disinformation, only 36% of Africans view Russia's economic and political influence as positive- the lowest rating of any major international actor measured in the survey.⁶⁵ China leads with 62%, followed by the United States (52%), the European Union (50%), former colonial powers (41%) and India (39%), before Russia sits at the bottom. Even former colonial powers score higher than Russia, a finding that directly complicates Russia's core anti-colonial narrative.⁶⁶

Another important aspect of the data is that, across 24 countries where Round 10 data can be compared with Round 8 (2019/2021), negative views of Russia increased by 6 percentage points while positive views increased by only 3 points. Meaning that as more Africans form opinions about Russia, those opinions are twice as likely to be negative as positive. Russia's growing engagement in Africa is, paradoxically, generating more critics than supporters.

Country-level variation is enormous. Mali stands as a dramatic outlier at 88% positive- a figure 28 percentage points above the next-highest country, Cameroon (60%), and 52 points above the continent-wide average. At the other end, Botswana records only 13% positive, Eswatini 14%, and Lesotho 14%. The chart below shows the full country-by-country distribution.

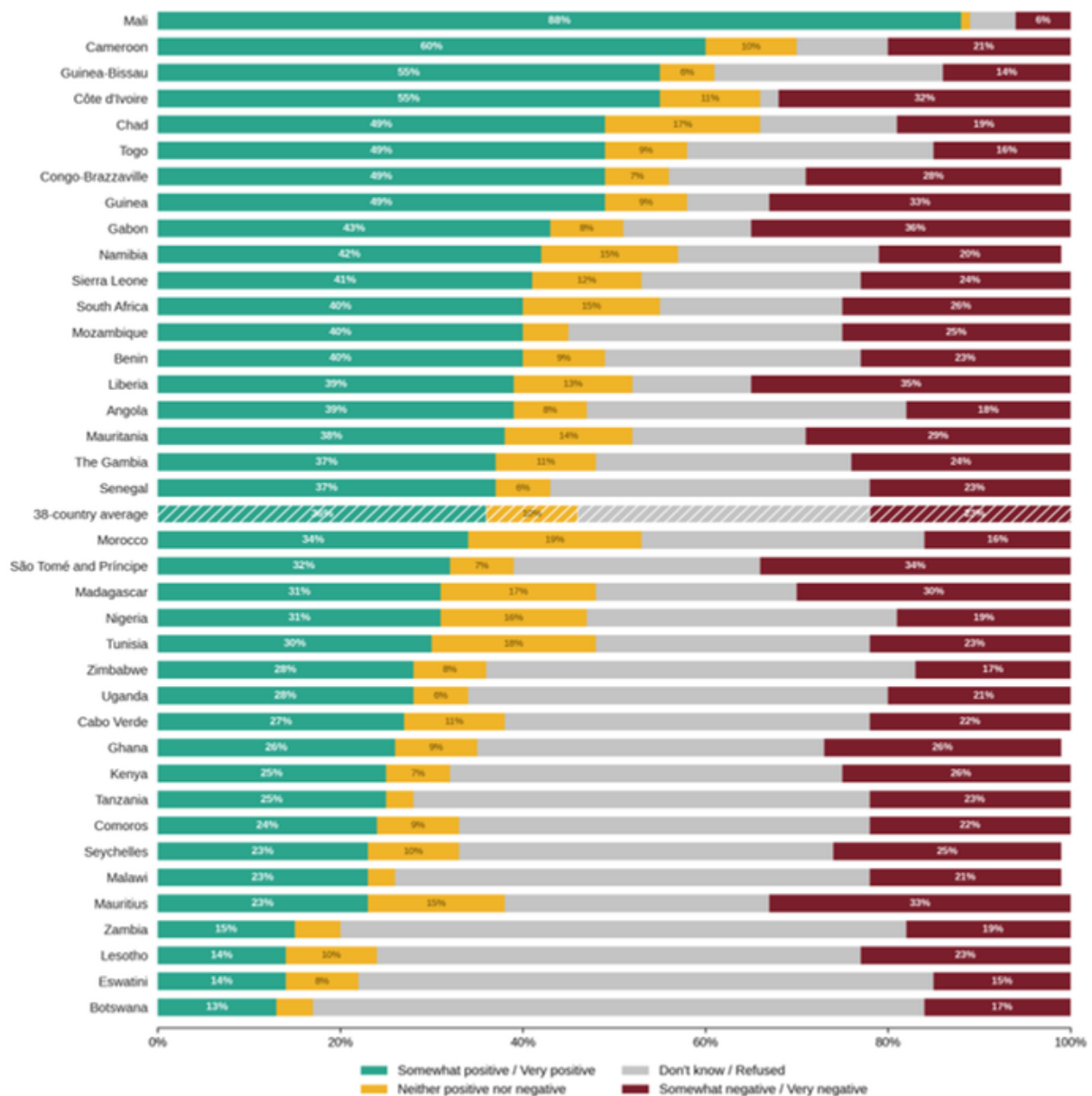
Two findings from this distribution deserve particular attention. First, the countries with the highest positive views of Russia- Mali, Cameroon, Guinea-Bissau, Côte d'Ivoire, Chad, Togo, Congo-Brazzaville, Guinea- are predominantly Francophone West and Central African states where Russia has deployed Africa Corps personnel, conducted active disinformation campaigns, and cultivated anti-French sentiment. Second, and importantly, Burkina Faso and Niger could not be fully surveyed in Round 10: Niger's government refused to allow the survey, and Burkina Faso's survey was only partial due to security conditions across large parts of the country. The two AES states with the deepest Russian military entanglement are now too closed or too dangerous to measure. That absence is itself a data point.

⁶⁵See: https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/AD1139-PAP6-Popular-perceptions-of-Russia-lag-even-as-its-influence-grows-across-Africa-Afrobarometer_2-25feb26.pdf

⁶⁶ See: Ibid.

Figure 4

Russia's Economic and Political Influence | 38 countries | 2024/2025

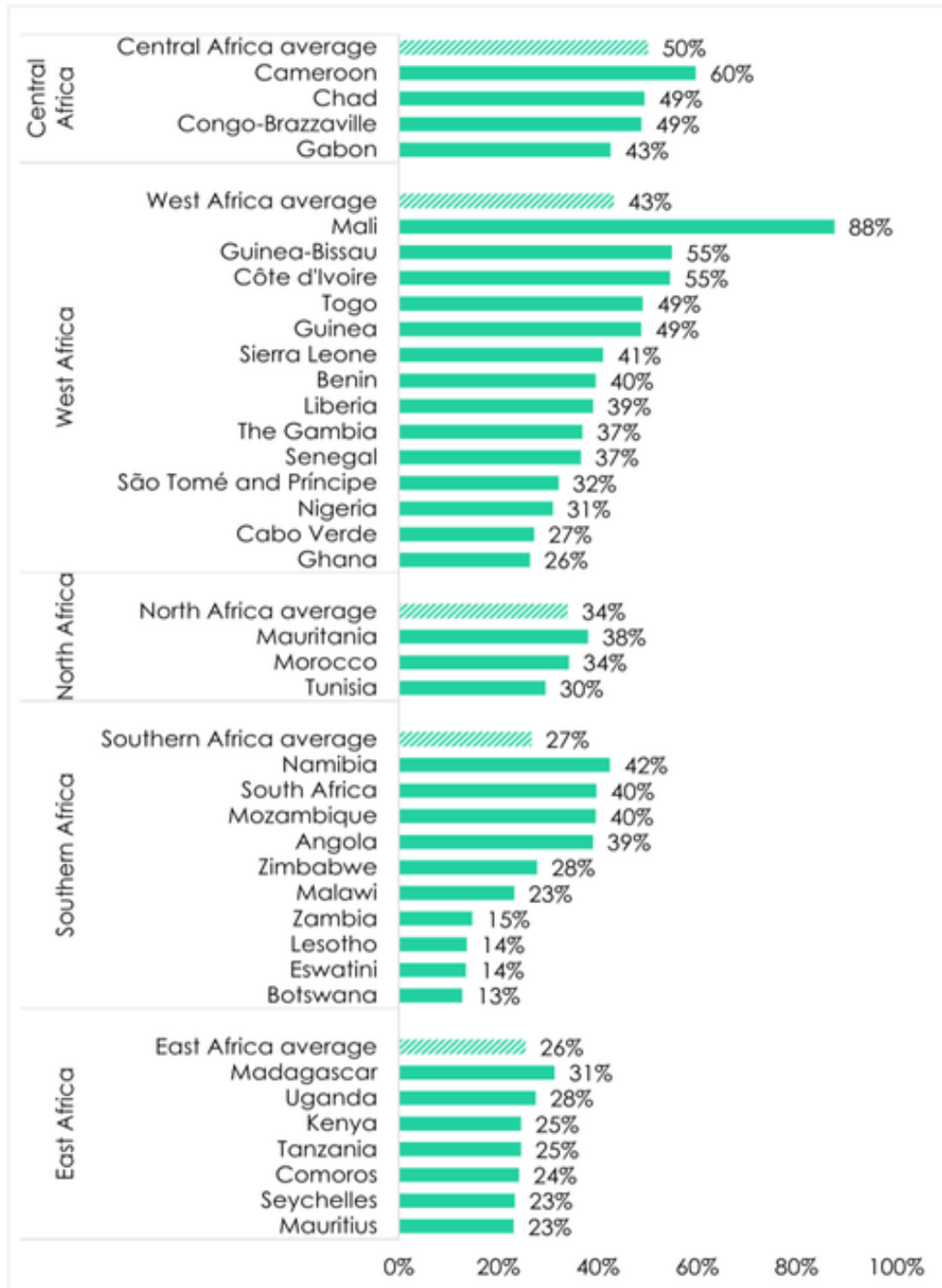


5.2 Regional Patterns and Russia in Comparative Perspective

Regional variation in perceptions of Russia is analytically significant. Russia receives its highest positive ratings in Central Africa (50% average), led by Cameroon at 60%. West Africa averages 43% positive, driven by Mali's extreme outlier status; without Mali, the regional average drops considerably. North Africa averages 34%, while Southern Africa (27%) and East Africa (26%) record the continent's lowest positive assessments.

Figure 5 below shows the regional breakdown.

Russia's positive economic and political influence | by region
| 38 countries | 2024/2025

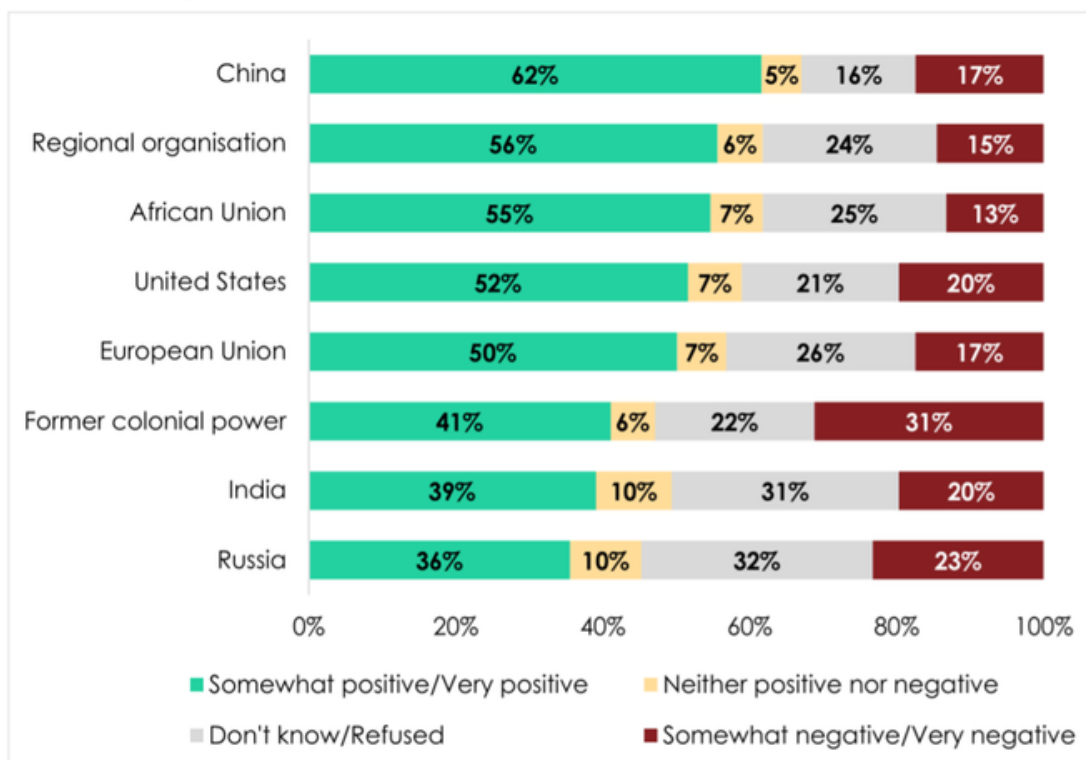


Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of Russia on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who say "somewhat positive" or "very positive")

The comparative picture against other major powers is equally revealing. Figure 6 places Russia in context against China, the United States, the European Union, the African Union, regional economic communities, India, and former colonial powers. Russia records the smallest share of positive assessments among all major continental and global actors.

Figure 6

Positive or negative influence of external actors | 38 countries* | 2024/2025



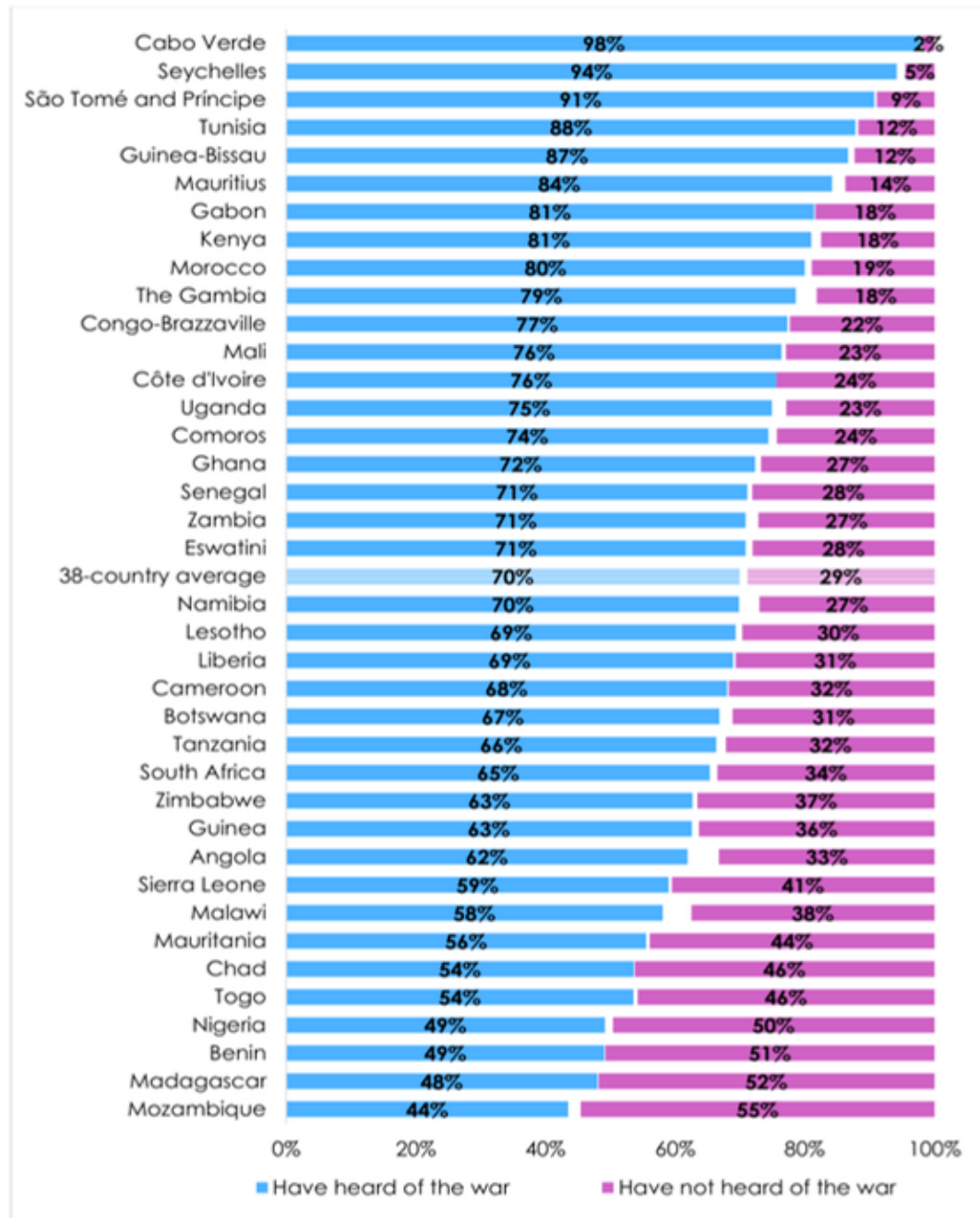
Respondents were asked: Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries or organisations on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?

5.3 African Attitudes Toward the Russia-Ukraine War

Awareness of the war in Ukraine is high: 70% of Africans say they have heard about the Russia-Ukraine war, ranging above 90% in Cabo Verde (98%), Seychelles (94%), and São Tomé and Príncipe (91%), and falling just below majority awareness in Nigeria (49%), Benin (49%), Madagascar (48%), and Mozambique (44%). [Figure 7](#) below shows the country-level distribution.

Figure 7

Heard of Russia-Ukraine war | 38 countries | 2024/2025

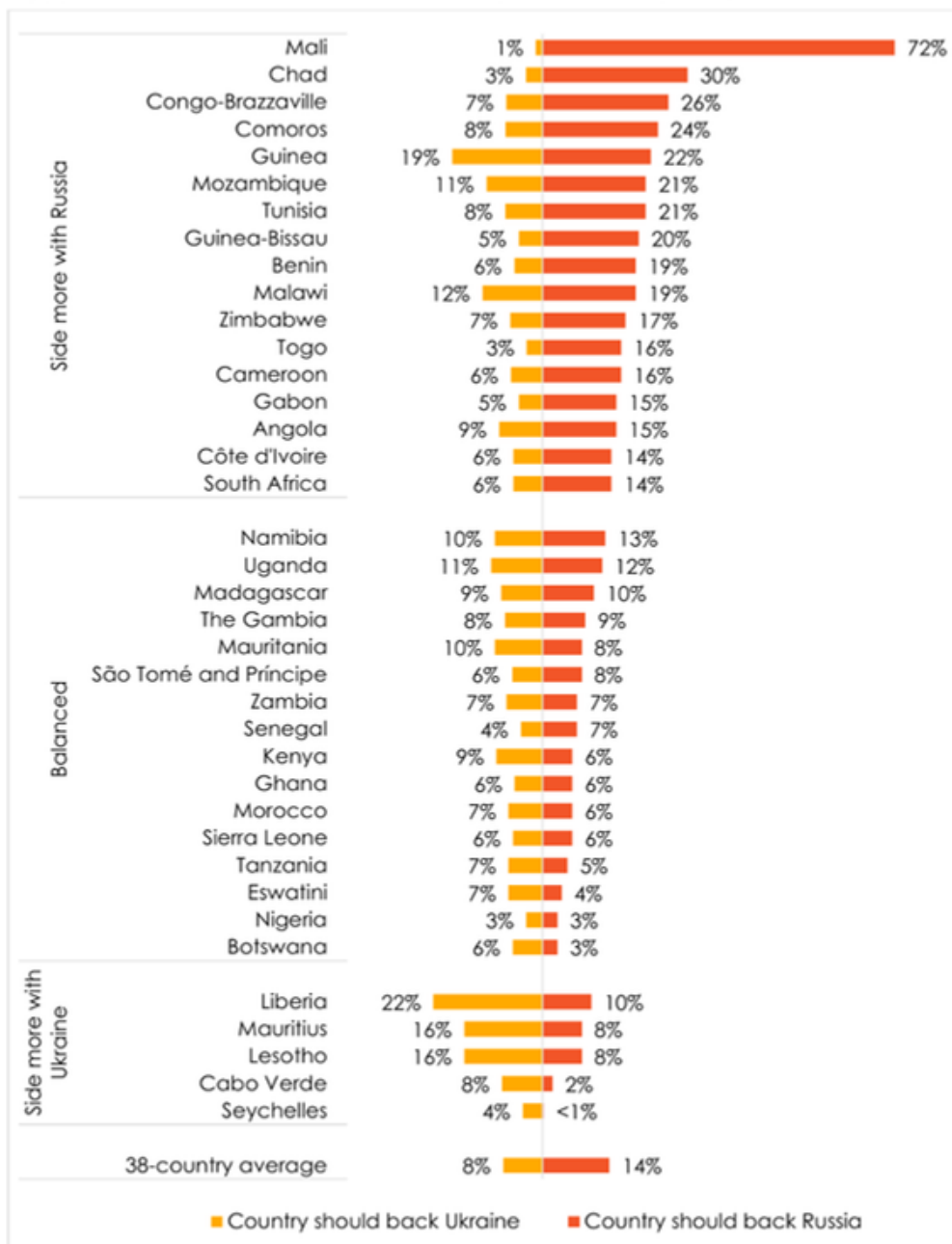


Respondents were asked: Have you heard about the war between Russia and Ukraine, or haven't you had a chance to hear about it yet?

Among those who have heard about the war, 72% say their country should remain neutral, a position that holds with remarkable consistency across 37 of the 38 countries surveyed. Only 22% of all respondents prefer to take a side. Among those who do choose, 14% favour Russia and 8% favour Ukraine.

Figure 8

Support which side in Russia-Ukraine war? | 38 countries | 2024/2025



Respondents who were aware of the Russia-Ukraine war were asked: Should your country be neutral, or support one side or the other in the Russia-Ukraine war? [If "support one side":] Which side?

As figure 8 shows, Mali is the sole and dramatic exception: 72% of Malians who have heard of the war say Mali should side with Russia- the only country in Africa where a majority picks a side, and the only country where that side is decisively Russia. This is not a reflection of organic pan-African solidarity with Moscow. It is the measurable output of years of Russian military presence, disinformation saturation, and the suppression of independent media in a country where civil society can no longer operate freely.

The 72% neutrality finding is sometimes cited as evidence of African non-alignment with Russia. But this misreads the data. African governments have largely abstained rather than condemned at the UN, and their citizens' preference for neutrality aligns more with those abstentions than with any pro-Ukraine or pro-democratic position. The Afrobarometer data does not show Africans rejecting Russia's war. It shows them refusing to be conscripted into someone else's conflict, while their own young people are being recruited into it.

6. Recruiting Africa's Youth for Russia's War

The preceding sections have documented what Russia has built in Africa and what African citizens think about it. This section turns to the consequence that gives this paper its most urgent claim on policymakers' attention: the systematic recruitment of African migrants, students, and young professionals to fight and work in Russia's war against Ukraine. This is not a side effect of Russia's Africa strategy.

6.1 The Scale and Pattern: An Escalating and Undercounted Crisis

As of May 2026, Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs recorded at least 2,965 citizens from 36 African countries who had fought or were actively fighting for Russia, a figure officials described as a likely undercount.⁶⁷ An All Eyes on Wagner investigation identified by name 1,417 recruits from 35 African countries between 2023 and mid-2025, of whom 316 were confirmed killed.⁶⁸ Ghana's Foreign Affairs Minister confirmed at least 55 Ghanaians killed out of about 272, the highest confirmed national death toll from any single African country.⁶⁹ For 2026, Russian military command has set a target of recruiting 18,500 foreign nationals, with Africa among its primary sources.⁷⁰ Egypt and Cameroon have emerged as leading source countries in their own right: Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs names Egypt, alongside Cameroon, Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, and Uganda, among the principal countries from which recruits are drawn, and independent investigators identify Egypt as the single largest African source of recruits.⁷¹

These figures are themselves minimum estimates. Rinu Oduala, a Nigerian human rights activist who has tracked the recruitment phenomenon since 2022, observed in an interview with the author that the documented totals have accelerated rapidly: "Sometime in November 2025, Reuters reported that Ukraine said more than 1,000 Africans were fighting for Russia. Fast forward three months later, that figure had risen to almost 2,000, then they said 3,000."⁷² She attributed the variation in estimates partly to weak migration oversight across African countries- "Russia is taking advantage of our weak migration oversight to pull us into a war" and partly to the difficulty of obtaining reliable official data, noting that many cases of recruitment are likely to go undocumented or unreported.

⁶⁷ See: <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/4127056-russia-has-recruited-nearly-3000-africans-from-36-countries-to-fight-against-ukraine-mfa.html>

⁶⁸ See: https://www.agenzianova.com/en/news/rapporto-all-eyes-on-wagner-quasi-1-500-combattenti-africani-reclutati-dai-russi-tra-il-2023-e-il-2025/?_cf_chl_f_tk=Rbl4xzC8PW03XNMuSsEtI4ySiP11FHziJP87NyHDXo4-1783320708-1.0.1.1-We8ZnSUspfR9T8vchjW5n1WMWLgveb7cslGDKhyQtYI

⁶⁹ See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgl5gxg3zj9o>

⁷⁰ See: <https://english.nv.ua/russian-war/russia-to-recruit-nearly-20-000-mercenaries-in-2026-50603882.html>

⁷¹ See: Ukrinform/Abravittova (2026, May 25). Russia has recruited nearly 3,000 Africans from 36 countries to fight against Ukraine - MFA. <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/4127056-russia-has-recruited-nearly-3000-africans-from-36-countries-to-fight-against-ukraine-mfa.html>; see also Washington Times (2026, February 19), African leaders sound alarm over Russia's recruitment of fighters for Ukraine war.

⁷² See: Oduala, R. (Interview with author, June/July 2026). Rinu Oduala is a Nigerian human rights activist and social rights defender who has monitored Russian recruitment of African nationals since 2022. See also: Oduala, R. (2025, December 27). Nigeria's youths are being lured into a war that's not theirs. Daily Trust. <https://dailytrust.com/nigerias-youths-are-being-lured-into-a-war-thats-not-theirs/>

A Kenyan civil society analyst interviewed by the author explained why even official Kenyan estimates of 1,000 or more recruits are likely undercounts: “The earlier estimates of around 200 or 300 were always going to be undercounts because they were based on departure records from the government or the Kenyan airports. If you look at people who left from Nairobi, you are missing the entire cohort who are already working in the Gulf and got redirected from there.”⁷³ This Gulf rerouting pathway, where recruits leave on legitimate overseas work visas for UAE or Qatar and are subsequently redirected to Russia without ever appearing in Kenyan departure records, is one of the structural reasons why all published totals understate the true scale.

6.2 How the Pipeline Works: Deception by Design

The recruitment of Africans for Russia’s war is not a single, uniform operation. It operates through multiple overlapping channels, some targeting people from the outset for military service, others beginning with entirely civilian offers that are subsequently redirected. What unifies them is the systematic use of deception, the exploitation of economic desperation, and the deliberate suppression of informed consent.

The soft-power pipeline begins long before any explicit recruitment offer. A Sahel-based security expert interviewed by the author noted that Russia has been offering scholarships to African students for years, and is now accelerating this through the opening of Russian language centres across the Sahel: “Russia has been giving scholarships to African students for a long time. What we have seen now is the opening of Russia’s language centres- they are calling African students to come and learn Russian.”⁷⁴ This soft-power infrastructure- scholarships, language, training, cultural outreach- creates a pipeline of African students with Russian connections who are subsequently more susceptible to economic offers framed around Russian institutions.

The harder recruitment pipeline typically begins with a legitimate-sounding job offer. As the Kenyan civil society analyst described it: “First, it starts with a legitimate-sounding job. A truck driver, a warehouse worker. Food packaging official, something very mundane.” The salary figures are inflated- “When someone offers you 350,000 Kenyan shillings, which is around \$3,000 a month to drive trucks in Russia, that sounds like a lifeline, not a risk”, and some offers include Russian citizenship as an additional incentive.⁷⁵ For young Kenyans, of whom over half aged 18 to 35 cannot find stable employment, and for the large pool of underemployed former military and police personnel with tactical skills, such offers are not obviously suspicious. They are presented as, and in many cases initially appear to be, legitimate overseas employment.

A signed commercial contract obtained in the course of this research provides rare primary documentary evidence of how Russia structures this recruitment through the African media and influencer economy. The contract- a formal agreement between a Russian private entrepreneur registered in Kaliningrad Oblast and a West African journalist, dated February 2025 and worth up to \$50,000 USD for three months’ work - specifies in detail the promotion of Russia’s Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to job-seeking communities across West Africa.

⁷³ Kenyan civil society analyst (interview with author, June/July 2026), anonymised at the interviewee’s request; a Kenyan independent expert with general awareness of the recruitment issue, not a government official.

⁷⁴ Sahel-based security expert (interview with author, June/July 2026), anonymised at the interviewee’s request; an expert based in or closely covering Burkina Faso and the wider Sahel region.

⁷⁵ Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.

The scope of work includes: use of social media platforms with audiences in the millions to target job-seeking communities in Nigeria, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Liberia; partnerships with named influencers with combined social media followings in the millions; publication in named African media outlets including Nairametrics, Daily Graphic (Ghana), Nigerian Tribune, Burkina24, GhanaWeb, Malijet, and The New Dawn Liberia; and outreach to 16 universities across Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Liberia, including the University of Ghana, KNUST, the University of Lagos, the University of Ibadan, Université Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), Université des Sciences de Bamako (Mali), and the University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso). The contract sets a target of generating contact information or expressions of interest from 800 university students across these institutions - 50 per campus - as a measurable, KPI-governed recruitment deliverable. (See Annex 1.)⁷⁶

Alabuga SEZ is not a neutral employer. Multiple independent investigations have identified it as a site where African women are held under what amounts to coerced labour conditions, manufacturing drones for use in the war in Ukraine. Rinu Oduala's published investigation documented cases of Nigerians ending up in Alabuga drone manufacturing facilities and military camps, including women whose passports were seized and who were held in compounds with armed guards.⁷⁷ The contract's university outreach component, framed as job placement, is, in this context, the documented entry point of a pipeline whose end destination has been independently verified as a Russian military-industrial facility.

Once recruits reach Russia, the deception deepens. The Kenyan analyst described what returnees reported: "When they reached Russia, some of them indicate that they were given contracts that were written in Russian language. They were given those documents just to sign", binding legal agreements whose contents the signatories could not read or understand. Many had their documents confiscated on arrival at Gulf transit points and were "being assembled somewhere before being distributed." Others were told their promised jobs no longer existed and were offered "another opportunity," making Russia their only apparent path forward. "Some of them," he added, "were told they had no legal status to leave, and that's the only path forward."⁷⁸

Those who accepted what they understood to be time-limited military service found the terms had changed once they were inside the system. A Russian presidential decree means that foreign nationals who enlist cannot withdraw even after their contracted period ends: "Even if your contracts will end or will finish after one year, you are still not able to remove yourself."

⁷⁶ Commercial contract obtained in the course of this research. Agreement between a Russian private entrepreneur (registered Kaliningrad Oblast, Russia) and a West African journalist, dated February 27, 2025. Total contract value: up to \$50,000 USD for three months of PR and social media services promoting Alabuga Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to West African audiences. Appendix 1 specifies: social media outreach through platforms with audiences in the millions; named influencer partnerships; publications in Nairametrics, Daily Graphic (Ghana), Nigerian Tribune, Burkina24, GhanaWeb, Malijet, The New Dawn Liberia; and university outreach at 16 institutions across Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Liberia, including the University of Ghana, KNUST, University of Lagos, University of Ibadan, Université Cheikh Anta Diop (Senegal), Université de Bamako (Mali), and University of Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso), with a target of 800 student leads (50 per institution). See Annex 1 for the full contract document.

⁷⁷ Oduala, R. (2025, December 27). Daily Trust, op. cit.; Oduala, R. (2026). Why Nigeria Must Study Russia's Sahel Experiment. Premium Times. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/opinion/853116-why-nigeria-must-study-russias-sahel-experiment-by-rinu-oduala.html>

⁷⁸ Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.

Most were told they would serve as assistants in support roles. “But when they go there, they were taken straight to the front line after around two weeks of training.”⁷⁹ Independent corroboration from the Foreign Policy Research Institute confirms the same pattern: African recruits were regularly deployed within two to four weeks of arrival, with a confirmed fatality rate exceeding 22% in the leaked Russian recruitment database, meaning the Russian citizenship promised at the end of a year's service was, for most, a promise they would never live to collect.⁸⁰

Rinu Oduala frames the ethical core of this operation precisely: “Informed consent is one of the most important things we have- it goes across academia, medical fields, legal fields. Did these people get informed consent? No. Did they get informed participation? No.”⁸¹ Whatever the variation in individual pathways- civilian job offer, military enlistment, scholarship, or influencer promotion- the absence of genuine informed consent is the common thread. Russia has constructed a recruitment architecture deliberately designed to prevent the people entering it from understanding where they are going or what will happen to them when they arrive.

6.3 Who Is Targeted and Why Africa?

The structural conditions that make Africa a viable recruitment pool for Russia's war are not accidental. They are the product of the same governance failures, economic exclusion, and institutional fragility that Russia has systematically exploited across the continent.

Youth unemployment is the most direct driver. The Kenyan analyst was direct: “Why Kenya specifically? Youth unemployment is the short answer. Over half of young Kenyans aged 18 to 35 can't find stable employment.” Kenya also has a relatively large pool of underemployed former military and police personnel with tactical skills, a demographic that makes them unusually attractive targets for recruiters offering combat-adjacent roles at inflated salaries. The combination of high youth unemployment and a significant pool of ex-security personnel has made Kenya one of the most heavily recruited countries on the continent, with its parliamentary inquiry citing over 1,000 Kenyans recruited, a figure the analyst considers credible precisely because it accounts for the Gulf rerouting pathway that earlier estimates missed.⁸²

Rinu Oduala frames the structural driver more broadly: “What is making young Africans go and fight in another person's war? It's not because Africa is not blessed. It's not because of any character flaw.”⁸³ It is because governance failures have denied young Africans the economic opportunities that their continent's resources should provide and because Russia has identified this structural vulnerability and built a recruitment infrastructure precisely calibrated to exploit it. The contracted influencer campaign targeting university students in Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Liberia is not targeting the wealthy or the secure. It is targeting the ambitious but economically precarious young people for whom a promised \$3,000-a-month overseas role appears transformative.

⁷⁹ Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.

⁸⁰ <https://www.fpri.org/article/2026/04/false-promises-russian-military-trafficking-in-africa/>

⁸¹ Oduala, interview (2026), op. cit.

⁸² Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.; Kenya Parliament. (2026, February). Report on Kenyan citizens recruited to fight in Russia-Ukraine war.

⁸³ Oduala, interview (2026), op. cit.

The Sahel-based security expert interviewed by the author added a further dimension: Russia's long-standing scholarship programme has created a cohort of African graduates with Russian institutional connections, Russian language skills, and established relationships with Russian state entities. This is the soft-power pipeline described in the earlier section, and it functions, in practice, as a pre-screening mechanism that identifies and cultivates future recruits years before any explicit military offer is made.

6.4 The Gender Gap: Women in the System

Almost all public attention on African recruitment for Russia's war has focused on men in combat roles. This framing, while understandable given the casualties and the visibility of frontline fighting, obscures an entire dimension of the recruitment system that is equally documented and equally alarming.

The Kenyan civil society analyst raised this explicitly: "Most of the media attention is on the men in combat roles. But there are reports of women being held in Russia or held in Russian special economic zones, like Alabuga, where they are doing drone assembly under what sounds like coerced labour conditions." Because these women are not on the front line, "it doesn't make the news." But "these are still Kenyans and other Africans trapped and exploited."⁸⁴ Rinu Oduala's published investigation independently confirmed this pattern, documenting cases of Nigerian women recruited to Alabuga SEZ under civilian job offers, whose passports were subsequently confiscated and who were held in controlled compounds manufacturing drones.⁸⁵

6.5 Government Response and the Accountability Gap

Of the 36 African countries from which citizens have been documented as fighting or working for Russia, only five- Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Cameroon- have spoken publicly on the issue at ministerial or diplomatic level. Ghana's Foreign Affairs Minister Samuel Okudzeto Ablakwa confirmed at least 55 Ghanaians killed during an official visit to Kyiv in February 2026.⁸⁶ Kenya's Parliament produced a report citing over 1,000 Kenyans recruited. In March 2026, Kenya's Foreign Minister secured a direct commitment from his Russian counterpart that Kenyan citizens would no longer be enlisted through Russia's Ministry of Defence, though Moscow's own public statements did not reference the agreement.⁸⁷ Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Yusuf Tuggar, issued a statement in February 2026 expressing grave concern over the recruitment of Nigerian citizens into foreign armed conflicts, though without naming Russia directly.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.; Kenya Parliament. (2026, February). Report on Kenyan citizens recruited to fight in Russia-Ukraine war.

⁸⁵ Oduala (2025, December 27), Daily Trust, op. cit.

⁸⁶ BBC Africa / Yahoo News (2026), op. cit. See also: Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2026, June 9). Russia's Deceptive War Recruitment Ensnarers Africans. <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-deceptive-war-recruitment-ensnarers-africans/>

⁸⁷ See: Al Jazeera (2026, March 16), Kenya and Russia agree no Kenyans will be recruited for Ukraine war, <https://www.aljazeera.com/amp/news/2026/3/16/kenya-and-russia-agree-no-kenyans-will-be-recruited-for-ukraine-war>

⁸⁸ See: Nigeria Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement, 15 February 2026, reported in Daily Trust (16 February 2026), <https://dailytrust.com/russia-war-nigeria-kicks-against-illegal-recruitment-of-citizens/>; see also AFP/Africanews (17 February 2026), <https://www.africanews.com/2026/02/17/nigeria-issues-warning-over-illegal-recruitment-of-its-citizens-for-russias-war-in-ukraine/>

South Africa's response has been the most senior of any documented source country. President Cyril Ramaphosa personally raised the recruitment of at least 17 South African nationals in a phone call with President Putin, securing the repatriation of 11 men in February 2026; two others were later confirmed dead. A domestic criminal investigation into the recruitment network has since implicated Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, daughter of former President Jacob Zuma, who resigned her parliamentary seat following the allegations.⁸⁹ Cameroon acknowledged its citizens' involvement for the first time in April 2026, when its Foreign Ministry issued a diplomatic note confirming 16 Cameroonian nationals killed; by June 2026, independent researchers put the confirmed toll at 94, the second-highest of any African country after Ghana.⁹⁰ Notably absent from this list is the country most frequently identified as the largest single source of recruits. Egyptian nationals are named by both Ukraine's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and independent investigators as supplying more recruits than any other African country, yet Cairo has issued no public acknowledgement of the issue.⁹¹ The silence of the other 31 governments reflects a combination of factors: diplomatic caution about antagonising Russia; limited awareness of the scale; and, as the Kenyan analyst noted, the political sensitivity of admitting that state institutions may have been complicit.⁹²

Kenya's response, despite being among the most public, has been deeply inadequate relative to the scale of the problem. The Kenyan analyst's assessment was blunt: "But 27 to 47 people returned against what we mentioned- 1,000 plus believed to be there. That gap is not explained by logistical difficulty. It suggests a lack of urgency."⁹³ Kenya's national intelligence service reportedly had credible information about the recruitment infrastructure before Parliament did, yet that intelligence "didn't materialize overnight" into action. The parliamentary report explicitly named the Directorate of Immigration Services and the Directorate of Criminal Investigation as compromised, yet the analyst noted "there has been almost no movement towards prosecution" and "no compensation so far" for affected families.⁹⁴ He mentioned that "Rogue recruitment agencies, corrupt airport staff, alleged embassy-level collusion, and the labour ministry's active promotion of overseas work to UAE and Gulf countries creates the legitimate infrastructure that Russia-bound pipeline exploits."

⁸⁹ See: Bloomberg (2026, February 24), South Africa Secures Release of Citizens Recruited to Fight for Russia; Associated Press/WTOP (2026, February 25), South Africa secures release of 11 nationals lured to Russia to fight against Ukraine; International Crisis Group (2026, February 27), Recruits Duped into Joining Russian War Effort Spark African Outcry.

⁹⁰ See: Al Jazeera (2026), Russia confirms 16 Cameroonian soldiers killed in Ukraine war; Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2026, June 8), Russia's Deceptive War Recruitment Scheme Ensnarers Thousands of Young Africans, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-deceptive-war-recruitment-ensnares-africans/>

⁹¹ See: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2026, June 8), op. cit.; CIVICUS Lens (2026, April 17), Russia's African cannon fodder, <https://lens.civicus.org/russias-african-cannon-fodder/>

⁹² Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.

⁹³ Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.

⁹⁴ Kenyan civil society analyst, interview (2026), op. cit.

7. Implications for African Governance and European Security

This section draws out the key implications for African Democratic Governance and what is at stake for European security.

7.1 Implications for African Governance and Security

Russia's Africa strategy is not merely destabilising African states militarily. It is actively delegitimising democracy as a governance model, and doing so through a sophisticated, multi-layered operation that combines institutional capture, narrative manufacture, and the exploitation of genuine democratic failures.

The first and most fundamental implication is institutional. By backing juntas that suppress civil society, capture courts, suspend media, and use manufactured security crises to justify indefinite military rule, Russia is systematically dismantling the institutional preconditions for democratic governance. The Sahel-based security expert interviewed for this research described what this looks like from the ground: "I would even say there are no more civil society actors in Burkina Faso- most have fled to Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana."⁹⁵ This displacement has completely hollowed out the local democratic ecosystem. The nucleus of the region's independent civil society, human rights defenders, and pro-democracy watchdogs now operates entirely in precarious exile from regional hubs like Abidjan and Accra, severing their direct operational links with grassroots communities at the base.

Where civil society cannot operate, democratic accountability cannot function. Where independent media is suspended, disinformation fills the vacuum. Russia's interest in the Sahel is not security; it is the entrenchment of a governance model that keeps its partners dependent and its mining concessions secure.

The second implication is about the delegitimation of democracy as a governance model at continental scale. The manufactured popularity of figures like Ibrahim Traoré, detailed in Section 4.2, demonstrates that Russia's disinformation apparatus has succeeded in making authoritarian military rule appealing to a new generation of Africans, independent of that rule's actual record in office. This is not a Burkina Faso problem alone; it is a template other juntas, and Russia itself, can and will replicate elsewhere.

This has a further, more structural dimension: Russia's operations are widening the gap between democratic aspiration and democratic delivery that they claim to respond to. As the Afrobarometer data in Section 5 shows, Africans have not abandoned democracy. Large majorities still prefer democratic governance, reject dictatorship, and support elections, term limits, and the rule of law. But that democratic preference coexists with a conditional tolerance for military intervention that Russia has deliberately cultivated- and the countries where that tolerance is highest are precisely the countries where Russia has invested most in disinformation, military partnerships, and civil society suppression. The disinformation machine is not converting Africans to authoritarianism. It is manufacturing the conditions in which authoritarian rule becomes politically survivable.⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Sahel-based security expert (interview with author, June/July 2026), anonymised at the interviewee's request.

⁹⁶ https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/02/AD1139-PAP6-Popular-perceptions-of-Russia-lag-even-as-its-influence-grows-across-Africa-Afrobarometer_25feb26.pdf

The last underappreciated dimension is how deeply this has penetrated. African POWs captured by Ukrainian forces after fighting for Russia have, in documented cases, expressed a preference for release back to Russia rather than repatriation to their home countries- citing lack of economic opportunities at home, unearned promises of Russian citizenship and compensation, and a genuine belief, shaped by Russian disinformation, that they will be rewarded by the Russian state upon return.⁹⁷ This is the measure of how completely Russia's narrative architecture has succeeded in specific individuals: young men who were recruited through deception, deployed to frontline combat within weeks of arrival, and who even after being captured as prisoners of war cling to the promise that Russia will come back to rescue them and honour their promise.

7.2 Implications for European Security

Russia's Africa strategy and its war in Ukraine are not two separate policy problems. They are, as this paper has argued throughout, two theatres of the same project. The European security implications of Russia's Africa engagement are direct and insufficiently recognised by policymakers.

1. **The most direct implication is economic.** Western sanctions were designed to constrain Russia's war economy- to limit the revenues, technologies, and financial flows that sustain the invasion of Ukraine. Russia's Africa strategy has partially circumvented those sanctions. Mining concessions in Mali, Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, and Sudan generate gold revenues that flow to Russia outside the sanctions architecture. A Washington Institute researcher has explicitly identified this as Russia's mechanism for sanctions evasion- using mineral extraction in exchange for mercenary services to generate war financing that Western financial controls cannot reach.⁹⁸ The European Parliament's own Research Service has recognised this connection, noting Russia's systematic use of military cooperation agreements, arms exports, and mercenary deployments across Africa as part of a strategy that simultaneously advances geopolitical goals and sustains its war economy.⁹⁹

2. **The second implication is diplomatic.** Africa's widespread abstentions on UN resolutions condemning Russia's invasion, a pattern documented across multiple votes since February 2022, have provided Russia with meaningful diplomatic cover at the international level, reducing the political cost of the war and complicating efforts to build a coherent global democratic response.¹⁰⁰ These abstentions are the return on Russia's decade-long investment in African diplomatic relationships, debt relief, grain diplomacy, and the cultivation of the anti-Western narrative that frames alignment with Western positions as neocolonial compliance. The mining concessions pay for the war. The UN abstentions legitimise it.

⁹⁷ See: BBC. (2024). Into the Void: Putin's Foreign Fighters. BBC World Service Documentaries. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3B6hNvpqwbI>; PBS NewsHour. (2026, July 4). Lured by Russia, African Soldiers End Up on Deadly Front Lines of Ukraine War. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/lured-by-russia-african-soldiers-end-up-on-deadly-front-lines-of-ukraine-war>

⁹⁸ See: Africa Defense Forum. (2025, February 11). Struggling to Defeat Terrorists, Sahel Nations Squeeze Mining Companies for Cash. <https://adf-magazine.com/2025/02/struggling-to-defeat-terrorists-sahel-nations-squeeze-mining-companies-for-cash/>

⁹⁹ See: European Parliament Research Service (EPRS). (2024). Russia's Military Presence in Africa. EPRS_BRI(2024)757654.

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/757654/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)757654_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/757654/EPRS_BRI(2024)757654_EN.pdf)

¹⁰⁰ See: Droin, M. & Dolbaia, T. (2023). Post-Prigozhin Russia in Africa: Regaining or Losing Control? CSIS; Götz, E., Gejl Kaas, J., & Knudsen, K.P. (2023). How African States Voted on Russia's War in Ukraine at the UN and What It Means for the West. DIIS Policy Brief.

3. **The critical-minerals dimension extends beyond gold.** Since Niger's 2023 coup expelled French forces and stripped France's Orano of operational control over the uranium mines that supply roughly a quarter of the European Union's uranium needs, Russia's state nuclear company, Rosatom, has actively pursued access to those same assets¹⁰¹, signing a cooperation memorandum with Niger's government in 2025.¹⁰² Russia's position in the Sahel is therefore not only a security or a gold story; it is a live contest over a mineral input to Europe's own energy supply.

4. **Another significant implication concerns manpower.** Russia has averaged more than 26,000 casualties per month since invading Ukraine.¹⁰³ The recruitment of African nationals, promised civilian jobs, given Russian-language contracts they cannot read, deployed to the front line within weeks of arrival, and prevented from leaving by presidential decree, is Moscow's response to this casualty crisis. Ukraine's Foreign Minister has stated explicitly: "In case of deaths or disappearance, they are ideal soldiers. If you lose your own soldier, you must pay the family \$50,000. They value them less than their own people. They use them in their so-called meat assaults in the most difficult directions on the battlefield."¹⁰⁴ Africa's young people are not bystanders to the war in Ukraine. They are being consumed by it, and the democratic institutions of their home countries, and of the international community, have not yet found an adequate response.

5. **The implication concerns the security and migration vacuum on Europe's southern flank.** The departure of French, EU, and US forces from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, documented earlier in this paper, was followed not by stability but by the entry of multiple non-democratic actors with no interest in the security outcomes they promised. The jihadist expansion that Russian security partnerships have conspicuously failed to contain is now moving toward coastal West Africa- toward Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Côte d'Ivoire- countries that are EU trade partners, significant migration origin countries, and functioning democratic partners. This is not a distant African problem. It is a European security problem with an African front. The trend is already measurable. Mali was the single largest African country of origin for irregular migration to Europe in 2024, and migration analysts now identify the Sahel's coastal neighbours, not the traditional Libyan route, as the area most likely to drive new migratory pressure on Europe in the years ahead.

¹⁰¹ See: <https://www.ecofinagency.com/mining/0406-45584-uranium-russia-s-rosatom-eyes-france-s-orano-s-assets-in-niger>

¹⁰² See: <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/articles/russia-niger-mou-on-nuclear-energy-cooperation>

¹⁰³ See: PBS NewsHour (2026), op. cit.

¹⁰⁴ See: PBS NewsHour (2026), op. cit. See also: Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI). (2026, April 2). False Promises: Russian Military Trafficking in Africa. <https://www.fpri.org/article/2026/04/false-promises-russian-military-trafficking-in-africa/>



8. Recommendations and Policy Response

The implications set out above require responses at three distinct but interconnected levels: African governments and institutions; European and international democratic actors; and multilateral organisations.

For African Governments and Regional Institutions

1. Treat Russia's recruitment pipeline as state-organised human trafficking, not irregular migration. The FIDH/Truth Hounds report (April 2026) finds *prima facie* evidence that Russia's recruitment meets the constitutive criteria of trafficking in persons under the Palermo Protocol- act, means, and purpose- thereby engaging both Russia's responsibility under international law and the obligations of states of origin to repatriate nationals and prosecute facilitating recruiters.¹⁰⁵ The European Parliament reached the same conclusion independently: on 12 March 2026, it adopted a resolution, by a vote of 479 to 17, formally classifying Russia's recruitment of African, Cuban, and Central and South Asian nationals as human trafficking and a grave human rights violation, and calling for targeted sanctions against those responsible.¹⁰⁶

2. Establish mandatory public registries of overseas recruitment agencies with real penalties for brokers operating outside them. The regulatory environment is currently loose enough that rogue agencies can operate with minimal risk. Agencies that facilitate the redirection of workers from Gulf states to Russian military contracts must face criminal prosecution, not administrative sanction.

¹⁰⁵ See: International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), Truth Hounds, and Kazakhstan International Bureau for Human Rights and Rule of Law. (2026, April 29). *Combatants, Mercenaries or Victims of Human Trafficking?* <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/europe-central-asia/russia/russia-s-war-against-ukraine-thousands-of-foreign-nationals-recruited>

¹⁰⁶ See: European Parliament (2026, March 12), *Resolution on human trafficking and grave human rights violations linked to the recruitment of non-Russian nationals, in particular from Africa, for Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine*, P10_TA(2026)0081, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-10-2026-0081_EN.html; see also Euromaidan Press (2026, March 12).

3. Create structured reintegration programmes for returnees from Russia- not amnesty declarations alone, but genuine psychosocial support, medical care, legal advice, and compensation for the families of those killed. Returnees have experienced trauma, debt bondage, and in some cases racial abuse from Russian commanders; their reintegration requires sustained professional support.

4. ECOWAS and the African Union must address the credibility gap on democratic enforcement. The double standard in applying democracy protocols- suspending Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger for outright coups while taking no action against constitutional manipulation in Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Guinea-Bissau- has gifted Russia a legitimate grievance to amplify.

5. Invest urgently in democracy education and disinformation literacy, particularly among African youth. The influencer and social media campaigns amplifying Traoré's image- involving prominent musicians, AI-generated deepfakes, and manufactured solidarity protests- are reaching exactly the demographic most vulnerable. Civil society organisations working on media literacy, civic education, and democratic resilience need financial and institutional support commensurate with the scale of the disinformation they are contending with.

6. Activate regional intelligence-sharing and enforcement coordination mechanisms, specifically ECOWAS, IGAD and the East African Community, to track and disrupt the transnational recruitment infrastructure. As the Kenyan civil society analyst interviewed for this research noted: "Traffickers adapt. If Kenya tightens one exit point, they shift the route." A national response alone is structurally insufficient.



For European and International Partners

1. European democratic actors must match Russia's soft power investment in Africa with democratic alternatives. Russia's scholarship programmes, Russian language centres, and cultural outreach- documented in this paper as a recruitment pipeline that precedes harder military recruitment- represent a sustained, long-term investment in African youth. The democratic response requires equivalent long-term investment: scholarships at Nordic and other European universities, academic partnerships with African institutions, support for African-language media and journalism that is resistant to disinformation capture, and cultural programming that positions democratic values as compatible with African sovereignty and dignity rather than as Western impositions.
2. Expand and coordinate counter-disinformation programming specifically targeting the Russian influencer and deepfake ecosystem operating in Africa. The commercial contract documented earlier in this paper- worth up to \$50,000 for three months of social media promotion targeting West African job-seekers- shows the precise mechanism. Countering it requires platform-level action (removing coordinated inauthentic behaviour), civil society capacity to identify and debunk deepfakes, and sustained investment in independent African journalism.
3. Engage the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the specific situation of African nationals held as prisoners of war in Ukraine, and of those held in Russian military facilities and special economic zones. These individuals have specific legal protections under international humanitarian law that their governments have not adequately invoked.

For Multilateral Democratic Institutions

1. Coordinate a joint diplomatic response to the silence of African governments on the recruitment issue. Of 36 documented source countries, only five- Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Cameroon- have spoken publicly at ministerial level. The Community of Democracies has the standing, the African membership, and the institutional legitimacy to convene a regional dialogue on this issue that bilateral diplomacy alone cannot achieve.
2. Develop a specific protocol for democratic solidarity with African populations under authoritarian pressure, a framework for supporting civil society, independent media, and civic actors in AES states and their neighbours, modelled on the democratic resilience frameworks that have been developed for Eastern Europe but adapted for the West African context.
3. Establish a jointly maintained, standardised recruitment tracker- pooling figures from the Ukrainian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Coordination Headquarters for the Treatment of Prisoners of War, national parliamentary inquiries, and civil society investigators- so that policymakers and journalists work from a single, regularly updated authoritative count rather than the fragmented, conflicting figures that currently circulate. The Community of Democracies is well placed to host and convene this given its standing with both African and European member states.
4. Support African-led documentation and testimony from recruitment survivors and returnees before existing international justice mechanisms already examining Wagner/Africa Corps conduct in Mali and the wider Sahel, so that accountability for recruitment-related trafficking and abuse does not depend solely on the political will or capacity of individual states of origin.



Concluding Thoughts: The Case for Re-engagement

The withdrawal of European democratic actors from Africa, whether of French forces from the Sahel, EU training missions, or USAID programming, has not produced a stable neutral environment. It has produced a vacuum filled by actors for whom democratic governance is, at best, irrelevant: Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Gulf states that maintain transactional relationships with both coup and non-coup governments. The lesson of the past three years is not that Africa does not want external engagement. It is that Africa is rightly sceptical of external engagement that comes with colonial baggage, governance conditions applied selectively, or security promises that go unfulfilled. The response to that scepticism should not be withdrawal. It should be a different kind of engagement- from different actors, with different histories and different models.¹⁰⁷

This paper argues that the most significant and underutilised opportunity in African democratic re-engagement lies with the Nordic democracies, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland. These countries carry no colonial legacy in sub-Saharan Africa. They have genuine, internationally recognised credibility on human rights, democracy, and rule of law. They offer a fundamentally different governance model from the Anglo-American majoritarian system or the French presidential model that has dominated African democratic architecture since independence: proportional representation, coalition government, institutionalised minority voice, strong social contracts, and high-trust public institutions.¹⁰⁸

The critique of Western democracy promotion in Africa is not merely propaganda, though Russia has amplified it as such. There is a legitimate argument that the Westminster-derived, winner-takes-all majoritarian model, which produces binary political competition and makes electoral defeat feel existential for groups who fear permanent exclusion, has been ill-suited to many African political contexts characterised by ethnic diversity, multiple party traditions, and the need for inclusive governance. The Nordic coalition-based model, which institutionalises compromise, distributes power across coalition partners, and protects minority interests structurally, is arguably better suited to Africa's political realities, and has never seriously been offered as a template. Russia has exploited the failure of the Anglo-American and Franco-American models. The democratic response should not be to export the same models more aggressively. It should be to diversify the democratic offer, bringing in European partners with different governance traditions, genuine credibility, and no legacy of extraction.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ See: European Parliament Research Service (EPRS) (2024), op. cit.; Lindén, K. (2023). Russia's Relations with Africa: Small, Military-Oriented, and with Destabilising Effects. FOI Studies in African Security.

¹⁰⁸ See: On Nordic governance models and their suitability for diverse political contexts: Lijphart, A. (2012). *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press. Nordic countries carry no colonial legacy in sub-Saharan Africa- this is a historically verifiable distinction that gives them unique standing for democratic partnership engagement

¹⁰⁹ See: On Nordic governance models and their suitability for diverse political contexts: Lijphart, A. (2012). *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (2nd ed.). Yale University Press. Nordic countries carry no colonial legacy in sub-Saharan Africa - this is a historically verifiable distinction that gives them unique standing for democratic partnership engagement

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