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Institute of Political Studies

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Master's Thesis

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**France's new strategy in the Francophone countries of
Sub-Saharan Africa, as a reaction to the growing anti-
French sentiment.**

Master's thesis

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1. I hereby declare that I have compiled this thesis using the listed literature and resources only.
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In Lille on 31/07/2024

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References

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Abstract

The latest coups d'état in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger are illustrations of a gradual decline in French influence in the Francophone Africa. France's historic offer of military partnership has been replaced by new players, such as Russia, which has stepped up its relations in the security field - through Wagner and then through the new Africa Corps. This rejection of France has been accompanied by an 'anti-French sentiment' that has developed thanks to anti-colonial and pan-Africanist rhetoric, accompanied by campaigns of disinformation and interference that are coming mainly from Moscow. Russia has deployed a strategy of influence that were most of the time successful in several cases across the region. These partnerships aim to safeguard the ruling elites while promising to pacify the territories where the forces are deployed. However, this French crisis in the Francophone Africa should not be limited to an analysis of Russian action, as this resentment stems from reasons internal to France's relationship with the continent. Faced with this crisis, France needs to change its strategy radically in order to deal with the new competition that also comes from Beijing, Ankara and Washington. This realistic restructuring concerns the military sphere - the main driving force behind anti-French theories - the diplomatic sphere and the renewal of a softer influence on the continent organized around the assets that Paris possesses in Africa.

Abstrakt

Poslední státní převraty v Mali, Burkině Faso a Nigeru jsou příkladem postupného úpadku francouzského vlivu ve frankofonní Africe. Historickou nabídku vojenského partnerství ze strany Francie nahradili noví hráči, například Rusko, které zintenzivnilo své vztahy v oblasti bezpečnosti - prostřednictvím Wagnera a poté prostřednictvím nového Afrického sboru. Toto odmítnutí Francie doprovází „protifrancouzské nálady“, které se rozvinuly díky antikoloniální a panafrikanistické rétorice, doprovázené dezinformačními kampaněmi a vměšováním, jež přicházejí především z Moskvy. Rusko nasadilo strategii vlivu, která byla v několika případech v celém regionu většinou úspěšná. Cílem těchto partnerství je zajistit vládnoucí elity a zároveň slibovat pacifikaci území, kde jsou tyto síly rozmístěny. Tato francouzská krize ve frankofonní Africe by se však neměla omezovat pouze na analýzu ruského působení, neboť tato nelibost pramení z vnitřních důvodů vztahu Francie k tomuto kontinentu. Tváří v tvář této krizi musí Francie radikálně změnit svou strategii, aby se vypořádala s novou konkurencí, která přichází také z Pekingu, Ankaru a Washingtonu. Tato realistická restrukturalizace se týká vojenské sféry

- hlavní hnací síly protifrancouzských teorií -, diplomatické sféry a obnovení měkčího vlivu na kontinentě organizovaného kolem aktiv, která Paříž v Africe má.

Keywords

France, anti-French sentiment, Sub-Saharan Africa, Russia, Strategy

Klíčová slova

Francie, protifrancouzské nálady, subsaharská Afrika, Rusko, Strategie

Title

France's new strategy in the Francophone countries of Sub-Saharan Africa, as a reaction to the growing anti-French sentiment.

Název práce

Nová strategie Francie ve frankofonních zemích subsaharské Afriky jako reakce na rostoucí protifrancouzské nálady.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction	8
1.1: The decline of French influence in a region undergoing rapid growth and change	8
1.2 The growth of global anti-French sentiment	9
1.3: The concept of Francafrique and its history.....	10
1.4: Research questions and hypotheses	12
1.5: Methodology and structure	13
2. Russia's role in the rise of the anti-French sentiment	14
2.1. Defining the “anti-French sentiment”.....	14
2.2. The Russian strategy and its tools	19
2.3. A growing informal Russian impact throughout the continent.....	25
3. Case studies: Study of the growing anti-French sentiment and the Russian strategies	32
3.1. Central African Republic: a resounding success story.....	33
3.2. Madagascar: a failed electoral interference.....	38
3.3. Chad: a partner in the making?.....	44
4. Building a new, realistic partnership with Africa	49
4.1. A military approach that supports State-building	49
4.2. A new realist diplomatic approach.....	56
4.3. The renewal of the “French soft power”	61
5. Conclusion	66
6. References	70

1. Introduction

1.1: The decline of French influence in a region undergoing rapid growth and change

During his most recent tour of the African continent from 1 to 5 March 2023, President Macron declared that "the age of Francafrique is over"¹, stating that France was now a "neutral interlocutor"² far removed from French neo-colonial paternalism within its "précarré". Although presented as innovative and breaking with traditional doctrine, one year after this declaration, 7 years after Macron came to power, and 10 years after the launch of operation Barkhane - halted in November 2022 - the observation seems a long way from the hopes raised by the 39-year-old enarque during his Ouagadougou speech in 2017.

French influence is declining, and with Paris which is engaged in numerous crises on the continent for which it is largely responsible, France's African policy is now almost limited to a series of declarations that do little to convince the authorities in place or their populations. As proof of this, sub-Saharan Africa has witnessed several coups d'état in recent years, culminating in the establishment of military powers that is openly anti-French and no longer shies away from cooperating with the continent's emerging players, now located in Beijing, Moscow, Ankara, Abu Dhabi, and many others.

Last July, Niger became the sixth country to suffer a coup d'état in the Sahel region, following on from the seizures of power in Mali in 2021, Chad in 2021, Sudan in 2019, Guinea in 2021 and the two coups d'états in 8 months in Burkina Faso in 2022. More recently, the list of power seizures by bayonet has been extended with the coup d'état in Gabon last July, overthrowing the Bongo dynasty, where Presidents Omar and then his son Ali had been in power since 1967. This chronic political instability reveals a deep crisis and a paradigm shift, giving way to what some pan-Africanists describe as a "second independence" for African countries.

In the face of this, the Elysée Palace's approach to Africa has been to respond to crises, in some cases exacerbating them, without implementing a realistic and inclusive strategy to safeguard French interests. The French state is now widely decried among a predominantly young African population that sees the former metropolis as the cause of all its ills. Paris is said to be

¹ Jeune Afrique, « L'âge de la Francafrique est révolu », assure Emmanuel Macron », 20/03/2023, by Jeune Afrique & AFP

² Jeune Afrique, « L'âge de la Francafrique est révolu », assure Emmanuel Macron », 20/03/2023, by Jeune Afrique & AFP

responsible for the absence of any economic development despite more than 60 years of independence and the extensive economic, political, and military involvement of Westerners, led by France. Thus, France's presence is interpreted solely in terms of its military presence, which supports all kinds of theories about neo-colonialist ambitions to enslave African populations and their resources.

Moreover, the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 seems to have accentuated the advent of a polycentric world in which American hegemony is diminishing to the detriment of growing powers. France's approach to Africa will have to include the arrival of new competitors for influence such as China, Russia, and India, as well as its own Western allies such as Germany, Italy and the United States. The green transition sought by the European Union in response to global warming, which requires the acquisition of critical minerals, is an example of the many future opportunities that these players are seeking to influence in Africa.

1.2 The growth of global anti-French sentiment

In any case, the strategy of the last few decades has been a failure, as the unspoken taboos about the influence of the former metropolis in its ex-colonies are reappearing, and anti-French sentiment organized around slogans such as "Down with France", or "Out with France" is proliferating.

In France, these demonstrations are largely paralleled by Russia's growing influence through its troll factories, its military presence via paramilitary groups and the proliferation of front companies exploiting African subsoil resources and directly linked to Russian spheres. The increasing disappearance of the paramilitary group Wagner since the death of its charismatic leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023, has given way to the growing appearance of the "Afrika Korps"³, which is directly affiliated to Russian power through its military intelligence branch, the GRU. The presence of these Russian forces in Libya, Sudan, Mali, the Central African Republic and, more recently, Niger testifies to the growing power of a state that abandoned the continent with the implosion of the USSR.

However, it is vital for Paris to understand the structural causes of this questioning, which cannot be limited to the responsibility of opportunistic Russian propaganda, but rather to an

³ Le Monde, « Africa Corps, le nouveau label de la présence russe au Sahel », 15/12/2023 by Frédéric Bobin & Morgane Le Cam

independent anti-French sentiment resulting from errors of assessment or decision-making on the part of the French executive.

All these factors are reflected in the populist rhetoric of a new young political class, which is promoting the creation of a new political model. The recent election of Bassirou Diomaye Faye in Senegal and the growing popularity of Succès Masra in Chad, who present themselves as anti-system and anti-colonialist candidates, bear witness to this. The relative popularity enjoyed by military juntas - at least on the façade - in capitals such as Bamako, Ouagadougou and Niamey are a parallel to the prevailing insecurity of rural populations, subject to separatist or terrorist groups. It also reveals the immortality of pan-Africanist symbols such as Thomas Sankara - President of Burkina Faso between 1983 and 1987 - among a generation that has never experience colonization. As a result, there is considerable contestation within society, for whom the Western model of democracy represents nothing more than corruption and the enrichment of a ruling elite that is complacent towards its Western partners - in short, a continuation of the Francafrrique practice.

1.3: The concept of Francafrrique and its history

As this research is taking place in the context of a clear demise of French influence, it is crucial to define the concept of Francafrrique and its implications for the concerned actors, in view of the impact and popularity that this concept represents. This period followed a massive move of European powers to partition the continent in the second half of the 19th century, reaching its peak at the dawn of the Second World War.

The French colonies played a crucial role in safeguarding the French state after the war. These regions were the theatre of conflict between Charles de Gaulle's Free France and Phillippe Petain's Vichy government. It was by imposing his influence in the colonies that de Gaulle succeeded in establishing himself as the French face of the Allied forces. The majority of the Free French army was made up of forces from the colonies, and General Leclerc's column that liberated Paris on 25 August 1944 started in Chad.

In 1944, a conference was organized by De Gaulle to determine a new status for the colonies, authorizing no independence and ruling out ideas of independence in order to protect the empire. Paris then created the Union Française, where everyone became equal before the law, but in practice the colonies were maintained. Post-war repression was particularly ferocious against these same populations (the insurrection in Madagascar in 1947 left almost 30,000

dead⁴) who had died to safeguard a democratic ideal in Europe. In 1958, faced with the political failure of the Algerian crisis, the Fourth Republic gave up and De Gaulle returned to power with the proclamation of the Fifth Republic, a largely presidential regime. This marked the beginning of decolonization, but also the installation of French networks in these new states. Paris decided to control decolonization by directly installing the leaders of its choice, ensuring their security in power in exchange for privileged access to resources and their support in international institutions such as the UN General Assembly. The Service Action of SDECE, the French counter-espionage service, through the cover of the Red Hand terrorist organization, was responsible for a hundred political assassinations, tortures, and rigged elections. Jacques Foccart's networks are a perfect illustration of this trend. Nicknamed "Mr. Africa", he placed France's pawns in Africa using all the instruments of the state. His companies, such as SAFIEX, provided cover for African leaders to finance the General's party directly.

The case of Guinea is the only example of resistance, and it will show the cruel French conviction to cling to its former possessions and the episode is massively recalled almost 65 years later. The country refused to vote no by 90% in the 1958 referendum establishing the French Community, on the pretext that the desire for independence would not be included. The French reaction was merciless: Paris stopped paying the pensions of Guinean soldiers who had fought for France, unscrewed light bulbs, and even burnt medicines so as not to leave them for the population⁵. Operation PERSIL was launched by the SDECE with the aim of destabilizing the regime. The counter-espionage services decided to flood the economic market in Guinea, which had just created a new currency, by printing massive quantities of banknotes and arming the opposition to President Sékou Touré.

In other French-speaking countries, the de facto domination of the Elysée Palace is indisputable, and the vestiges of these decades are very much present in the current political heritage of these states. In Cameroon, Ahmadou Ahidjo was appointed and when he died in 1982, President Biya - still in office today - was appointed by Paris. In Togo, when the first president, Sylvanus Olympio, tried to break free from the economic tutelage of France, he was assassinated. His presumed assassin became the future head of state under the name of Gnassingbé Eyadema from 1967 to 2005, and was succeeded by his son Faure Gnassingbé, who remains in power today. In the Central African Republic, President Dacko was overthrown, after drawing closer to China, by President Bokassa who was a former soldier in

⁴ Marianne, « 1947, "l'insurrection malgache" », 25-31/12 2004, by Françoise Raison-Jourde

⁵ Mediapart, « La France punit la Guinée d'avoir choisi l'indépendance », 10/08/2020 by Kalidou Sy

the French army and who had the habit to call De Gaulle "daddy. He was crowned emperor at the end of a lavish ceremony paid for by the French taxpayer but was eventually overthrown for his rapprochement with Muammar Gaddafi - who was fighting France on the Libyan-Chadian border. He was replaced by none other than his predecessor, David Dacko, after the intervention of French paratroopers.

Finally, it is worth illustrating the impact of this period on current generations by looking at the death of the myth represented today by Thomas Sankara. When Sankara came to power - following a coup d'état - the country that was still called Upper Volta underwent profound change. The captain called for the cancellation of African countries' debts to European creditors, announced a boycott of Western products and promoted women's rights and action against global warming. This extraordinary modernization of the country was halted by his sudden assassination and the seizure of power by his second-in-command, Blaise Compaoré - widely accused, like France, of the murder. Compaoré installed a militaristic regime for 27 years until 2014, when demonstrations forced him to flee on board a French plane.

The Sankara affair is still stirring people's minds, and its legacy is immense in sub-Saharan Africa. The trial of those responsible for his murder in 1987, which opened on 11 October 2021 and ended six months later with life imprisonment (in absentia) for three people, including former president Blaise Compaoré, is an edifying example⁶. In addition, the new juntas make extensive use of its rhetoric and symbols - the head of the transition in Burkina Faso, Captain Traoré, never takes off his military uniform and red beret, as did President Sankara.

All these examples are important drivers of the historic mistrust of African populations towards the former metropolis, who did not have their destiny in their own hands, at least during the decades of the Cold War. At the end of the Cold War, the French presidency made a point of declaring the end of Francafrique several times, from at least President Mitterrand's La Baule conference in 1990, through President Sarkozy's Dakar speech in 2008, to President Macron's arrival in 2017.

1.4: Research questions and hypotheses

The thesis will answer the following questions:

⁶ Le Monde Afrique, « Assassinat de Thomas Sankara : la fin d'un procès historique au Burkina Faso » 07/04/2022 by Sophie DOUCE

- To what extent does Russian influence intensify anti-French sentiment in African French-speaking countries?
- Can France's new strategy for Africa effectively counters its waning influence?

The hypotheses of the expected results of this research are as follows.

- 1- France is losing influence in its former colonies due to their policy over the last 50 years.
- 2- Russia's strategy and tools exacerbates this sentiment and are effective in chasing France out of Africa.
- 3- The new French strategy can prevent spread of anti-French sentiment and help Paris stabilize its presence.

1.5: Methodology and structure

The structure of this work will be divided into two brief parts. Firstly, the rise of anti-French sentiment will be defined and studied through the prism of Russian interference on the continent. Although Russian interference is not the creator of this anti-French sentiment, their methods of operating in several countries in the region have proved effective in recent years and illustrate the main catalysts of discontent with Paris.

This research will be based on a comparative analysis, following the 'Most Similar System Design' model, of three French-speaking countries in Sub-Saharan Africa: the Central African Republic, Madagascar, and Chad. These countries were chosen for their similarity in a number of aspects - their colonial past, their history of French military intervention and attempts by Russian interference. However, these cases differ in the extent of anti-French sentiment, the reasons behind it, and the success of the integration of Russian influence within these states.

In the second part, an analysis will be made of realistic recommendations that can be followed by the new French strategy, which has been widely debated in political society - as shown by the recent information report, registered with the Presidency of the National Assembly on 8 November 2023. This will be based on a more inclusive approach, both in the implementation of policy hitherto perceived as militaristic and domineering, and in the organisation of the role of the decision-making circles of French political power.

It is essential to analyze the real weight of Paris in these countries, a weight that is often overestimated and based on dubious arguments. France is said to be monopolizing these countries economically through the CFA Franc, its military presence and the monopolization

of its raw materials (gold, uranium, oil, gas, etc.). By way of illustration, none of France's top five trading partners in Africa are currently from the CFA franc zone. Côte d'Ivoire, the French-speaking country in Sub-Saharan Africa with which Paris trades the most, is Paris' 9th trading partner on the continent, far behind South Africa and Nigeria⁷.

Finally, it will also be judicious to emphasize the "soft power" advantages that France has over its competitors on the continent, some of which, such as the Francophonie and the AFD (Public development aid) deserve to be developed in order to have a greater influence on the changing societies of Sub-Saharan African countries.

2. Russia's role in the rise of the anti-French sentiment

The “Anti-French sentiment” is a phenomenon that has developed in recent years, and the popularity of the term is linked to the onset of the epidemic of coups in the Sahel. This sentiment is a perfectly French matter, since research or conferences on the subject never take place in Africa and are confined to France. Protest against Paris is nothing new, since as far back as the 1950s, at the dawn of decolonization which followed in the 1960s, there was a strong protest against French influence, and future governments would turn to USSR or China. It is therefore important first to define the recent term “anti-French sentiment” before analyzing Russian strategy and its impact on French-speaking African countries.

2.1. Defining the “anti-French sentiment”

In order to study the rise of this anti-French sentiment in Francophone Africa, it is necessary to distinguish it from Russian interference, since it is endogenous, i.e. it stems from internal causes - the consequences of French policy in Africa. First of all, it should be remembered that this anti-French sentiment is a linguistic convenience, since the criticisms are directed toward French policies and not at its population in general. Today, there are many immigrants or descendants of immigrants living in France – in 2022, 6.9 million immigrants will be living in France⁸ - and many French people living as expatriates in these African countries, without any incidents or acts of discrimination against them. What's more, the rise of this sentiment is all too easily equated in the media or by official rhetoric with Russian action, using the latter as an alibi not to question the political actions carried out over the last few decades. These

⁷ IFRI, « Après l'échec sahélien, repenser le logiciel de la politique française en Afrique », 10/04/2024, Alain ANTIL & Thierry VIRCOULON

⁸ INSEE - The French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies

reticence towards Paris are long-standing and are polarized around several key issues that are incomprehensible to the local population. France needs to overcome certain internal contradictions: a lost expertise of the continent; an insulting paternalism; and the contradiction between an omnipresent migration issue in the electorate and its African policy.

First of all, French officials have lost expertise in their knowledge of the continent, gradually isolating French diplomacy from local grievances. The Elysée Palace, which used to have contacts and networks in all African chancelleries, now finds itself less informed than the Americans or Germans on many issues, the latest coup d'état in Niger being a good example. It came as a surprise, even though Niamey was France's closest ally in its fight against terrorism. President Macron's strong reaction and the serious incidents around the embassy, which caused an unprecedented diplomatic crisis, revealed the shortcomings of French intelligence. The replacement of the Director of the French General Directorate for External Security (DGSE) in December 2023⁹ demonstrates the dissatisfaction of French political power with the crises in Ukraine, but particularly with the French departure from the Sahel.

This gap between political power and reality on the ground is accompanied by a paternalism that is particularly frowned upon by African youth, who are demanding greater recognition and equity for a continent left on the margins of globalization. These accusations of paternalism, which are widely taken up in anti-Western rhetoric, can be explained by the military role that France has assigned itself on the continent over the past decade.

Historically, French interventions have been traumatic for African populations - the Algerian War, the War of Liberation in Cameroon and the intervention in Rwanda, for example, are far from having a good reputation. However, operations Artémis in Ituri in 2003 and Sangaris in the Central African Republic in 2013 have tended to not be a failure. In 2013, Operation SERVAL - France's biggest overseas operation since the Algerian war - was by no means a Francafrique operation, since Modibo Keita's Mali had immediately distanced itself from the former metropolis in the 1960s. The operation was largely successful, since France was seen to have liberated the advancing forces of terrorist groups towards Bamako. Following on from this, Operation BARKHANE launched in 2014 brings together 5 Sahel countries (Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad). It is too often forgotten that relations with these countries

⁹ L'Express, « DGSE, la chute d'un maître espion : Bernard Emié, stratège et manager d'agents secrets », 03/01/2024 by Etienne Girard

were not easy throughout the operation - French politicians, for example, avoided several times Bamako when visiting French troops in the field.

There were two main areas of divergence between Paris and its Sahelian allies: one on the causes of the conflict; the other on the conduct of the war. However, the results of Operation BARKHANE are clear: The jihadist movements have proliferated throughout the region. Mali's 2015 Algiers Peace Agreement groups have not been disarmed and are in open rebellion against Bamako. Finally, the community conflicts and banditry are still rife in rural areas that the state has no control over.

However, from the outset, France's strong army gave the impression that it could eradicate radicalization in the Sahel, but Paris did not understand the local causes and issues. Over the years, this overconfidence has led to a lack of understanding on the part of local populations, giving way to mistrust and fueling the worst conspiracy theories. Thus, before the arrival of the first Russian forces, reports that French forces were arming jihadists or committing atrocities against local populations were spreading among the population¹⁰. French perceptions and obsession with terrorist groups were far removed from local priorities, as the case of Mali shows. A 2017 survey of 2,000 Malians showed that the top concerns were unemployment and corruption, far ahead of religious extremism¹¹. As for the political spheres, the primary enemy was Tuareg separatism in the north, rather than the JNIM or the Islamic State.

This apparent confidence on the ground has been accompanied by a unilateral public policy of clumsy acts and declarations. President Macron - a central figure in the highly presidential Fifth Republic - has gone from one opinion to another after promising humility and the birth of a new multilateral relationship with the continent in 2017. He spoke of an Africa that stigmatizes the West, and declared in a speech that "without France, there would be no Mali, no Burkina Faso"¹². These words, perceived as lessons from a schoolmaster on the continent, are accompanied by failed official visits to the continent, where only disagreements with his interlocutors will go down in posterity. Thus, during his visit to the Democratic Republic of Congo on March 4, 2023, President Tshisekedi said to his French interlocutor: "Look at us

¹⁰ YouTube, « Afrique : le sentiment antifrançais existe-t-il ? » 24/05/2024 by Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques

¹¹ Une Guerre perdue – La France au SAHEL, Marc-Antoine PEROUSE DE MONTCLOS, JC Lattès

¹² YouTube, « Afrique : le sentiment antifrançais existe-t-il ? » 24/05/2024 by Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques

differently, without a paternalistic gaze!”¹³ after having publicly corrected him at a press conference on a foreign policy issue.

France is also accused of applying “double standards” to its African partners. These accusations are nothing new, since Paris has always had ambivalent positions on its African allies, favoring the security of a dictator over the instability of the street. Thus, President Macron's visit to Idriss Deby’s funeral in 2021 was interpreted as an endorsement of power and the establishment of a dynasty with his son Mahamat Deby. Deby’s son, who initially promised the African Union and France that he would not stand in future elections, extended the transition from 18 months to 3 years, firing on the population when they took to the streets in protest. He was thus elected last May after a sham election in which he dismissed all serious candidates. The French government recognized the elections as legitimate, and President Macron's envoy to Africa, Senator Bockel, travelled to Chad in March to share his admiration for the organization of the transition. Recently, Togo's constitutional amendment leaving President Gnassingbé - in office since 2005 - in power without a term limit did not provoke a strong reaction in Paris.

The putsch in Gabon on August 30, 2023, and General Brice Oligui Nguema sworn in as an interim president did not trigger a reaction in Paris either - unlike in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso - since the general is considered acceptable by the authorities. He even made a 5-day official visit to France on May 28, where he met Emmanuel Macron and was received with military honors¹⁴. All these inconsistencies in French foreign policy are gas pedals of an anti-French upsurge in countries where Paris collaborates with heads of state who are authoritarian towards their populations, and in countries where putschist regimes have come to power by surfing on the denunciation of French policies.

In fact, at the political level, African governments have used this anti-French wave to justify their legitimacy and have not hesitated to insist massively on reproaching Paris in order to advance their political objectives. In this way, governments traditionally close to France have not hesitated to turn against it to satisfy a section of their population. In recent months, for example, President Mahamat Déby in Chad seems to be distancing himself from France in order to widen his partnerships, even though the country is the last Francophile Island in the region. In Senegal, anti-French rhetoric was an electoral strategy used by PASTEF (Patriotes

¹³ Le Point, « Macron à Kinshasa : débat présidentiel sur la Françafrique », 05/03/2023 by V.P.

¹⁴ Le Monde Afrique, « France-Gabon : le général Oligui Nguema, un putschiste ami à Paris », 28/05/2024 by Coumba Kane

africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité) to win power at the ballot box via its candidate Bassirou Diomaye Faye. In the case of Senegal, these strategies for exploiting anti-French sentiment are for the moment merely window-dressing and are limited by the pragmatic and complex exercise of power. For example, in November 2023, Ousmane Sonko - historic leader of the PASTEF party - approved the construction of an Auchan, a French company in his hometown, which is his electoral stronghold, and there's a capitalist rather than an identity-based logic at work here. On the political front, there has still been no marked separation between Dakar and Paris, and the Senegalese president was even received at the Elysée Palace on June 20.

A final aspect of this rise in anti-French sentiment affects local populations in a more direct way, since it concerns French migration policy and its African policy. This factor in French sentiment on the continent is often overlooked vis à vis of security and political factors, but it is just as important because it has a more direct impact on local African society. French policy also has an impact on the image France may have of Sub-Saharan African countries. Indeed, the Maghreb is France's main source of migration, while Sub-Saharan Africa is its second. Political decisions, particularly those concerning the migration issue - which is becoming increasingly important in the public arena - have an impact on French soft power. Recently, the radicalization of Macron's government with its immigration law - promulgated on January 26, 2024 - but above all the resounding victory of Marine le Pen's Rassemblement National in the first round of the legislative elections on June 30, showed the image of a closed and divided France ready to apply an extreme right-wing program to deal with the migration issue.

France's visa policy is a good example of this trend. The report by the French National Assembly's Foreign Affairs Committee, registered with the Presidency of the National Assembly on November 8, 2023¹⁵, gives some edifying examples that help to understand the impact of this system at a more local level. It explains that the French visa system is outsourced to private companies, and the time required to obtain a visa is “long, complex” and “perceived by local populations as a constraint”¹⁶. As a result, some of the most Francophile and educated Africans can't even access these visas. Business leaders, brilliant students and teachers and researchers are thus rejected their applications without any clear reason, creating a word-of-mouth situation that tarnishes France's reputation and discourages departures to the Hexagon.

¹⁵ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d'information sur les relations entre la France et l'Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹⁶ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d'information sur les relations entre la France et l'Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

What's more, France's misjudgments and political stances have repercussions on a country's overall population. Since the diplomatic tensions between Niamey and Paris, the Ministry of the Interior has banned visa applications from Niger nationals. While the decision may be justified in terms of security, the message given to a whole population is a stain. Particularly for a European democracy that promotes meritocracy and multiculturalism and wishes to establish a close relationship with a region that has historically enabled it to establish itself as the power it is today.

However, it is important to put the study of anti-French sentiment and the crisis facing Paris in French-speaking Africa into a global perspective. The crisis is a Franco-Sahelian one, since of the 49 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, only three have decided to sever their ties with France. Only in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso have French ambassadors been recalled, and development aid and visas suspended. What's more, these countries are openly at odds with the European Union, and regional organizations such as UEMOA and ECOWAS. So, on the military front, incomprehension is not limited to France alone, since Western players such as the United States, the European Union and even UN peacekeeping initiatives have failed to adapt to Africa's changing security situation.

These changes are characterized by a rise in local demands across the continent, African governments have a variety of offers for partnerships they can choose from. These African governments are not passive, as they do not hesitate to balance their interests to maximize their advantages and benefit from the situation. The ambivalence lies in the desire of these states to achieve their full sovereignty, as they present it in their populist rhetoric, and in their decision to privatize their security¹⁷. These decisions could be seen as an acknowledgement of failure in the short term and seems to be a failure for the stability of the country in the medium and long term. So, in an international context that favors the return of the sovereigntist state and the rejection of neoliberalism, the anti-French sentiment is the catalyst for the ills of the coup regimes, which are turning to Russia as an actor with a singular approach and objectives in the former French zone of influence.

2.2. The Russian strategy and its tools

Enabled by the crisis of France's image in Africa, one player stood out and forced Paris to start changing its strategy to Russia's growing footprint. Moscow is a traditional player on the

¹⁷ Le Monde Afrique, « En Afrique, Paris n'a pas su réfléchir au nouveau contexte géopolitique », 23/06/2024, Interview of Paul-Simon Handy by Cyril Bensimon

continent, having positioned itself as a defender of the cause of the new peoples of the countries that emerged from decolonization. It is essential to understand this Soviet legacy in order to grasp the rhetoric that Russia uses on the continent today. Khrushchev - first secretary of the Communist Party between 1953 and 1964 - ushered in the period of “peaceful coexistence”, which meant that war between West and East was no longer inevitable. Khrushchev de-Stalinized the State and developed cooperation with Third World countries, which he saw as a breeding ground for the expansion of Communism. Soviet ideology thus spread to countries such as Angola, Ethiopia and Modibo Keita's Mali. The Kremlin has endeavored to initiate partnerships with newly independent African countries, even going so far as to train the African intelligentsia in the prestigious universities of Moscow and St. Petersburg. More than 25,000 African students¹⁸ have been trained in the USSR, notably at Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University. Mali's current Prime Minister, Choguel Maïga, studied in Minsk - in Belarus - and then in Moscow within the framework of partnerships with the Soviet Union. All these Russian affiliations with the continent are an asset for the Russian discourse.

This Soviet past is widely used to fuel the anti-colonialist ideas spreading across the continent. Although 1990s hasty departure, Russia's comeback coincides with Vladimir Putin's return to power in 2000, particularly since the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the introduction of Western sanctions. More than 40 new embassies were opened on the continent in 2010s, representatives were sent to regional organizations such as the African Union and ECOWAS, and state visits followed one another under Putin and Medvedev - president between 2008 and 2012. In the case of Russian French relations on the African continent, researchers often focus on 2011 with the operation in Libya - Russia abstained on Resolution 1973 at the Security Council - which led to the death of Gaddafi and the end of Russian-Libyan contracts, to describe this relationship as warmongering.

It is all the more interesting to note that, since the invasion of Ukraine, Putin has been using the lexical field of anti-colonialism to weave a historical link with the USSR's role in the decolonization movements. When Assimi Goita staged a coup d'état in Mali, Evgueni Prigozhin hailed it as an act of the last phase of decolonization and compared Assimi Goita to Che Guevara - a comparison already used for the pan-African symbol Thomas Sankara. In the official English translation of its 2023 foreign policy doctrine, the Kremlin states in article 57: “Russia stands in solidarity with African states in their inspirations to establish a multipolar

¹⁸ ARTE « Afrique : quelle influence russe ? » 21/10/2023 by Le dessous des cartes

world”¹⁹. Moscow even calls for “the elimination of the social and economic equality that is being reinforced by the ingenious neo-colonial policies of certain Western states”²⁰. This Russian ideology of sovereignty is variable geometry, as the Russians operate a double discourse when it comes to interpreting the invasion of Ukraine - which could be compared to a neo-imperialist war. Yet this ambivalence doesn't seem to be hindered by the de facto development of Russian rhetoric in sub-Saharan Africa.

Russia's strategy can be divided into two parts: an official approach involving active diplomacy on the continent, based on trade promises and declarations in response to current protests, and a more unofficial approach involving an opaquer sphere of military partnerships, accompanied by disinformation campaigns and lucrative contracts for these countries' natural resources.

Firstly, the official approach, which is largely based on the signing of bilateral contracts and the intensification of diplomacy on all sides. Russia has signed defense agreements with no fewer than thirty African countries by 2022²¹, covering military training, military exercises and arms sales. The country has always been a major arms dealer in Africa - according to the Stockholm International Peace Institute, it accounted for 44% of arms sales on the continent between 2017 and 2021²². Although Russia's economic impact must be minimized in the face of the commercial giants represented by China and the European Union, Moscow is present in key sectors. The country has invested heavily in vital sectors such as hydrocarbons, mining and nuclear power, as demonstrated by Rosatom's signature in October 2023 with Burkina Faso for the construction of a nuclear power plant²³ - in a region where 50% of the population has no access to electricity. Although the viability of the project is questionable in the country's current security conditions, the media stunt is significant, since currently only South Africa has reactors on the continent, although Egypt is currently building a power plant after signing a construction/maintenance subcontract with none other than Rosatom.

Russia's influence on the countries of the region has also been illustrated recently by the invasion of Ukraine and the dependence of these countries on grain import- countries such as

¹⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” 31/03/2023

²⁰ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “The Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation” 31/03/2023

²¹ ARTE « Afrique : quelle influence russe ? » 21/10/2023 by Le dessous des cartes

²² Anadolu Ajansi « Selling weapons and sealing deals: Is Russia a reliable defense partner for Africa? », 27/11/2023 by James Tasamba

²³ Jeune Afrique « Nucléaire russe : pourquoi l’atome africain n’est pas pour demain », 30/05/2024 by Bilal Mousjid

Senegal and Benin are around 60% dependent on Russian wheat²⁴. As Moscow and Kiev are among the world's biggest exporters, the Kremlin has made a name for itself with its grain diplomacy, promising free grain deliveries to certain heads of state at the Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg in 2023, while blocking and bombing Ukrainian ports on the Black Sea.

Alongside these trade agreements, Russia is also stepping up its diplomatic efforts. More than 40 heads of state or ministers attended the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi in 2019. It should be noted, however, that only 17 African heads of state were present in St. Petersburg in 2023 - a symbol that Russian promises are worth little²⁵. Russia's very active foreign minister, Sergueï Lavrov, has made no fewer than 6 visits to Africa in less than 2 years, revealing Russia's desire to establish a lasting presence on the continent. In early June 2024, the Russian Foreign Minister made official visits to Guinea, Congo Brazzaville, Burkina Faso and Chad. It is worth taking a closer look at these diplomatic visits to consider the rhetoric used. What's more, the choice of these countries is telling, as it reveals the extent of the networks that Moscow is weaving diplomatically across the continent.

In Guinea, Lavrov recalled the historic understanding between the two countries, since the USSR was the first country to recognize Sékou Touré's Guinea and helped him in the face of French interference - as explained in the introduction. In Congo-Brazzaville, Russia expressed its support for the “inter-Libyan conference”, President Sassou-Nguesso being the chairman of the African Union's high-level committee on Libya. Speaking of the Congolese president, the Russian minister said: “*He understands that Ukraine is an instrument of the West, whose aim is to inflict a strategic defeat on Russia.*”²⁶ Libya is a country dear to the hearts of Russian diplomats, since the Kremlin's networks have a strong presence in the country via its support for Marshal Haftar's camp. In Burkina Faso, the diplomat assured us that “*Russian instructors are working here, and their numbers are set to increase*”²⁷, at a time when the country is prey to terrorist attacks by the Islamic State and Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) groups. Finally, in Chad, although the country is historically a centre of French influence and does not receive Russian military auxiliaries, the Minister insisted on Russia's openness, contrasting it with France. “*France, on the other hand, has a different approach: either you're*

²⁴ Statista « Ces pays africains qui dépendent du blé russe et ukrainien » 22/03/2022 by Tristan Gaudiaut

²⁵ TV5 Monde « Que faut-il retenir du deuxième Sommet Russie-Afrique ? », 31/08/2023 by Margot Hutton

²⁶ Le Monde Afrique, « Au Congo, Sergueï Lavrov apporte son soutien à la « conférence interlibyenne » voulue par Denis Sassou Nguesso », 05/06/2024 by Le Monde & AFP

²⁷ Le Monde Afrique, « Au Congo, Sergueï Lavrov apporte son soutien à la « conférence interlibyenne » voulue par Denis Sassou Nguesso », 05/06/2024 by Le Monde & AFP

*with us, or you're against us,*²⁸” he declared on June 5, 2024. All these diplomatic and commercial initiatives are accompanied by tools of influence that propagate an anti-Western discourse and ally themselves with Russian interests. The financing of local radio stations such as Radio Lengo Songo in the Central African Republic, in which Russian embassy staff have a say over the editorial line, follows this trend²⁹. At the same time, the development of public news channels such as Russia Today and Sputnik contrasts with their inaccessibility in Europe - Sputnik France has become Sputnik Afrique.

The Kremlin also has a more unofficial strategy, which in recent years has made itself known through the activities of a private military company on the continent, the WAGNER Group. The Private Military Company (PMC) concept is not new. Bob Denard, the unofficial arm of Jacques Foccart, was already carrying out covert operations in Guinea, Katanga and Biafra in the 1950s on behalf of the Fifth Republic. More recently, the use of Blackwater SMP by the United States in Iraq and Afghanistan has received more media coverage. The advantages for Russia of using these companies could be summed up in the term “plausible deniability”. Just as France has been able to extricate itself from scandals involving Bob Denard, Russia has long been able to deny its involvement in the operations of the group headed by Prigozhin and his associates.

However, Wagner diverges from the classic PMC concept for two main reasons: it is a state within a state, with a sphere of companies that benefits from massive Kremlin funding. In addition, the group has developed within a closed political environment, where there is no freedom of the press to support serious investigations into the matter. The group - which was declared a terrorist organization by the USA in January 2023 - doesn't just stop at the military level, but also makes its presence felt in politics and the economy as the Wagnerian nebula can resell Central African timber as well as diamonds via its Diamville company.

While Prigozhin did not acknowledge a link with the company until September 26, 2022, the latter has made a name for itself through its action since 2014 in the Donbass and through its troll factories - accused of having influenced the American campaign in favor of Donald Trump in 2016. Wagner will diversify into three main areas: offering security services to the powers that be paying for these services in exchange for privileged access to local resources, and an aggressive disinformation campaign with the aim of promoting the group's or Russia's image

²⁸ Le Monde Afrique, « Sergueï Lavrov termine sa tournée africaine par le Tchad, dernier allié de la France au Sahel », 06/06/2024 by Carol Valade

²⁹ SPOTIFY, « L'expansion de la Russie en Afrique » by Afrique 360° of the International Crisis Group

and breaking that of its competitors. The Wagnerian strategy met with some success, as the web spread from Bakhmut to Bangui, via Bamako. This growing success, however, was to be its undoing when Prigozhin decided - buoyed by his popularity and success - to march on Moscow on June 23, 2023, to mutiny against the Russian command. His death in a plane crash two months later forced the majority of Wagner's operations to be halted by his takeover by Russian military power.

To ensure Wagner's growing influence and strategic success in Africa, the Kremlin has reorganized these networks. The Deputy Defense Minister, accompanied by General Averianov, a leading figure in the GRU - Russian military intelligence - made several trips to the Sahel and Central African Republic to reassure local partners that Moscow would remain at their side, despite the disappearance of Yevgeny Prigozhin. At the end of October, several dozen Russian troops were sent to Ouagadougou. They were deployed to the presidency and the National Intelligence Agency to protect the putschist government, but also to monitor the civilian opposition - whose political leaders are frequently the victims of kidnapping or prosecution.

The new organization, called Africa Corps, draws on members of the Russian army, the GRU and former members of Wagner. A new structure replaces the sphere of media influence represented by Wagner's troll factories under the name of the African Initiative - controlled by the FSB's 5th foreign operations department. In short, the Kremlin is reducing Wagner's autonomy, but relying on a sphere of groups that it can control more easily, but which are still adaptable in their language and political objectives. One of the Kremlin's new innovations in Africa is the Bear Brigade, which has been gaining a foothold in Burkina Faso for several months. Created in March 2023 in Crimea, it is a semi-formal structure for recruiting and sending soldiers to Ukraine, but also to the Africa Corps. Subsequently, on May 30, 2023, the brigade officially became the "81st Specialized Volunteer Brigade", before moving closer to an PMC named Redut - which would be supervised by GRU unit 35555, which was already supplying Wagner with arms and ammunition in the occupied Donbass from 2014³⁰.

This desire for influence in the sub-Saharan African region can be explained by the Kremlin's adaptation to the international context. Already since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russia has been striving to develop new partnerships in response to Western sanctions and with the

³⁰ Le Monde Afrique, « La Brigade Bear, nouvel outil paramilitaire de la Russie en Afrique », 06/07/2024, by Thomas Eydoux, Benjamin Roger et Cellule Enquête Vidéo

aim of returning to the international stage as a power. This desire for power has then been accentuated since February 24, 2022, and the massive support the West has put behind Ukraine. This sidelining of Russia on the international stage has been limited to Western countries, and the so-called “Global South” does not attach the same importance to it. These unofficial methods enable Russia to destabilize - at low cost - the partnerships of African countries with the West, France being the first victim. The development of anti-French sentiment is based on historical reasons that have nothing to do with Russia, but the Kremlin is using disinformation networks to encourage a section of the population to demand a change of partner. Russia is thus counterbalancing Western influence by proposing an alternative defined by partnerships that are less conditional on the democratization of the regime, the promotion of human rights and other Western values in general (LGBT+, etc.).

However, the importance of these networks and influence should not be overestimated. It is necessary to objectively analyze the impact of Russian strategies and actions in sub-Saharan Africa in order to contrast their effectiveness in French-speaking Africa.

2.3. A growing informal Russian impact throughout the continent

Having described the Russian strategy and the objectives it pursues, we need to look in detail at the results across the continent, as the results and characteristics of the Russian presence are not homogeneous. As explained, although Russia's presence also relies on an official vector, it is the unofficial one that is initially most used in Africa. Subsequently, official channels are established in these countries, and relations with the Kremlin are clearly forged. Prior to this, Russia's destabilization strategy is based on media, military and economic influence groups.

Between 2021 and 2023, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger signed a partnership with Russia, which had strengthened its presence in the Central African Republic (CAR) while maintaining forces in Libya and Sudan - where it sided with the Rapid Support Forces of General Mohamed Hamdan Dogolo, known as “Hemeti”.

For every instance of Russian interference, observers have identified one or more of the following strategies: destabilizing disinformation campaigns encouraging Moscow's arrival, offering military service - in counterinsurgency and protection of ruling elites – to unstable countries, and exploitation of local natural resources by a sphere of Russian companies.

The Kremlin first disrupted the countries with an active disinformation campaign. In Niger, the coup was preceded by a disinformation campaign lasting at least a year, which destabilized the

government of Mohamed Bazoum - deposed president of Niger - democratically elected on February 21, 2021. It is worth repeating the analysis by the Africa Center for strategic studies of Russian involvement in these campaigns throughout the July 2023 coup in Niger³¹. These campaigns were based on online networks of influence supported by local personalities such as the UNPP (Union des Patriotes Panafricanistes) or the GPCI (Groupe Panafricain pour le Commerce et l'Investissement).

Prior to the coup, numerous sources established that Niger was likely to be the next target after Burkina Faso, and this was followed by several coup rumors via social networks. In February 2023, a cyber campaign on the Facebook, Telegram, and X (formerly Twitter) networks was carried out with the aim of spreading rumors of a coup d'état while President Bazoum was visiting Paris³². The campaign was fake news, but small investigations show that the starting point was on Facebook, where several pages held a generally anti-French and pro-Russian discourse, with a pan-Africanist slant. During the coup, Prigozhin reacted directly by supporting the putschists from the Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg, and this declaration was followed by massive information campaigns on the networks. According to the Africa Center for strategic studies, “The effect was to confuse and paralyze citizens so that they would not react.”³³

In the wake of the coup, the campaign was organized around the reaction of international organizations, calling on the population to act against an imminent invasion by ECOWAS, backed by France, which would land its Rafales in neighboring Senegal. Numerous demonstrations were organized to denounce the international players, and some came close to degenerating, as was the case in front of the French Embassy, which found itself in a virtual state of siege for several days. Russian tactics then focused on presenting the partnership with Russia as a sovereigntist solution to the fight against all these meddlers. Thus, “*Niger-related content increased by 6,645% on 45 Russian State and Wagner Telegram channels in the month following the coup*”³⁴.

³¹ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, “Mapping a surge of disinformation in Africa” 13/03/2024 By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

³² Jeune Afrique “Mohamed Bazoum : « Armer les civils pour combattre les terroristes est une tragique erreur », 26/05/2023 by François SOUDAN

³³ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, “Mapping a surge of disinformation in Africa” 13/03/2024 By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

³⁴ Africa Center for Strategic Studies, “Mapping a surge of disinformation in Africa” 13/03/2024 By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

The Niger campaign is a success story for Russian influence, since last April around a hundred “Russian instructors” were deployed to Niger. Some of these forces even to Base 101 near the international airport still occupied by US forces - who agreed to withdraw from the country in mid-April after having invested nearly \$100 million in their drone base in Agadez³⁵, in the north of the country. On the political front, Niger and its neighbors Mali and Burkina Faso created the “Confederation of Sahel States” on July 6, which was soon welcomed by Moscow through the voice of Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova³⁶.

In the case of Mali, democratic since 2013 - in the midst of the French army's Operation Serval - came to an end with the coup d'état of 2020 and then the 2021 coup which installed Assimi Goita in power. Gradually, agreements with Western countries were brought to an end, as they were seen as “corrupt and reminiscent of a colonialist past”.³⁷ The French group “All Eyes on Wagner”³⁸, which tracks the group's activities across the globe, has investigated Russian strategy and the relationships forged to achieve its ends in Mali. As early as 2016, the association “le Groupement des patriotes” called for Russian intervention against terrorism. In June 2019, Mali seemed to be drawing closer to Russia, as the Malian Defense Minister signed a military cooperation agreement with his Russian counterpart at the time, Sergei Choigu. In January 2021, the pan-African NGO “Yerewolo Debout Sur les Remparts” calls for the departure of the French, supported by Malian activists and openly anti-French pan-Africanists such as Kemi Seba.

These NGOs then set about developing polls to highlight the popularity of a Russian partnership with the local population. At the same time, Wagner began financing demonstrations to push Barkhane forces and the Takuba force - a special anti-terrorist force made up of several European Union countries - out. The group, with the help of the junta, is also continuing its disinformation campaigns in the region, via fake news as well as cartoonish and simplistic videos. So much so, that by January 2023 it was commonplace to see famous videos on social media depicting France as a rat, a snake or zombies being shot at by stalwart

³⁵ Le Monde Afrique, « Le Niger et les Etats-Unis trouvent un accord pour le départ des soldats américains, fixé « au plus tard » au 15 septembre », 19/05/2024 by Le Monde & AFP

³⁶ Anadolu Ajansı, « La Russie salue la création de la "Confédération des États du Sahel" », 14/07/2024 by Salif Omar

³⁷ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

³⁸ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

African soldiers aided by a Wagnerian mercenary holding the ammunition³⁹. The result was clear: Wagner arrived in Mali at the end of 2021⁴⁰, and on February 18, 2022, France was forced to withdraw its troops from Mali.

Once the informational sphere has been completely controlled, it concentrates on praising the contribution of new Russian paramilitary troops in the field. Yet in countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso, which have been severely destabilized by terrorist and insurgent groups, the situation seems to have worsened since the arrival of Russian personnel. In Mali alone, three conflicts are intertwined: a civil war with the insurgent Azawad movement, a war against the forces of JNIM and the Islamic State, and a war between JNIM and the Islamic State. Burkina Faso - which suffered two coups d'état in 2022 - has become, according to the Global Terrorism Index, the world's leading country in terms of victims of terrorism, with almost 1907 victims in 2023 (i.e. almost ¼ of the world's victims), Mali is third in this ranking. The Russian presence aggravates the situation, as shown by the figures and the multiple humanitarian crises their actions cause. According to ACLED, 456 deaths were recorded in the first five months of Russia's presence in Mali⁴¹. 812 civilians are affected by violence (an increase of 151% compared to the first quarter of 2021) and the most important category of violations is the killing of civilians, which increases by almost 324%⁴².

To understand the violence with which they act, it is necessary to detail some of the abuses committed by Russian forces in their theater of operations. In February 2022, a Minusma report blamed Malian soldiers and Wagnerians for the discovery of a grave containing some thirty charred bodies near the village of Dangere-Wotoro. Between March 27 and 31, 2022, the regular army and its auxiliaries massacred almost 500 people in Moura, in central Mali. A UN report on Moura concluded that the operation “*was carried out in violation of the rules of international sanitary law*”⁴³, and although the report refers only to “foreigners”, there is no doubt that these were Russian forces. In Burkina Faso, the situation does not seem to be improving, as the army is already committing abuses. According to Human Rights Watch, the

³⁹ TV5 monde, « En Afrique, des dessins animés anti-France, au service de la propagande russe », 03/02/2023, by AFP

⁴⁰ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

⁴¹ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

⁴² Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

⁴³ United Nations Human Rights “Malian troops, foreign military personnel killed over 500 people during military operation in Moura in March 2022 – UN human rights report” 12/05/2023 by the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Burkinabe army massacred no fewer than 223 civilians, including 56 children, on February 25, 2024⁴⁴. The growing presence of Russian military forces - more specifically, the Bear Brigade - in the country, along with the subjugation of the population and political opponents, seem to augur a similar fate for Ouagadougou as for its neighbor Mali.

As for the third consequence of Russian action, Libyan oil and Sudanese gold illustrate the massive exploitation of local resources by Russian companies close to Wagner and the Kremlin. As early as May 2018, Wagner appeared in Libya, and investigators estimate the number of mercenaries at 300 by March 2019. After the ceasefire in 2020 between the Libyan factions, Wagner's presence focused on training soldiers in the east of the country, but also on protecting the oil fields in the province of Cyrenaica, i.e. close to Egypt. The current presence in Libya is designed to ensure secure access to oil in order to finance Marshal Haftar, while reinforcing the Kremlin's strategic position in the resolution of the conflict.

In Sudan, Wagner began deploying in the country in 2017 and first stood out by suppressing protests against the then Islamic dictator - Omar El Bashir. Russian services protect, train and arm the government. The group receives gold mining licenses in exchange for its services, and several Russian companies begin mining or prospecting for the precious metal in the country. Meroe Gold, one of these companies, signs an agreement with the Ministry of Mines to obtain mining licenses while benefiting from tax rebates. On January 15, 2023, a Meroe Gold employee was arrested in the north of the country while attempting to smuggle 7 kilos of gold. The following month, the Mining Prosecutor's Office prosecuted 43 people - including 35 Russians working for Meroe Gold - for sabotaging the national economy⁴⁵. However, from April 2023, Sudan fell into a civil war that pitted General Al-Burhan against General Hemeti for control of power. Russia sided with General Hemeti, with whom it had become close since the start of its operations in the country, notably through the formation of its militia, the Rapid Support Forces. The gold market continues, while providing material support for their protégé. The Rapid Support Forces provided protection for gold mining operations in the south of the country after these licenses were granted to the Russian company Kush E&P⁴⁶ - active in Sudan since 2013.

⁴⁴ Human Rights Watch, "Burkina Faso: Army Massacres 223 Villagers" 25/04/2024 by Human Rights Watch

⁴⁵ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

⁴⁶ The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE), "Mapping Russian Illicit Finance in Africa: The Cases of Sudan and Madagascar" 05/2022 by Catherine Owen

Although the strategy is generally a success - for Russian influence - in these theaters of operation, this model can show its limits, as was the case for the deployment in the Cabo Delgado region of Mozambique in 2019. Indeed, the region in northern Mozambique has been facing the influence of the Islamic State since 2017, and the government approached its historic Russian ally, but the latter only agreed to deploy Wagner's mercenaries. In exchange, the Mozambican government gives exclusive rights to gas deposits.

However, Wagner demonstrates an inability to operate in the jungle - terrain they do not master - and to cooperate with the local army, and trust between the two parties deteriorates to the point where he no longer cooperates. In autumn 2019, Wagner disengages after losing “a dozen fighters and around thirty wounded in two months of operations.”⁴⁷

On the strength of its successes in the Sahel and Central African Republic, the group is trying to spread its model to new French-speaking countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

For Abidjan - the country's second-largest economy after Nigeria - the battle plan is based on Côte d'Ivoire's tensions with members of the Alliance of Sahel States, but also on the political instability in which the country could find itself in the run-up to the 2025 presidential elections. Numerous destabilization campaigns, such as those organized in neighboring countries, are developing in the country, and Wagner's responsibility is obvious. In January 2023, the Wagnerian group posted a video calling for the liberation of Côte d'Ivoire⁴⁸. These initiatives are accompanied by bellicose diplomacy from Mali and Burkina Faso - the new sanctuary of influence in the region. The arbitrary arrest of 49 Ivorian soldiers by Mali in 2022 opened a diplomatic crisis that has never really been able to close, and is polarized by certain issues, notably the electricity supplied by Abidjan to Bamako. With Burkina Faso, Captain Traoré has regularly taken a hard line against Ouattara's government, which he accuses of welcoming the Burkinabe opposition. At the same time, Ouagadougou is welcoming Guillaume Soro, the main exiled and convicted opponent of President Ouattara. Abidjan has decided not to respond publicly to these acts so as not to aggravate the situation, but the opponent's public proximity to the regimes and putschist rhetoric demonstrates a real risk of destabilization.

⁴⁷ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

⁴⁸ Institut Montaigne, « Tchad, Côte d'Ivoire, RDC : dans le viseur de Moscou » 15/07/2024 by Jonathan Guiffard

In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the situation is not quite so clear-cut, and current trends in the country could be a breeding ground for Russian influence. The situation in the east of the country, and the West's lack of firmness in the face of Rwandan interference through the M23 group, has provoked strong protests from both the population and the political elites. Moscow declared itself ready to cooperate militarily with the country - Kinshasa declined the proposal - and a campaign of Russian trolls on social networks denouncing the genocide of the Congolese accompanied this declaration⁴⁹. The mineral wealth of Congo, the predation to which these resources have already fallen victim, and the growing resentment against international and Western organizations are all facilitators of a well-oiled Russian strategy in sub-Saharan Africa.

Russia's advances on the continent are unequivocal and demonstrable, but their popularity with the population is difficult to quantify. People's perception of their safety in countries where Russian soldiers are operating is limited to a blocking of the flow of information, self-censorship for fear of being arrested, and inaccessibility to very remote areas. While on the face of it, the young urban population seems to be more sensitive to Russian rhetoric, as they are more exposed to its propaganda but also to these demonstrations of strength (demonstrations, “soft power” initiatives, etc.), scientific research on the subject is to be taken with caution, as researchers with access to the field can only limit themselves to a small population. One of these researchers⁵⁰, for example, cited the case of Niger, in the Tillabéry region, where the local population continues to applaud the military in power and hope for an improvement in the situation, despite the deterioration in security since their arrival.

By way of illustration, this graph for 2021, drawn up by Leonid Issaev, Alisa Shishkina and Yakov Liokumovich, shows a certain trend that has been confirmed by recent developments in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso over the past three years.

⁴⁹ Institut Montaigne, « Tchad, Côte d'Ivoire, RDC : dans le viseur de Moscou » 15/07/2024 by Jonathan Guiffard

⁵⁰ SPOTIFY, « L'expansion de la Russie en Afrique », 28/06/2024 by Afrique 360° of the International Crisis Group

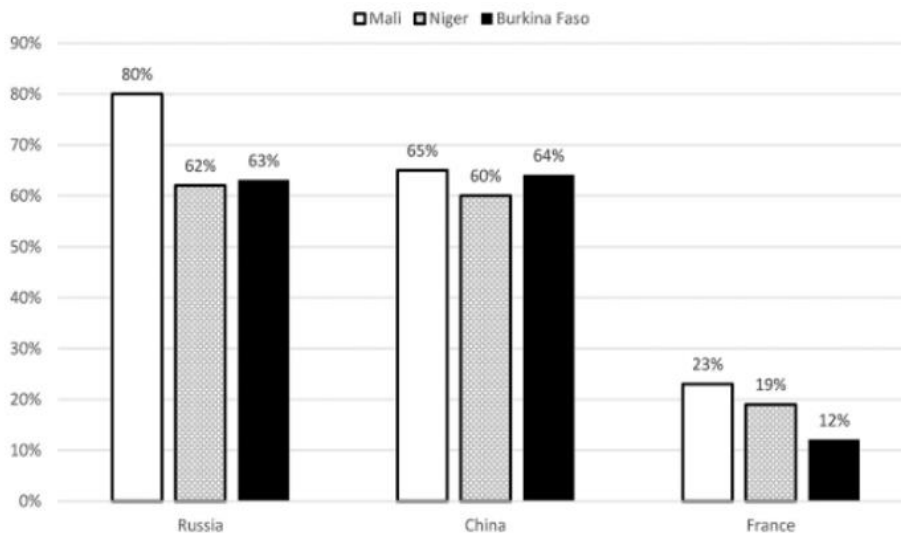


Figure 6. 'Do you think the policy of France, China, Russia towards Africa is effective?' Responses from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Source: Authors' findings, 2021.

SURVEY ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF FRENCH, RUSSIAN AND CHINESE POLICIES IN MALI, NIGER AND BURKINA FASO IN 2021⁵¹

It would appear that the Russian strategy has been a strategic success for Russia in recent years, and that it has also met with a certain degree of success with a section of the population in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in French-speaking Africa. Faced with this observation, it makes sense to study the underlying causes in depth in order to understand this rejection of France in favor of Russia. It is therefore necessary to use case studies to analyze the outlook for three French-speaking African countries (Central African Republic, Chad and Madagascar), which differ in some respects but are similar in others, since all three have been or are currently under Russian influence.

3. Case studies: Study of the growing anti-French sentiment and the Russian strategies

The case studies will be analyzed using "Most Similar Systems Design", i.e. the selected countries are similar in many respects, but different in terms of outcomes or dependent variables, and linked to Russia's role. In this case, the Central African Republic, Chad and

⁵¹ Leonid Issaev, Alisa Shishkina & Yakov Liokumovich (2022) "Perceptions of Russia's 'return' to Africa: Views from West Africa", South African Journal of International Affairs, 29:4, 425-444

Madagascar can be selected as cases sharing certain characteristics such as former French colonies, linguistic and cultural links with France and a history of French military intervention.

However, they differ in terms of the level of anti-French sentiment, Russian involvement and underlying reasons. By analyzing the similarities and differences between these cases, we can identify the factors that contribute to the emergence of anti-French sentiment, and how the new French strategy can respond to these factors.

3.1. Central African Republic: a resounding success story

Historically, the Central African Republic (CAR) was one of the states that remained closest to its former metropolis after independence, and in which Francafrique networks were able to develop. Following the death of the father of independence, Barthélemy Boganda - in a plane crash whose crash report was censored by France - Paris installed David Dacko in power. When the young president moved closer to China, while France exploited the country's diamond and uranium mines, he was toppled by Bokassa - a former soldier in the French army. Bokassa was then pampered by Paris, which even went so far as to finance his imperial coronation in a ceremony that left a lasting impression of its ridiculousness.

However, in 1979, accused of being close to the Libyan dictator Kadafi, he was overthrown by French paratroopers and his predecessor David Dacko was reinstated. The country remained a symbol of Francafrique, which left its mark not only on Central Africans, but also on the French - notably through his close relationship with President Giscard d'Estaing. To sum up, since independence, the country has experienced multiple coups d'états, two civil wars and a number of disappointing peace agreements that have ended in new crises.

As for anti-French sentiment, it has been fueled in recent years by a combination of factors, like the perception that France is not doing enough to resolve the ongoing conflict in the country. Paris was present in the country through Operation Sangaris between 2013 and October 2016, the operation cannot be described as a success. "500 million euros invested, over 1,000 days of interventions, nearly 2,500 men mobilized, 3 deaths, sex scandals..."⁵² France has also been accused of its colonial heritage and of supporting certain political factions in the country, fueling suspicions of interference. In addition, the Central African Republic was hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, and some criticized France for not providing enough aid to the country during this difficult period. In the face of these factors, the country will gradually

⁵² Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

become, between 2018 and 2021, the laboratory and model of success for Russian implantation on the continent, and more specifically a Wagner Group implantation. This result has not been achieved anywhere else, the Wagnerians have infiltrated the power elites, diversified their economic sources and adapted their discourse. Today, they remain the country's most influential force, even though the group is in the process of disappearing.

The first contacts between CAR and Russia were established in Sochi in 2017, where President Touadéra met Lavrov before meeting Vladimir Putin in 2018. Moscow will even negotiate the lifting of UN sanctions at the Security Council, and the partnership will begin with the sale of light weapons. These agreements will be followed by the increasing arrival of Russian instructors in the country (their current strength is estimated at around 2,000 men⁵³) after successive rapprochements, notably at the 2019 Africa-Russia summit in Sochi. These links with the Kremlin through Wagner - although denied outright by the latter - are not in doubt either. As proof, Fidèle GOUANDJIKA, special advisor to the President of the Central African Republic, declared in 2022: “We have signed a contract with the Russian Federation, so if Putin... sends us Wagner, it's not our problem. As far as we're concerned, they're Russians.”⁵⁴

However, the action of “Russian instructors” on the ground has been decisive, and the results in CAR have showcased the Wagnerian model to countries in the region. From 2019, the Khartoum peace agreement - supported by Russia - will lead to negotiations with certain warlords who will join the government. The group's role in the counter-insurgency fight against rebel groups led by Bozizé - former president of CAR from 2003 to 2013 - is undoubtedly recognized as key to improving the situation in the country. Indeed, in 2021, the Coalition des patriotes pour le changement (CPC) - the group attached to Bozizé - failed in its offensive in Bangui, and the counterattack by Wagner and Rwandan special forces pushed the rebels back into rural areas or out of the country. The success of this operation could also be explained by the different approach taken by the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic - MINUSCA.

UN peacekeepers have adopted a more offensive posture, played not just a peacekeeping role but took a direct part in the fighting. MINUSCA is the largest UN peacekeeping mission in terms of numbers, with 14,000 troops until 2021 - and the CPC offensive - when its strength

⁵³ Le Monde Afrique, « Entre brutalité et prédation, comment Wagner pacifie la Centrafrique » 21/06/2024 by Christophe Châtelot

⁵⁴ YouTube, “Centrafrique : l’emprise russe”, 10/09/2022 by FRANCE 24

was expanded to 16,000⁵⁵. The appointment in February 2022 of a new Rwandan head of mission changed the situation to such an extent that President Touadéra himself praised the support and contribution of MINUSCA - a situation which contrasts with Malian statements concerning MINUSMA. Wagner's military success could be explained in part by the argument that the group was able to cooperate - or at the very least did not hinder them - with Central African forces, Rwandan forces and MINUSCA, in contrast to its deployment in Cabo Delgado.

The Russians' tough, brutal approach has paid off, as the government now controls all the country's population centers, but at a heavy humanitarian cost. For the civilian population, the situation does not seem to have improved. According to the Red Cross, the country has more internal refugees than ever, numbering 1.3 million⁵⁶. Rural populations are particularly exposed to the consequences of the conflict, being the first victims of the many atrocities, especially the Muslim and Fulani communities, who are systematically associated with the rebels by the Russians. According to a group of experts commissioned by the UN, the Russians are responsible for “*arbitrary detentions, torture, disappearances and summary executions*”⁵⁷. The report goes on to highlight the entire Russian system behind the intervention. “*This confusion between civilian, military and peacekeeping operations during hostilities creates confusion as to legitimate targets and increases the risks of widespread violations of human rights and humanitarian law.*”⁵⁸ By 2020, Wagner was the most violent actor in the CAR, according to the Armed Conflict and Events Data Project (ACLED)⁵⁹.

What's more, Central African society is closing down, so that journalists' work is censored, and their safety threatened. Journalist Jean Sinclair Maka Gbossokotto died in February 2022 while working on Wagner's influence in the country. Even more impressively, on July 30, 2018, three Russian journalists were violently murdered as collaborators of Khodorkovsky - Putin's exiled opponent - arrived in Bangui to “shoot footage on the activities of private military company Wagner”⁶⁰. More generally, the arrival of the Russians in the country suspended public

⁵⁵ Le Monde Afrique, « Entre brutalité et prédation, comment Wagner pacifie la Centrafrique » 21/06/2024 by Christophe Châtelot

⁵⁶ Al Jazeera, “Analysis: The curious case of Russia in Central African Republic”, 20/05/22, by Bram Posthumus

⁵⁷ UN, « RCA : Les experts s'alarment de l'utilisation par le gouvernement de " formateurs russes " et des contacts étroits avec les soldats de la paix de l'ONU », 31/03/2021, by UN

⁵⁸ UN, « RCA : Les experts s'alarment de l'utilisation par le gouvernement de " formateurs russes " et des contacts étroits avec les soldats de la paix de l'ONU », 31/03/2021, by UN

⁵⁹ ACLED “Wagner Group Operations in Africa”, 30/08/2022 by Ladd Serwat, Héni Nsaibia, Vincenzo Carbone and Timothy Lay

⁶⁰ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

development aid from the European Union and the World Bank, having a direct impact on the civilian population. In December 2021, France decided to suspend its annual development aid of 10 million euros, justifying its decision by the complicity of the Central African government in Russian disinformation. The victims of all these consequences are not the Russians, but the civilian populations who are abandoned to the influence of the Kremlin, which can fully exacerbate a resentment towards French policies already well imbued in the local population.

In parallel with this diplomatic rapprochement and its successes on the ground, Wagnerian networks are also active online and locally to maintain a positive image of the intervention among the 5 million Central Africans. For several years, the Kremlin has financed local associations such as “Galaxie Nationale”, which organizes pro-Kremlin demonstrations accompanied by Russian flags. Slogans such as “The Central African Republic and Russia against racism” - a reference to the denazification of Ukraine that Putin has used in his speeches - appear. As one protester explained in a France 24 report, “*The Russians asked Ukraine to stop its attacks, but the Ukrainians didn't obey, so Russia was forced to attack Ukraine, that's what you have to understand.*”⁶¹ The demonstrators' testimonies testify to a genuine admiration for Russia and the symbol of strength it represents.

The Kremlin has become an expert in communication, dominating all media and flooding society with pro-Russian propaganda, even to the point of writing films. In 2021, for example, a Russian film crew produced the movie “Tourist”, about Russian soldiers intervening in the country, fighting rebels and protecting the innocent. This barely concealed propaganda is accompanied by a pro-Russian, anti-Western discourse. “*The United States fights for democracy, Russia fights for justice*”⁶², says a Russian soldier in the film. The film was shown in the national stadium, and Russian “soft power” symbols continue to flourish in Bangui. A Russian house has been set up, offering language courses as well as recreational and family events. The French beer sold in the country has been replaced by Africa Ti l'or - a beer produced in the country by a brewery close to Wagner. More symbolic still, a statue to the glory of the Russian savior has also been erected next to the country's only university in Bangui. The monument depicts a frightened African family behind a line of Wagner soldiers protecting them from harm.

⁶¹ YouTube, “Centrafrique : l’emprise russe”, 10/09/2022 by FRANCE 24

⁶² YouTube, “Centrafrique : l’emprise russe”, 10/09/2022 by FRANCE 24

In exchange for its presence in the country, Wagner gains access - in line with their usual strategy - to natural resource exploitation contracts. As the Central African Republic is a resource-rich country, the Russian footprint can be seen in the diamond, gold and even timber trades. Obtaining these contracts coincides with Wagner's war aims, since a struggle is emerging between the rebels and the Wagnerians for control of these mines, both sides being economically dependent on these resources.

This partnership for resource protection coincides with the arrival of companies that were part of the Wagner galaxy, such as Lobaye Invest. The Russian company arrived in 2018 - at the same time as Wagner - and obtained licenses for gold and diamond mines. In 2021, a UN group of experts denounced “the interconnected actions of Sewa Security Services, Lobaye Invest and Wagner SARLU, a Russian company and a Russian-based organization known as Groupe Wagner”⁶³. In addition, other companies close to the Kremlin, such as Malagasy, ensured that the Central African government cancelled the agreement it had signed with a Canadian company to reallocate the Ndassima gold mine to Malagasy⁶⁴. Since Russia took control of the mine, it has been transformed from an artisanal to an industrial operation.

Timber exploitation has also long been a financial windfall for the group. Indeed, while timber was the main export product in 2021, far ahead of diamonds, it seems that Touadéra's government has decided to sacrifice its rich forests to the detriment of its security. According to the research group “All Eyes on Wagner”⁶⁵, a company called “Bois Rouge”, has been granted a huge parcel of forest since 2021 and benefits from tax rebates and no environmental obligations in their exploitation. However, this logging operation is being called into question, as the latest analyses suggest that the market for this timber has become more limited in recent months, following the closure of logging routes to Cameroon.

Income from these operations follows the usual Russian strategy. Wagner “feeds on the beast” while taking advantage of the opportunity to circumvent Western sanctions - Central African timber has been liquidated on the European market by front companies. In a way, the country seems to be a prisoner of its partnership with Russia. A source close to the Central African Ministry of Finance told “All Eyes on Wagner” that the country would pay the group around 5.13 billion CFA francs, or 78.2 million euros per month. The government would allocate

⁶³ UN, « RCA : Les experts s'alarment de l'utilisation par le gouvernement de " formateurs russes " et des contacts étroits avec les soldats de la paix de l'ONU », 31/03/2021, by UN

⁶⁴ International Crisis Group, “Russia’s influence in the Central African Republic”, 03/12/2021, by Pauline Bax

⁶⁵ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

nearly 20% of its annual budget to Wagner, which would have received nearly 391 million euros since its arrival⁶⁶.

Since Prigozhin's death, Wagner's presence in the country has been more discreet, but their strength of around 2,000 men has been maintained. Unlike other operations on the continent, the CAR force has not been forced to nurture new contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defense. Wagner's continued presence in the country can be explained by the infiltration of the political elite. This is illustrated by recent statements by Maxime Balalou, the Central African Minister of Communication, who declared that “*without the intervention [of] Russian allies, none of this would have been possible*”⁶⁷. The group has also demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt in order to maintain its influence with the population. Local influencers such as Radio Lano Songo - financed by Lobby invest - focus on criticizing the American PMC Bancroft, which seems to be deploying in the country with the agreement of President Touadéra. Faced with Russia's changing position in Africa, Bangui seems keen to diversify its partnerships, as evidenced by President Touadéra's visit to Paris at the end of 2023⁶⁸.

3.2. Madagascar: a failed electoral interference

In the case of the Madagascar, Russian interference has been less effective, and its meddling in the 2018 presidential elections has been documented. Historically, it is essential to look back at French colonization to analyze the developments in Madagascar since the arrival of the French settlers. France established itself on the island in 1895 through a protectorate signed by force with the Queen of the island. It provoked uprisings in the country, which led France to annex the country in August 1896.

General Joseph Gallieni's appointment as supreme governor of the “Big Island”, the period that followed was one of violent pacification, with the aim of “civilizing” the territory. Repression claimed tens of thousands of lives, and it is estimated that 20% of Malagasy workers who underwent forced labor lost their lives⁶⁹. The royal organization was reorganized, and Malagasy governors - who enjoyed numerous privileges - were appointed and they organized colonization from the outset. A racial strategy was introduced, dividing the

⁶⁶ Lou Osborn, Dimitri Zufferey « Wagner : Enquête au coeur du système Prigojine », Editions du Faubourg, 12/09/2023

⁶⁷ Le Monde Afrique, « Entre brutalité et prédation, comment Wagner pacifie la Centrafrique » 21/06/2024 by Christophe Châtelot

⁶⁸ SPOTIFY, « L'expansion de la Russie en Afrique », 28/06/2024 by Afrique 360° of the International Crisis Group

⁶⁹ Les yeux du Monde, « La colonisation française de Madagascar », 1/12/2015 by Jean ROQUAIN

population according to the strategy of “divide and conquer”. As a consequence, the nation unlike the government was not unified and sharp divisions emerged even after independence. Following the Second World War, new revolts in 1947 led to 89,000 deaths on the island⁷⁰ - according to French estimates - but the country finally gained independence in 1960, and Philibert Tsiranana became the country's first president.

The country remained close to Paris in economic, military, linguistic and cultural terms. In 1972, President Tsiranana was toppled in a coup d'état in favor of Ramanantsoa, who initiated a political transition that was replaced by a new coup d'état led by Didier Ratsiraka in 1975. Ratsiraka set up a socialist regime, aligning himself with the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, moving away from French influence. In 1991, a new popular protest overthrew the “Red Admiral” and Zafy became president after a democratic transition. A new post-electoral crisis divided the country in 2002, and Ravalomana finally came to power - while France seemed to support his rival Ratsiraka. The new president was not considered as Francophile, and during his term of office, Madagascar joined the Southern African Development Community, and the English language was recognized alongside Malagasy and French as the country's official language. In 2009, a new coup d'état overthrew the president in favor of Andry Rajoelina, and although France condemned the coup, Paris maintained relations with the transitional government. Hery Rajaonarimampianina was elected in 2014 before Rajoelina's return in the 2018 elections that became the scene of attempted Russian interference in the country. In short, the country has a history of coups d'états, popular protests and remains one of the poorest countries in Africa, even though Madagascar has enormous resources in nickel, cobalt and uranium.

Anti-French sentiment focuses on the country's colonial heritage and memory. The economic exploitation, racial regime and brutal repression of the Metropole is still remembered as an injustice in the Malagasy unconscious. The widespread use of the French language in the education system and, more generally, of French culture are illustrations of a colonial past that is still present. Moreover, the French presence in the country following independence via companies or defense agreements are seen as one of the reasons why the country failed to develop.

The ambiguous French role in the 2009 elections could be another political factor influencing Malagasy opinion. France is suspected of interference and of having facilitated the overthrow

⁷⁰ Les yeux du Monde, « La colonisation française de Madagascar », 1/12/2015 by Jean ROQUAIN

of President Ravalomanana. Large-scale demonstrations were organized across the country. These protests were openly hostile not only to France, but also to French nationals living in the country, who were directly threatened. Although the French role has not been proven, the closeness of the French government to the de facto leader of the transition, Andry Rajoelina, is obvious - as demonstrated by the impressive inauguration of a large Ibis hotel (owned by the French Accor group) back in 2009⁷¹.

However, the issue of the sovereignty of the Eparses Islands - currently French - remains the main catalyst of tension, as Antananarivo demands the retrocession of this territory. Although tiny and uninhabited except for a few scientists, this territory of several islands is of major strategic importance due to its location in the Mozambique Channel (although only 43km² in size, its territorial waters account for 6% of France's maritime territory⁷²). This territory was contested by Madagascar, which demanded its retrocession until 1973, on the grounds that France had unilaterally integrated them into its territory at the time of independence in 1960. In 1979, the UN General Assembly passed a non-binding resolution calling on France “*to enter into negotiations without further delay with a view to the reintegration of the Glorieuses, Juan de Nova, Europa and Bassas da India islands, which have been arbitrarily separated from Madagascar*”⁷³.

On May 11, 2020, President Rajoelina will once again call for the islands to be returned to Madagascar⁷⁴. The president has tried to mobilize public opinion by launching a national convention on the subject and by appearing with his predecessor Ratsiraka, as if to demonstrate their unanimous political will. In response, France refused to leave the islands, and although President Macron seemed intent on finding a common solution by organizing a joint commission on the subject, he changed his mind during his visit to the island on October 23, 2019. During that visit, he declared: “This is France”, before continuing: “It's our country, our wealth. It's not a hollow idea”⁷⁵. He went even further, classifying the island of Grande Glorieuse as a “national nature reserve”, a clear sign of his choice to assert French sovereignty.

⁷¹ YouTube, “Russia’s Madagascar Election Gamble - BBC Africa Eye documentary”, 08/04/2019 by BBC News Africa

⁷² Thomas BORREL, Amzat BOUKARI-YABARA, Benoit COLLOMAT and Thomas DELTOMBE, “Une histoire de la Françafrique, L’empire qui ne veut pas mourir » SEUIL, 07/10/2021, 1008p.

⁷³ GEO, « Les îles Éparses : plus d’un siècle après la colonisation française, où en sont les revendications de Madagascar ? », 10/02/2023 by Marion FONTAINE

⁷⁴ Thomas BORREL, Amzat BOUKARI-YABARA, Benoit COLLOMAT and Thomas DELTOMBE, “Une histoire de la Françafrique, L’empire qui ne veut pas mourir » SEUIL, 07/10/2021, 1008p.

⁷⁵ Thomas BORREL, Amzat BOUKARI-YABARA, Benoit COLLOMAT and Thomas DELTOMBE, “Une histoire de la Françafrique, L’empire qui ne veut pas mourir » SEUIL, 07/10/2021, 1008p.

Faced with this complex Franco-Malagasy relationship, the Kremlin tried during the 2018 presidential elections to extend its influence on Madagascar through actions that would be repeated in subsequent years in Mali or the Central African Republic. On the diplomatic front, President Rajaonarimampianina visited Moscow in March 2018 and met Vladimir Putin and Evgueny Prigozhin. There was already cooperation between the two countries, notably between the Ministries of Defense of the two countries, which signed agreements on intelligence exchanges, and joint military exercises. The Madagascan Ministry of Mines was also cooperating with its Russian counterpart in mineral prospecting - the country has cobalt, nickel and uranium resources - which has led to the arrival of Russian companies specializing in this field, such as Ferrum mining, which will take over the Kraoma mine before the contract ends 1 year later.

In February 2018, i.e. 8 months before the election, three Russians from St Petersburg arrived on the big island on tourist visas, although these were covers. The aim of the operation is to sponsor a dozen candidates so as to extend Russian influence and access to the country when one of them is elected. These actions do not fit directly into Wagner's usual strategy, but the operation was carried out by the group's political and economic branches. This is the first time that Russian experts close to Prigozhin have been identified with the aim of influencing an electoral process, notably through an online support campaign.

On October 30, 2018, Facebook claimed to have dismantled a Russian disinformation operation in several countries, including Madagascar⁷⁶. In 2018, an investigation by the New York Times concluded that the campaign on social networks was designed to put forward several candidates in order to divide the opposition to the government⁷⁷. Russian actors presented themselves as election specialists in Africa to the campaign teams of at least 6 to 8 candidates. These proposals are confirmed by the candidates themselves. This assistance will be provided by a think-tank called AFRIC, which will soon be linked to the Kremlin⁷⁸. In 2021, the US Treasury sanctioned the AFRIC think-tank, along with three individuals linked to it, stating that

⁷⁶ Jeune Afrique, « Madagascar : les mystères de l'influence russe sur la présidentielle », 14/11/2019 by Jeune Afrique

⁷⁷ Jeune Afrique, « Madagascar : les mystères de l'influence russe sur la présidentielle », 14/11/2019 by Jeune Afrique

⁷⁸ The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE), "Mapping Russian Illicit Finance in Africa: The Cases of Sudan and Madagascar" 05/2022 by Catherine Owen

“although it presents itself as an Africa-led initiative, AFRIC serves to disseminate Russia's preferred messages, often related to disinformation”⁷⁹.

Pastor André Mailhol - who obtained 1.27% of the vote - confessed to having received 12,000 euros for his registration fees and 5,000 euros in cash from three Russians (Andrei, Roman and Vladimir⁸⁰). The sole condition for that money was to support the Russian sponsored candidate that had the most votes and who was qualified for the second round⁸¹. A bodyguard, a former soldier in the Russian army, was even appointed to ensure André Mailhol's safety during his travels. Former Prime Minister Jean-Omer Beriziky was also offered Russian support after Prigozhin's men asked him, as he testifies: “If I were ready to open Madagascar's diplomacy to other horizons.” They promised him the sum of 2 million dollars to cover his election expenses, but the promise was never kept.

The Russians provided technical support, but it became clear that they also had the aim of directly controlling the candidates to whom they organized conferences so that they could make their voices heard. When the polls showed Rajoelina as the favorite, the Russian sponsored candidates testified that they had been pressured by these Russian experts to shift their votes to Rajoelina who was clearly going to become the winner and be elected in January 2019. These actions were facilitated by the fact that the elections were contested and that there were no limits on candidates, budgets or foreign financial support for the campaign.

As part of their strategy, the Russians were also trying to spread resentment towards France via the main issue of discontent - the Eparses Islands. Demonstrations, notably in front of the French embassy, were organized with a Beninese influencer known for being openly anti-French - Kemi Seba, who attended two conferences during his stay. The Russian-funded influencer stood out with slogans such as “Africans have more confidence in Russia than in the USA or France”, or he reappropriated Sankara's pan-African image, declaring “Free Africa or death, we shall conquer”⁸² (an allusion to the famous “Fatherland or death, we shall conquer” that ended all Sankara's speeches). Moscow's role was made more obvious by directly paying students to take part in the demonstrations and carry banners, before filming them and posting

⁷⁹ The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE), “Mapping Russian Illicit Finance in Africa: The Cases of Sudan and Madagascar” 05/2022 by Catherine Owen

⁸⁰ YouTube, “Russia's Madagascar Election Gamble - BBC Africa Eye documentary”, 08/04/2019 by BBC News Africa

⁸¹ Le Point, « Moscou à la manœuvre à Madagascar », 17/04/2019 by Marc Nexon

⁸² YouTube, “Russia's Madagascar Election Gamble - BBC Africa Eye documentary”, 08/04/2019 by BBC News Africa

them on social networks. Following these events, the Russians and Kemi Seba were banned from Madagascar.

However, the Russian influence did not take into the local population, as demonstrated by the Kraoma mine affair, where workers went on strike as they were no longer receiving their wages and had lost their social benefits since the Russian company took over the mine. This affair had a major impact on the campaign and gave Russia a bad name when the strikers put up banners calling for the Russians to leave the island⁸³.

In the end, the Russians' attempts had little impact, their proximity to the former president was not proven - the latter refused to justify himself - and the new relationship established with President-elect Rajoelina is unclear. Madagascar was nevertheless among the 25 countries to have abstained or not to have voted in the UN General Assembly vote to condemn the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022⁸⁴. According to RFI, the Russian members in charge of interference left the country before the 2023 presidential elections, illustrating the failure in Madagascar⁸⁵.

This Russian failure to develop and exploit anti-French sentiment can be interpreted in different ways. Unlike the Sahel countries, it is important to note that the country has been less affected by French interventions, which could have undermined France's image in the collective unconscious. The French influence, though present, has been more discreet, and the grounds for resentment remain limited and centered around the dispute over the Eparses Islands. The Wagner group's electoral results were disappointing, and their presence was a source of contention among the local population, who was not receptive to the Russian disinformation campaigns. These campaigns were perhaps too short or not very intensive in a tense electoral context - Madagascar has historically had many disputes during election periods - and their barely concealed aggressive interference in the country's political life was also a reason for rejection.

Today, it's interesting to note that France still plays an active role in the country, as showed by the French government's figures. Trade between the two countries is on the rise (by 28% between 2021 and 2022), France is its 3rd largest customer and 6th largest supplier, French

⁸³ YouTube, "Russia's Madagascar Election Gamble - BBC Africa Eye documentary", 08/04/2019 by BBC News Africa

⁸⁴ The Serious Organised Crime & Anti-Corruption Evidence (SOC ACE), "Mapping Russian Illicit Finance in Africa: The Cases of Sudan and Madagascar" 05/2022 by Catherine Owen

⁸⁵ Rfi, « Influences russes en Afrique [3/5]: Madagascar, l'élection présidentielle de 2018 infiltrée », 19/07/2023 by Sarah Tétaud

tourists are the second nationality by their number to visit the island, France is the 2nd largest supplier of official development aid after the United States, and France remains the top destination for Malagasy students, with almost 4,500 in the country⁸⁶. All these indicators should be considered when trying to analyze Chad, which could be the next French-speaking country to get closer to Russia.

3.3. Chad: a partner in the making?

This Sahelian country is an interesting case in point, as the government remains relatively pro-French, although recent months have seen a relative shift, with a widening of partnerships and an unstable environment making the state a perfect target for Russian expansion.

Historically, the country became part of the French colonial empire in 1910, when it became part of French Equatorial Africa. In 1945, the end WW2 accelerated decolonization movements around the world. In Chad, several political parties came into being, including the Parti Progressiste Tchadien led by Gabriel Lisette who was one of the architects of the Defferre framework law, which granted greater internal autonomy to the French colonies. With the fall of the colonial empires, the country became independent on August 11, 1961, and François Tomalbaye became its first president. Tomalbaye's rule remained authoritarian and close to the former metropolis until 1975, when he was toppled and killed in a coup d'état - the first of many.

From 1975 to 1990, the country was in a state of chronic instability, with conflicts between several rebel groups, as well as tensions with neighbors such as Khadafi's Libya - a conflict in which France intervened with Operation Epervier in February 1986. Indeed, Libyan forces crossed the border to support President Oueddei, who was overthrown – with the support of France and the US - by Hissène Habré in 1981. The conflict between Chad and Libya ended in a Chadian victory in 1987, thanks to French support. In 1990, Idriss Déby overthrew Habré - with the support of France in particular - and remained in power until his death on the front line in 2021. The country is characterized by extreme authoritarianism and ethnic tensions both within its borders and with its neighbors. It has always been a key part of the French system in Africa, as it has long served as a training ground for the French army, as well as a means of limiting Islamism coming from Sudan and the maneuvers of Kadafi's Libya to the north.

⁸⁶ France Diplomatie, « Madagascar – Relations Bilatérales », Updated the 16/01/2024 by Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires étrangères

From 1990 onwards, Idriss Déby's Chad opted for French partnership, posing the following dilemma to Paris: stability with him in power or chaos. Although French presidents have repeatedly tried to distance themselves from this dictator, the break has never really taken place. In 2008, President Sarkozy did not intervene directly to fight the rebel columns, but the French army held N'Djamena's airport, carried out air strikes and authorized arms deliveries from Libya. With President Hollande, relations were not good until the Operation SERVAL and then BARKHANE, that made the country an untouchable partner in the French regional strategy. Jean-Yves Le Drian, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time, made no secret of his admiration for the Chadian forces, which he considered to be the most effective in the G5 Sahel (comprising Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad)⁸⁷. This role gave a certain tolerance to the many abuses of the government and its army - far from irreproachable - which was evacuated from the Central African Republic at the request of the UN after numerous scandals during their deployment⁸⁸. In 2021, Idriss Déby was killed, and his son Mahamat was appointed by the generals to head a transition that was officially due to last just 18 months.

Mahamat Déby's accession to power is a good example of a decision that developed anti-French sentiment, since it is widely used to denounce Paris's double standards on the continent with regard to coups d'état and authoritarian regimes. Emmanuel Macron's presence at Idriss Déby's funeral was interpreted as a dynastic endorsement of the son. Beyond that, the African Union even refused to sanction the military coup - on condition that the transition lasted 18 months and that its leader did not stand in the civil elections - on the pretext that the country is an essential lock against terrorism in the region. The first months of the transition gave hope to the population, since Mahamat's youth (he was 37 in 2021) and the organization of multi-party negotiations seemed to open the country to fair elections. However, these discussions will be limited by the government's decision not to guarantee that Mahamat will not stand in the elections.

The transition will be extended to three years, the country will still not be sanctioned, and the elections were organized on the model of the last ones in 2011 and 2016 - in other words, they've been played out in advance. On October 20, 2022, the day that was supposed to mark the end of the transition planned for eighteen months, thousands of people protested in the streets. The brutal repression by the security forces left 128 people dead, 518 injured and over

⁸⁷ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

⁸⁸ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

900 arrested, according to the Chadian Human Rights Commission⁸⁹. That day marked the end of hope, and the ensuing repression forced the opposition leaders to leave. Mahamat Déby fired into the crowd for the first time, something even his father had never done before.

In the months leading up to the election, the government ensured its complete control over Chadian society. The Constitutional Council is made up of members of the presidential party, and more than 10 candidacies were rejected. The date of the legislative elections was not announced, despite the fact that the country has not had a new assembly for 13 years. On the executive level, a constitutional referendum enshrined the country's hyper-centralized presidential system, provoking objections from the opposition. Indeed, despite images of largely empty polling stations on December 17, 2023, the government declared the new constitution approved by 86% of voters, with a turnout of 62% - the international observers expressed doubts⁹⁰. Finally, at the end of February, Mahamat Déby announced that the presidential election, initially scheduled for October, would be held in May. He also dissociated the presidential and legislative elections, which were due to be held at the same time.

Furthermore, in February 2024 - less than 3 months before the elections - Mahamat's cousin Yaya Dillo died in what looks like an execution during the intervention of the rapid intervention forces (Mahamat's praetorian guard, which he firmly controls). His party's office was destroyed by security forces following a demonstration in front of the headquarters of the Chadian intelligence services, during which 8 people were killed⁹¹. The following day, a military operation was carried out and he was executed. Dillo and the President's uncle Salleh Déby, who was also arrested, are both members of the Déby clan family, the Zagawas. As a result, the situation in the country and the balance within the ruling elite appears more than fragile.

In parallel to these political tensions, the popular discontent that was based on the economic situation of a population that cannot even guarantee its human security grew. Recent events have shown, however, that this same power can be destabilized by internal threats. In addition to the divisions still present in the country, there is greater fragmentation in the hinterland - 76% of Chadians live outside the cities⁹² - where inter-community conflicts have multiplied. The south and the center are plagued by conflicts between herders and farmers, exacerbated by

⁸⁹ International Crisis Group “Chad: Adverting the Risk of Post-transition instability” 03/05/2024 by Enrica Picco and Charles Bouëssel

⁹⁰ International Crisis Group “Chad: Adverting the Risk of Post-transition instability” 03/05/2024 by Enrica Picco and Charles Bouëssel

⁹¹ The Horn, “Chad’s Young New Ruler Tightens his grip” 04/04/2024 by International Crisis Group

⁹² International Crisis Group “Chad: Adverting the Risk of Post-transition instability” 03/05/2024 by Enrica Picco and Charles Bouëssel

long-standing identity-based divisions, which have led to a resurgence of secessionist grievances. In recent weeks, journalists have witnessed an upsurge in clashes between communities in eastern Chad, which lasted 3 days and killed 45 people⁹³. The eastern provinces, meanwhile, are under unprecedented pressure from the arrival of over 600,000 Sudanese⁹⁴.

Beyond the repression by security and community forces, social tensions also remain high in the country. Recent measures, such as the agreement with teachers, the reduction in transport taxes and subsidies for public services, have not calmed social discontent. On the contrary, wage delays in the civil service, rising fuel prices, water and electricity cuts have provoked repeated strikes.

Faced with a deterioration in the country's social, political and security factors, France appears to be an ideal scapegoat for its historical support for authoritarianism in Chad. The pan-African and anti-French rhetoric - exacerbated in part by Russian networks - that has developed in Sahelian countries could impact the Chadian population, although it should be remembered that the country's security situation is not as extreme as in the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States. The seeds of a growing anti-French sentiment have appeared in the population, particularly since 2021 and the demonstrations put down by the regime. Several associations rose up to support a rhetoric that has already been observed in Burkina Faso and Mali⁹⁵.

The government, aware of this trend, is working to limit it and distance itself from the French partnership to ensure its survival. At the end of January, Mahamat went to Moscow in a visit that was taken as a warning to Paris, although the results were kept confidential. As mentioned, this visit was followed by a visit from Emmanuel Macron's special envoy for Africa, Senator Bockel, in March⁹⁶. Discussions focused on the new military partnerships that Paris wants to establish in the country, with a reduction in troop numbers and a more discreet military presence. France would like to keep around 300 soldiers in N'Djamena, it is currently 1,000

⁹³ The Horn, "Chad's Young New Ruler Tightens his grip" International Crisis Group, 04/04/2024.

⁹⁴ International Crisis Group "Chad: Adverting the Risk of Post-transition instability" 03/05/2024 by Enrica Picco and Charles Bouëssel

⁹⁵ SPOTIFY, « Elections au Tchad : un résultat globalement prévisible ? » 24/04/2024 Afrique 360 degrés by International Crisis Group

⁹⁶ SPOTIFY, « Elections au Tchad : un résultat globalement prévisible ? » 24/04/2024 Afrique 360 degrés by International Crisis Group

soldiers, in order to respond to a more agile vision of crisis response and military training, along the lines of its Turkish and, above all, Russian competitors⁹⁷.

For Moscow, Chad is geographically at the heart of its influence in Africa. Libya to the north has been divided in two, with Russian support for Marshal Haftar's camp for several years. To the west, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali are falling further and further into the Russian sphere. In the south, the Central African Republic has been the most successful Russian implantation, and the Wagnerians control power as analyzed above. Finally, to the east, Sudan is occupied by Russian forces, who exploit gold mines there while supporting General Hemeti's Rapid Support Forces.

For now, Mahamat Déby has opted to widen his relationships in order to stay in power. He has distanced himself from traditional French allies, drawing closer to players such as Hungary (Budapest is due to send 200 soldiers to the country⁹⁸) and Turkey (particularly in the economic sphere, with the sale of drones⁹⁹). However, N'Djamena has recently made a name for itself by forging closer ties with countries where Russian influence is present. N'Djamena has strengthened its ties with President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in the Central African Republic, and with Marshal Khalifa Haftar in Libya. This rapprochement has enabled Chad to carry out military operations against rebels in the Central African Republic and Libya.

Aware that part of public opinion wants to go further and join the Alliance of Sahel States, Deby has drawn closer to the coup governments. He is close to certain elements of the Niger junta, having fought terrorism together in the past. The announcement on May 26¹⁰⁰ of large-scale military exercises between Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad and Togo is part of this trend.

Chad is therefore an ideal candidate for Russia to forge an alliance of states in the heart of the continent. Its history of interventionism and elite collaboration with France has fostered resentment of the former colonial power, as in other countries in the region. France's support for the Déby clan appears to be a catalyst for tension, as the government's authoritarianism and repression taint French support for N'Djamena.

⁹⁷ Le Monde Afrique, « L'armée française cherche à finaliser sa réorganisation en Afrique », 20/06/2024 by Elise Vincent

⁹⁸ DW, « Que cherche la Hongrie au Tchad ? » 04/04/2024 by Kossivi Tiassou

⁹⁹ African Intelligence, « Des avions aux drones, l'industrie militaire turque s'active à N'Djamena », 14/06/2023 by African Intelligence

¹⁰⁰ Le Monde Afrique « Sahel : exercice militaire « d'envergure » des armées du Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Tchad et du Togo », 27/05/2025 by AFP

However, Russia seems to have chosen not to support the overthrow of a regime, but rather to mobilize public opinion to convince the ruling elite to turn to Moscow to stay in power. At his last meeting with Putin, Deby described the encounter as “a historic act of sovereignty and independence”¹⁰¹. The head of the Kremlin congratulated the Chadian “for having succeeded in stabilizing the country” and said that Russia would “contribute in every possible way”¹⁰². Lavrov's latest visit to the country on June 5 seems to confirm these statements.

Having analyzed these three case studies, Russian interference has highlighted French errors in its relations with the Francophone countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. It would appear necessary for Paris to change its approach in depth with the continent, capitalizing on the advantages it enjoys while remaining realistic in a withdrawal that has become necessary.

4. Building a new, realistic partnership with Africa

Having analyzed the rise of anti-French sentiment across the continent, and having established the reasons for it, as well as the actors responsible, it is necessary to make realistic recommendations for limiting the withdrawal of French influence on the continent. First and foremost, Paris needs to change its all-military approach in Francophone countries to a more discreet one, while prioritizing State-building in territories that often have weak institutions and capabilities. It's also clear that a drastic change needs to be made in the political sphere: a certain amount of African expertise needs to be rebuilt, Paris also needs to open up to the entire continent, i.e. to the “other Africa” which are the countries that are not part of the French traditional influence. Finally, France does not only have disadvantages, Paris should also know how to play on the strengths that could support its influence on the continent, strengths that are currently unexploited or whose efforts are not sufficiently highlighted.

4.1. A military approach that supports State-building

Over the past 70 years, France's presence in its former colonies has been primarily economic and military, before becoming exclusively military over the past two decades. The age of French predominance for signing lucrative contracts on the continent is largely over, as it can be seen through an analysis of its economic relations with the continent. Indeed, Côte d'Ivoire is the Francophone sub-Saharan country with which Paris trades the most and it only ranks as

¹⁰¹ International Crisis Group “Chad: Adverting the Risk of Post-transition instability” 03/05/2024 by Enrica Picco and Charles Bouëssel

¹⁰² Le Monde Afrique, « Sergueï Lavrov termine sa tournée africaine par le Tchad, dernier allié de la France au Sahel », 06/06/2024 by Carol Valade

its 9th most important economic partner¹⁰³. As a result of globalization, France has lost out not only to China, but also to allies such as Germany - which has become the continent's leading supplier in the EU. Given these facts, the French government's interest in investing in military operations - which are extremely costly - or negotiating the maintenance of bases on the continent seems questionable. Faced with this situation, the approach has been confined to the military, who have taken precedence over diplomats, and the military presence participates - in part - to the security failure and catastrophic humanitarian situation that some countries are experiencing.

The SERVAL and BARKHANE interventions are striking illustrations of the need for a change of doctrine in order to adapt to the decline of the French influence. The success of the first operation in 2013 motivated French elites to a more massive commitment with the operation BARKHANE - 8,000 French soldiers will be involved - over a wider territory. The result will be that the liberation army that was worshipped in the streets of Bamako in 2013 was transformed into an army of occupation, with a mixed record and accused of the most simplistic and conspiratorial theories. It's not the concept of a foreign military presence in a territory that seems to be in question - the United States should open a base in Côte d'Ivoire, Russia in Sudan and Saudi Arabia in Djibouti¹⁰⁴ - but only the French presence. There are many reasons for this failure.

Firstly, French strategy at the time of BARKHANE was following the Defense-Military-Diplomacy approach, largely neglecting the weakness of the state in these countries and the predation to which they were subjected. It seems appropriate here to focus on the concept of “utility of force” and “disutility of force”¹⁰⁵. It studies the use of force and whether or not it has an impact and political utility. “It's not about destroying the enemy, but about creating military conditions that allow a conflict to be resolved by other means.”¹⁰⁶ In the context of Operation BARKHANE, it appears that the direct force used by French forces was unable to create a favorable context for the elaboration of a political solution - without which the end of

¹⁰³ IFRI, “Après l’échec sahélien, repenser le logiciel de la politique française en Afrique” Alain ANTIL, Thierry VIRCOULON, 10/04/2024 :

¹⁰⁴ Le Monde Afrique, « En Afrique, Paris n’a pas su réfléchir au nouveau contexte géopolitique », 23/06/2024, Interview of Paul-Simon Handy by Cyril Bensimon

¹⁰⁵ Bertrand, Eloise, Tony Chafer, and Ed Stoddard. 2023. “(Dis)Utilities of Force in a Postcolonial Context: Explaining the Strategic Failure of the French-Led Intervention in Mali.” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, November, 1–20.

¹⁰⁶ Bertrand, Eloise, Tony Chafer, and Ed Stoddard. 2023. “(Dis)Utilities of Force in a Postcolonial Context: Explaining the Strategic Failure of the French-Led Intervention in Mali.” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, November, 1–20.

any conflict is impossible. Paris has largely focused on eliminating the terrorists rather than supporting the population and prioritizing their security. As an illustration, since security in the conquered regions of Mali was provided by the Malian Forces and MINUSMA, their lack of resources encouraged the return of armed groups to these areas. These shortcomings have not created trust with the population and have not encouraged the exchange of intelligence - by fear of reprisals from armed groups.

Furthermore, the action of national troops on the ground directly jeopardized the operation by numerous exactions that could have been anticipated by France given the complex situation of armed forces on the continent. Indeed, the case of Nigeria shows that in its fight against Boko Haram, Nigeria Watch calculated that from June 2006 to May 2017 the “Nigerian security forces and their militias had killed roughly as many people (16182) as Boko Haram (16666).”¹⁰⁷ These figures can be explained by the superior firepower available and the relative impunity and indifference its forces enjoy in their fight against terrorism. Thus, the UN and the World Bank have estimated that from 2012 to 2016, Boko Haram was responsible for half of all civilian deaths over the period, without specifying that half of the remaining victims were killed by national security forces¹⁰⁸.

This proved to be an impossible mission for France who had to cooperate with national forces that fueled and exacerbated the hostilities, killing more civilians than terrorists. As Niagalé Bagayoko explains¹⁰⁹, the performance of these armies can be explained by the fact that they are organized in such a way as to be first and foremost a financial drain. Resource management is totally opaque, to the point where not even the State knows about them. Promotions are not meritocratic but based on relationships, which creates tensions. The payment of bribes to obtain a diploma or a position is commonplace. The integration of fighters from the various rebellions has also been another example of the fragility of these forces. They are integrated into officer positions according to ethnic criteria, in order to meet the requirements of a peace agreement. At the root of this financing lies the programmed misappropriation of international aid, both at the highest state and local levels, and Niagalé Bagayoko gives several well-documented examples of this fraud. In Niger, for example, 76 billion CFA francs were embezzled between

¹⁰⁷ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹⁰⁸ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹⁰⁹ Niagalé Bagayoko (2022) *Explaining the failure of internationally supported defence and security reforms in Sahelian states*, Conflict, Security & Development, 22:3, 243-279

2014 and 2019 (48.3 bn overbilled and 27.8 bn in undelivered equipment)¹¹⁰. More locally, army salaries are widely misappropriated or falsified. The number of soldiers is deliberately increased to take advantage of bonuses granted individually by the state.

The army's intrusion into civilian power has led to the monopolization of state resources by a minority of officers, who despise the soldiers fighting on the front line, causing cracks in cohesion. This lack of cohesion leads to a lack of discipline, which has two main consequences. The first concerns the soldiers' behavior towards the population, as the many abuses committed against them reveal a lack of discipline and an incompetent justice system. The second consequence is internal: the chain of command is broken, and clans emerge within the army, as in Mali, where the privileged status of the “red berets” aroused the jealousy of the “green berets”, who saw in them the protection of the ruling elite.

Beyond this lack of French understanding of national armies, there were also differences of opinion on the priority targets of each camp, particularly in Mali. The majority of the elite in Bamako did not see JNIM and the Islamic State as the primary threats and prioritized the fight against the Tuareg rebels in the north of the country. This proved problematic when the French relied on Tuareg troops in their fight against terrorist groups. In return, France was intransigent and refused to negotiate or mediate with the Islamic terrorist groups, entering a cycle of “republican self-radicalization”¹¹¹.

In fact, the French government exaggerated the terrorist threat to justify it towards its population, while ignoring its root causes and remaining discreet about the operation's real effectiveness. There was a need to present the operation as necessary - even if this means fostering a certain arrogance in the face of differing interpretations. As a result, the Sahel in the French citizens' unconscious, was nothing more than a land of rebellion and instability, spreading misunderstanding and shortcuts across a continent that didn't need them in the first place. Furthermore, this over-mediatization was a great opportunity for the terror groups whose aim is to spread terror on a global scale.

In parallel, the international context since 2001 has encouraged us to fall into simplistic language to qualify a group as terrorist and overestimating their impact on the globe. In 2012, the UN estimated that of the 56 million people who died worldwide, 7,600 were victims of

¹¹⁰ Niagalé Bagayoko (2022) *Explaining the failure of internationally supported defence and security reforms in Sahelian states*, Conflict, Security & Development, 22:3, 243-279

¹¹¹ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

terrorism¹¹². If the comparison is pushed even further, the budget allocated to maintaining and creating infrastructure in countries like Nigeria is much lower than the budget for fighting terrorism, while the country's leading cause of death is by far road accidents¹¹³.

However, secular France, which has been marked by numerous Islamist terrorist attacks since 2015, has focused itself into the religious rhetoric, while no jihadist group from Sub-Saharan Africa has yet committed attacks in Europe or in America. The label “terrorist” is above all a question of perception, since methods of terror can serve a goal recognized as honorable by a part of the population. This confinement within the anti-terrorist doctrine has left no room for any compromise that might have enabled a way out of the crisis. The emphasis on this qualifier is a substitute for more complex underlying causes, especially in the Sahel. Indeed, the regional conflicts, and the recruitment of soldiers into these groups, are first and foremost related to economy, exactions, politics or ethnicity, and not primarily through the Islamic prism which occupies a very limited theological place in the objectives of these groups¹¹⁴.

The focus of France should be on improving governance as the starting point for regaining political stability. France's initiatives brought some successes (like the Takuba Force) but had also the effect of unleashing violence, radicalizing groups even further and justifying the most extreme rhetoric as a way out of a catastrophic humanitarian situation. One illustration of these trends is the evolution of these groups' recruitment strategies, with an increase in hostage-taking and the recruitment of child soldiers¹¹⁵.

All these observations reveal that France did not elaborate long-term political goals and followed an agenda mostly militaristic. For this to happen, it is necessary to create an environment that favors the implementation of lasting political solutions, and this must be achieved by maintaining a stable state with objective prerogatives backed by solid institutions. Nowadays, France seems to have already begun to demilitarize its presence on the continent, with a probable reduction in the number of troops over the next few months. Only around 100 men and women could be maintained in Libreville (down from 350 today), Dakar (down from 350), Abidjan (down from 600 today) and around 300 in N'Djamena (down from 1,000

¹¹² Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹¹³ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹¹⁴ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹¹⁵ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

today)¹¹⁶. It will also be interesting to follow the implementation of the new Africa Command (CPA) created by the April 24 decree, which is to specialize in African issues from September 2024¹¹⁷.

This approach is not enough. In fact, France's military commitment remains inadequate, as it contributes to one of the causes of the conflict through its indiscreet presence, and also by arming or supporting the current governments. Paris needs to focus on State-building, but this support must be provided over the long term (according to the World Bank, it takes at least 20 years to rebuild a state in an acceptable way after a war¹¹⁸). In the Sahel, for example, the development of the state plays a role in the causes of conflict, since its passive presence accelerates the emergence of opposition forces in the form of rebel groups, and its active presence is currently accompanied by exactions on the part of its representatives. The religious prism that France has followed in recent years must also be replaced by an obsession with governance, which entails better control of society to ensure its stability. A case in point is Senegal, which is often held up as an island of stability, the non-penetration of political Islamism such as Salafism or Jihadism in the country is largely due to its level of governance.

Following Tilly's analysis of State-building, France should support countries wishing to develop or maintain the “pillars of the state¹¹⁹” that would enable them to occupy their territory by associating the population, the territory and its institutions. First, the state must be capable of extracting resources from its territory, and for this to happen, a real security force must be put in place. The dependence of African countries on international aid does not encourage this trend, quite the contrary.

In theory, French withdrawal from the field could bring an opportunity for African states, as they could be forced to take their security into their own hands. However, this withdrawal must be accompanied by second-rate assistance, because realistically, these states would be abandoning their French partners to become dependent on another partner. The French approach needs to be more measured and follow clear objectives to help the partner country

¹¹⁶ Le Monde Afrique, « L'armée française cherche à finaliser sa réorganisation en Afrique », 20/06/2024 by Elise Vincent

¹¹⁷ Le Monde Afrique, « L'armée française cherche à finaliser sa réorganisation en Afrique », 20/06/2024 by Elise Vincent

¹¹⁸ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹¹⁹ Eeben Barlow, Bohumil Doboš & Martin Riegl (2021) Beyond Ouagadougou: State-building and jihadism in Burkina Faso, African Security Review, 30:2, 152 169

develop a “national defense strategy”¹²⁰. Thus, the country should draw up a list of the threats it faces, improve its ability to gather intelligence, set clear and realistic objectives in line with its means, and adopt C3I strategy (Command, Control, Communications and Intelligence¹²¹). French assistance can take the form of arms sales in line with the structure and mission of the armed forces, or training in intelligence gathering with realistic short-term objectives. In short, the French offer must be standardized with the needs and status of the partner armed forces.

In practice, France has lost the initiative in many African countries, such as Senegal and Chad. Paris should try to recover it by prioritizing a partnership under well-defined conditions, rather than out of nostalgia for France's African vocation. Relative complacency towards the putschist authorities in Gabon must be accompanied by clear measures to ensure a return to civilian rule. Governance must prioritize investment for the benefit of the Gabonese population, who have long been deprived of the benefits of oil rents to the benefit of the Bongo elite - largely supported by France in the not-too-distant past.

In the urgent case of Chad, the Elysée should take the lead from the Chadian authorities and withdraw from an authoritarian state that tarnishes the image of Paris - which gains nothing in return. France's role in the country is minor, but its impact is major, particularly in view of its liabilities. N'Djamena is already widening these partnerships, and anticipating the withdrawal would enable it to focus on other countries to maintain or build a healthy, open relationship.

In this way, Paris could ensure that it maintains good relations with countries such as Côte d'Ivoire - where there is currently a French base with 600 soldiers - by offering a partnership that matches their needs. The country is Sub-Saharan Africa's leading French-speaking trading partner, and French resentment has not developed there to any great extent. The threat of terrorism approaching from the Gulf of Guinea, or even drug trafficking - which is a far more direct threat to the EU - are destabilizing risks that require the maintenance of a capable security force to ensure the country's good governance.

However, all these changes in the security approach will not happen without a profound change in the political decision-making apparatus which is currently monopolized by a minority of closed-minded elites with no global vision of Africa's opportunities.

¹²⁰ Eeben Barlow, Bohumil Doboš & Martin Riegl (2021) Beyond Ouagadougou: State-building and jihadism in Burkina Faso, *African Security Review*, 30:2, 152-169

¹²¹ Eeben Barlow, Bohumil Doboš & Martin Riegl (2021) Beyond Ouagadougou: State-building and jihadism in Burkina Faso, *African Security Review*, 30:2, 152-169

4.2. A new realist diplomatic approach

As well as adapting its military approach in Africa, France also needs to change its diplomatic approach, which is characterized by a number of mistakes that are commonly used by the anti-French rhetoric. These interpretations, speeches or decisions may come from a loss of African expertise within decision-making circles, and a lack of openness that has triggered approximations that are perceived in particular as symbols of neo-colonial paternalism. These interpretations and decisions taken within a restricted circle explain the militaristic image that France has on the continent: the military has taken precedence over diplomats, so it is needed to renew a militaristic approach and move away from unnecessary operation that could be perceived as an attempt to restore historical domination.

First of all, France needs to open up the circles of analysis and decision-making that are still confined to the presidential domain and his close collaborators. While the French president under the Fifth Republic has generally had the initiative in terms of foreign policy, he must know how to surround himself with diverse advisors, while being sensitive to constructive criticism. The refusal of any criticism of operations BARKHANE or SERVAL are illustrations of a government unwilling to acknowledge its errors of assessment. The government's response that it would be disrespectful to consider these operations as failures in view of the French soldiers who died on the ground is an illustration of this denial.

France is fortunate to have an extensive academic community in this field, with conferences, researchers and associations that are all experts on the subject. Unfortunately, the findings of these experts have received far too little attention, to the point where some of their analyses have been transformed into prophecies, to France's great misfortune. The specific African approach to Islamist groups should have been understood or considered before committing to Operation Barkhane. The analysis that religious motives are in minor in the radicalization of individuals in the Sahel, to the detriment of a lack of governance, is an example of a lack of openness prior to intervention in the Sahel. This view was repeated several times in the National Assembly's commission of inquiry and should have been considered¹²². In short, there is a disconnect between analysis and policy. The 2023 report on France's relations with Africa sums

¹²² Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

it up: the country needs to “decompartmentalize the reserved domain to make it a shared domain.”¹²³

To achieve this, the subject of Africa must be able to move beyond the closed doors of the Elysée Palace and the President's African advisors and open up to experts. The retreat of the Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs has relegated diplomats to the background, with the result that diplomatic jobs in Africa are not attractive as their skills are not recognized. Beyond the Ministry, the subject of relations with Africa is so central and directly affects French citizens that it needs to be debated by the people's representatives in the National Assembly. Decisions on withdrawal, strategy of influence or operations are not yet debated in Parliament. Limiting African affairs to a restricted circle also limits the ground that French authorities can cover, whereas they should invest in building a deep relationship with African society. To do this, Paris need to be active on the diplomatic front, meeting not only the official government, but also the representant of the society as a whole, such as political opponents. The 2023 report illustrates by way of example: “while an American ambassador receives or visits the entire political class and civil society, the majority of French diplomats in the Francophone world are content to remain close to the official authorities.”¹²⁴

Moreover, Paris should strive to open up to the so-called “other Africa”, i.e. countries that were not colonized by France. Portuguese- and English-speaking states are interesting alternatives, since traditional partners such as the United Kingdom are also losing influence there. If France has developed important commercial partnerships - on the scale of the African continent - with giants such as Nigeria and South Africa, it needs to continue in this trend diplomatically to increase French influence and therefore its international standing. There are numerous opportunities in East Africa - a region relatively neglected nowadays - with emerging powers such as Kenya and Ethiopia - with which France has maintained diplomatic relations for almost 125 years. Paris also needs to be more vocal on issues that don't make the headlines but have just as dramatic an impact on the continent. The civil war in Sudan is a good example, and on the surface, Paris seemed to be trying to take initiatives such as organizing the International Humanitarian Conference for Sudan and neighboring countries on April 15, 2024¹²⁵ but it is

¹²³ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹²⁴ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹²⁵ Le Monde Afrique, « A Paris, une conférence pour faire sortir de l’oubli la guerre civile au Soudan », 16/04/2024 by Phillipe Ricard

not enough. However, these relations must be built along clear lines and without adopting mixed postures – i.e. contrary to international law - which could call into question French values or strong international positions, as is the case with the War in Ukraine.

In this context, Rwanda is an edifying example: although bilateral relations have improved since Emmanuel Macron's election, the country is far from an ideal partner. The two countries' relationship has been tense since the 1994 genocide, in which France played a questionable role during the deployment of Operation TURQUOISE, to the point where it was accused of complicity by new government of Kigali. However, efforts have been made - notably in the field of historical research - and the country appears to be a stable partner. Thus, France is pushing for Rwanda to play a greater role in international organizations - as witnessed by the appointment of Rwandan Louise Mushikiwabo as head of the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF)¹²⁶. However, it is important for France not to fall into a double standard, as is already the case in Francophone Africa. Paris must not blindly support Kigali, a country that enjoys a certain popularity among Western chancelleries given its extraordinary development over recent decades. Indeed, the country is also an authoritarian state, as demonstrated by Kagamé's re-election - in power since 2000 - with over 99% of the vote¹²⁷. Moreover, Rwanda's active role in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo through the M23 group must be firmly denounced to avoid falling into a double standard that would compromise relations with neighboring countries, concerned about the stability of the Congolese giant.

President Tshisekedi's recent statements regretting Western decisions and the double standards between Ukraine and the DRC are signals that a clear and unambiguous position must be expressed on the subject¹²⁸. The Democratic Republic of Congo is an equally telling case as a former Belgian colony but a Francophone country, French influence could take root there but surprisingly remains very limited despite being one of the world's most populous Francophone country. However, the strategic interest of this giant no longer needs to be proven and although Chinese and American competition is fierce, Kinshasa has repeatedly expressed its desire to diversify its relations and establish reliable partnerships. Paris must do better in this aspect, and

¹²⁶ Le Figaro « Macron «se réjouit » de la nomination de la Rwandaise Mushikiwabo à la Francophonie », 12/10/2018 by AFP & Le Figaro

¹²⁷ Jeune Afrique « Présidentielle au Rwanda : nouveau plébiscite pour Paul Kagame », 16/08/2024 by Jeune Afrique

¹²⁸ TV5 Monde « RD Congo : "Une guerre avec le Rwanda est possible", déclare le président Tshisekedi », 03/05/2024 by AFP & TV5 Monde

it begins by supporting French companies to establish themselves in this market, where public Congolese contracts are not met with French bids¹²⁹.

France, a power in decline, could also draw on the extraordinary force of initiative that the European Union could be on the continent. Although the 27 Member States do not have a unanimous position on international issues, cooperation in key areas vital to the European economy (and therefore to France, which is largely dependent on it) is necessary in the face of rising global isolationism - the American allies being a clear example. Implementing a European strategy in specific areas such as energy and ecological transition could prove effective, as the EU has unique arguments to put forward in the face of its competitors.

To support the development of African countries, a European-style transition is not feasible. An economic boom similar to the model of Europe or China in the 20th century is not objectively achievable for Africa, so EU need to help them adapt their development. To achieve this, Brussels and Paris need to ensure that they follow sustainable development objectives such as the end of electric car sales by 2035 and carbon neutrality by 2050. Indeed, limiting European emissions is essential to make way for the inevitable African emissions of the coming years. Paris must not adopt a moralizing stance on climate change but must actively involve African countries in taking advantage of the economic growth offered by their fossil fuels to invest in stable, clean growth.

It seems unfair for African countries - which have polluted very little in history - not to be able to exploit their resources for development. Polluting states must pay for the adaptation efforts of African countries. This is all the more necessary as these states are determined to exploit these resources anyway, and if the EU doesn't understand this, other countries will invest in African oil and gas under far more devastating conditions. It is up to the EU - and France must support it in this - to establish a balanced partnership to use fossil resources as a gas pedal for the development of stable, low-carbon solutions that can train a workforce through the development of local production chains. This workforce training is even more necessary in the face of Europe's aging population. These partnerships will be of direct benefit not only to Africans, but also to Europeans, who will limit their chronic dependence in certain areas, as demonstrated by the energy crisis since 2022. The most obvious example of this risk of dependence is the access to the critical minerals needed for the ecological transition to which

¹²⁹ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d'information sur les relations entre la France et l'Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

the EU is committed. Access to these resources needs to be secured at a time when the majority of production chains are under Chinese control.

To this end, France should call on the EU to adapt its regulations, which limit the competitiveness of European companies in Sub-Saharan Africa. European banks' constraints on gas investments need to be eased in favor of a more active but responsible engagement so that European companies can adapt to their Asian and American competitors. A collective European fund for minerals could be implemented to act collectively in a matter that will undoubtedly concern the 27 members. African authorities' demand for fair partnerships that benefit local communities makes the EU an ideal partner. Faced with competition from Beijing, which massively subsidizes these companies in the exploitation of minerals, France and its European partners have stringent regulations that will benefit their African partners. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) or IFC standards - which identify social and environmental risks¹³⁰ - are examples of regulations that would promote transparency, reduce risks for local populations and thus boost confidence.

However, all these sustainable and inclusive initiatives cannot be put in place without a real desire on the part of African states to undertake such a major change. Yet these necessary long-term efforts in governance and investor selection are realistically limited by the region's chronic instability. Indeed, the continent's situation is more than worrying as the economic growth is low, at 3.6% in 2023 and 4.2% in 2024, while population growth is 2.5% per year¹³¹.

There are initiatives to support, as some countries have shown a desire for change, and access to electricity is a good example of it. With 50% of the continent's population without electricity, and almost a billion people without access to clean cooking¹³², this area should be a priority for European investment. A number of African countries have already invested on clean energy initiatives, demonstrating a new demand on the continent. Kenya, for example, is aiming for 100% renewable energy by producing 100GW, and Senegal would like to increase the share of green energy in its electricity system to 40% by 2030¹³³.

¹³⁰ IFRI, « Quel cadre pour un partenariat énergétique et climatique Europe-Afrique gagnant-gagnant ? », 07/2023, Marc-Antoine EYL-MAZZEGA

¹³¹ IFRI, « Quel cadre pour un partenariat énergétique et climatique Europe-Afrique gagnant-gagnant ? », 07/2023, Marc-Antoine EYL-MAZZEGA

¹³² Le Monde Afrique « La « cuisson propre », double combat dpour els femmes et le climat en Afrique », 13/05/2024 by Laurence Caramel

¹³³ IFRI, « Quel cadre pour un partenariat énergétique et climatique Europe-Afrique gagnant-gagnant ? », 07/2023, Marc-Antoine EYL-MAZZEGA

Access to electricity is not simply a matter of personal consumption, but could, for example, enable the electrification of key equipment in the mining sector - a priority area for European investment - such as pumping, water treatment and the evacuation of minerals to limit their ecological impact. In short, France through the EU should prioritize investments - with responsible African states - in African fossil energies to foster development and give priority to financing electricity and mining investments that will limit the carbon footprint over the long term and promote useful partnership for the African population.

This new realistic French approach must be accompanied by the development of French assets on the continent that are not sufficiently exploited or promoted among the local population.

4.3. The renewal of the “French soft power”

In addition to the approaches outlined above, France has genuine advantages through which it can promote these interests and directly influence the African continent. Although this aspect of French policy is generally forgotten, these ‘soft power’ factors can be an effective means of changing the perception of local populations in the medium and long term, provided that they are developed and communicated effectively.

One of the most obvious tools of this French potential for soft influence is language, an effective tool - particularly through the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie (OIF) - for influencing and fostering a community that generates initiatives. Of the 321 million French speakers in the world - the world's 5th largest language - half of them live on the African continent (120 million Africans in 24 countries)¹³⁴. Although the use of French in Africa is mixed with many African dialects, 21 African countries have French as an official or co-official language¹³⁵. By 2022, the proportion of French speakers in the population will for example reach 65% in Gabon, 61% in the Republic of Congo and almost 51% in the Democratic Republic of Congo¹³⁶. However, the Francophonie policies seem to have been disappointing as several countries have decided to turn to the Commonwealth, such as Cameroon (already in 1995), Togo and Gabon more recently in 2022¹³⁷.

¹³⁴ Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie OIF « La langue française dans le monde »

¹³⁵ Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie OIF « La langue française dans le monde »

¹³⁶ Statista « Nombre d'habitants maîtrisant la langue française par pays ou territoire en 2022 », 05/12/2022 by Sheelah Delestre

¹³⁷ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d'information sur les relations entre la France et l'Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

France needs to invest more actively in this area, particularly faced with the heavy competition, that has understood the importance of language in creating local links. Turkish, Chinese through the Confucius Institutes and Russian (the opening of the Maison à Russe in Bangui was mentioned above) are developing as a part of a wider strategy to influence the continent. Paris seems to have abandoned these tools, as the French language could be perceived as a colonial tool. Yet the country has a strong presence on the continent, with “28 French institutes, 109 French alliances in sub-Saharan Africa and 108 schools on the continent”¹³⁸. The approach needs to be adapted in a more local way, with multiple partnerships in the fields of sport, culture and employment. New tools also need to be developed to identify and reward these students who decide to learn French, and this should take the form of placements in French companies on the continent, as well as the possibility of studying and working in France - the procedures for obtaining visas, which have become too long, therefore need to be urgently reformed, as mentioned in 2.a above.

The Francophonie must once again become a tool for the development of influence, whereas for now, the field relies largely on its historical assets and establishments. There is a demand to learn French on the continent that is not confined to French-speaking countries. The National Assembly report of 2023 used the example of Angola to illustrate this trend¹³⁹. Angola, a Portuguese-speaking country, is the country where French is most widely spoken among the population of the continent's non-French-speaking countries. Luanda has even applied in 2019 to join the OIF as an observer member, as well as the Parliamentary Assembly of the Francophonie¹⁴⁰. 15% of the population speaks French¹⁴¹, thanks to local initiatives such as the Association for the Teaching of French in Angola, which is supported by the French embassy in the country. French language learning has also developed thanks to the presence of French companies in the country, such as Total, which has set up the Eiffel partnership with the Angolan Ministry of Education to promote French in the education system¹⁴².

¹³⁸ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹³⁹ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹⁴⁰ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹⁴¹ Ambassade de France en Angola « La culture au cœur du projet francophone » 06/06/2024 by La France en Angola

¹⁴² Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

Paris should draw inspiration from this to further develop the French language in the countries where it is most economically established - these countries are not Francophone. For example, initiatives in Nigeria, Kenya or South Africa based on local teaching and with partnerships opening up professional opportunities - in France or in local French establishments - would represent an additional incentive for young people who are largely affected by unemployment (youth unemployment in South Africa reached 45.5% at the beginning of 2024¹⁴³).

As for the culture, there are several areas that could be strengthened or developed. In terms of historical commemorations, it seems important to continue the return of arts seized during colonization to their African countries of origin, as it was the case with the return of the Abomey treasure to Benin¹⁴⁴. The joint past should strengthen cooperation in the field of culture through exchanges of arts and the organization of exhibitions in both African and French museums. The Senegalese poet and president Senghor - a French deputy from 1945 to 1959 and a member of the Académie Française - is an example of a memorable and historic opportunity. His love of the French language and the renown he enjoyed among both populations is unquestionable. The recent acquisition in France of more than 300 of his books by the Senegalese government with the aim of creating a museum dedicated to him is a good illustration of this¹⁴⁵. In addition, university partnerships should be further developed as an effective and direct way of bringing the African and French populations closer together. A model inspired by the ERASMUS programme - which undeniably played a direct part in the creation of a European identity - should be put in place. The Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe had already mentioned the idea of creating an 'Ibn Khaldoun' programme in his 2021 report on new relations between Africa and France¹⁴⁶.

On a more economic level, France is involved in a large number of projects through its official development assistance, the Agence Française au Développement (AFD). France has increased this official aid by almost €5 billion between 2017 and 2021¹⁴⁷ and has set to allocate these funds to clear areas such as "climate, education, health, gender equality, support for NGOs and

¹⁴³ Le Figaro, « Afrique du Sud : le taux de chômage grimpe à 32,9% » 14/05/2024 by Le Figaro & AFP

¹⁴⁴ TV5 Monde « À quoi ressemblent les 26 œuvres du trésor d'Abomey, restituées au Bénin par la France ? » 08/11/202021 by Pierre Desorgues

¹⁴⁵ Jeune Afrique « Le Sénégal acquiert la bibliothèque de Léopold Sédar Senghor » 02/05/2024 by Mawunyo Hermann Boko

¹⁴⁶ Achille Mbembe « Les nouvelles relation Afrique-France : Relever ensemble les défis de demain » 10/2021, Elysée

¹⁴⁷ Achille Mbembe « Les nouvelles relation Afrique-France : Relever ensemble les défis de demain » 10/2021, Elysée

civil society”¹⁴⁸ and by 2022, €54 billion will have been invested in Africa. Of the ten countries benefiting most from this aid, only 3 are French-speaking Sub-Saharan African countries in 2022 - Côte d'Ivoire (400 million euros), Senegal (291 million euros) and Cameroon (212 million euros)¹⁴⁹.

However, this aid allocation model has a poor image, or worse, a bad reputation. Paris is said to be funding authoritarian states - 578 million euros have been committed to Chad over the past 10 years¹⁵⁰ - which further fuels accusations of double standards and historical anti-colonialist rhetoric. Although there is a part of this public aid that benefits the elites who take advantage of the international money within an opaque system to maintain themselves in power, this part remains very much in the minority. These accusations are linked to the fact that the real impact of French aid is unknown because it is not the subject of real surveys, and calculating its impact objectively is impossible. In practice, the analysis of these funds from the local populations is limited to annual budgets without knowing exactly where the money is going and what projects it is really supporting – “it's the intention that counts”¹⁵¹. AFD's recurrent use of loans rather than grants as in Germany¹⁵² has given an image of a bank, with the complexity of its procedures. As a result, changes need to be made within AFD because, although it has important funds, its impact in the field is minimal. This may be linked to several factors.

First of all, the term ‘development aid’ needs to be changed, as it could be interpreted as paternalizing in French. Furthermore, aid implies indirectly that its initiatives will lift countries out of poverty, which is realistically impossible given the minimal funds granted. The aim of this public aid is to support the country in its social, ecological or economic development objectives. As the Cour des Comptes¹⁵³ (French Court of Auditors) points out, AFD has a dual nature, being both dependent on the State and an establishment of an industrial and commercial nature (EPIC). Its de facto management has encouraged autonomy at the expense of the State, which no longer has the capacity to manage initiatives that are consistent with its strategy on

¹⁴⁸ Achille Mbembe « Les nouvelles relation Afrique-France : Relever ensemble les défis de demain » 10/2021, Elysée

¹⁴⁹ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹⁵⁰ Agence Française de Développement AFD, « Tchad/Notre action »

¹⁵¹ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹⁵² Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹⁵³ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d’information sur les relations entre la France et l’Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

the continent. It would seem effective, as the Cour des Comptes has stated in 2012, 2019 and 2023, to create “a pilot ministry that would integrate the design and implementation of French development aid policy as a major dimension of France's foreign policy”¹⁵⁴.

At the same time, it is necessary to reinvest in the field of communication - which seems to have been neglected - in order to promote and defend French actions on the continent so that the local population is aware of their impact. Beyond AFD, communication must be a central axis of the new African policy, since it is essential to present the many French initiatives in the fields of culture, health and the fight against global warming - subjects that are less political and local. In addition, this communication must be accompanied by action against disinformation - notably due to Russian interference - which has polluted social networks with theories that are not always disproved by French actors.

To this end, France has recognized instruments of influence at its disposal in the form of the France Médias Monde (FMM) group, which includes RFI, France 24 and Monte Carlo Doualiya. These channels are widely followed on a regular basis on the continent, with almost 78.5 million people following their work on a weekly basis in 2022¹⁵⁵. This popularity is all the more impressive given that the budgets allocated to these channels are much smaller (€263m in 2023) than their Western rivals of the BBC (€386m in 2022) or Voice of America (USA Global Media) (€813m in 2022)¹⁵⁶.

However, FFM's popularity can backfire on Paris because of its open approach, compared with the state-run and pro-Russian media, since unfiltered testimonies can give resonance to anti-French rhetoric. Since anti-French events in the Sahel countries are widely covered by the media, listeners may assimilate the bad situation. It is necessary to insist on a positive approach to French actions while at the same time denouncing the misinformation that France is the victim of on the continent. This requires a greater capacity for adaptation and responsiveness in order to turn the popularity of these media into real support for France's image in sub-Saharan Africa. The Western approach to media coverage needs to adapt to the context in which it takes place. Indeed, journalists from Al-Jazeera (financed by Qatar) or Sputnik (financed by

¹⁵⁴ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d'information sur les relations entre la France et l'Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

¹⁵⁵ Pérouse de Montclos Marc-Antoine. — Une guerre perdue. La France au Sahel, Paris, J. C. Lattès, 2020, 312 p., bibl

¹⁵⁶ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d'information sur les relations entre la France et l'Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

Russia) follow a media agenda that fits in with their political projects by propagating fake news or simplistic demonstrations of the reality of the facts.

The State should encourage these channels to become more aware of the propagation of anti-French sentiment. While insisting on the freedom of editors and field correspondents, these media outlets must also be made aware of the need to open up their audiences more to French initiatives. These actions in concrete areas for the population must balance the focus currently placed on anti-French events - which are for the most part limited to Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali.

In short, more attention should be given to key sectors of French influence (biodiversity, sport, culture, health, etc.) to the general public. Global warming is one of the concrete examples of this in a continent that accounts for only 4% of global CO2 emissions but is still the region most affected by it¹⁵⁷. As the 2023 report by the French National Assembly points out¹⁵⁸, Paris is participating in the Great Green Wall, a reforestation project along the Sahelian strip, and is the leading financial supporter of the African Renewable Energy Initiative (AREI), which aims to double the continent's energy capacity.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, France's African policy has been in crisis for several decades, and its historical presence has been limited to a military presence in Francophone Africa since the early 1990s. However, this has been called into question, forcing Paris to change its strategy once and for all. This desire for change has long been expressed by French political representatives without any substantive reforms being undertaken, and the recent political choices have encouraged the emergence of anti-French sentiment. This feeling is directed at French policy - not at its population - and it is endogenous, meaning that the causes are internal to the Franco-African relationship.

In the face of this resentment, Russia has succeeded in deploying a strategy of influence in these countries based on disinformation campaigns, an offer of military partnership and the extraction of raw materials where Kremlin forces are deployed. Russian action has combined

¹⁵⁷ Jeune Afrique « L'Afrique désormais mauvaise élève de l'émission de dioxyde de carbone », 19/06/2024 by Damien Glez

¹⁵⁸ Assemblée Nationale « Rapport d'information sur les relations entre la France et l'Afrique », 08/11/2023 by Bruno FUCHS and Michèle TABAROT

an official branch with the development of Kremlin diplomacy in the region, as witnessed by the multiple visits by Minister Lavrov and the Russia-Africa summits in 2019 and 2023. At the same time, Moscow has used influential players such as the WAGNER Group of Prigozhin to respond informally to requests from certain African states. These governments, eager to do business with the Kremlin, capitalize on anti-French sentiment, which they include in their anti-colonialist and pan-Africanist rhetoric, with the sole aim of maintaining themselves in power. Russia's impact has generally been an accelerator of instability, as the security situation has worsened in the countries concerned. The deployment of Wagner's soldiers - now replaced, except in the CAR, by the Afrika Corps under Moscow's direct command - has led to the closure of society, with the imprisonment of civilian protesters, a multitude of military abuses against civilians and an increase in the terrorist threat in Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso.

There are many reasons why the Russians have successfully exploited anti-French sentiment. These strategies seem to be more easily imbibed in a French-speaking country that has been subject to a strong French military presence in its history - and numerous military interventions such as BARKHANE -, as in the CAR, Chad and Mali. France's maintenance of a paternalistic or moralizing role, with a double standard stance on democracy (Paris supports Chad or Cameroon) has undermine its image. The denial of French power, which attributes the causes of this rise in French resentment solely to Russian interference rather than admitting mistakes - such as on visas or military operations - are examples of factors that have facilitated the establishment of anti-French rhetoric. These Russian successes need to be put into perspective, however, as the Kremlin's presence has failed in Mozambique, and in Madagascar - where interference in the presidential elections was denounced by the population. France has to review its doctrine in order to make a strategic withdrawal in order to be able to establish a new stable relationship with the continent.

To achieve this, Paris needs to change its military approach, since it is the primary catalyst for tension in French-speaking Africa. While an initial withdrawal seems to be taking place, with a reduction in the number of troops (except in Djibouti) in African bases, these changes need to be seen as a new beginning, with choices made that are consistent with the values that France wishes to represent. Thus, support - even partial - for authoritarian states such as Chad must cease, as it compromises France's image throughout the continent while offering few strategic gains. This withdrawal must go hand in hand with an institutional reorganization of French policy in Africa, which means opening up debates - in the National Assembly, for example -

and taking decisions in consultation with a greater number of experts, researchers and diplomats.

From now on, French military action must prioritize a political objective through military means, i.e. it must focus on building a solid state capable of following an institutional governance agenda. These military resources must be matched on a case-by-case basis to a list of clear and realistic objectives in which France participates through military training and the dispatch of military equipment adapted to a national strategy. The current situation lends itself to a military withdrawal, and Paris must force itself to back down in order to maintain viable partnerships over the long term - as is the case with Côte d'Ivoire, for example. France must be patient and not put itself in a position that would serve as an excuse or legitimize any military failure on the part of its competitors. On the other hand, the Russian military solution is ineffective, the failure to pacify the territory led to major losses for the Kremlin - dozens more Russian mercenaries were killed by the Tuaregs on 27 July 2024¹⁵⁹ - which will have to make its presence profitable at the expense of the economic sovereignty of the countries concerned.

Paris must also work to invest diplomatically in non-Francophone African countries - most of which are its main trading partners - since its image as a partner is good as long as Paris does not commit the same double-standard errors there. Any violation of international law (the argument behind France's legitimacy) must be denounced. The recent warming of relations with Rwanda should not prevent Paris from pointing out Paul Kagamé's authoritarianism and publicly denouncing Rwanda's active participation - via the M23 group - in the fighting in the east of the DRC. In addition, the considerable economic force that the EU could symbolize in Africa needs to be developed. Its potential for initiatives - through viable and constructive legislation and objectives - are a good way for France to invest in the continent's economic field while promising sustainable solutions for the environment and the local population. The demand from African countries for a win-win partnership also represents an urgent opportunity to move away from France's future dependence in strategic sectors - such as critical minerals.

Lastly, French soft power needs to be renewed, as Paris seems to rest on its historical presence in the region without facing up to the fierce competition from powers (China, Turkey, the United States, etc.) wishing to invest in the same territory. The advantages that France enjoys on the continent, such as the use of the Francophonie or the shared history and culture, need to

¹⁵⁹ France 24, « Revers et lourdes pertes de l'armée malienne et de ses alliés russes dans le nord du Mali » 28/07/2024 by France 24

be developed at local level through partnerships (in the field of employment, through memorial work) but also through direct exchanges (reforming visas, setting up student exchanges or exchanges of art collections). The AFD needs to be reformed so that it can be actively steered in support of France's political influence strategies and demonstrate concrete initiatives on the ground. Generally speaking, all these initiatives must be supported by media coverage organized around positive French initiatives, with balanced and reactive media coverage to respond to state media or disinformation networks - massively deployed in Sub-Saharan Africa.

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