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House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa
Tuesday, July 18th 2023

Members of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Africa: thank you for the opportunity to speak about the implications of the activities of the Russian Federation and its proxies in Africa. It is an honour to speak at this hearing.

I am deputy director for the Africa Program at International Crisis Group. Crisis Group is a global organisation that works to prevent, mitigate and help resolve deadly conflict. I'd like to begin my remarks with a brief overview of attitudes toward the Russian Federation on the African continent, particularly in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, as well as a synopsis of how African states have come to perceive the Wagner Group, which at least until recently was Russia's main proxy.

For the purposes of this testimony, I will speak about Wagner as we knew it before the June 23 rebellion in Rostov. At the moment, we do not know how its operations in Africa will evolve. Neither do we know whether Wagner will continue using the same logistical and commercial networks it has relied on to extend its reach. Having studied Wagner's activities on the continent for years, I maintain that it deserves condemnation and isolation for its noxiousness. At the same time, my colleagues and I believe that Washington's response to Wagner's activities needs to be carefully weighed, taking into account both the situation on the ground in Africa and the fast-moving developments in Russia, which have produced uncertainty about Yevgeny Prigozhin's fate and that of his business empire.

Attitudes in Africa towards Russia and the United States

The economic fallout of the war in Ukraine has reverberated throughout Africa, as it has around the world. The intense focus of Western countries on the conflict in Europe has created resentment among African leaders, who feel that the West is diverting its diplomatic and financial resources to Ukraine at the expense of other places suffering destabilizing violence. The reluctance of a significant number of African countries to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine during discussions at the UN General Assembly demonstrated two crucial things.¹ First, the Soviet Union's financial and material assistance to African liberation movements during the Cold War era created an enduring and often misunderstood good will toward Russia and other nations that advocate for a non-Western governance model that purports to take African concerns into account. Secondly, the West's push to bring Africa onto its side in its campaign against Russia did little to persuade African governments that they should abandon their longstanding preference for non-alignment. These sentiments still prevail, but the dominant focus for African leaders is on managing economic headwinds as ordinary people on the continent struggle to make ends meet – particularly as many citizens now blame the leaders for high food and fuel prices.

¹ Fifteen African nations abstained in the first UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia in March 2022. Eight others did not vote, while Eritrea voted against the measure.

That said, these governments are also acutely aware that partnering with Russia could harm their relations with other foreign powers – including the United States – that are prepared to support democratically elected leaders with generous financial, technical and humanitarian assistance. Overall, the U.S. is perceived as a desirable partner, mainly because of its democratic governance and global economic weight. Most young Africans also believe that the U.S. has a positive influence in Africa, although China now ranks first as the foreign power with the biggest positive influence on the continent, thanks to its considerable infrastructure investments and affordable consumer goods.² For these reasons, many heads of state in West and Central Africa, even those that are facing severe security threats, are loath to strengthen ties with Russia or hire the Wagner Group. The group does not have a good reputation on the continent, deservedly so: it is often perceived as an actor that heightens instability rather than reduces it.

To be sure, Russia has been working to improve its reach. It has been trying for years – starting well before its all-out invasion of Ukraine – to extend its influence in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2019, it held its first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi on the Black Sea. As the continent’s biggest arms supplier, Russia focused mostly on signing bilateral military cooperation agreements. The Kremlin did not have an overarching political strategy in place – rather, it began using the Wagner Group to test the potential for political influence or economic encroachment, and often a combination of both, in unstable or impoverished countries that were looking for new security partners. Using a proxy gave the Kremlin the benefit of plausible deniability and conveniently shielded it from suspicion that its forays into Africa were primarily designed to further its own geopolitical and commercial interests. Wagner thus served as a channel for Russian power projection: its employees and linked companies deployed to countries that had signalled an interest in tighter military cooperation with Russia. Simultaneously, Wagner undertook information activities that aligned with Moscow’s interests and armed operations in coordination with Russian defence and military intelligence bodies. It also looked around for lucrative business opportunities.

I will also say a few words about South Africa, where I reside. South Africa is an example of an African country that has tried to balance Western expectations with a Russia policy partly driven, rightly or wrongly, by gratitude for the Soviet Union’s support for African liberation movements. South Africa has abstained in all the UN General Assembly votes on the Ukraine war since March 2022. It has not levied any sanctions on or broken ties with Russia. South African dignitaries regularly visit Russia and vice versa. South Africa also hosted joint military exercises with Russia and China in March 2023, exactly a year after the war started.

Its position is also linked to internal politics. As the ruling African National Congress heads toward a difficult election in May 2024, it is facing opposition from populist factions within its ranks and from the extreme left. These political forces are all decidedly anti-Western; they often accuse the U.S. and European countries of neocolonial bullying. South Africa’s reaction also relates to its status as a member of the BRICS alliance. South Africa is now the chair of BRICS and will host its annual summit this August in Johannesburg. This occasion could be a major test for South Africa, since it is a party to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court,

² African Youth Survey 2022, Ichikowitz Family Foundation

which has issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin. If past rulings are any guide, South African courts appear to agree with many international law experts that the government will be legally required to arrest Putin if he sets foot on South African territory. It remains to be seen whether Putin will attend the summit, and what the government will do if he does.³

President Cyril Ramaphosa's government is aware of the dangers its perceived pro-Russia policies pose to the country's economy. It has trod carefully to avoid being punished for transgressing sanctions against Russia, but it could in time lose the benefits of the U.S. African Growth and Opportunity Act, or AGOA. (The AGOA holds great value to South Africa since its exports to the U.S. under the act are worth about \$1.75 billion per annum.) To mitigate the situation, Ramaphosa has sent several special envoys to the U.S. to explain South Africa's position. The African peace initiative, led by Ramaphosa, which saw six African leaders visit Russia and Ukraine in June, could also be seen as one of the measures employed by South Africa to reinforce its non-aligned stance.

Despite the perceptions of South Africa as pro-Russian, it has maintained close diplomatic ties with the U.S. and Europe. South Africa has a strong constitution and a vibrant democracy. It promotes freedom of speech, inclusivity and non-discrimination on a continent where these principles are often under threat. South Africa is also the driver of regional economic development and of the African Continental Free Trade Area. It plays a leading role in the African Union and the Southern African Development Community, as well as in fighting militant jihadism in the region. Against this backdrop, it is hard to see how a strained relationship with Pretoria serves U.S. interests. To guard against that eventuality, the U.S. might consider following the example of Germany, which is South Africa's biggest European trade partner – continuing to engage economically and politically while respecting certain diplomatic boundaries.

Wagner in Africa

In a sense, Wagner was born in Ukraine. Yevgeny Prigozhin himself says its fighters took part in combat in the part of eastern Ukraine known as Donbas in 2014, though precisely what they were doing at the time is unclear, and Wagner as a company does not appear to have emerged until later. Wagner started to take the shape of the organisation it was until recently in Syria, where its forces supported the Assad regime's war effort. It expanded into certain African countries, too. As the group's footprint expanded outside Ukraine, certain common threads emerged. The group tends to thrive in unstable places where leaders harbor grievances about the West's perceived track record. Its influence activities are aligned with Moscow's interests and have been particularly effective in playing upon existing anti-Western sentiment and resentment of Washington's historical inattention to African politics. Wagner has thus been able to present itself as a no-holds-barred security provider to countries disappointed with traditional partners or lengthy but ineffective UN peacekeeping missions.

Countries that have hired Wagner value the group's flexibility and its willingness to actively engage in ground combat. Wagner senior operatives have also managed to

³ Mispa Roux, "The law is clear: Putin must be arrested if he sets foot in South Africa", *Daily Maverick*, 4 June 2023.

build close personal relationships with leaders. Overall, Wagner's flagrant indifference to international legal protections for civilians is not the reason that these governments hire it. But they are prepared to overlook the company's bad acts – because they feel that they have no other good option. Thus far, Wagner's reputation with the African states using its services has survived its reported abuses.

Wagner has thus far put boots on the ground in four African countries.

In Libya, a small number of Wagner personnel helped train Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's forces, which in 2018 and 2019 were fighting the internationally recognized government in Tripoli. In 2019, they supported Haftar's efforts to capture the Libyan capital. When that siege proved unsuccessful, they withdrew from Tripoli but continued to work with Haftar, notably by guarding military bases and oil facilities.⁴ Haftar reportedly paid Wagner directly through his own channels. At present, the number of Wagner fighters in Libya is believed to be in the hundreds, with many fighters reportedly having been redeployed elsewhere. According to military analysts and U.S. officials, however, Wagner continues to use Libya as a logistical hub for its activities elsewhere in Africa.⁵

In the Central African Republic, Wagner has between 1,500 and 2,000 fighters on the ground. Wagner's venture in the CAR has been its most successful to date, at least measured by its influence on the presidency and military as well as its business deals. In 2017, President Faustin-Archange Touadéra asked Russia to train and equip the country's armed forces, which were weak and unable to defend themselves from rebel groups embedded in the east. Along with weapons, Russia sent official military instructors who were then gradually replaced by Wagner personnel over the course of the next two years.

In 2020, Wagner fighters were instrumental in securing the president's hold on power as rebel forces threatened to sabotage elections and attack the capital. In exchange, Wagner secured long-term gold mining concessions, took over customs services and encroached on other sectors of the economy. While Central Africans welcomed the Russians at first, hailing them as liberators, many outside the capital now see Wagner as just one of many predatory militias that are primarily interested in the country's natural resources.

Earlier this month, hundreds of Wagner troops were rotated out of the country, fuelling speculation that their departure was linked to the revolt in Russia. But both Russian and Central African authorities have stated that Russia will continue to lend support, in line with the military agreement signed between the two countries some five years ago.

Wagner has also been active in Mali, a landlocked country that produces little else but gold. Bamako has struggled to quell an array of jihadist insurgencies since 2012 and its relations with its long-time partner, France, have soured as of late. Since the departure of the French stabilisation mission in August last year, Russia has become

⁴ Crisis Group interviews, Libyan politicians, diplomats, Tripoli and Benghazi, 2022.

⁵ Most flights from Syria reportedly touch down in Libya for refuelling before heading to other countries where Wagner operates. Crisis Group interviews, U.S. officials, Washington and Tunis, May 2023. See also Crisis Group Commentary, "Reuniting Libya, Divided Once More", 25 May 2022.

Mali's main foreign ally. It has sold the country helicopters and military equipment, and it has promised fertilizer and fuel supplies as well.⁶ Wagner has deployed over 1,000 mercenaries who protect key government figures and patrol alongside the army in the north of the country, where Islamic State in the Greater Sahara is increasingly venturing into territory held by the jihadist coalition JNIM. Bamako's political elite views Russia, and by extension Wagner, as preferable to other security partners – a sentiment evidenced by Mali's recent call for MINUSMA to withdraw.⁷

Finally, Wagner is also active in Sudan, although it appears to have limited influence on the country's unfortunate spiral into a full-blown civil war. Wagner first deployed there in 2017 to help bolster dictator Omar al-Bashir as Russia sought to negotiate rights to open a naval base on the Red Sea. Around the same time, a Prigozhin-owned company opened a gold processing plant in the country, which is one of Africa's major gold producers. After the army ousted Bashir, Wagner threw its weight behind army leader Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and his then-ally Mohamed "Hemedti" Hamdan Dagalo, head of the powerful paramilitary Rapid Support Forces. The group is now viewed as particularly connected to Hemedti and his vast gold operations. Even though Wagner has reportedly supplied Hemedti's forces with surface-to-air missiles at least once, its presence has thus far not influenced battlefield dynamics. Hemedti, for his part, appears keen to avoid public association with the group.⁸

How the U.S. Can Counter Wagner's Influence

The real issue for Washington and those of us who work on conflict resolution and stability in Africa is dealing with the circumstances that brought about Wagner's rise. Whatever happens to the Wagner Group, these underlying circumstances will likely remain at play. Crisis Group has written elsewhere about how Western (mainly European) countries should approach programming in African states where Wagner has gained a foothold. Recommendations include avoiding a rupture in relations, keeping military-to-military channels open and (in states that have experienced one or more coups) looking for ways to support a return to constitutional governance.¹ While some of these recommendations are specific to European donors, the overarching themes about maintaining relations and lines of communication offer guidance relevant to Washington as well.

We know that there is also a conversation in Washington about the prospect of designating Wagner a Foreign Terrorism Organization (FTO), even amid doubts about the group's present and future status. We believe an FTO designation would be the wrong move. It would be a hasty step considering the rapidly changing status of the group and its founder. Whether Wagner will continue its nefarious activities in Africa using the same logistical and commercial networks it has built up, or whether it will be subsumed by Russia's defence ministry and emerge in a different shape or form, is a matter of speculation at this time. Further, an FTO designation would be more likely to quash hope of constructive engagement with governments that rely on Wagner for security assistance – Mali and the Central African Republic – than to lead them to cut ties with the group. Indeed, an FTO designation is likely to be seen as confrontational

⁶ Tiemoko Diallo, "Mali says no need to justify Russia as partner as Lavrov visits", Reuters, 7 February 2023.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Malian military officers and government officials, Bamako, 2022.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Sudanese civil society figures and African, Arab and Western officials, 2022-2023.

in these countries, feeding impressions that the West sees African countries as pawns in a power struggle with Russia.

Designation could also jeopardise Washington's and other crisis response efforts in areas where Wagner has major operations. Businesses and financial institutions often respond to an FTO designation by pulling out from those locations, which tends to strain already fragile economies and drive up demand for assistance. At the same time, aid groups may stop operations for fear that the assistance they distribute is considered "material support" to an FTO.

The risks are of particular concern for countries benefiting from USAID funding. The agency provides millions of dollars in humanitarian and other assistance to Mali and the Central African Republic. It would face major complications if Wagner is listed as an FTO. The listing would make USAID support in the places Wagner operates difficult, expensive and bureaucratically burdensome – and less effective. Because, unlike with other sanctions, the U.S. government cannot use licenses to mitigate the effects of the material support statute, the potential workarounds would require congressional action. For instance, Congress might have to enact an exception such that humanitarian and peacebuilding activities would not count as "material support or resources". But even that measure might be insufficient for many important foreign organizations and businesses to bear the perceived risk of operating in Wagner's proximity.

While continuing to monitor the group's evolution, and steering clear of an FTO designation, the U.S. government should vigorously enforce existing sanctions that will hinder Wagner's access to its lifeline – international financial markets. The Transnational Criminal Organization designation imposed in January 2023 has already helped Washington induce both domestic and foreign agencies to work harder at addressing the group's illicit business activities. Should Wagner activities continue, this listing reinforces the message that the group is enriching itself by extracting gold and other natural resources. Continued communication to firms encouraging them to strengthen due diligence standards and stop trading in Wagner-mined minerals, lest they run afoul of U.S. sanctions, can also play a useful role.

Beyond the world of sanctions, Washington should seek to influence the circumstances that enabled Wagner's rise and relevance in Africa. As I said earlier, these conditions will be salient regardless of the Wagner Group's fate. One way the U.S. can help is by positively shaping the information environment Wagner and Russia have exploited. The U.S. can best do this by putting resources into improving the quality of independent local media in Africa. Russia, including through Wagner, has taken advantage of the African information environment to amplify existing grievances, polarize the public debate and increase its own standing. It has hired professional African journalists and social media influencers. Wagner has also disseminated copyright-free content to news websites and content aggregators and given syndication deals to content creators. A U.S. approach that offers financial and other support to independent African media could help confront dangerous influence operations like Wagner's. African voices are more credible than U.S. or Russian voices when it comes to shedding light on Wagner abuses.

Thank you for your attention today. I look forward to discussing this subject further and to answering your questions.