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FRENCH MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN THE SAHEL

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Explaining how Russian interference affected French withdrawal

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Withdrawal of [...] troops will become like salted peanuts to the [...] public: the more [...] troops come home, the more will be demanded.

- Dr. Henry Kissinger

After the wave of decolonisation in many African countries, several issues marked the continent for decades. Africa had the highest number of coups and attempts. The French maintained a presence through permanent bases and military interventions, and the Soviet Union tried to influence and persuade countries to cooperate with them or even adopt communist ideology. In the 2000s, this situation changed as Russia showed less interest in Africa after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the number of successful coups dropped dramatically. Only the French presence seemed to make it through this period unchanged. In 2020, this situation changed dramatically. In the last four years, there have already been more coups than in the decade before and, in the process, they have become much more successful. Countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Gabon saw their governance, some of which had endured for decades, change several times in

undemocratic ways. Two more striking trends were visible during this period. One was that relations became strained between the French and the African host countries where they were stationed, eventually leading to a diplomatic crisis and the withdrawal of French forces. On top of that, Russia showed renewed interest in the region. It organised large-scale African conferences, entered into several partnerships and finally deployed Russian military personnel in the form of mercenaries. These trends are particularly evident in the Sahel region, an ecoregion stretching roughly from Senegal to Sudan.

This study examines how one process, namely Russian influence, impacted coups and French military withdrawals. In this way, it seeks to contribute to the debate on the impact of Russia on events in the Sahel in recent years. However, the study will not place the Russian exercise of influence, called sharp power, as the root cause of the French withdrawal. It does, however, look for the cause in the local actor and the increased militarisation of that society. It thus examines the extent to which Russian influence had an impact on the process between that cause and the eventual French military withdrawal. The overall research question is thereby formulated as, 'How did

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Russian interference in the Sahel region influence the French decision to withdraw militarily there?’

Withdrawal from military interventions

Military operations, in which withdrawals also constitute an important part, are continuously evolving. Initially, the local actor plays an important role in this. Bennett’s (2023) study points out how disloyalty from friendly local security forces leads to the withdrawal of Western military forces. When no serious countermeasures are taken to offset the flow of hostile propaganda, this can lead to deep cracks in the loyalty of local security forces. It results in an implausible strategy that must urge the local population to resist the influence of a rising power and, cooperate with a distant and decaying European state. In addition, counterinsurgents must be able to maintain the legitimacy of their military intervention. If not, withdrawal is the only solution. However, this is not without consequences. If disengagement is not organised properly, it can cause problems, especially in the cities. It leads to a power vacuum where the population feels completely separated from the counterinsurgents (Aloyo & Swenson, 2022; Lopez, 2007). Withdrawal is necessary when the incumbent local government withdraws its consent to the foreign military, although this depends on the local situation. This is the case, for example, when the demand for termination comes from warring factions or an unrecognised government such as a junta. Thus, some policymakers argue that withdrawal requires a collective decision, and no faction has the right to unilaterally withdraw consent. But at some point, external forces may require renewed consent from the new local power (Wippman, 1996).

Secondly, there are various reasons and methods for withdrawal, with several crucial factors such as the external environment. Neighbouring countries play an essential role and can facilitate or complicate the exit. The situation of the host state is also important. A politically stable system with a functioning civil service is necessary when withdrawing. The focus is often on security sector reform while insufficient attention is given to

building government capacity. Finally, national politics and foreign power politicians also play a role. Success in military interventions abroad does not guarantee re-election, but failure will certainly hinder that election (Boeke, 2014).

Withdrawal can happen in different ways. There is the time-driven way where the exit is determined by a deadline, a goal-driven approach that looks at whether strategic goals have been achieved or the worst-case scenario: the abrupt exit. An abrupt exit can be a cut-and-run decision, a deportation or an exit by default. In a cut and run, the mission does not go according to plan and domestic political pressure from the intervention force becomes too great to stay. In the case of an expulsion, the host state unilaterally decides that the foreign troops should leave the country. Finally, an exit by default is when the Status of Forces Agreement (the agreement between the host state and the intervention force) has expired and attempts to renegotiate it have failed (Boeke, 2014; Caplan, 2012).

French military interventions & coups in the Sahel

2000-2020: the pre coup period

When it comes to Africa, French military operations have a long history. Even after independence from its colonies, France was never able to disengage completely, although French troops in Africa declined sharply in the second half of the 20th century. Eventually, France even took part in multilateral interventions in the early 2000s, giving renewed legitimacy to their military presence in Africa (Charbonneau, 2006; Tardy, 2020; Vallin, 2015). However, this policy ended with the unilateral French Opération Licorne in Côte d’Ivoire where a coup threatened to overthrow the government. It led to a redefinition of the French strategy, where a direct unilateral intervention as peacekeeping could complement capacity building. However, this French military cooperation produced the insecurity it wanted to combat. Namely, by maintaining and defending the social conditions and forces that often cause conflict and violence, it only exacerbated the situation (Charbonneau, 2006). Also, in 2013 with

Opération Sangaris in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Opération Serval in Mali, Paris again opted for unilateralism. The military interventions in Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and CAR can therefore be defined as a new French interventionist policy. They led to an increasing militarisation of France's relations with African societies (Banégas, 2014). As a result, France has failed in its stabilisation objectives. Because the French military position in Africa depends on cooperation with regimes that contribute to the emergence of regional instability, there are only short-term results at best. Creating a sustainable solution thus became impossible (Powell, 2016).

2020-2024: five coups in four years

Besides the lack of results in the Sahel, France also faced another problem. Coups in the host country forced Paris to withdraw its military interventions under junta pressure. After the Malian parliamentary elections during the spring of 2020 were very controversial and in favour of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta (IBK), anti-government protests continued to grow. It eventually resulted in a coup on 18 August 2020 led by special forces colonel Goïta (Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022). Following the coup, Bah N'Daw, a former defense minister and compromise figure, became president. As N'Daw continued to fight terrorism with French support, international pressure waned, despite other coup leaders such as Goïta and defence minister Camara seeing the Russians as partners (Dumas et al. 2021; Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022). A year later, however, a second coup occurred in which interim president N'Daw and Prime Minister Ouane were arrested by the army and stripped of their powers. Goïta, who orchestrated the coup as vice-president, was installed as president of Mali (Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022). When, in January 2022, the Malian government went ahead and postponed the promised February elections that year for five years, tensions with Paris ran high. It eventually led to the expulsion of the French ambassador, the relocation of all French troops to neighboring Malian countries, and the official termination of Opération Barkhane (Korotayev & Khokhlova, 2022).

After the withdrawal from Mali, the intention was to focus more on special forces operations such as Opération Sabre in Burkina Faso. However, this was made impossible after the 2022 double Burkina Faso coup in which France had to withdraw from a Sahel country again. The first coup of 23-24 January 2022 was still met with cautious optimism by the French. The coup leader, Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, took several French and US courses and did not suspend cooperation with France (BBC, 2022). The motivation was mainly dissatisfaction among the military about President Kaboré's too lax attitude in the fight against jihadism. This changed during the second coup on 30 September of the same year by Captain Ibrahim Traoré. The new coup plotters justified their action on the grounds of Damiba's failure to fight the jihadist insurgency and his too pro-French stance. The new junta also accused France of helping Damiba organize a counter-coup. Subsequently, anti-French demonstrations broke out in major cities and protesters damaged the French embassy (Oxford Analytica, 2022). Finally, in January 2023, at Burkina Faso's request, France recalled their ambassador, acceded to Burkina Faso's request to withdraw their troops resulting in the official end of Opération Sabre. The French special forces were transferred to Niger and Chad where the remaining French military from Barkhane were then stationed (Le Monde, 2023; Paquier, 2023).

Following these events, France adapted their military interventions in the Sahel. The old model of external operations strictly under French command was replaced by an operational partnership more closely intertwined with the local armies where the strategy changed, and the aim was to reduce the French footprint. This intervention, which now continued under the umbrella name Forces françaises au Sahel, counted 1,500 soldiers under les éléments français au Niger and 1,000 troops in Chad belonging to les éléments français au Tchad (Charrier, 2023; Ministère des Armées, 2022). The increased French presence proved not without risk for Nigerian President Mohamed Bazoum, whose pro-French stance was not unanimously supported. Neither within his

government nor among his people (Garcia, 2022). Indeed, on 26 July 2023, there was a military coup led by General Abdourahamane Tiani who declared himself president. The coup plotters justified themselves by wanting to address the deteriorating security situation, although in Niger the terrorist threat was met better than in the other Sahel countries. In reality, a dispute between Bazoum and Tiani was at the root of the coup in which the president wanted to sideline the general. In turn, the relationship between the Nigerian rulers and France went to an all-time low. While France openly supported a military intervention by the regional bloc ECOWAS, demonstrations against the former colonial power broke out in various parts of Niger. Dissatisfaction also prevailed among part of the Nigerian military for some time where disinformation had led to conspiracy theories about the 'real, colonial reason' for the French presence (Bianchi & Sangaré, 2024). Once again, tensions with France became intense, their ambassador was sent out of the country and President Macron announced the official withdrawal from Niger on 24 September 2023 (Élysée, 2023, Ministère des Armées, 2023).

The more than a thousand French military personnel remaining from Opération Barkhane had to return home or retreat to Chad, the last G5 Sahel country where French troops are still deployed (Olech, 2023). But with France's forced withdrawal in much of the Sahel, their influence has already declined sharply, leaving the way open for other actors to emerge as alternatives.

Several causes could be found for the failed French strategy. First, there was no clear and viable strategy, which led the French to fail to invest sufficiently in development and diplomacy. Second, Paris failed in their communication with the local rulers. This was not strong enough to withstand neo-colonial perceptions and disinformation campaigns from Russia and other sources. Finally, France ignored that working with leaders who came to power in undemocratic or questionable ways increases the likelihood that they will not respect the strategy (Wilén, 2022).

Sharp power

The way Russia is trying to build its influence in Africa can be situated within what Walker (2018) describes as sharp power. Specifically, it is an unconventional method of exercising power in which a foreign, often autocratic, state interferes or infiltrates another country's domestic society and institutions to undermine it. This may be through interference in elections, party politics and media, infiltration into civil society or eavesdropping on leaders. Such manipulation is usually done through state-led and not very transparent organisations. It is a specific tactic in hybrid warfare aimed at influencing hearts and minds.

The most pronounced user of sharp power is Russia, applying a wide scope of tools to reach its goals. For instance, the Russian Federation often uses non-governmental but state-sponsored groups for this exercise of power. This covers services such as combat operations, intelligence gathering, propaganda dissemination, provocations and cyber operations (Gregor et al., 2023; Richter, 2022). This power is commonly referred to as 'sharp power' as it aims to penetrate the political and informational environments of targeted countries. Russia thus bends globalisation to their will by manipulating discourse abroad, especially in the open information space offered by (fledgling) democracies (Walker, 2018).

According to a US white paper, the current Russian sharp power strategy can be compared to the Soviet doctrine of maskirovka, also known as military deception. This is the use of camouflage, denial, deception and operational agility. The white paper describes that through this strategy, Russia can conduct hybrid operations using propaganda and PMSCs (Daly, 2023; Department of Defense, 2019). This contemporary strategy is also described as the Gerasimov doctrine, named after the chief of staff of the Russian armed forces (Bechis, 2022). The army general stated some years back that the boundaries between war and peace were blurring. This made it necessary to rethink traditional warfare by exploring the possibilities of the new information warfare to gain a strategic advantage. The general wrote back in 2013 that: 'The role of nonmilitary means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown,

and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness' (Gerasimov, 2016).

Russia, Wagner Group and PMSCs in the Sahel

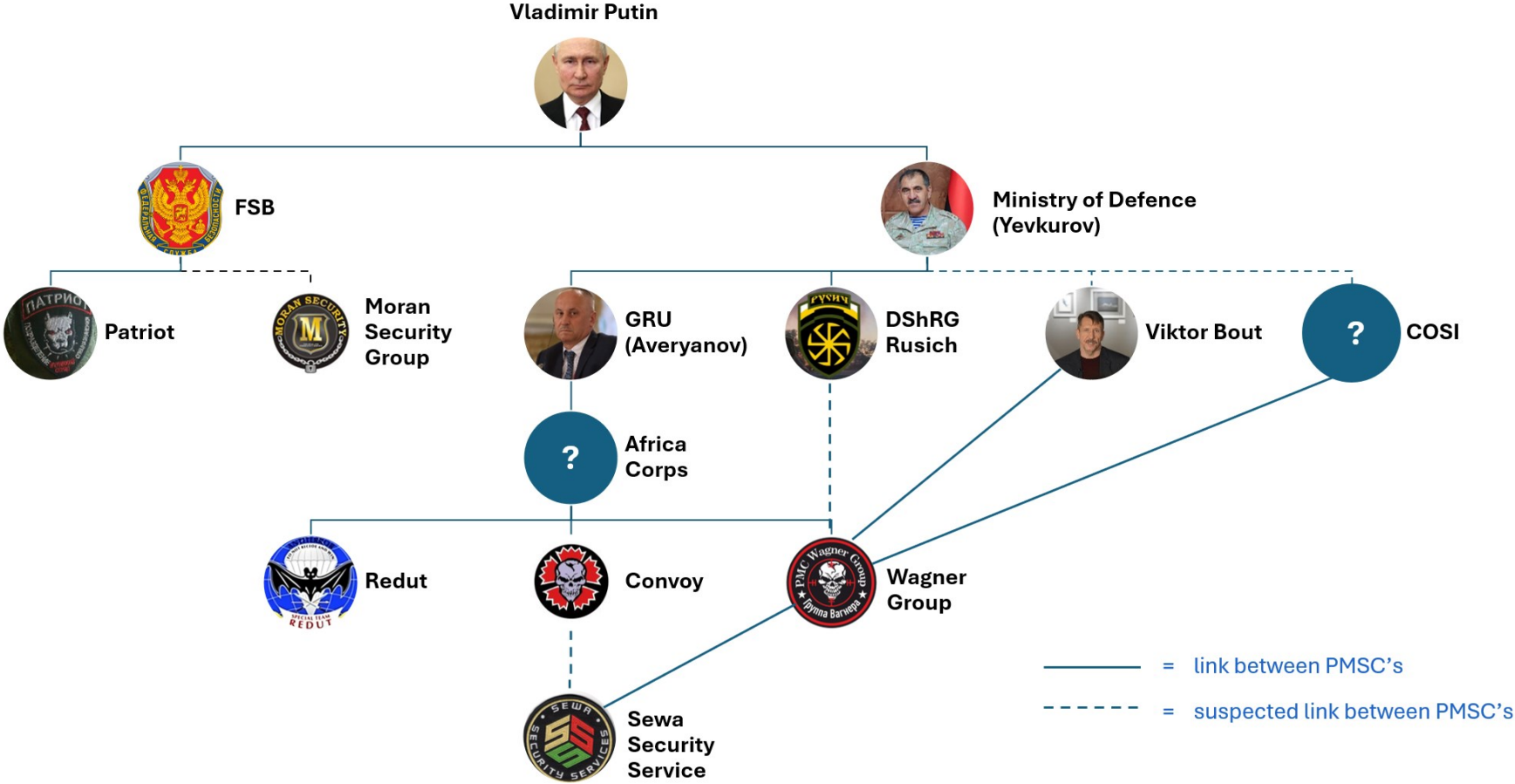
The absence of a colonial past in Africa allowed Russia to distinguish itself favourably from Western powers (Abimbola, 2022; Issaev et al., 2022). After the collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s, establishing relations with the West became a priority, leading to a decline in Russian interest in Africa. As a result, it is remarkable how Russian interest in the Sahel experienced a serious increase in the last 10 years. An explanation for this can be found in the Arab Spring and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Elischer, 2022). Indeed, the former caused long-term partnerships with friendly dictators to come to an end; the latter led to economic sanctions. Thus, following both cases, Moscow had to expand their network of economic partners. Here again, Russia's dual strategy is confirmed: export arms and gain control over local natural resources in exchange for security services. The fact that Russia provides these services through private militias like the Wagner Group ensures that it cannot be formally associated and acts as a facilitator. The narrative of the Russian struggle against colonialism combined with the promotion of African countries' sovereignty, Russian indifference to the domestic policies of local authoritarian regimes and traditional views on gender relations and national values makes Russia an attractive partner. Through propaganda and infiltration in local media, for example, this is further spread to ordinary citizens (Issaev et al., 2022; Messiaen, 2023).

Some researchers argue that increased Russian involvement in the Sahel is the result of Western actors leaving the region. Thus, vacuum logic assumes that liberal and non-liberal actors cannot operate in the same space. In their research Jacobsen and Larsen (2023) disagree with this application of the theory. A first shortcoming is that the logic entails a limited understanding of the host state agency. Indeed, it suggests that liberal actors decide to leave and that non-liberal actors then act, without considering the host state's

agency in that process. Liberal actors can also be rejected and disinvited by host states, as happened to France in Mali. A second flaw in the vacuum logic is that it does not consider how liberal actors are present. The modus operandi of liberal actors in the Sahel sometimes cause the host state to experience a security vacuum which allows other (non-liberal) actors to fill. Again, reference can be made to the cases of Mali and CAR. One way Russia creates space for itself amidst its liberal presence is by using private military companies, also abbreviated as PMSCs (private military and security companies) (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023).

The strategy of Russian PMSCs can be summarised in a three-pronged approach. First, it conducts disinformation campaigns and spreads fake news, along with pro-government information such as manipulated polls and demonstrations. In addition, the PMSC secures payment for its services through concessions in extractive industries such as precious metals. Finally, the mercenaries become involved in the country's military and provide services through training, consultancy, personal security and counterinsurgency operations (Doxsee, 2020; Mquirmi, 2022; Parens, 2023). Of all the Russian PMSCs, the Wagner Group is the most well-known and infamous player in Africa. Yet the private militia has fore-runners and competitors in the region. The diagram below (Figure 1) shows the Russian PMSCs operating in the Sahel. It shows how Viktor Bolt, the Moran Security Group, Sewa Security Service, COSI, Patriot, DShRG Rusich, the Wagner Group, Convoy, Redut and the Africa Corps are most recently interconnected with each other and with Russian state institutions.

Figure 1: The network of Russian PMSCs in the Sahel



Methodology

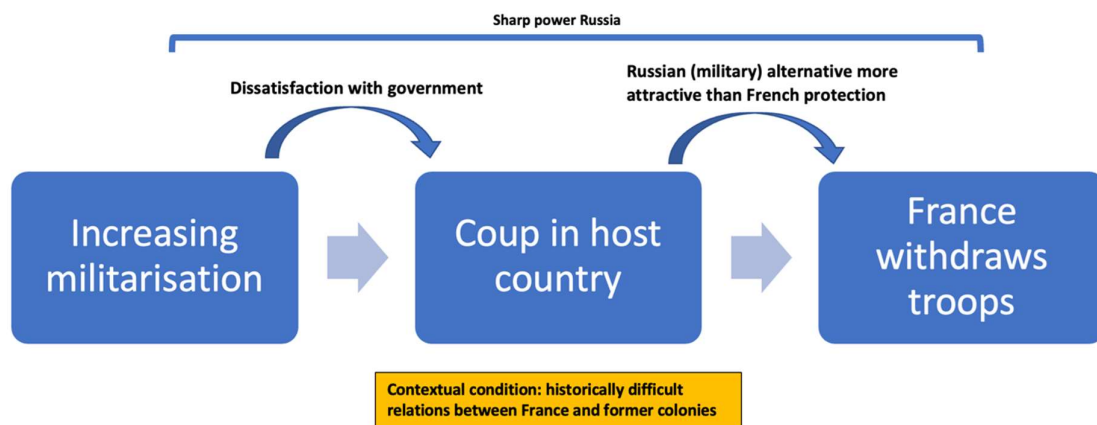
The research relies on the method of process-tracing, after the standard work by Beach (2018). It is a research method to trace a causal mechanism occurring in one or more concrete case studies. The analytical focus here is on understanding the process between cause and outcome. In the literature review, it becomes clear that there is no single explanation for why France retreated into the wider Sahel. However, a sequence of events and factors emerges that seems to show a pattern across different cases. A cause can be identified to which the whole process of events is attributed, namely increased militarisation in the broad Sahel. Because a cause, outcome and between them a causal process (also called causal mechanism) can be clearly defined, the process-tracing research method is very suitable.

Specifically, this paper will apply theory-testing process-tracing. This is deductive research where the literature and previous research will serve as clues to the causal mechanism (CM). After the CM is theorised, the cases that can be considered for the study will be collected. Ultimately, a subset of cases will be selected that are comparable based on cause, outcome and hypothesised CM. These cases will be part of the research to be conducted (Beach, 2018). During case selection, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger all experienced one or

more coups, followed by a Russian PMSC deployment and the withdrawal of a significant French contingent. These countries thus show the greatest coherence among themselves and are best suited to be tested together by the causal mechanism.

Analysis

Applying theory-testing process-tracing consists of four steps. First, a conceptualisation of the case is made. Based on the literature described above and previous research by Messiaen (2023), a CM is proposed that in this study focuses on the influence of Russian interference on French military withdrawals. To this CM, parameters are eventually added within which a theory is expected to operate. These parameters, also called contextual conditions, enable the causal mechanism. This study starts with how increasing militarisation in the Sahel led to a more violent society in which the military plays a prominent role and dissatisfaction with the government can lead to a coup. Furthermore, the CM argues that the new rulers, possibly influenced by Russian sharp power, come to prefer the Russian military alternative to that of the French. It eventually leads to the forced withdrawal of French troops as cooperation is terminated by the junta leaders. This causal mechanism is illustrated in Figure 2.



During the second step, operationalisation is carried out through predictions and tests. Here, the

case is linked to hypotheses. Based on the CM, these are formulated as follows:

H1: Russia influences local people's dissatisfaction with their government leading to a coup (anti-government)

H2: Russia influences junta dissatisfaction with France leading to French military withdrawal (anti-French)

H3: Russia offers a military alternative which is adopted by the junta (pro-Russian)

Next, evidence is collected and evaluated. Thus, each hypothesis is tested with several observations to increase or decrease confidence in the assumptions. Here, an observation may contain several sources, depending on the reliability and confirmation of the prediction. For example, the source provides solid, moderate, or weak empirical reliability and confirms the prediction to a strong, moderate, or weak degree. This is based on primary data, including elite interviews, official reports, and propaganda in the (social) media, as well as secondary data consisting of press releases, reports, analyses, and scientific articles. As a final step, the CM as a whole is assessed based on the observations found (De Ville, 2023). An argumentative tree summarises the findings schematically to draw final conclusions on how Russian interference influenced the French decision to withdraw militarily from the Sahel.

Results

H1: Russia influences local people's dissatisfaction with their government leading to a coup (anti-government)

Low to moderate evidence was found for the first part 'Russia influences local people's dissatisfaction with their government'. For Mali and Burkina Faso, it became clear that there were several indications that Russia influenced local people's dissatisfaction with their government. Civil society organisations in particular showed signs of at least Russian sympathy, with some even having contacts with official Russian representatives such as the ambassador. Also, during demonstrations, Russian flags showed a possible connection with Moscow. It is currently unclear to what extent the Kremlin was driving the anti-government discourse. For now, it seems to be mostly

exploiting rather than orchestrating an existing sentiment. Certainly, for Niger, no clear evidence has been found that Russia instructed the anti-government movement. For the second part 'local discontent leads to a coup', low to moderate evidence has been detected. Especially for Mali and Burkina Faso, there are signs that both civilians and military turned against the incumbent president and government. Some indications show that a link to Russia has not been ruled out, but further investigation should show how great the Russian influence was. As for Niger, it was mainly the problem between the president and the presidential guard that led to the coup, rather than mass demonstrations against the president. Russian flags during pro-junta demonstrations after the coup are an indication of Russian interference but further evidence cannot be substantiated. As a result, the first prediction has a low to moderate burden of proof. While several observations are pointing to Russian interference in anti-government protests, this is rather panned. If the evidence base were to expand further in the future, it might strengthen the hypothesis.

H2: Russia influences junta dissatisfaction with France leading to French military withdrawal (anti-French)

The observations found for the first part of this hypothesis, 'Russia influences junta dissatisfaction with France', are moderate evidence for this prediction. In Mali, there were signs that organisations and individuals linked to Russian PMSCs spread an anti-French narrative once the junta came to power. Similar practices could also be found in Burkina Faso and Niger, albeit to a slightly lesser extent. However, for the three cases, it was visible how Russian flags reappeared in anti-French and pro-junta protests. In addition, there was clear pro-Russian messaging on social media from the movements organising the demonstrations. For the second part, the same recurring pattern is always visible among the three cases about how France withdraws from the host country after tensions rise. Firstly, there are already indications that the French presence is running into opposition from the population. Then, the relationship deteriorates after the coup

with the new rulers leading first to violent disagreements, the expulsion of the French ambassador and finally the breaking of the agreement legitimising the presence of the French force. These courses of events always play out in short order and happen in the first few months after the coup. This part is also moderate evidence as new observations are needed to make further statements on how Russia capitulated to French tensions with the host countries. But there are already signs that Russia is exerting influence in the Sahel countries through various means, particularly by fostering anti-French sentiment.

H3: Russia offers a military alternative which is adopted by the junta (pro-Russian)

The first piece of this predicted evidence, 'Russia offers a military alternative to the junta', is confirmed to a moderate to high degree. Thus, military alliances are established before the coups but intensify significantly after the coup. In this way, one can no longer argue that Russia is entering the market as an economic player but is effectively developing a privileged position among the three countries. For instance, several PMSC leaders offer the services of their mercenaries and there are several meetings between official Russian representatives and the junta leaders. The training of African officers in Moscow, with Malian colonels staging a coup shortly after their return, is another indication of how Russia is trying to interfere. However, it is still unclear which actor took the 'first step' for rapprochement. For now, it is assumed that the juntas were looking for a security partner while Russia was ready and promoting their alternative. Mali and Burkina Faso have the highest evidence of this while with Niger it is moderate. The reason is that Niger's coup is the most recent and it still had intensive cooperation with France until the summer of 2023. Therefore the Russian offer became more emphatic only later. For the latter part, where the host country responds to the Russian offer, high evidence was found in all countries. For instance, Mali has hired the Wagner Group since late 2021, Burkina Faso has been counting on Russian military personnel and the Africa Corps since late 2023 and early 2024, and finally, the latter arrived

in Niger in April 2024. Of these, credible sources found clear observations such as joint operations between the PMSCs and the local African army in which war crimes were also committed such as in Moura (Mali).

The results of the three hypotheses show that Russian interference was found in quite a few cases. However, resources and time were too limited to clarify this further clearly. The evidence suggests that over time, there may be an increase in empirical confirmation and confidence in the predicted results. In conclusion, these research findings reasonably confirm the causal mechanism.

Conclusion

Years of French interventions and their focus on security further fuelled or perpetuated increasing militarisation in the Sahel. In addition, it also became clear that France experienced expulsion by the host country in each of the three cases studied. As for Russia, the study showed that Moscow seeks to exert influence in Africa through sharp power. This includes the use of private military and security companies (PMSCs), which are not officially directly under Russian defence but in reality have links to the Kremlin. After the death of Wagner Group leader Prigozhin, it became clear that these groups were interconnected and, with the creation of the Africa Corps, even more controlled by Moscow.

Hypotheses were drawn up for the investigation, each of which required multiple observations to show the degree of empirical confirmation. The first key finding is that there is evidence that Russia influenced local people's dissatisfaction with their government, leading to a coup. This mainly concerns pro-Russian civil society organisations in Mali and Burkina Faso and the presence of Russian flags during demonstrations during the coup period. As for Niger, there is less clear evidence of this. However, it must be said that deeper research is appropriate to increase confidence in the hypothesis. For now, the conclusion is that Russia exerted influence by exploiting, rather than fueling, anti-government sentiment.

Second, moderate evidence was found for the ‘Russia influences junta dissatisfaction with France leading to French military withdrawal’ hypothesis. For the three countries, observations proved that Russia spread an anti-French narrative through PMSCs and local pro-Russian civil society organisations. In addition, it led to increased tensions between France and the junta with the same recurring pattern for the three countries. Thus, the French presence was already running into opposition before the coup, relations with the authorities deteriorated after the coup, the French ambassador was expelled from the country and the French operation was forced to leave. So, Russia exerted influence in creating an anti-French discourse, although further observations are recommended to strengthen this evidence. This is especially true for the Russian role during the process of expelling French troops.

Moderate to strong evidence has been found for the predicted evidence that Russia offered a military alternative assumed by the junta. For now, it remains unclear whether the juntas urgently sought a security partner or if Russia actively promoted their offer. Current evidence seems to be pointing to both. The fact is, however, that the cooperation goes far beyond classic market-based

partnerships. By being paid in mining concessions and providing advice directly to the junta, among other things, Russia already penetrated deep into the state, illustrating the striking relationship. With the eventual deployment of Russian PMSCs in Mali, Burkina Faso and, most recently, Niger, it was confirmed that the new rulers had fully embraced Moscow’s offer. The fact that this was already resulting in massacres, like the one in Moura (Mali), is a telling consequence.

This study could thus explain to what extent Russian interference had an impact on the French military withdrawals of Opération Barkhane, Opération Sabre and Les éléments français au Niger. It is not the case that Russia was the great orchestrator of the coups and the termination of French interventions. It capitulated to a growing discontent and exacerbated the situation through PMSCs and local African civil society organisations. Russian activities increased significantly after the new authorities came to power following a coup. Partly because the coup leaders were more Russia-friendly, and partly because Russia itself was pushing this. The fact that the three countries similarly had French and Western troops replaced by Russian mercenaries are already the ultimate consequence of this.

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