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EXAMINING THE REALITIES OF RUSSIAN ACTIVITIES AND INFLUENCE IN AFRICA AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE CONTINENT

Chairs Bass and Keating, Ranking Members Smith and Fitzpatrick, and other Distinguished Members of the Subcommittees, thank you for inviting me to testify on Russian activities and influence in Africa. I commend your leadership in highlighting this important issue at today's hearing and through proposed legislation such as the Countering Malign Russian Activities in Africa Act.

I am a Research Fellow at the Hudson Institute, a nonpartisan Washington, DC-based foreign policy and national security think-tank promoting American global leadership for a secure, free, and prosperous future. My project, the Kleptocracy Initiative, conducts policy research on countering illicit finance and other forms of malign influence from Russia and similarly adversarial authoritarian regimes.

In this statement I have sought to provide an overview of Russia's engagement in Africa, but also to address urgent issues arising from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Western sanctions imposed on Russia in response, and implications for African food security. The views expressed in this statement are mine alone and do not represent those of Hudson Institute or any other organization.

Russia's Objectives in Africa

Russian engagement in Africa often seeks to capitalize on Cold War-era ties but has accelerated in recent years and now serves several interrelated purposes. First, the Kremlin has an obvious interest in securing access to the continent's abundant natural resources. This



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motivation is hardly unique to Russia, but especially urgent for the Kremlin as it seeks alternative suppliers in the face of Western sanctions.

Russia also sees Africa as a complementary frontier to Europe in its confrontation with the West. Russian involvement in Libya and Sudan raises the possibility of a military presence on NATO's southern flank. By undermining African democracy and stoking conflict and instability, the Kremlin also makes it harder for Western countries to engage constructively with African states and potentially fuels further migration to an increasingly strained Europe. Co-opting African elites can help secure their support for, or at least acquiescence in the face of, Russian conduct at the United Nations and other international fora.

Russia's Engagement in Africa

Russia's strategic interest in Africa has translated to an approach that is opportunistic and transactional at best, and brutally exploitative at worst. Unlike Western donors and concessional lenders, Russian assistance is not contingent on reforms pertaining to democracy, human rights, rule of law, or fiscal restraint—quite the opposite in some cases. And unlike China, Russia makes no serious pretense of contributing to the continent's broader economic development through trade, infrastructure financing or other ostensibly beneficial investment—despite the window dressing of initiatives such as the Russia-Africa Summit, which is due to meet again in late 2022.

The prevailing model for Russian involvement in Africa is what a recent Institute for Global Change [report](#) terms “regime support packages,” through which the Kremlin deploys its asymmetrical capabilities to prop up vulnerable leaders, usually in exchange for direct payment or natural resources concessions. As my fellow witness Joseph Siegle has [noted](#), “the ‘partnerships’ that Russia seeks in Africa are not state- but elite-based. By helping these often illegitimate and unpopular leaders to retain power, Russia is cementing Africa's indebtedness to Moscow.”

In particular, Russia is the largest supplier of arms to Africa, providing [almost half](#) of the continent's military hardware. Exports [increased](#) by 23 percent in the period 2015-19 compared to 2011-15, and Russia signed further [deals](#) worth \$12.2 billion with more than 30 countries at the Russia-Africa Summit in 2019. Western sanctions mean that many of these agreements are unlikely to now be fulfilled, but conventional arms sales are only part of the picture.

Russia has increasingly intervened directly in African countries through the extensive [deployment](#) of private military contractors (PMCs). Russian PMC activity in Africa more than tripled between 2014 and 2018, partly in response to a weakening Western security presence and African leaders' need to counter rising insurgencies. Sudan, Libya, Central

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African Republic, and Mali among others have all seen decisive interventions by Russian PMCs in recent years. These have all been accompanied by [reports](#) of summary executions, torture, and other human rights abuses.

The spearhead of this is the Wagner group, a PMC funded and controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, one of Vladimir Putin's closest and most useful subordinates (though he, and the Kremlin, deny any affiliation). Wagner is aptly [characterized](#) by the Institute for Global Change as “a shadow vessel of the Kremlin, affording Putin and Russia a cost-effective way to shape foreign policy while receiving financial reward, yet simultaneously working under the rules of so-called plausible deniability.”

Wagner has grown significantly since it first came to prominence during Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and is no longer a single legal entity but a sprawling conglomerate of shell companies and groups that variously employ military, political, and cyber capabilities. The opaque nature of Wagner's agreements with African host governments, often involving natural resources concessions, energy contracts, or other corruption-prone forms of payment for its services, has also fueled transnational kleptocracy and so helped deprive Africa of tens of billions of dollars in illicit [capital flight](#) each year.

In addition to military and security support for embattled regimes, Wagner—and by extension Russia—has branched into other useful “services” including political strategy, disinformation, and cyber operations.

Russian political strategists and advisors now surround several African leaders, working to convince them and their populations of the benefits of authoritarian rule and closer alignment with Russia. Perhaps the best example of how this can lead to state capture occurred in the Central African Republic (CAR), where a former Russian military intelligence officer on Prigozhin's [payroll](#) serves as no less than national security advisor to President Touadéra.

Russia's cyber operatives and disinformation networks—including Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency—find ample employment in, and from, African countries. In 2019, Facebook [took down](#) three Russian disinformation networks linked to Prigozhin's troll factories that sought to influence domestic affairs in Madagascar, the CAR, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Sudan, and Libya. In 2020, the company [took down](#) a further two Russian-led networks aimed at inflaming U.S. political divisions that had been outsourced to local Ghanaian and Nigerian operatives. They have [continued](#) to use the platform to push anti-Western, pro-Russian narratives that some argue have also contributed to the recent spate of military coups across the Sahel.

Russian cyber and disinformation activities are increasingly supported by more conventional

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soft power initiatives. These include education programmes, including university funding and scholarships, and the expansion of Russian state media into African markets.

The Consequences of Russia’s Encroachment in Africa

Russia’s approach to Africa has proven appealing not only to embattled warlords in need of hired muscle, but leaders in vulnerable democracies who face rising anti-Western sentiment and are themselves tired of the West’s conditional approach to development assistance and investment. As Western influence in Africa recedes, Russia has opportunistically stepped in to fill the vacuum with short-term solutions that seem almost designed to exacerbate systemic problems. In doing so, Russia has often ventured where even China and its notoriously exploitative state-owned companies fear to tread.

The Kremlin’s growing influence in Africa is increasingly evident on the international stage. At the March 2, 2022 UN General Assembly [vote](#) condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, 141 countries supported the resolution, but 17 of 35 countries that abstained were African. While some of these countries traditionally maintain a non-aligned stance, many also have growing security and economic ties to Russia. The regimes in CAR, Mali, and Sudan in particular are wholly dependent on Russian PMCs for their security.

Russia now seeks to further exploit its influence over several African governments as it attempts to enlist their support in diverting attention from its role in exacerbating the global food crisis.

RUSSIA SANCTIONS AND THE GLOBAL FOOD CRISIS

The UN [estimates](#) that around 193 million people in 53 countries worldwide experienced acute food insecurity at crisis or worse levels in 2021, an increase of nearly 40 million people compared with the already record numbers of 2020. This alarming trend is the result of several converging dynamics: primarily the devastation and displacement caused by new and ongoing conflicts, but also extreme weather and climate change, and the economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Of sixteen “hunger hotspot” countries [identified](#) by the World Food Program with catastrophic or deteriorating critical conditions, twelve are located in Africa. The International Committee of the Red Cross has [estimated](#) that 364 million Africans will face severe food insecurity this year—equivalent to more than the entire population of the United States going hungry.

Russia’s assault on Ukraine is recklessly exacerbating this dire situation. Rising food prices, combined with fuel inflation, have already [sparked](#) civil unrest not only across Africa but

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throughout the developing world. The World Bank [suggests](#) that the Russia's aggression has further "disrupted global patterns of trade, production and consumption of commodities in ways that will keep prices at historically high levels through the end of 2024."

According to the International Food Policy Research Institute, exports from Russia and Ukraine before the war [accounted](#) for roughly 12 percent of total calories traded globally, and the two countries were among the top five exporters for several important cereals and oilseeds, including wheat, barley, sunflowers and maize. Ukraine is also an important source of sunflower seed oil, having supplied about 50 percent of the global market.

Many African countries depend heavily on these exports. According to the UN, fourteen African countries import [more than half](#) of their wheat from Russia and Ukraine, while ten import up to half of their fertilizer from Russia.

Russia's Blame Game

The Kremlin has characteristically sought to [blame](#) the United States and its allies for this situation by claiming that sanctions prevent the export of food and agricultural products from Russia. While it is true that sanctions programs must be managed carefully to avoid such negative side-effects, this claim is demonstrably false.

There are no Western sanctions on the export to third countries of food, fertilizer, or other agricultural products from Russia or Ukraine. In the United States, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has issued [General Licenses](#) under the Russian Harmful Foreign Activities and Ukraine-/Russia-related sanctions programs to authorize humanitarian assistance, agricultural and medical trade, the free flow of information, and other forms of support. In fact, U.S. officials have reportedly been [encouraging](#) agricultural and shipping companies to purchase and transport more Russian fertilizer.

By contrast, Russia's conduct since the beginning of the war suggests no concern for maintaining food exports whatsoever—quite the opposite. It is Russia which maintains the naval blockade of Ukraine's ports, preventing anyone who would venture to transport food exports by sea from doing so. It is Russia that continues to [target](#) Ukraine's agricultural infrastructure, depleting its capacity to produce food for itself and the world. And it is Russia that has reportedly [stolen](#) up to 500,000 tonnes of Ukrainian wheat, worth \$100 million, to transfer to its perceived partners instead of the global market.

President Macky Sall of Senegal, who also currently serves as Chairperson of the African Union, [suggested](#) after meeting Vladimir Putin recently that Western sanctions on Russian banks have made payment for Russian food and agricultural product exports "complicated,

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if not impossible.” He further warned EU leaders that Russia’s propaganda regime is “out there” pushing the narrative of Western culpability for the food crisis.

However, not all Russian banks are sanctioned by the U.S. and its allies, and Russia has continued to receive payments for energy and other unsanctioned exports. As Ambassador Jim O’Brien, Head of the Office of Sanctions Coordination at the State Department, [observed](#) in a recent press briefing: “Russia is bringing in a lot of money for the things it wants to sell, and if it’s not selling food, that’s Russia’s choice.”

Ambassador O’Brien noted that no specific examples of difficulties making payments for food as a result of U.S. sanctions had been brought to his attention. He implored anyone encountering such problems to raise it with the local U.S. Embassy so that the rules could be clarified and the situation resolved: “I am fully confident that there is a way to pay for this grain, even if it’s through a different mechanism than before.”

Russia is notably not encountering any serious problems exporting its own grain. Before the invasion, Ukraine exported up to 6 million tonnes of grain each month. In May 2022 this had fallen to 1.7 tonnes, in June 1.11 tonnes as a result of Russia’s blockade. Some 25 million tonnes are currently [stranded](#) in silos across the country, a figure that may grow by a further 50 million tonnes following this year’s harvest—though much of this may go to waste as storage capacity is already running low. Russia’s grain exports, by contrast, have continued to [flow](#) almost uninterrupted and are actually set to [grow](#) this year despite soaring shipping costs.

Ultimately, the problem is not nonexistent Western sanctions on Russian food and agricultural products, but Russia’s blockade of Ukraine. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken [summarized](#) the situation accurately:

“This is all deliberate. President Putin is stopping food from being shipped and aggressively using his propaganda machine to deflect or distort responsibility because he hopes it’ll get the world to give in to him and end the sanctions. In other words, simply put, it’s blackmail.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Elevate efforts to combat Russian propaganda:** The Biden administration has proactively exposed and countered Russian disinformation over the Kremlin’s role in exacerbating food shortages, but it will need to sustain and elevate these efforts as the crisis escalates. This is not a matter of self-interested competition for global influence. It is important that African populations know the truth about Russian culpability for the food shortage, so they can pressure their leaders to direct their international efforts at

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finding genuine solutions.

- **Reassure exporters on sanctions exemptions:** There have been reports of financial institutions, shipping companies, insurers, and other relevant parties “self-sanctioning,” or refraining from engaging in business with Russian and Ukrainian agricultural exports out of an abundance of caution. Just as the Biden administration should make clear the consequences of breaching sanctions that have been imposed on Russia, it must also elevate efforts to reassure these parties that exporting Russian or Ukrainian food will not carry any penalties. This includes not only issuing regular advisories to make the rules crystal clear, but making sure these are announced and publicized by senior U.S. officials.
- **Build broad diplomatic support for a humanitarian naval corridor:** The outcome of ongoing UN negotiations to secure the release of Ukrainian grain remains uncertain. Meanwhile, efforts to export Ukrainian grain overland are proving insufficient. A NATO naval force to clear mines and escort shipping runs the risk not only of direct conflict with Russian forces, but playing into the Kremlin narrative of Western aggression. A broader international coalition including non-NATO countries, however, would negate such Russian objections. African leaders have the strongest possible interest in supporting, or even participating, in such a mission and should be encouraged to do so.
- **Give Ukraine what it needs to break the blockade:** Ultimately, Ukrainian food exports will remain vulnerable until Russia is driven back decisively from its blockade. To this end, the U.S. should provide Ukraine with longer-range weaponry to attack the Russian fleet and protect its own shipping. As my Hudson colleagues Bryan Clark and Peter Rough suggested recently, this includes [reversing](#) the Biden administration’s recent block on transferring Grey Eagle unmanned aerial vehicles.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify at today’s hearing. I look forward to answering any questions you may have about these or other issues.