SPECIAL REPORT:
RUSSIA’S GROWING INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

EXX Africa explores Russia’s growing influence in Africa. We look at the drivers of this foreign policy shift, the locations of interest, and the implications for traditional players across the continent.

At the end of this year, in October 2019, Russia will host its very first Russia-Africa Summit, which will bring together more than 50 African leaders in Sochi. While Russian influence across the continent is nothing new, as the former Soviet Union enjoyed extensive support among many African nations throughout the Cold War, there has been a notable shift in its focus over the past half-decade. We explore the nature of this shift and the strategic objectives behind Russia’s engagements with select countries. We further look at how Russia fares against other global powers in this latest ‘scramble’.

Background

Russian influence across the continent is not unprecedented. From 1960 until the end of the Cold War, the former Soviet Union supported liberation movements in Algeria, Angola, the DRC, Ethiopia, Guinea, Morocco and South Africa, among others. However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, these relations faded. Indeed, throughout the next decade, Africa experienced a so-called ‘third wave of democratisation’ during which Vladimir Putin showed limited interest in Africa.
This outlook changed significantly after 2014. With the Russian annexation of Crimea in Ukraine, relations with the West reached its lowest point since the Cold War. The US and EU responded to Russian expansionist policies in Eastern Europe by implementing sanctions against the regime, while both sides of the dispute engaged in a military build-up.

In response to actions from the West, Russia amended its foreign policy to establish strategic ties outside of the West and to insulate its economy against ongoing sanctions. As a part of this, Russia established new economic and security ties with South Asia, the Middle East, South America and indeed, Africa.

The Africa pivot

According to leaked documents obtained by the Dossier Centre, a London-based investigative unit, Russia’s pivot towards the continent typically involves a deal in which it offers some level of political or security support to African leaders in return for various concessions, such as in mining, oil and gas, arms or infrastructure contracts. Through these deals, Russia also establishes close personal ties with various heads of state and upcoming leaders, ensuring longevity to its plan.

The man reportedly driving this shift to Africa is known as Yevgeny Prigozhin, a businessman and close ally of Putin who is believed to be a funder of Wagner Group: a private military contractor with a presence in Africa. According to the leaked documents, Prigozhin has identified various countries with which Russia is seeking to bolster relations through political and economic ties, police training, media and humanitarian projects, and “rivalry with France”. Each country is ranked out of five in terms of priority with five being the highest level, and one the lowest.

The following countries are identified as part of this shift, according to the leaked documents:
- Rank five: Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan and Madagascar
- Rank four: Libya, Zimbabwe, and South Africa
- Rank three: South Sudan
- Rank two: the DRC, Chad and Zambia
- Countries cited where Russia “plans to work”: Uganda, Equatorial Guinea and Mali
- Countries cited “where cooperation is possible”: Ethiopia
- Countries cited as “traditionally supportive”: Egypt

We explore the nature of these relations and the impact on Western interests in some of these countries of interest.

Central African Republic – Rank Five

Russian influence in the CAR – a former French colony - failed to garner much attention until July 2018 when it was reported that three Russian journalists had been killed around 180km from the capital, Bangui, while on an assignment focused on investigating the activities of Wagner Group in the country. By the end of the year, Russia’s involvement had made its way into a UN Experts Report.
In the midst of a protracted armed conflict that had been ongoing since 2013, it emerged that President Faustin-Archange Touadéra sought out Russian assistance on the side-lines of a UN General Assembly meeting in 2017 to help bring about peace and get armed groups around the negotiating table. Russia responded by providing the national army with training and equipment and provided the president with security advice and personal protection.

To date, this has included: the free delivery of thousands of small arms to equip local law enforcement and two local battalions totalling 1,300 men; the deployment of Valery Zakharov (a former member of Russian intelligence services) as the top security advisor to Touadéra; the deployment of over 170 servicemen to train local security services; the deployment of an additional 30 servicemen to join the local UN peacekeeping mission, and plans to open a local office in the country.

Rich in natural resources – such as gold, diamonds and uranium – Russia is suspected to be shoring up support with Touadéra to secure these contracts. Indeed, reports have emerged of the presence of Wagner Group mercenaries guarding valuable gold and diamond mining operations in the country. This includes the large Ndassima gold mine that is alleged to have been taken over by Russian interests funnelled through a locally registered company known as Lobaye Invest. Ndassima was previously owned by a Canadian company before falling into the hands of Seleka rebels.

In addition to winning contracts in the extractives sector, the leaked documents further reveal that Russia plans to “replace national assembly representatives and [the] foreign minister who are orientated towards France” and “own [a] radio station and two print publications.” These objectives were partially achieved with the establishment of a new government this year and the opening of Radio Lengo Songo, which is funded by Lobaye Invest and the Russian embassy, last year.

France’s response to Russian meddling in its former colony has been vociferous. Following the free delivery of arms to the CAR the French Defence Minister noted, “I am not sure that this presence and the actions deployed by Moscow... help to stabilize the country”. In November 2018, in a show of force, France announced that it would be delivering its own arms to the CAR as well as aid to the value of USD 27.4 million.

South Africa – Rank Four

Ranked as a level four, recent Russian interests in South Africa have revolved around entering into political consultations with the ruling African National Congress (ANC) party ahead of the May 2019 general elections, monitoring of public-political social processes, and creating a new media – according to the leaked documents. This plan was formed as part of Putin’s strategy to support incumbents in office and to work against “pro-Western” parties and movements.

Just prior to the elections in May, in which doubt began to emerge as to whether the ANC would garner above 50 percent of the vote, a local investigation by the Daily Maverick revealed that these plans were underway. It emerged that entities linked to Prigozhin had devised to “create a disinformation campaign that favoured the ANC and put out a propaganda action against the opposition DA [Democratic Alliance] and EFF [Economic Freedom Fighters].” As a part of this strategy, Russia reportedly deployed a small team of political analysts to South Africa to work within a research outfit that would influence public rhetoric, degenerate and disseminate video content, coordinate with a “loyal pool of journalists” and produce “pro-ANC
videos”.

While subsequent reports revealed that the initiative was not very effective and that there was no disinformation campaign, the attempt nevertheless points to the intent my Russia to meddle in African politics to ensure a favourable outcome.

Moreover, the investigation by the Daily Maverick further pointed to various business interests in South Africa that Russia planned to pursue under the leadership of Prigozhin. These include the supply of ammunitions and short-barrelled weapons to a South African company, the acquisition of stakes in a local industrial packaging company and various infrastructure projects, particularly in Johannesburg.

Beyond South Africa, the report revealed interests in Zimbabwe (a rank four country), particularly under the new president, Emmerson Mnangagwa. Here, Russia is looking to secure access to gold mining, tantalite, copper and chromium deposits - it is already developing one of the world’s largest deposits of platinum group metals - and the establishment of a military industrial complex.

**South Sudan – Rank Three**

Russia’s relationship with South Sudan cannot be explored without acknowledging the close ties it enjoys with its neighbour, Sudan (a rank five country). Putin had long enjoyed a close relationship with former Sudanese President Omar Al Bashir who reportedly even offered Russia a naval base at the Red Sea in return for support for his government, particularly in light of mounting protests. While Al Bashir was eventually removed in 2019, Putin still enjoys relations with the transitional military council in power and will likely play an active role in the 2020 elections.

South Sudan is crucial to Sudan, and therefore Russia. While Sudan lost 75 percent of its proven oil reserves after South Sudan gained independence in 2011, it nevertheless retains the infrastructure required to bring South Sudan’s oil to market and, as such, continued flow between the two states is necessary. As South Sudan has looked to open up its hydrocarbons sector to potential investors in light of its peace deal in 2018, Russia has emerged as a top contender.

In late 2018, a delegation from South Sudan along with officials from the government-owned Nile Petroleum Company travelled to Russia to sign an MoU with a Russian oil company, Zarubezhneft, to explore some of its blocks open for licensing. The officials also signed two other MoUs with Russian oil producer, Gazprom Neft and energy company, Rosneft, to develop a geological map of the country’s minerals. In addition to these oil exploration deals, Russia is also reportedly working to establish a refinery for South Sudanese oil back in Sudan.
Furthermore, it is alleged that as Russia’s commercial relationship with South Sudan continues to expand, Russia may soon shift to promoting its military interests in the country. In this scenario, much like in the CAR, its security forces are expected to be deployed to guard Russian interests – such as oil blocks – and train local forces.

**Democratic Republic of Congo – Rank Two**

Russia has recently hedged its bets by backing newly-elected President Félix Tshisekedi following the controversial general elections that took place at the end of 2018. While many Western countries – including France and Belgium – supported opposition concerns that Tshisekedi had struck a deal with former President Joseph Kabila ahead of the vote, Russia not only sided with the new president but – along with China and South Africa – also blocked the UN from taking any meaningful action regarding the vote.

This action is unsurprising given that Russia had engaged in discussions with Kabila and his supporters about reviving a 1999 agreement on military cooperation in 2018, and had reportedly cultivated a relationship with Tshisekedi ahead of the vote. Rich in natural resources, Russia is likely looking to gain access to new concessions whilst promoting an anti-Western ideology in the country – a stance previously undertaken by Kabila and likely to be pursued under Tshisekedi.

**INSIGHT**

While Russian engagement with Africa has certainly grown, with trade and investment climbing by 185 percent between 2005 and 2015, it lags behind the initiatives of other major powers, such as the US, the EU, and China. Each one of these countries has established economic and military ties across the continent and has their own programmes in this regard.

While US investment in Africa has barely risen since 2010, in June 2019, it launched a new Prosper Africa policy to reverse this trend and, indeed, counter both Chinese and Russian influence across the continent. The US also has a vast military presence in Africa, which includes 34 sites with high concentrations in the north, west and the Horn of Africa.

The EU and Africa also have extensive ties. Economically, 41 African states have signed Economic Partnership Agreements with the bloc and there is even talk of a continent-to-continent free trade agreement. Military, France has a large presence across the continent, particularly in the Sahel and the Maghreb. As part of Operation Barkhane alone, France has deployed over 3,000 personnel to the region in its largest overseas operation.

Lastly, China remains the top contender (economically speaking) with it being the continent’s leading trading partner. The total volume of two-way trade between China in Africa currently exceeds USD 200 billion while investment from China to Africa doubled between 2010 and 2016. As a show of further commitment to the continent, in September 2018, President Xi Jinping pledged an additional USD 60 billion in broad and diverse financing. Its key focus in this regard has been its Belt and Road Initiative.

In comparison to these other actors, Russian influence in Africa appears relatively weak and poses a limited threat to more established players. However, instead of competing head to head in terms of military or economic might, Russia is likely playing a more subtle game in which it establishes itself in less popular destinations, sows seeds of discontent with the West, helps up prop up long-term leaders and secures access to natural resources.