

Introduction

In 2025, the Wagner Group continues to occupy and concern a multitude of international security agencies. The various entities that have analyzed its nature agree that Wagner can be understood as a network of mercenaries and hybrid agents who carry out paramilitary operations for the benefit of Moscow's interests.

Actions aimed at combating this group have grown significantly in recent times. In early 2023, the US Treasury Department took the decision to classify and define the private military and security company Wagner as a transnational criminal organization. It was Rear Admiral John F. Kirby, then spokesperson for the US National Security Council, who announced that Washington was invoking Executive Order 13581, issued in 2011, to give its intelligence and security agencies greater capabilities and thus improve the tools available to curb Wagner's growing activities in different regions.

Along the same lines, since 2023, the European Union has progressively intensified its actions to contain and weaken the Wagner Group and its successor, the Africa Corps. In the legal and coercive sphere, the Council has expanded the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime, adding eleven individuals and seven entities linked to Wagner in February 2023 for human rights violations in the Central African Republic and Sudan, imposing asset freezes and travel bans¹. In April of that same year, both Wagner and the media outlet RIA FAN, an essential part of the pro-Russian media ecosystem, were included in the EU sanctions list for their role in the aggression against Ukraine². At the same time, the global human rights sanctions regime was extended until December 2026³. In October 2024, Brussels went a step further by creating a new specific framework against Russian hybrid activities such as cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, sabotage, and the exploitation of migrants, which opened the door to directly

¹ Council of the EU (2023a). Council imposes restrictive measures against the Wagner Group in view of its international activities. Press Release, February 25. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/02/25/wagner-group-council-adds-11-individuals-and-7-entities-to-eu-sanctions-lists> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

² Council of the EU (2023b). Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine: Wagner Group and RIA FAN added to the EU's sanctions list. Press Release, April 13. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/es/press/press-releases/2023/04/13/russia-s-war-of-aggression-against-ukraine-wagner-group-and-ria-fan-added-to-the-eu-s-sanctions-list> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

³ Council of the EU (2023c). Council prolongs EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime until December 8, 2026. Press Release, December 6. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2023/12/04/eu-global-human-rights-sanctions-regime-restrictive-measures-prolonged/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

sanctioning operators and networks of influence associated with Wagner in Africa⁴. These measures were complemented by the May and July 2025 sanctions packages against Russia, which tightened the noose around the financial, logistical, and propaganda networks also used in Africa⁵. Finally, the European Parliament has maintained political pressure by calling for Wagner to be included on the EU's list of terrorist organizations, underscoring the shared perception that it is a hybrid actor that combines paramilitary violence, resource plundering, and information manipulation with direct consequences for European security⁶.

These actions and legal efforts are motivated by a verifiable and extremely worrying fact: in recent years, specifically since the start of Russia's second invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the Wagner Group's presence has expanded into different areas of Africa, especially in the Sahelo-Saharan strip, causing considerable uncertainty in Europe due to its implications for international security⁷. This region, which includes countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has become, as noted in the Institute for Economics & Peace's Global Terrorism Index 2025 (GTI), a key arena where armed conflicts, terrorism, humanitarian crises, and an intense information war converge. Recent events, including a series of coups and the expulsion of Western missions, point to a decline in Western

⁴ Council of the EU (2024a). Council establishes a new framework for restrictive measures against hybrid threats. Press Release, October 8. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/10/08/russia-eu-sets-up-new-framework-for-restrictive-measures-against-those-responsible-for-destabilising-activities-against-the-eu-and-its-member-states/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁵ Council of the EU (2025a). Council sanctions 21 individuals and 6 entities in response to Russia's hybrid campaigns. Press Release, May 20. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/05/20/russian-hybrid-threats-eu-lists-further-21-individuals-and-6-entities-and-introduces-sectoral-measures-in-response-to-destabilising-activities-against-the-eu-its-member-states-and-international-partners/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

Council of the EU (2025b). Council adopts the 17th package of sanctions against Russia. Press Release, May 20. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: https://finance.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-adopts-17th-package-sanctions-against-russia-2025-05-20_en (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

Council of the EU (2025c). Council adopts the 18th package of sanctions against Russia. Press Release, July 18. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-adopts-18th-package-sanctions-against-russia-2025-07-18_en (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁶ European Parliament (2023). European Parliament resolution on the Wagner Group and its activities in Africa. Strasbourg: European Parliament, November 24. Available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2023-0423_EN.html (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷ DE LA CORTE IBÁÑEZ, L. (2022). What do we know about the Wagner Group? IEEE Research Paper 04/2022. Madrid: Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (Spanish Ministry of Defense). Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_investig/2022/DIEEEINV04_2022_LUICOR_Wagner.pdf (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

influence in Africa. While the European presence is waning, new asymmetric conflicts and new forms of *proxy wars* are emerging, with actors such as Wagner at the forefront⁸.

"The region has seen large changes in its conflict dynamics with an array of armed state and non-state actors waging war, controlling large swathes of territory and using resource extraction and illicit economies to advance their strategic goals. [...] The involvement of Africa Corps, formerly the Wagner Group, has exacerbated tensions. Despite the group's presence, attacks and deaths attributed to terrorism have remained prevalent in the region"⁹.

Two hypotheses guide this study: First, that Wagner acts as a Russian hybrid instrument whose objective is to destabilize the Sahel in order to threaten European security. Second, that Wagner exemplifies the decline of Western presence in the region, while new forms of proxy warfare emerge. Based on these two hypotheses, various dimensions of the problem will be examined in a balanced manner—paramilitary/security, demographic/humanitarian, informational/propaganda, as well as economic/natural resources—with specific references to the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, among others.

The aim is to link the severe disruptions that the Wagner phenomenon is causing in the Sahel with the direct and indirect implications for European security, paying particular attention to Spain as the southern border of the EU.

Spain and its European partners consider instability in the Sahel to be a direct threat: the region is already perceived as Europe's "forward frontier" in the south¹⁰. Throughout this article, we will argue how Wagner's activities in the Sahel—from paramilitary operations to disinformation campaigns and resource exploitation—pose a multidimensional threat to Europe.

Historical and conceptual framework

As noted by the Council of the European Union, the Wagner Group "is a private military company [...] based in Russia, created in 2014, led by Dimitriy Utkin and financed by

⁸ KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O., & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024). Wagner. Deconstruction. Kyiv: Come Back Alive Initiative Center. Available at: <https://savelife.in.ua/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁹ Institute for Economics & Peace (2025). Global Terrorism Index 2025: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism. Sydney: IEP. Available at: <https://www.economicsandpeace.org/global-terrorism-index/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁰ PUIG, O. (2020). The Sahel: Europe's other border. CIDOB International Note No. 230, July. Barcelona: CIDOB. Available at: <https://www.cidob.org/publicaciones/el-sahel-la-otra-frontera-de-europa> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

Yevgeniy Prigozhin"¹¹. The group was initially deployed covertly in eastern Ukraine and Syria, later evolving into an instrument of Russian foreign policy to exert influence on different continents¹². Although sometimes presented as an autonomous private military company, Wagner has always operated with the acquiescence and logistical support of the Russian state, serving as a front to act where the Kremlin prefers to maintain plausible deniability¹³. In practice, it is a form of hybrid warfare: Wagner combines paramilitary capabilities, illicit economic activities, and psychological or information operations, all outside the traditional channels of the regular armed forces¹⁴. This allows Moscow to project power in unstable regions without an official deployment, avoiding direct diplomatic commitments but obtaining strategic benefits¹⁵.

Historically, Africa has been a battleground for competition between powers. During the Cold War, the superpowers relied on local factions and developed so-called *proxy wars*. Today, the relative decline of Western presence, exemplified by the recent completion of many European operations, has opened up spaces that actors such as Russia have exploited through Wagner to fill the security vacuum¹⁶. Wagner acts as a highly politicized mercenary company that intervenes at the request of local governments, but for the geopolitical benefit of a third party¹⁷. This modality fits into Russia's strategy of non-linear warfare, where the boundaries between war and peace are blurred and non-state actors are used to weaken the influence of rivals¹⁸.

In the Sahel, local dynamics of instability—jihadist insurgencies, ethnic conflicts, state fragility—have provided an opportunity for Wagner to present itself as an "alternative" security provider following the erosion of Western intervention¹⁹. The military juntas in

¹¹ Ibid Council of the EU (2023a).

¹² Ibid, DE LA CORTE IBÁÑEZ, L. (2022).

¹³ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

¹⁴ GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Ó. (2024). Reinventing Wagner: Africa Corps arrives in the Sahel. IEEE Analysis Document 14/2024. Madrid: Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (Spanish Ministry of Defense). Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2024/DIEEEA14_2024_OSCGAR_Wagner_ENG.pdf (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁵ Ibid, DE LA CORTE IBÁÑEZ, L. (2022).

¹⁶ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

¹⁷ RONDEAUX, C. (2019). Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare. Washington D.C.: New America Foundation. Available at: <https://www.newamerica.org/future-security/reports/decoding-wagner-group-analyzing-role-private-military-security-contractors-russian-proxy-warfare/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁸ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

¹⁹ Ibid. GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Ó. (2024).

Mali and Burkina Faso, which emerged from coups in 2020-2022, embraced a discourse of anti-neocolonial sovereignty, expelling French troops and European missions while inviting "new partners" such as Russia to support them. In this narrative, Wagner embodies the unconditional democratic aid that these regimes sought, while Moscow capitalizes on the narrative of "liberation from the Western yoke" in Africa²⁰. This ideological framework—reinforced by disinformation campaigns—has facilitated Wagner's consolidation in the Sahel as a tool of Russian power, with worrying implications for Europe, which sees a strategic competitor gaining ground in its southern neighborhood.

Below, we will analyze in detail the different dimensions of the threat posed by Wagner in the Sahel, articulating how the paramilitary, demographic-humanitarian, informational-propagandistic, and economic aspects converge to affect European security, and in particular Spain as a gateway for the destabilizing effects coming from Africa.

Paramilitary and security dimension

The paramilitary dimension refers to the military and security operations carried out by Wagner and their impact on regional stability and, by extension, on European security. In Mali, Wagner's arrival in late 2021 brought about a drastic change in the security landscape. At the invitation of the military junta led by Colonel Assimi Goïta, some 1,000 Wagner mercenaries began operating in Mali with the stated mission of training the Malian Army (FAMa) and support the fight against rebel and jihadist groups—such as the Tuareg militias of Azawad or franchises of Daesh and Al-Qaeda—that ravage the north and center of the country²¹. In their first months of activity, Malian forces advised by Wagner managed to regain control of up to 44% of the territory in conflict zones in the center-north²², an advance that the Bamako government presented as a success. However, these operations were accompanied by accusations of brutal human rights violations. Numerous reports documented massacres of civilians allegedly perpetrated in joint FAMa-Wagner operations, notably the March 2022 massacre in *Moura*, where

²⁰ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

hundreds of inhabitants of a village suspected of harboring jihadists were reportedly summarily executed²³.

"The Malian armed forces and their foreign allies from the Wagner Group illegally executed 500 or more people during the siege of the town of Moura between March 27 and 31, 2022. It also documents the cases of 58 women and girls who suffered sexual violence at the hands of Malian military personnel"²⁴.

The UN even called for investigations into possible war crimes committed by "foreign military elements"²⁵ in Mali, in a clear reference to Wagner. The human cost of the anti-jihadist campaign, with its expeditious methods, led several international partners to suspend their support for Mali, accelerating the withdrawal of French troops and the UN peacekeeping mission MINUSMA²⁶. By 2023, France had completed its withdrawal and the UN mission was expelled by the Malian authorities, leaving the monopoly of foreign military assistance in the hands of Russia²⁷.

In Burkina Faso, a similar trajectory unfolded a year later. Following two military coups in 2022 motivated by deteriorating security in the face of jihadist, the junta led by Ibrahim Traoré adopted an openly hostile stance toward the former French metropolis and broke off military cooperation with Paris²⁸. In early 2023, Ouagadougou demanded the departure of French special forces stationed in the country, coinciding with mass anti-French protests in the capital, often waving Russian flags. In this context, Wagner emerged as the preferred partner to fill the security vacuum: while Russian mercenaries arrived discreetly in Burkina Faso at the end of 2022 to assess the situation, by early 2023 they had already been integrated as instructors for local units²⁹. Wagner's main

²³ Human Rights Watch (2022). Mali: Massacre by Army, Foreign Soldiers. HRW Report, April 5. New York: Human Rights Watch. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/05/mali-massacre-army-foreign-soldiers> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

²⁴ Amnesty International (2023). Burkina Faso: Responsibility of the army indicated in Karma massacre. AI report on the Karma massacre, April 20. London: Amnesty International. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/05/burkina-faso-la-responsabilite-des-forces-speciales-de-larmee-pointee-dans-le-massacre-de-karma/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

²⁵ United Nations (2023). Situation in Mali – Report of the Secretary-General. UN Security Council, S/2023/236, March 30. New York: United Nations. Available at: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4012519> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

²⁶ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

²⁷ Ibid. GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Ó. (2024).

²⁸ International Crisis Group (2023). Reversing Niger's Unravelling. ICG Africa Report No. 318, August 3. Brussels: International Crisis Group. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/unravelling-coup-niger> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

²⁹ Reuters (2024). Russian troops deploy to Burkina Faso – security sources. Reuters, January 25. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/russian-troops-deploy-burkina-faso-2024-01-25/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

mission in Burkina Faso has been to train the armed forces in counterinsurgency tactics and provide direct security for the Traoré regime, including personal protection for the transitional president³⁰. As in Mali, the takeover by paramilitaries and mercenaries has led to a hardening of military operations: the media, international observers, and human rights organizations have reported a sharp increase in extrajudicial executions of civilians suspected of collaborating with insurgents. A tragic example is the Karma massacre in April 2023, where Burkinabe soldiers killed at least 150 civilians in retaliation for a jihadist ambush; some testimonies suggested the possible presence of "foreign instructors"³¹ in the operation, although this has not been verified.

"Wagner fighters, in collaboration with local armed groups, have been accused of committing serious human rights violations in Mali. Human Rights Watch claims that Russian mercenaries and the Malian armed forces have summarily executed and forcibly disappeared several dozen civilians since December 2022"³².

The truth is that the spiral of violence in Burkina has not been contained: armed groups continued to advance and control large rural areas, contributing to the country recording the highest number of deaths from terrorism in the world in 2023³³. Wagner's failure to provide sustainable security, coupled with the atrocities committed, raises serious questions about whether its presence actually improves the situation or exacerbates it, an issue of direct relevance to European security given the risk that an even more ungovernable Sahel could become a sanctuary for transnational terrorism.

In Niger, Wagner's influence was more indirect but equally disturbing. Niamey was until recently the main Western ally in the region, hosting French and US bases crucial to the fight against terrorism in the Sahel. However, the military coup in July 2023 overthrew the elected president Mohamed Bazoum—a key pro-Western figure—and installed a junta that broke with France and moved closer to Moscow in its rhetoric³⁴. Although Wagner

³⁰ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

³¹ Amnesty International (2023). Mali: The perpetrators of the killings in Moura must be prosecuted and tried before a competent court. News Release, May 3. London: Amnesty International. Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/es/latest/news/2023/05/mali-les-auteurs-des-tueries-a-moura-doivent-etre-poursuivis-et-juges-devant-un-tribunal-competent> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

³² ASKEW, J. (2023). Executions, torture, and looting: Russian Wagner mercenaries accused of abuses in Africa. Euronews, July 25. Available at: <https://es.euronews.com/2023/07/25/ejecuciones-torturas-y-saqueos-los-mercenarios-rusos-de-wagner-acusados-de-abusos-en-afric> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

³³ Institute for Economics and Peace (2023). Global Terrorism Index 2023: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism. Sydney: IEP. Available at: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/resources/global-terrorism-index-2023> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

³⁴ Ibid, International Crisis Group (2023).

initially had no formal presence in Niger, the new leaders welcomed its offer of "cooperation." In fact, after the coup, popular demonstrations took place in Niamey, with people waving Russian flags and chanting slogans in favor of Vladimir Putin and Wagner, in a repeat of the script seen in Mali and Burkina³⁵. Various sources reported that the junta requested Wagner's support to consolidate its power in the face of possible interventions by the Economic Community of West African States³⁶. By the end of 2023, there was no confirmation of Wagner fighters deployed in Niger³⁷. However, in early 2024, Russia sent official military contingents under the new label of Africa Corps to carry out training and equipment provision missions in Niger, demonstrating Russia's continued interest³⁸. The total expulsion of French troops from Niger in the fall of 2023 dealt a severe blow to the European position in the Sahel: the last Western base in the Mali-Burkina-Niger triangle was lost, implying a considerable degradation of preventive surveillance and counterterrorism capabilities in the Sahelian strip. From a European perspective, this loss of strategic access to Niger—a pivotal country between the Sahel and the Mediterranean—increases vulnerability to threats that may emerge from an uncontrolled Sahel, whether it be the proliferation of jihadist groups or the expansion of criminal networks that could directly reach Maghreb and European territory.

It should be noted that Wagner's transition to the Africa Corps—as the official expeditionary force of the Russian Ministry of Defense created after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023—has not led to a reduction in paramilitary risk, but rather to its formalization. Following Prigozhin's suspicious death in August 2023, Moscow acted quickly to absorb Wagner's operations in Africa under direct state command in order to avoid losing influence³⁹. The Africa Corps brand began to be used to identify Russian contingents in the Sahel: in Mali, elements of the original Wagner were gradually replaced or reincorporated under this new structure during 2024, coming under the control of the Russian Ministry of Defense⁴⁰. Similarly, in January 2024, a first contingent of 100 Africa

³⁵ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

³⁶ RFI (2023). In Niger, protesters wave Russian flags in Niamey. Radio France Internationale, July 30. Available at: <https://www.rfi.fr/es/afrika/20230730-n%C3%ADger-manifestantes-atacan-embajada-de-francia-y-colocan-banderas-rusas> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

³⁷ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

³⁸ BBC News (2024). Russian troops arrive in Niger as military agreement begins. BBC News, April 12. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68796359> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

³⁹ Ibid. GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Ó. (2024).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Corps troops arrived in Burkina Faso to relieve Wagner contractors and establish a permanent military base near Ouagadougou⁴¹. This process confirms that Russia does not intend to withdraw from the Sahel, but rather to consolidate a permanent paramilitary presence, albeit now without the ambiguity of a private company: these are practically official forces operating in support of like-minded regimes⁴². For Europe, this fact exacerbates the geopolitical dimension of the problem because it is no longer facing only uncontrolled mercenaries, but the direct projection of Russian power in its southern neighborhood, with all the implications that this entails in terms of strategic rivalry.

In short, Wagner's security dimension in the Sahel reveals a disturbing paradox: under the promise of combating terrorism and stabilizing local governments, Wagner has contributed to weakening international peace efforts, exacerbating violence against civilians, and strengthening military regimes that were previously isolated. This situation has a negative impact on European security. A more unstable Sahel could become a hotbed of terrorist threats against European interests, as is already feared with the possible creation of jihadist sanctuaries free from Western pressure⁴³. Furthermore, the hostile presence of Russian-linked forces in the region hinders any eventual return of European missions and may trigger an escalation of East-West tensions in Africa, adding a southern front to European security concerns traditionally focused on the eastern flank.

Demographic and humanitarian dimension

The demographic and humanitarian dimension refers to the impact on the civilian population and migratory movements resulting from destabilization in the Sahel, phenomena closely linked to European security given that Europe is affected by refugee crises, irregular immigration, and humanitarian tragedies on its periphery. Wagner's actions and the dynamics of the conflicts in which it intervenes have a pronounced effect on the local population: civilian casualties, mass displacement, food crises, and human rights crises.

In Mali, after a decade of conflict, the humanitarian situation is critical, and Wagner's presence has introduced new layers of complexity. Brutal military operations, such as the

⁴¹ Ibid, Reuters (2024).

⁴² Ibid. GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Ó. (2024).

⁴³ Ibid, Council of the EU (2023c).

afore mentioned Moura massacre, not only result in direct human losses but also instill terror in entire communities, causing thousands of families to flee their villages for fear of indiscriminate reprisals⁴⁴. Compounding this, the withdrawal of international peacekeeping forces (MINUSMA) at the end of 2023, forced by the Malian government and coinciding with Wagner's expansion, left many populations without protection or basic assistance⁴⁵. Several northern towns that depended on the presence of blue helmets saw fighting resume between the army and Tuareg rebels as UN troops left, causing further displacement and hardship for the civilian population. According to UNHCR, the number of internally displaced persons in Mali exceeds 400,000, while another 160,000 Malians have sought refuge in neighboring countries, figures that have tended to rise with the deterioration of security⁴⁶. If left unaddressed, these flows of displaced persons could turn into transcontinental migrations if the situation does not improve, as desperate people are setting out on the route north, with Europe as their final destination.

The case of Burkina Faso is even more dramatic in demographic terms. Jihadist violence combined with a relentless military response has created one of the worst internal displacement crises in the world. By the end of 2023, it was estimated that more than 2 million Burkinabés were internally displaced, nearly 10% of the population, an exponential increase since 2018⁴⁷. In 2022-2023 alone, periods marked by coups and the arrival of Wagner, hundreds of thousands of new displaced persons were added. Entire communities in the north and east of the country have fled rural areas beset by jihadist massacres or military offensives that do not distinguish well between combatants and civilians⁴⁸. In addition, hunger looms over many areas: food insecurity is exacerbated because violence prevents harvests and hinders the delivery of humanitarian aid. The World Food Programme warned that in 2023 more than 3.4 million people in Burkina needed urgent food assistance, a situation aggravated by the restrictions imposed on

⁴⁴ Ibid, Human Rights Watch (2022).

⁴⁵ Ibid, United Nations (2023).

⁴⁶ UNHCR (2023). Mali situation. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/mali> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁴⁷ OCHA - United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (2023). Burkina Faso: Humanitarian Response Plan 2023. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. Available at: <https://fts.unocha.org/plans/1112/summary> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁴⁸ Human Rights Watch (2023). Burkina Faso: Army Linked to Massacre of Civilians. HRW News, May 24. New York: Human Rights Watch. Available at: : <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/04/burkina-faso-army-linked-massacre-156-civilians> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

international NGOs by the authorities⁴⁹. This humanitarian deterioration has ramifications for Europe: firstly, as a matter of values and commitments, given that the EU and its member states are major aid donors in the Sahel. Secondly, because the collapse of living conditions may translate into additional migratory pressure towards the north. An increase in Burkinabe refugees crossing into coastal countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana has already been observed. If these inland routes become saturated or conditions worsen, it cannot be ruled out that more people will attempt to reach North Africa and eventually Europe in search of safety.

Focusing on Niger, it should be emphasized that this country plays a key and crucial role in regional migration transit. Before the 2023 coup, Niger cooperated with the EU to control migration flows along the trans-Saharan route. Following the break with the West, there are fears that Niamey will relax migration control measures or even use them as a tool to exert pressure, knowing that the EU values this cooperation⁵⁰. Leading security think tanks such as the International Center for Counter- r Terrorism, the Rand Corporation, and the French Institute of International Relations have warned that General Abdourahamane Tchiani—former leader of the military junta and current president of the country—and the Wagner Group are using migrants as a weapon: Russia and its local allies are not preventing new and more acute migratory flows from crossing the Sahel to Libya or the Maghreb, which is leading to a worrying increase in the arrival of migrants on European shores, in turn generating political and social tensions in the EU⁵¹. Although most migratory movements in West Africa remain intracontinental—with 90% of West African migrants remaining in Africa⁵² - even a small increase in the 10% heading to Europe has a major media and political impact in European countries.

Spain, in particular, is on the front line of reception on the Western Mediterranean migration route. Ten years after the irregular immigration crisis resulting from the war in

⁴⁹ World Food Program WFP (2023). Burkina Faso Country Brief – June 2023. Rome: World Food Programme. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/burkina-faso/wfp-burkina-faso-country-brief-june-2023> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁵⁰ BISIAUX, N. (2023). Niger coup: A blow to EU migration policy in the Sahel. European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), Policy Note, August. Available at: <https://ecre.org/eu-external-partners-niger-coup-detat-halts-migration-cooperation-as-frontex-head-expresses-reluctance-on-senegal-and-mauritania-deployments-deadly-natural-disasters-in-morocco-and-libya-tunisia/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁵¹ RAMANI, S. (2023). Russia's Messaging on Niger Coup Resonates in West Africa. Foreign Policy, August 4. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/author/samuel-ramani/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁵² Ibid, PUIG, O. (2020).

Syria, Spain, as the EU member state most exposed to this liquid phenomenon⁵³, is witnessing a massive increase in arrivals from the Sahel or coastal countries hosting refugees from the Sahel⁵⁴. This can be seen in the dramatic increase in arrivals in the Balearic and Canary Islands from Senegal, Gambia, and Mauritania following instability in Mali and Burkina Faso, with migrants indirectly fleeing regional insecurity.

"With the publication of the latest report on irregular immigration by the Ministry of the Interior, it can be seen that the Canary Islands are once again breaking records. For another month, the figures for 2024 exceed those for 2023 in the same period. While last year 14,967 irregular migrants arrived on the islands in the first nine months of the year, in 2024 the figure is 105.7% higher, reaching 30,808"⁵⁵.

Another crucial demographic aspect is the explosive population growth in the Sahel region, which is double or triple the global average, in contrast to a declining state capacity to provide services. This demographic time bomb, combined with the climate crisis that is causing desertification and chronic conflicts, paints a picture of millions of young people without opportunities, a potential breeding ground for mass migration or terrorist radicalization⁵⁶. If Wagner and the regimes it supports do not contribute to stabilizing and offering minimal prospects to this population, it is more than likely that in the very near future Europe will face even more severe waves of migration and humanitarian crises on its periphery. The human security of the inhabitants of the Sahel is intrinsically linked to European security: not only because of migration, but also because despair and social collapse can translate into new transnational risks and threats that directly affect the European continent.

Finally, from a humanitarian perspective, Wagner's arrival has coincided with a decline in human rights and freedoms in the countries where it operates. The presence of mercenaries is often accompanied by harassment of journalists and international NGOs, preventing them from documenting abuses. For example, in Mali, the head of human rights at MINUSMA was expelled and access for UN investigators has been restricted

⁵³ BAUMAN, Z. (2015). *Liquid Surveillance*. Barcelona: Austral.

⁵⁴ Frontex (2023). *Risk Analysis for 2023*. Warsaw: European Border and Coast Guard Agency. Available at: https://www.frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/General/ARA_2023.pdf (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁵⁵ ALCÁNTARA, M. (2024). The Canary Islands break records for irregular immigration with 105.7% more arrivals than in 2023. *El Mundo*, October 1. Available at: <https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2024/10/01/66fc06d3e4d4d8e3718b45a4.html> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁵⁶ GAZAPO LAPAYESE, M. (2018). *Daesh: global and local terrorism halfway between the physical and the virtual*. Madrid: Complutense University of Madrid. Available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14352/17259> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

following reports of atrocities⁵⁷. In the Central African Republic, where Wagner has been operating since 2018, international organizations have reported widespread sexual violence and summary executions linked to these mercenaries⁵⁸. This pattern could be replicated in the Sahel: Wagner's impunity weakens the primary and limited accountability systems and undermines the rule of law, causing long-term damage to the social fabric. Europe, which promotes democratic values and human rights in its neighborhood, sees its efforts frustrated and faces the dilemma of how to protect the civilian population from a distance, without a presence on the ground due to the hostility of Wagner-backed regimes.

In short, the demographic and humanitarian dimension show that Wagner's influence in the Sahel has a tragic human face: it is counted in lost lives, displaced communities, and broken hopes. For Europe, the consequences materialize in potential refugee crises, migration challenges, and moral and legal obligations to respond to humanitarian emergencies in its neighborhood. Furthermore, the exploitation of human suffering as a political weapon—whether through the promotion of migratory flows or anti-Western narratives based on colonial grievances—poses a complex challenge that transcends traditional security, placing it on the level of human security and Europe's social and political resilience in the face of external impacts.

Informational and propaganda dimension

As noted in the document *Innovative technologies shaping the 2040 battlefield*, developed in 2021 at the request of the European Parliament's Panel for the Future of Science and Technology (STOA), the contemporary evolution of warfare has expanded its domains beyond the physical realm to incorporate the cognitive dimension, in which the human mind becomes a strategic space for confrontation. In this new framework, the Wagner Group is a paradigmatic example of how hybrid actors use cognitive warfare to complement their traditional military operations.

Beyond its participation in combat in scenarios such as Mali or Ukraine, Wagner has deployed systematic disinformation and propaganda campaigns designed to manipulate

⁵⁷ Ibid, United Nations (2023).

⁵⁸ UN Human Rights Council (2021). Report of the Independent Expert on the situation of human rights in the Central African Republic. A/HRC/48/60, August 12. Geneva: United Nations. Available at: <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/48/60> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

perceptions, shape narratives, and erode the internal cohesion of societies inhabiting the Sahel-Saharan strip and throughout Africa. Technological expansion and information saturation make individuals and communities particularly vulnerable to this type of operation, where cultural manipulation, the exploitation of social media, and the spread of fake news act as weapons of psychological attrition.

As stated in the NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept, cognitive warfare is characterized by its subtlety and the cumulative effects it generates in the medium and long term: it does not seek immediate victories on the battlefield, but rather the progressive transformation of attitudes, beliefs, and social responses⁵⁹. In this context, every citizen can become, consciously or unconsciously, a vector for the transmission of strategic information, giving Wagner and its sponsors invaluable access to the social intelligence of open societies, such as Western democracies.

The specific case of Wagner/Africa Corps clearly illustrates how cognitive warfare can achieve far-reaching strategic effects. By eroding trust in institutions, exacerbating social divisions, and spreading an alternative narrative favorable to Russia, these tactics are reshaping the global security environment and pose a direct challenge to Europe's political, informational, and cultural stability.

The informational dimension—information warfare, narrative, propaganda, and media influence—exerted around Wagner's operations is an intangible front that has been and remains central to Russia's strategy to gain local support in Africa and erode the legitimacy of the Western presence, constituting a key element of the hybrid threat. In the Sahel, the battle for the narrative has accompanied every step of Wagner's intervention, with tangible effects on the attitudes of the population and the political decisions of governments in the region.

One of the pillars of Russian influence has been the creation and dissemination of an "anti-imperialist" and pro-Russian narrative that resonates with latent postcolonial sentiment. Through social media, allied local media, and covert campaigns, the idea has been spread that France and the West failed in the Sahel, and even deliberately fueled instability, while Russia—and Wagner as its arm—come as true, selfless liberators. In

⁵⁹ NATO (2021). NATO Warfighting Capstone Concept. Norfolk, VA: Allied Command Transformation. Available at: <https://www.act.nato.int/our-work/nato-warfighting-capstone-concept/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

Mali, before and during Wagner's arrival, multiple websites and countless Facebook profiles and Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, Telegram, V Kontakte, and Odnoklassniki accounts of dubious origin emerged, accusing France of supporting terrorist groups or plundering resources, while praising cooperation with Russia⁶⁰. This campaign succeeded in changing the stance of large sectors of Malian public opinion in record time: in 2019, the majority viewed the French presence against jihadism favorably; by 2021-2022, after the propaganda barrage, many voices supported the expulsion of Barkhane and the entry of "Russian friends". The popular demonstrations in Bamako with Russian flags and anti-France banners in 2022, carefully orchestrated on social media by, provided the military regime with the "proof" of social legitimacy it needed to reorient its alliances⁶¹.

This information machinery in the Sahel did not arise spontaneously. War correspondents, research entities specializing in cyber operations such as Logically, and media outlets such as the BBC, RFI, NPR, and Libération have uncovered and denounced the involvement of international disinformation operators linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin's circle. In many other cases, a key player in this regard was Luc Michel, a Belgian national who, until his death in April 2025, maintained close ties with the ultra-radical Russian ideologue Alexander Dugin and ran the so-called African "Russosphere," a network of front NGOs, websites, and profiles that disseminated pro-Russian content in French throughout West Africa⁶². As referenced in the Come Back Alive Foundation's *Wagner Deconstruction* report, Michel coordinated campaigns in Mali and Burkina Faso to amplify pro-Wagner messages⁶³.

It's the latest example of how influence campaigns connected to Russia capitalize on political divisions—a continuation of the tactics the Kremlin used during the 2016 U.S. presidential election. And it shows how social media remains a potent channel to spread pro-Russian messages, even as the big technology platforms have tried to crack down on manipulation and state-backed propaganda [...] The majority of Michel's operations in Africa promote pan-Africanism and anti-colonialist sentiment as a rallying point to support

⁶⁰ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

⁶¹ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

⁶² ATANESIAN, G. (2023). Russia in Africa: How disinformation operations target the continent. BBC News, February 1. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-64451376> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁶³ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

Michel's central thesis: that African countries would benefit from distancing themselves from their European colonizers and developing closer ties with Russia"⁶⁴.

"Luc Michel, a self-proclaimed political activist with a history of engaging in operations targeting Africa with pro-Russian online content. These operations widen their scope to target French speakers [...] The nexus of these individuals with known platforms espousing extremist and often Russia-associated propaganda and misinformation, indicates the potential that Russia-state affiliated misinformation campaigns are being directly or indirectly expanded to target specific U.S. communities, in addition to influence operations in Africa [...] Michel has since engaged in influence operations in Libya, Central African Republic, Chad, Equatorial Guinea, and Burundi. Gaining more than 78,000 followers and subscribers across platforms"⁶⁵.

Similarly, the "All Eyes on Wagner" project documented intensive use of fake accounts and AI-generated content in Burkina Faso to spread anti-French fake news to praise Russia⁶⁶. This technological innovation—deepfake videos, manipulated photos, etc.—has added a layer of apparent credibility to propaganda, deceiving local audiences with sophisticated disinformation. The cumulative effect has been the radicalization of public opinion against the West in countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso: community leaders, opinion leaders on social media, young people, and even the local press now replicate this narrative, in many cases without distinguishing between genuine patriotic sentiment and foreign manipulation.

"Since March 2022, media affiliated with Evgeni Prigozhin has spread anti-colonialist narratives, amplified demonstrations and messages of support for the war led by Russia in Ukraine. Research has shown how persistent Russian influence operations are and aligned on key political moments in Burkina Faso [...] The anatomy of the pro-Russian influence campaign shows that the techniques include: the production and dissemination of impactful videos via fake accounts or by relying on highly followed political influencers; micro-targeting or the use of Facebook advertising to deliver anti-Western messages to Burkinabè audiences; the call to demonstrate which is relayed via advertisements, copy-pasted messages, and relayed via groups by fake accounts created recently; the creation of networks of fake news pages to relay anti-Western messages, favorable to Russia and in favor of the Transitional government"⁶⁷.

⁶⁴ BOND, S. (2023). A pro-Russian social media campaign is trying to influence politics in Africa. NPR, February 1. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2023/02/01/1152899845/a-pro-russian-social-media-campaign-is-trying-to-influence-politics-in-africa> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁶⁵ WALTER, K. & BACKOVIC, K. (2023). Kremlin-tied propagandists approved to target African audiences expand influence ops to U.S. Logically Investigations, 1 February. Available at: https://logically-web.cdn.prismic.io/logically-web/aDmb8SdWJ-7kSu-3_LI_investigations_kremlin_tied_propogandists_approved_web_download.pdf (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁶⁶ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

⁶⁷ All Eyes on Wagner (2023). Burkina Faso under influence. February 5. Available at: <https://alleyesonwagner.org/2023/02/05/burkina-faso-under-influence/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

Wagner has also invested in psychological operations on the ground: distributing aid with extensive media coverage and Russian branding, public relations campaigns to improve its image or demonize opponents. Just as Syria was the theater of operations that Putin used to implement the strategies he is now applying in Ukraine, Wagner established a laboratory in the Central African Republic to test the effectiveness of its information tactics. There, they established sympathetic media outlets such as *Radio Lengo Songo*, which, thanks to funding from Lobaye Invest—a front company used by Wagner to make investments in Africa—broadcasts pro-Russian propaganda and attacks media outlets critical of the mercenary presence.

"Despite focusing on the strategic dimension, Wagner tailored its effort to the local environment. In the CAR, where social media platforms are not as popular as in Mali, its main vehicle has been Radio Lengo Songo, created in 2018 by political strategist Igor Mangushev, in Bangui. It continues to operate and is very popular in the CAR"⁶⁸.

Similar tactics can be observed in the Sahel: in Mali, a highly controlled information space was created where the military authorities, advised by Russian strategists, expelled journalists from French media outlets belonging to RFI and Jeune Afrique, accusing them of spreading fake news, closed or censored international radio stations, and since then have only promoted the government's version of events. Thus, following events that were reported in the international press, such as allegations of the Moura massacre, a denialist counter-narrative is immediately deployed: the Malian government, supported by a swarm of Russian bots, categorically denied any civilian casualties, describing all those killed as "203 neutralized terrorists"⁶⁹ and accusing those who reported otherwise of being "instruments of foreign powers"⁷⁰. This type of information distortion hinders the work of international organizations and obscures the truth, but above all, it reinforces the local perception that Wagner and its allied armies are heroic and effective, while any collateral damage is enemy propaganda.

"While the Russian state was Wagner's top client in terms of information campaigns, these rapidly evolved into joint ventures with African politicians and activists. Not only did

⁶⁸ GIUSTOZZI, A. & LEWIS, D. (2024). Did Wagner Group prove an effective tool for Russian foreign policy? London: Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), December 9. Available at: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/external-publications/did-wagner-group-prove-effective-tool-russian-foreign-policy> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁶⁹ Jeune Afrique (2022). Mali: "A dozen terrorists" killed, including a Franco-Tunisian. Jeune Afrique, January 25. Available at: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1339738/politique/mali-une-douzaine-de-terroristes-tues-dont-un-franco-tunisien/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷⁰ Ibid, Jeune Afrique (2022).

Wagner's media team and the Russian telecommunications ministry cooperate closely, they also collaborated with African politicians, who were willing to contribute to a daily expenditure of up to \$3,000–3,500 on influencers and social media supporters. Wagner alone had a budget of \$35,000 per month to spend on influencers, YouTubers, and others on social media"⁷¹.

For Europe, this information dimension is no minor issue, as it erodes its influence and reputation on the African continent and beyond. The narrative promoted by Russia portrays Europe as a hypocritical, weak, and decadent actor, undermining decades of European diplomatic and cultural efforts in Africa. Countries that traditionally cooperated with the EU in the areas of governance and development now distrust Western intentions, partly because of this propaganda. A tangible example is how Mali and Burkina Faso have rejected aid or expelled European NGOs on grounds of "sovereignty," even to the detriment of their own needy populations, prioritizing an alliance with Russia that propaganda has sold them as more respectful and effective⁷². Furthermore, as warned by the European External Action Service (EEAS) from the perspective of European security, Wagner's disinformation campaigns have an undeniable impact within Europe⁷³. As was the case in Spain with the Catalonia crisis, in the Georgian elections, in the German electoral processes, or in the French elections, it cannot be ruled out that the Russian hacktivist group *NoName057(16)* or the same influence apparatus operating in Africa will attempt to influence European audiences to exacerbate, for example, political divisions around immigration or foreign interventions.

In fact, Prigozhin publicly admitted his interference in Western electoral processes⁷⁴, and the so-called "troll farms" associated with him have been detected on European social

⁷¹ GIUSTOZZI, A., DE DEUS PEREIRA, J., & LEWIS, D. (2025). Did Wagner Succeed? In the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients. Whitehall Report, January 9. London: Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Available at: <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/whitehall-reports/did-wagner-succeed-eyes-its-african-and-middle-eastern-clients> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷² DW (2023). Burkina Faso and Mali want to unite. Deutsche Welle, February 2. Available at: <https://www.dw.com/fr/burkina-faso-mali-assimi-go%C3%AFta-ibrahim-traor%C3%A9-lutte-contre-le-djihadisme-vdp/a-64594822> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷³ FUENTE COBO, I. (2025). The Russian obsession: disinformation and propaganda in the Sahel. Opinion Paper, Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE) – Spanish Ministry of Defense, June 4. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieeee/la_obsesion_rusa_desinformacion_y_propaganda_en_el_sahel (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷⁴ PAVLOVA, U. (2022). Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin appears to admit Russian interference in US elections. CNN en Español, November 7. Available at: <https://cnnspanol.cnn.com/2022/11/07/oligarca-ruso-yevgeny-prigozhin-injerencia-rusa-elecciones-ee-uu-trax> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

networks spreading ultra-nationalist or anti-immigration messages⁷⁵. In the context of the Sahel, there are fears that the exploitation of potential migration or humanitarian crises will be accompanied by disinformation campaigns in Europe, for example, spreading alarmist news or images taken out of context to sow panic about a supposed migration invasion, which would fuel populist forces and could politically destabilize European countries.

"Through hybrid strategies that include media manipulation, the promotion of narratives of European decline, and climate or migration disinformation, they seek to erode public confidence in institutions and fuel extremism to legitimize their authoritarian models and reconfigure the international order to their advantage"⁷⁶.

"The spread of disinformation campaigns has been greatly accentuated since Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. The Kremlin continues to opportunistically promote these campaigns against Spain, Europe, and the West [...] The Russian government maintains among its priorities disinformation operations that specifically target Africa, Latin America, and Asia, with the aim of counteracting Western influence and advancing its vision of a multipolar world. To this end, it promotes work with proxies and has significantly increased agreements between Russian state agencies and local media in Latin American and African countries [...] the Kremlin has chosen to prioritize social media campaigns, in the development and dissemination of which has taken on particular importance with the use of AI tools, whose gradual improvement and optimization have led to a qualitative and quantitative leap in the dissemination of massive and almost instantaneous disinformation"⁷⁷.

Finally, Russian propaganda in Africa also seeks diplomatic alignments: thanks to these strategies, Russia has garnered support or at least neutrality from many African countries in critical UN votes, such as those relating to resolutions on Ukraine. Mali, the Central African Republic, Sudan, and other states where Wagner has a presence tend to abstain or vote against measures condemning Russia⁷⁸. This indicates that the information battle has repercussions on international cohesion in the face of aggression or principles of the global order. A Sahel under Wagner's narrative could become a bloc of Moscow's allies

⁷⁵ YANG, Z. (2022). China is copying Russia's election interference playbook. MIT Technology Review, November 9. Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/2022/11/09/1062966/china-twitter-russia-misinformation-chip/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷⁶ MAUC – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union, and Cooperation (2025). Spain's Foreign Action Strategy 2025–2028. Madrid: Government of Spain, Minister's Office, Strategy and Prospective Division. Available at: https://www.exteriores.gob.es/es/PoliticaExterior/Documents/EAE_2025-2028/Estrategia_Espa%F1ol.pdf (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷⁷ DSN – Department of National Security (2025). 2024 Annual National Security Report. Madrid: Office of the Presidency of the Government, April. Available at: <https://www.dsn.gob.es/sites/default/files/2025-05/IASN2024%20ACCESIBLE.pdf> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁷⁸ Ibid, RAMANI, S. (2023).

in international forums, hindering European initiatives on issues such as human rights, sanctions, or multilateral counterterrorism, which undermines collective security.

In short, the informational dimension shows how Wagner has gained control of minds and territories in the Sahel through the combined use of bullets and narratives. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies has warned on numerous occasions that the effectiveness of its anti-Western and pro-Russian propaganda represents a strategic challenge for Europe: reversing adverse perceptions and countering disinformation is a complex but essential task if it intends to reestablish a constructive influence in the region.

"The proliferation of disinformation is a fundamental challenge to stable and prosperous African societies. The scope of these intentional efforts to distort the information environment for a political end is accelerating. The 189 documented disinformation campaigns in Africa are nearly quadruple the number reported in 2022 [...] Disinformation campaigns have directly driven deadly violence, promoted and validated military coups, cowed civil society members into silence, and served as smokescreens for corruption and exploitation. This has had real-world consequences for diminishing Africans' rights, freedoms, and security. [...] Russia continues to be the primary purveyor of disinformation in Africa, sponsoring 80 documented campaigns, targeting more than 22 countries. This represents nearly 40 percent of all disinformation campaigns in Africa [...] Russia has promulgated disinformation to undermine democracy in at least 19 African countries, contributing to the continent's backsliding on this front"⁷⁹.

⁷⁹ ACSS – Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2024). Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa. Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, March 13. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

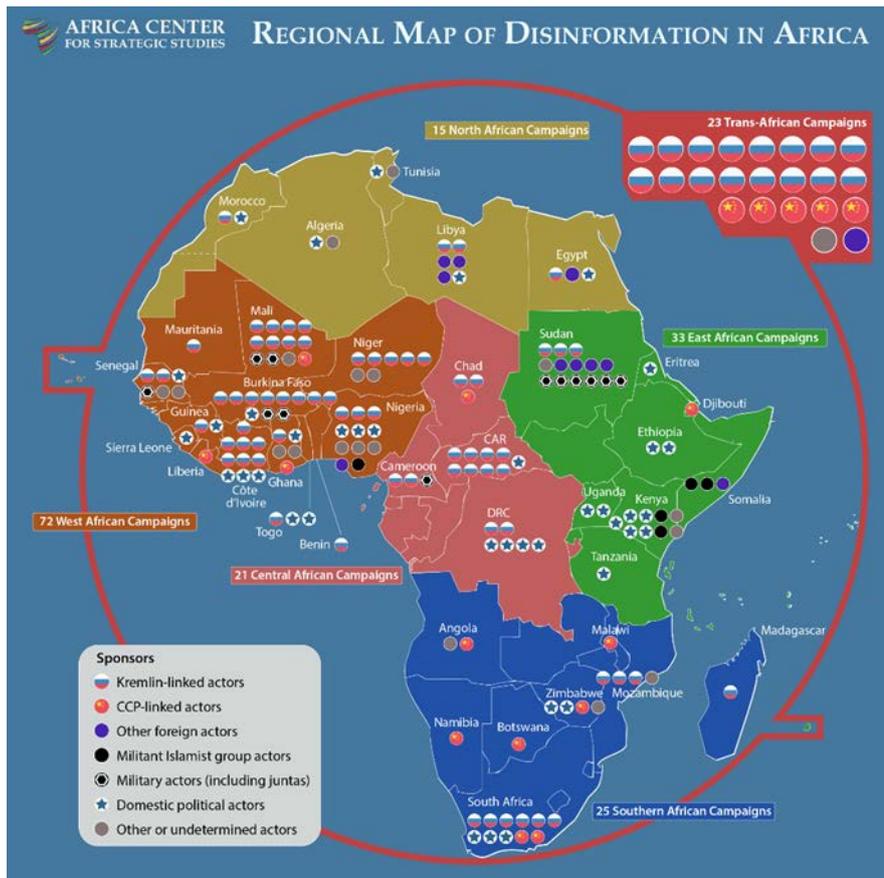


Fig. 1: Map of Disinformation in Africa. Source: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>

Economic dimension and natural resources

The economic dimension focuses on the financial interests and natural resources involved in Wagner's expansion, as well as how the exploitation of these same resources fuels conflict and has geo-economic implications for Europe. Wagner does not operate solely for political reasons; its business model is based on obtaining mining concessions, contracts, and economic assets in exchange for its military services. In the Sahel and surrounding countries, this has meant a strong interest in valuable resources such as gold and uranium, among others. The so-called war economy promoted by Wagner reinforces its operational sustainability while depriving local populations and legitimate governments of the wealth necessary for development, perpetuating cycles of instability that ultimately have repercussions in Europe.

A key resource in Wagner's strategy is gold. Since its initial foray into Sudan and the Central African Republic, the network of companies linked to Prigozhin—such as Meroe Gold in Sudan and Lobaye Invest in the CAR—has sought to control gold and diamond mines to generate multimillion-dollar revenues⁸⁰. As US authorities warn, these funds finance both Wagner's operations on the ground and Russia's own war machine, circumventing sanctions⁸¹. In the Sahel, Mali has been a natural target: it is Africa's third-largest gold producer. Reports in late 2021 indicated that geologists and technicians associated with Wagner were already conducting explorations in gold-bearing areas of western Mali even before the formal arrival of the mercenaries⁸². It is believed that as part of the deal with Goïta's junta, Wagner would receive rights to certain mines or a percentage of Malian gold production as partial payment for its services. In fact, in late 2022, Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo publicly denounced that the Malian government had granted Wagner control of a gold mine as compensation. Although Bamako denied this, local sources indicate that Russian front companies are already involved in the exploitation of Malian deposits, channeling profits to the circle of the now-defeated Prigozhin⁸³.

As various EU bodies have warned, this situation not only involves corruption and loss of revenue for Mali, but also makes Europe an unwitting accomplice: much of Africa's gold ends up on international markets, including European banks and jewelry stores. Gold mined under opaque conditions could be financing the war in Ukraine or other destabilizing activities, which is why the EU has had to take measures such as sanctioning mining companies linked to Wagner to cut off these flows⁸⁴.

“In a 2020 statement, the CAR’s Ministry of Mines estimated that the gross value of gold deposits at the site was \$2.8 billion.⁷⁹ Some experts have estimated annual revenue generated from the mine at between \$100 million and \$290 million, which if true would make it one of Wagner’s central financial assets [...] Wagner also received permits to

⁸⁰ SUKHANKIN, S. (2020). “Russian private military contractors in Sub-Saharan Africa: Strengths, Limitations and Implications”, *Russie. Nei.Visions*, No. 120, Ifri - Institut français des relations internationales. September. Paris. Available at: https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/sukhankin_russian_private_military_contractors_africa_2020.pdf (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁸¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury (2023). Treasury sanctions illicit gold companies funding Wagner forces and Wagner Group facilitator. Press Release, June 27. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Treasury. Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy1581> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁸² Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

⁸³ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

⁸⁴ Ibidem, Council of the EU (2023a)

explore other gold mining sites in the country. Documents dated 2018 showed that Lobaye Invest had won exploration rights for diamonds and gold at seven sites, including an area near Yawa, in the southwest of the CAR. Wagner actively sought to reshape the mining sector in the CAR to its advantage, for example attempting to 'influence the revision of mining legislation so that the legal framework would serve its own economic interests, particularly its control over production', or recommending that the government bring the artisanal mining sector under state control"⁸⁵.

Another resource of enormous strategic importance is uranium. On this point, Niger becomes crucial: historically, the Agadez region has supplied around 5% of global uranium production and was a key supplier to France, whose nuclear power plants depend in part on this element⁸⁶.

"Niger is one of the world's largest uranium producers and is also of key importance to Europe, given that the Old Continent is one of Niger's main customers in this market"⁸⁷.

Russia, for its part, is one of the largest producers and exporters of uranium through Kazakhstan and the Rosatom holding company. According to intelligence analyses published by the Brookings Institution in the United States and the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) in Sweden, Moscow sees uranium as a geopolitical: controlling it allows it to influence the energy security of rival powers⁸⁸. The *Wagner. Deconstruction* report highlights that several uranium-producing countries are already in Russia's orbit or under Wagner's presence, accounting for nearly 70% of global production⁸⁹. This figure includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and others, but also points to targets such as Niger. The coup in Niger in 2023 had an immediate effect: the junta cut uranium exports to France in retaliation for sanctions, raising concerns about supplies to European nuclear plants⁹⁰. If Russia consolidates its influence in Niger through the Africa Corps or agreements with the junta, it could use uranium as leverage: for example,

⁸⁵ ALLISON, O., CONNON, N., GIUSTOZZI, A., & PASCALL, J. (2025). *Wagner's Business Model in Syria and Africa: Profit and Patronage*. London: Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), February. ISSN 2397-0286 (online). Available at: https://static.rusi.org/wagners-business-model-in-syria-and-africa_0.pdf (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁸⁶ World Nuclear Association (2022). *World Uranium Mining Production*. Report updated October. London: World Nuclear Association. Available at: <https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/nuclear-fuel-cycle/mining-of-uranium/world-uranium-mining-production> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁸⁷ PARRA, S. (2023). *Uranium: a crucial element in the coup in Niger*. National Geographic Spain, August 9. Available at: https://www.nationalgeographic.com.es/mundo-ng/uranio-elemento-crucial-golpe-estado-niger_20537 (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁸⁸ Ibid, KUCHERENKO, M., BURLAKA, O. & DEMCHENKO, O. (2024).

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Reuters (2023). *France to start Niger troop pullout, Macron says, after coup soured ties*. Reuters, September 24. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/france-pull-troops-out-niger-following-coup-says-macron-2023-09-24/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

redirecting production to Russian or Chinese companies, or keeping it off the market to raise prices. In a context where it seeks to reduce its dependence on Russia, this represents a serious risk to the EU's energy diversification and the stability of electricity costs. In essence, competition for nuclear resources in the Sahel is intertwined with European security, making control of uranium an international power game in which Wagner/Africa Corps is the enforcer of Russian interests on the ground.

At the same time, Wagner has also shown a clear interest in other resources and economic sectors. In Sudan, for example, Prigozhin's network, now coordinated from the Kremlin, traded in precious woods and diamonds in exchange for supporting the regime of Omar al-Bashir and later General Hemeti⁹¹. In Mali, in addition to gold, there are reserves of phosphates, bauxite, and possible oil reserves. Any future exploitation could be monopolized by Russian companies favored by the junta. In Burkina Faso, rich in gold and, to a lesser extent, zinc, there is also speculation that Wagner will seek mining licenses currently held by Western or local companies⁹².

The presence of mercenaries scares off foreign direct investment, and an increasing number of multinational mining companies have reduced their operations due to insecurity. This leaves the field open for opaque companies associated with Wagner, which operate without environmental or labor standards, to fill the gaps left by American or European. The result is doubly negative: local populations suffer from extractive exploitation with little national benefit, and conflicts can be prolonged by the economy of looting. In the Central African Republic, we have seen how Wagner perpetuates the war against rebels in part to maintain access to mines in unstable areas, in a kind of insecurity business: the very presence of the conflict allows for the illegal exploitation of resources⁹³. Similarly, in the Sahel, we could be facing a vicious circle where Wagner profits from chaos and prevents pacification because this would mean scrutiny of its economic activities.

⁹¹ Global Witness (2022). Blood Timber: How Russia's Wagner Group profits from logging in the Central African Republic. London: Global Witness, July. Available at: <https://globalwitness.org/es/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁹² Jeune Afrique (2023). Burkina Faso grants new gold mining permit to Russian company Nordgold. Jeune Afrique, September 19. Available at: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1683287/economie-entreprises/le-burkina-faso-octroie-un-nouveau-permis-dexploitation-dor-a-la-societe-russe-nordgold/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁹³ DOXSEE, C. (2022). Wagner: The Cornerstone of Russia's Strategy in Africa. Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Available at: <https://www.catrinadoxsee.com/publications> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

The transition to Africa Corps after 2023 did not alter this economic pattern, but rather formalized it under the Russian state umbrella. In fact, many of the assets previously controlled by Prigozhin's business empire have been taken over by other Russian entities. According to various international magazines specializing in financial flows, there are reports that Rosatom, the Russian nuclear corporation, is seeking direct agreements with Niger on uranium, thereby displacing Western companies⁹⁴. Similarly, Russian mining companies linked to oligarchs close to the Kremlin have shown interest in Mali and Burkina Faso for extraction projects, benefiting from the advantage of Russian military influence in the region⁹⁵. This shows that Russia is integrating the economic dimension into its global strategy: Wagner/Africa Corps opens doors through force and politics, and then Russian state-owned or parastatal corporations enter to close lucrative deals, consolidating a kind of economic neocolonialism to the detriment of local interests and, of course, Western companies that are more respectful of transparency. For Europe, the expulsion of its companies or the loss of access to vital resources in Africa is not only an economic setback but can also create strategic vulnerabilities. Dependencies such as uranium or certain critical raw materials can become points of geopolitical pressure that Moscow exploits to its advantage. Furthermore, Wagner's illegal economic activity (smuggling of gold, blood diamonds, etc.) undermines the international anti-corruption and fair-trade regimes promoted by the EU, affecting global governance.

A final economic aspect worth noting is that Wagner's presence is also associated with costly security contracts for the African countries that hire it, draining their already scarce public resources. It is estimated that Mali pays approximately \$10 million per month for Wagner's services⁹⁶, not counting mining concessions. This is a huge expense for impoverished economies, taking away funds that could be invested in development or basic services. In practice, transitional governments are mortgaging their countries' futures by going into debt or redirecting budgets to meet the payments they owe to

⁹⁴ Bloomberg (2024). Russia Is Said to Seek French-Held Uranium Assets in Niger. June 3. Available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-03/russia-said-to-seek-takeover-of-france-s-uranium-assets-in-niger> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁹⁵ The Moscow Times (2025). The Wagner Group Is Leaving Mali. But Russian mercenaries aren't going anywhere. The Moscow Times, June 11. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/06/11/the-wagner-group-is-leaving-mali-but-russian-mercenaries-arent-going-anywhere-a89415> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

⁹⁶ The Washington Post (2023). Wagner's playbook in Africa: civil wars, gold mines and mercenaries. The Washington Post, July 23. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/05/23/mali-russia-west-africa-wagner/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

mercenaries, which exacerbates poverty and inequality, risk factors for further conflict and migration. Europe, which is a donor of aid to these countries, faces the dilemma that its cooperation money may end up indirectly supporting regimes that in turn finance Wagner. Some European donors have already frozen part of their aid to Mali or Burkina Faso so as not to effectively finance these governments while they employ mercenaries⁹⁷. However, this reduces aid to civilian populations, creating a strategic vacuum that China or Russia can easily fill, gaining more influence. Once again, it is a complex chessboard where economic, political, and military factors are intertwined⁹⁸.

In short, the economic dimension of the Wagner threat in the Sahel shows how behind the weapons come the bulldozers and how the pursuit of wealth finances the mercenary machine and vice versa. Europe sees both its principles and its pragmatic interests compromised, such as access to strategic resources, energy security, and the containment of international competition. A detailed analysis of the various documents on Wagner published by Antonio Giustozzi and David Lewis, analysts at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), and by the All Eyes On Wagner (AEOW) project team reveals a network in which modern proxy wars are also fought over mines and wells, not just flags. Addressing this challenge will require Europeans to understand and counteract the economic logic that makes destabilization in the Sahel profitable for actors such as Wagner.

"Former Wagner members have said that [...] Wagner's earnings come from security and support services, customs and tax collection, gold mining, diamond mining, timber logging, alcohol production [...] Overall, assuming a revenue range of €91 million (the minimum it is known Bangui was transferring to Wagner) to €200 million per year (the claimed amount inclusive of mining revenue after Prigozhin's death) and costs of the Wagner contingent of \$25–\$100 million (salaries plus 30% for the loaned equipment), this puts the yearly profit range for Wagner's top management at €0–€100+ million"⁹⁹.

Discussion

The various dimensions analyzed—paramilitary, demographic, informational, and economic—highlight that the Wagner phenomenon in the Sahel constitutes a

⁹⁷ Council of the EU (2021). Council conclusions on the EU's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel. April 16. Brussels: Council of the EU. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf> (Accessed: September 30, 2025).

⁹⁸ Ibid, GIUSTOZZI, A. & LEWIS, D. (2024).

⁹⁹ Ibid, ALLISON, O., CONNOR, N., GIUSTOZZI, A. & PASCALL, J. (2025).

comprehensive hybrid threat to European security. The following pages integrate these findings to understand the interactions between dimensions, evaluate the hypotheses put forward, and engage in critical reflection.

First, the facts support the first hypothesis: Wagner effectively acts as a Russian hybrid instrument whose presence in the Sahel has the effect (and probably the objective) of compromising European security through regional destabilization. The evidence shows coordination between the military, informational, and economic spheres under a strategic plan: to weaken Western influence and project Russian power. Wagner is not simply a mercenary group that uses the Soviet doctrine of *maskirovka*¹⁰⁰ to profit, but rather operates in line with Moscow's geopolitical interests, providing Russia with a tool for warfare by other means in Africa¹⁰¹. The consequence has been an acceleration of trends that directly threaten Europe: the spread of terrorism in previously contained areas, the breakdown of security alliances, local governments aligned with the Kremlin in international forums, and conditions conducive to greater uncontrolled migration flows. All of this confirms that Wagner has been the multiplier of chaos¹⁰² in the Sahel and that this chaos reverberates all the way to the Mediterranean.

The second hypothesis, which suggested that Wagner illustrates the decline of Western presence in Africa and the emergence of new forms of proxy warfare, is also corroborated. The cases of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger are paradigmatic: in a matter of a few years, France and the EU went from leading security missions in the Sahel to being practically expelled, replaced not by a traditional colonial power but by a proxy actor of Russia. This transition marks a change of era: the era of post-9/11 Western interventions in Africa, based on formal military cooperation and conditional on reforms, is fading, and an era of *proxy wars 2.0* is emerging, in which emerging powers use private military contractors and covert influence to achieve strategic ends.

For Europe, this means adapting to a new playing field where its soft power faces competitors willing to play aggressively by combining soft power, hard power, and sharp

¹⁰⁰ TORRES SORIANO, M.R. (2025). Russian disinformation in 2025. Opinion Paper IEEEE055-2025. Madrid: Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), Spanish Ministry of Defense, June 27. Available at: https://www.defensa.gob.es/ceseden/-/ieee/la_desinformacion_rusa_2025_dieeo55 (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁰¹ Ibid, DE LA CORTE IBÁÑEZ, L. (2022).

¹⁰² Ibid.

power¹⁰³. The Western withdrawal, motivated in part by popular resentment toward French tutelage and in part forced by Wagner's actions, makes it clear that without a change in approach, the EU risks becoming, if it is not already, marginalized on its own southern periphery¹⁰⁴.

An important debate is whether Wagner/Afrika Korps' presence has brought any stability or positive results to the Sahel or whether, on the contrary, it has worsened the situation on all fronts. Proponents of cooperation with Russia in Africa often argue that the West had years to resolve the conflicts and failed, while Wagner's firmness at least recovered territories from terrorism and strengthened Mali's national sovereignty. However, an in-depth analysis of articles published by Colin P. Clarke in *Foreign Affairs* and Jack Detsch in *Foreign Policy* suggests that these supposed military advances are short-lived. While local armies with Wagner have achieved tactical victories, they have not addressed the underlying causes of extremism and have even exacerbated the rift between the armed forces and the civilian population due to the atrocities committed¹⁰⁵.

"The United States has heard from multiple African countries that they regret giving access to the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group, current and former U.S. military and defense officials said [...] U.S. defense and military officials have had conversations with representatives of several African nations in recent months indicating a growing frustration with Wagner over human rights abuses and the targeting of civilians. Wagner has significant forces in the Central African Republic, Mali, and Libya and has sent advisors and liaisons to other countries, including Sudan and Mozambique. The Russian mercenary outfit's presence is a way for the Kremlin to extend its influence in Africa"¹⁰⁶.

In Mali, after a year and a half of Wagner's presence, jihadist attacks rebounded in late 2022 and 2023, including incursions into previously pacified areas¹⁰⁷. In Burkina, the security situation did not improve substantially after the arrival of Russian instructors; on

¹⁰³ NYE, J.S. JR. (2018). How Sharp Power Threatens Soft Power: The Right and Wrong Ways to Respond to Authoritarian Influence. *Foreign Affairs*, January 24. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-01-24/how-sharp-power-threatens-soft-power> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁰⁴ MAŚLANKA, Ł. (2023). Vanishing partners: the implications of the Sahel coups for the EU's security policy. *OSW Commentary*, September. Warsaw: Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). Available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/osw-commentary/2023-11-02/vanishing-partners-implications-sahel-coups-eus-security> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁰⁵ CLARKE, C.P., PARENS, R., FAULKNER, C., & WOLF, K. (2023). Is Wagner Pivoting Back to Africa? Ukraine Isn't the Only Place Where America Must Counter Russia's Mercenaries. *Foreign Affairs*, May 11. Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/africa/ukraine-wagner-pivoting-back-africa> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁰⁶ DETSCH, J. (2023). Wagner's African Hosts Regret Letting Them In: Libyans, among others, are sick of the Russian mercenaries. *Foreign Policy*, September 25. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/09/25/wagner-africa-mali-libya-car-prigozhin-putin-russia/> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹⁰⁷ ACLED (2023). Regional Overview – Africa (Annual Report 2023). Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. Madison: ACLED. Available at: <https://acleddata.com> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

the contrary, jihadists expanded their control in the east. This suggests a possible boomerang effect: the indiscriminate violence perpetrated by Wagner fuels local resentment and breeding grounds in which jihadist recruiters operate, spreading the tentacles of their radical Salafist propaganda¹⁰⁸. Therefore, Wagner is not only a threat in itself, but also an actor that exacerbates other threats—terrorism, transnational organized crime, humanitarian crises—by worsening the conflict.

Another topic of discussion is the West's ability to counteract this decline. Although the Russian narrative is biased, it contains elements that resonated because there were real flaws in the European and American strategy when it came to act in the Sahel theater of operations. France, despite its remarkable military effort, was perceived as paternalistic and ineffective by large segments of the Sahelian population¹⁰⁹. The lack of visible results for years, combined with scandals arising from civilian collateral damage in French bombings, undermined the legitimacy of its presence.

The EU, for its part, invested in development policies and training plans for local armies, notably the European Union Training Mission in Mali (EUTM) and the Groupes d'Action Rapide Surveillance et d'Intervention (GARSI SAHEL) project led by the Civil Guard and involving security forces from other EU member states¹¹⁰. However, Brussels underestimated the communications battle: it failed to counter Russian disinformation swiftly and did not know how to communicate its achievements efficiently and pedagogically. Furthermore, the EU's condition that the coup governments in power carry out transitions to democratically elected civilian governments clashed head-on with the juntas' immediate desire for security and protection, which preferred Wagner's unquestioning support. Recognizing these factors is crucial for a self-critical and pragmatic approach: Europe needs to rethink its commitment to the Sahel if it wants to regain lost ground. The response cannot be simply military, but must be comprehensive, and in this regard the lesson of the Wagner threat is clear: we must respond on all levels, from security to information and the economy.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, GAZAPO LAPAYESE, M. (2018).

¹⁰⁹ International Crisis Group (2022). Imagining the End of France's Sahel Strategy. ICG Africa Briefing No. 173, February 14. Brussels: International Crisis Group. Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/sites/default/files/b173-ethiopia-sudan-border.pdf> (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

¹¹⁰ Ibid, DSN – Department of National Security (2025).

From Spain's perspective, the relevance of the Sahel as a strategic southern border stands out. Spain plays an active role in leading programs such as GARSI SAHEL, EUTM Mali until its end in May 2024, Operation Ivory active from 2013 to 2025, and training operations in Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Senegal, Benin, etc. This shows that Spain has played a key role in promoting greater European involvement in the region. However, the emergence of Wagner and the end or expulsion of many of the European missions represent a setback for Spain's foreign and security policy, which sees increased risks in its neighborhood: Firstly, an increase in drug trafficking and jihadist terrorism, as Daesh and Al Qaeda cells in the Maghreb continue to take advantage of the porosity of an unguarded Sahelo-Saharan strip. Secondly, there will be a greater flow of irregular migration both via western routes to the Canary Islands and via Morocco to Ceuta and Melilla. And thirdly, there will be an expansion of Russian influence in North Africa and the consequent threat that this represents, for example, to Spanish seaports such as those in the , as a gateway for the illegal entry of Russian individuals linked to the Kremlin's intelligence services.

In line with the above, it should not be forgotten that Mali and Burkina Faso border Algeria, a crucial energy partner for Spain, and other countries in the Gulf of Guinea where Spain has economic interests. Prolonged instability could spread to these areas, which would be extremely detrimental to the security interests of Spain and Spanish companies based there. Therefore, for Spain and Europe, stopping the bleeding in the Sahel is not merely international altruism, it is strategic self-defense.

It is also pertinent to discuss the role of other actors in this arena. While the West retreats and Russia advances with Wagner, China maintains a quieter but significant presence focused on economic matters. Xi Jinping is applying the principles of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the "New Silk Road," in Africa. As analyzed in depth by Navy Captain and IEEE analyst D. Abel Romero Junquera, Beijing is securing a multitude of investments, infrastructure, and access to minerals¹¹¹. Turkey and the Gulf States are also competing for influence in the Sahel through religious alliances, aid, or arms sales.

¹¹¹ ROMERO JUNQUERA, A. (2025). Dispute over maritime hegemony. China follows Mahan's lead; the US tries to get back on track. Analysis Document IEEEA46-2025, June 18. Madrid: Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (IEEE), Spanish Ministry of Defense. Disponible en: https://www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2595202/disputa_por_la_hegemonia_maritima_2025_dieeee46.pdf/5feb4a85-0956-e219-91fe-47a1832c31b7 (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

Europe faces a multipolar environment in Africa where it no longer enjoys automatic preeminence. This means that any strategy to address the threat posed by Wagner must be part of a broader policy toward Africa that combines realism with support for democratic governance and real sustainable development. A simple military return to the Sahel is unfeasible due to local opposition; African solutions supported by Europe are required.

Finally, it is essential to discuss the future sustainability of Wagner/Africa Corps. Prigozhin's failed mutiny in June 2023 and his subsequent elimination demonstrated the tensions inherent in employing an actor such as Wagner: it can become uncomfortable for its own sponsor. Russia has chosen to rename the group under discussion in this article and continue the mission under direct control¹¹². This partly resolves the uncertainty of command, but could reduce flexibility. Furthermore, it raises the question of how stable Russia's presence in the Sahel can be in the long term, given its own challenges in Ukraine and the results in Africa.

“Wagner’s direct intervention in ongoing conflicts had mixed achievements, even in the eyes of the group’s clients. All clients appreciated having a foreign armed force at their service that would enable them to avoid confronting the major social, political, temporal, and technical issues related to strengthening their own armed forces. They also liked the fact that Wagner did not interfere with their politics but offered a pliable tool with as few strings attached as possible. The more Wagner was willing to place itself at the service of the host government, the more it was appreciated. Indeed, when the Russian government decided to bring Wagner's operations in Africa under stricter control after the mutiny, neither the Malian nor the CAR governments were pleased, and both sought to keep Wagner in their countries”¹¹³.

At the time of writing, Russia is betting heavily on maintaining contingents, equipment, and money flowing into Africa despite its problems in Ukraine. Europe and its members, for their part, seem to be playing damage control by relocating forces to neighboring countries in the region such as Mozambique, Ivory Coast, and Somalia, thus waiting for new windows of opportunity that will allow them to reengage diplomatically. But waiting may not be enough if Russia consolidates an antagonistic bloc in the heart of the Sahel.

Underlying these ideas is the evidence that, for Europe, the Wagner threat in the Sahel is not an isolated phenomenon but a symptom of major geopolitical changes: the struggle for influence in Africa in the 21st century, the return of competition between great powers,

¹¹² Ibid, GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Ó. (2024).

¹¹³ Ibid, GIUSTOZZI, A., DE DEUS PEREIRA, J. & LEWIS, D. (2025).

and the need to adapt security strategies to new forms of asymmetric and hybrid warfare. Wagner has temporarily achieved what no other actor has done since colonization: relegating Europe to a secondary role in Sahel security. It has done so through a combination of brute force and narrative manipulation that has exploited Western weaknesses. But its successes are fragile and its methods questionable and possibly unsustainable. This opens up space for Europe, with the lessons learned from, to reassess its role and update its capabilities in the face of private paramilitary threats, disinformation, and migration overflows.

Conclusions

The analysis confirms that the presence of the Wagner Group and its successor, Africa Corps, in the Sahel-Saharan strip constitutes a multidimensional threat to European security, particularly palpable on the southern border represented by Spain.

In the paramilitary dimension, Wagner has destabilized the regional security balance, undermining international efforts against terrorism and extending Russian influence to the detriment of Europe.

In demographic and humanitarian terms, his intervention has exacerbated violence against civilians, fueled displacement crises, and increased migratory pressures toward the north.

In the informational dimension, Wagner has waged an effective propaganda war that has eroded the image and influence of the West in Africa, hindering future collaborations and fueling anti-European narratives.

Finally, in the economic dimension, Wagner has inserted itself into local economies to plunder strategic resources and finance itself, which affects the future local development of countries in the African region and impacts European economic and energy interests.

Taken together, these pieces confirm the initial hypotheses: Wagner is a Russian hybrid instrument that operates as the spearhead of a contemporary proxy war, highlighting the Western withdrawal and the renewed struggle for Africa. However, it is also concluded that the Wagner strategy has intrinsic weaknesses. On the one hand, in the short term, its tactical gains are circumstantial and its presence on the ground generates serious security distortions and contradictions: perpetuation of conflicts, increased threats,

abuses that undermine the legitimacy of the governments that host it, lack of real development, external dependence on the Russian regime, etc. On the other hand, in the long term, these same contradictions could limit Russia's success in the Sahel by opening up loopholes that offer the EU the opportunity to support local alternatives for stability and regain the trust of the populations. For this reason, in the immediate and distant future, European security in Africa should not be based solely on traditional approaches: knowing that Wagner has changed the rules of the game, the EU has a need and an obligation to innovate its vision and adopt new comprehensive and multidimensional strategies that will enable it to counter Russian destabilization on the other side of the Mediterranean.

In conclusion, Wagner's emergence in the Sahel has been a wake-up call for European security in Africa. This early warning, sometimes underestimated, has highlighted vulnerabilities in the Western approach and the audacity of geopolitical competitors. With the stage of surprise and retreat now over, it is imperative that Europe move to a proactive and coordinated strategy. As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the measures taken by the EU and other actors in 2023 are not enough. As the Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies points out, "none of Russia's objectives in the Sahel have anything to do with making Africa more prosperous or stable"¹¹⁴; therefore, the EU must accept that its own objectives (stability, shared prosperity, respect for rights) clash directly with that agenda and will only be achieved through intelligent and sustained involvement.

Spain, due to its frontline position, has a special role to play in ensuring that European security in Africa is addressed in a comprehensive manner, combining defense against emerging threats with support for development and governance. Brigadier General and Director of the IEEE, Víctor Bados Nieto, has stated that "Russia has caused great instability with its involvement in several coups d'état in countries in the region. This instability is creating an escape route to Europe and, above all, to Spain, becoming a problem not only of illegal immigration but also of crime and terrorism"¹¹⁵. This means that addressing the Wagner threat in the Sahel is not just about dealing with a mercenary group: it is about reaffirming Europe's commitment to human security and progress on its

¹¹⁴ Ibid, GARRIDO GUIJARRO, Ó. (2024).

¹¹⁵ Bados, V. (2025). XXXII International Defense Course. Press statements. COPE Jaca, September 15. Available at: https://www.cope.es/emisoras/aragon/huesca-provincia/jaca/noticias/espana-que-darse-espectador-sucede-africa-clave-socios-igual-igual-20250915_3213920.html (Accessed: September 25, 2025).

periphery, preventing the gap from being filled by destabilizing forces. The task is arduous and long-term, but unavoidable if we want to ensure that the Sahel region does not become the "Achilles heel" of European security in the coming decades.

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