



# RUSSIA'S USE OF PMCS AS A FOREIGN POLICY INSTRUMENT IN MALI POST 2021

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*Following successive coups in 2020 and 2021, Mali faced a deteriorating security situation, exacerbated by the withdrawal of French troops and UN peacekeepers. The vacuum created has allowed external actors, namely Russia, to exert influence. The Wagner Group, a Russian private military company (PMC), has played a prominent role in Mali since 2021, providing military support and advancing Russian strategic interests. The article examines the legal and operational framework of PMCs, with a focus on Russia, and compares their role in foreign policy to similar entities from the United States and China. Mali's rich natural resources and strategic location make it a focal point in global power dynamics, while the dependence on PMCs raises critical questions regarding sovereignty, security and exploitation by other foreign powers. By analyzing these issues, the article sheds light on the implications of the private military companies involvement in fragile states and their use as instruments of geopolitical influence.*

**Keywords:** *Wagner; African Corps; Mali; PMC; Mercenaries; Foreign Policy.*

## Introduction

Private military companies (PMCs) are increasingly present worldwide and represent a threat to international security. According to a report of the Council of the European Union, since 1980 there has been a steady increase in the number of the PMCs driven by several factors, and in 2010 the total workforce of these companies was higher than the number of US troops deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan (Analysis and Research Team, 2023). The same report shows that year after year the

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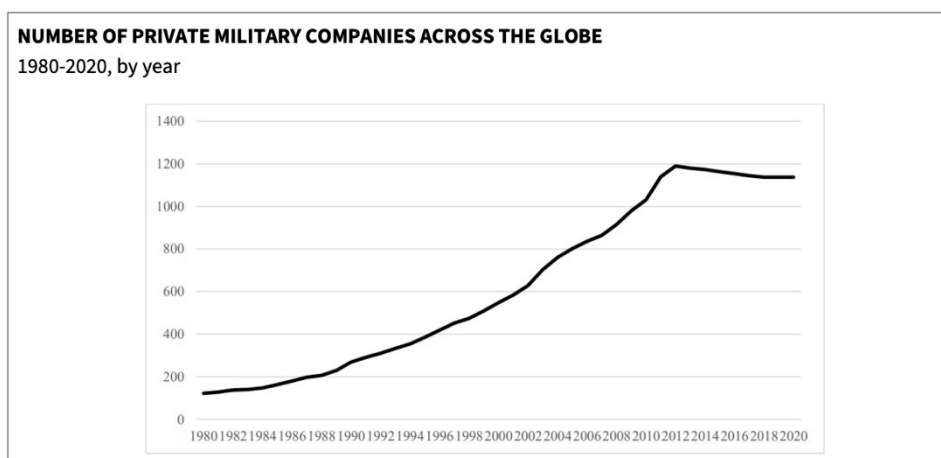


number of the private military companies has increased, and by 2020 there were approximately 1200 of these companies worldwide (see Figure no.1). According to a report of Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights from 2018, states must pay more attention and due diligence to countering the actions of private military and security companies which violate human rights, while mentioning that the number of these companies is growing at a transitional level, whether they are present in armed conflicts or in peacetime situations (Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, 2018). In the report, the Working Group concludes that the experts' proposals for a new, realistic definition of mercenarism and for a binding international instrument regulating the actions of private military and security companies have faced substantial obstacles (Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, 2018). One of the obstacle for a binding international instrument found by the Working Group is the dichotomy in the approaches of the states: some of the states want to enforce regulation of private military companies, while other states prefer a soft law response based on self-regulation. The same report mentions that general trends of privatisation of the use of force combined with a growing number of non-state actors in armed conflict will lead to more frequent human rights violations by these actors operating in a legal vacuum (Working Group on the use of mercenaries as a means of violating human rights and impeding the exercise of the right of peoples to self-determination, 2018). Another report of the United Nations, dating back in 2021, acknowledges the rise of the private military and security companies in the context in which the humanitarian space is full of threats. In addition, the same report states that even humanitarian actors are seeking the expertise of these companies, while adding that some private military and security companies are present as combatants in armed conflicts (Working Group on Use of Mercenaries: the Increasing Number of Private Military and Security Companies Operating in the Humanitarian Space Exacerbates the Risk of Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, 2021). The report reiterates the lack of international legislation regulating private military companies and the need for a binding international framework. The report concludes that private military and security companies are increasingly present in humanitarian operations (Working Group on Use of Mercenaries: the Increasing Number of Private Military and Security Companies Operating in the Humanitarian Space Exacerbates the Risk of Violations of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law, 2021).

Currently, PMCs are being used by states worldwide for several reasons: they lack accountability, they are cheaper than traditional armies, they can be deployed around the world more quickly than state armies, and they act as force multipliers.

In the past, several PMCs from different states have come to public attention. Among these private military companies, the most well-known is the Russian Wagner Group or the African Corps, as it was renamed after the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin (Bobin & Cam, 2024). The report of the Council of the European Union identified three different models for these private military companies from the cases of South Africa, the United States and Russia. The “South African model” is based on the modus operandi of Executive Outcomes PMC, whose strategy closely resembles that of traditional mercenaries by conducting military operations and financing their model through the resources of the country where they operate. The “US Blackwater model,” also seen as “military entrepreneurship”, is integrated in the traditional armed forces of a state, through subcontracting different tasks such as logistics. The third model identified is the “Wagner model” which integrates elements from both models, allowing the private military company to operate in such a way without having any respect for human rights or international law (Analysis and Research Team, 2023).

The purpose of this article is to present arguments on the fact that the Wagner Group is used in Mali as a foreign policy instrument by the Russian state. In order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject, the article employs a qualitative research methodology. It integrates data from multiple sources, including government documents, academic analyses, reports from international organization, and reputable news outlets. Primary data such as official statements and policy documents were analyzed to establish the legal and political framework in which PMCs operate. Secondary data, including case studies, expert commentaries, and journalistic investigations, were used to provide context and insights into the activities of the Wagner Group.



**Figure no. 1:** The increase of the number of private military companies between 1980 and 2020 (Source: The Council of the European Union)



## 1. General Background

The Republic of Mali is an African state situated in the Sahel region. It was a colony from 1892 until 1960, when it gained its independence from France. Currently, Mali is a fragile state facing significant internal security challenges, including terrorism, ethnic conflict and economic issues, according to various sources.

Furthermore, in recent years, several key events have taken place, which are important for the country's history and are also relevant to the security of Mali. In 2020, a military coup d'état took place, and the President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita was forced to resign (Mugabi, 2020). In 2021, another military coup took place and the President, Prime Minister and the Defence Minister were detained (Lewis, 2021). A year later, the military government announced on state television that they thwarted a coup d'état (News Agencies, 2022).

In 2022, following the coups and due to internal instability in Mali, France decided to withdraw its last troops from the country, ending a nine-year operation (Al Jazeera and News Agencies, 2022). According to the Central Intelligence Agency, the French military ended its missions in citing problems with the ruling military government and the presence of Russian private military contractors (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024).

In addition, the United Nations withdrew its peacekeeping forces from Mali in 2023 at the request of the country foreign minister (United Nations, 2023). All these events led to a security vacuum that Russia eventually has tried to fill.

Another important aspect to bear in mind in order to understand the overall context in Mali is the fact that the country is very rich in natural resources, which are sought after by many other states. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, Mali is the third largest producer of gold in Africa (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, n.d.). In addition to gold, the Republic of Mali also holds other natural resources, but according to the Central Intelligence Agency, although Mali has bauxite, iron ore, manganese, tin, and copper deposits, these are not being exploited (Central Intelligence Agency, 2024).

Russia's interest in Mali has been obvious since the 2021 coup, marked by the arrival of the Wagner Group, a private military company with Russian ties, in the country. As reported by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, the Russian military leased Wagner Group aircraft to facilitate the transportation of personnel and equipment to the African nation. The flight tracking data reveals that a Russian Air Force Tupolev TU-154 aircraft arrived in the Malian capital on 19 December 2021. This aircraft is part of the Russian Ministry of Defence's 223rd Flight Detachment and has previously contracted with Wagner-linked companies to facilitate the transportation of Wagner personnel in other African countries (Thompson, Doxsee, & Jr., 2022).



In 2023, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Mali and pledged military support for the African state. During his visit he stated that Russia delivered “very large supplies of aviation equipment” that “significantly increased” the capability of local forces. Furthermore, Sergey Lavrov stated that “We will now be planning additional steps in the field of education through military higher educational institutions and in the field of supplies of weapons and military equipment,”. In contrast, his counterpart, Abdoulaye Diop, defended the relationship between Mali and Russia and stated that the collaboration with France “does not meet the objectives of Malians.” (NEWS WIRES, 2023).

## **2. An Overview of the International Legislation on PMCs, How Other States Use Private Military Companies and Why Do These Details Matter?**

Throughout history, there have always been people who fought for money, known as mercenaries. Over the centuries this phenomenon has been constant until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the international community has decided to regulate mercenary activity and prohibit it. Despite this, as will be argued in the next paragraphs, it can be seen that the great powers have left themselves a loophole to use financially motivated individuals in their own interests.

Over the years, several documents addressing the topic of mercenarism have come into force. The first documents on mercenaries were the Geneva Convention of 1949 and the later Protocol I to the same Convention of 1977 (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.). Also in 1977, another important document on mercenarism was signed, namely the “OAU Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa”, which came into force in 1985 (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.). In 1989, the UN document “International Convention against the Recruitment, Use, Financing and Training of Mercenaries” was signed, and it entered into force in 2001 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). These are just some of the binding documents that regulate the use of mercenaries. However, none of these documents mention the use of private military companies.

Until the end of 2024, the only international document addressing the regulation of private military companies is the “The Montreux Document on Pertinent International Legal Obligations and Good Practices for States Related to Operations of Private Military and Security Companies During Armed Conflict”. The Montreux Document initiative was launched by the Swiss government and the ICRC and was signed by 17 states on 17 September 2008. However, the document is non-binding and contains only relevant international legal obligations and good practices (International Committee of the Red Cross, 2020).

Currently, according to the Montreux Document website, only 59 states have signed the document, and among the most influential states that have signed the



document are: The United States of America, the United Kingdom, France, Germany and China (The Montreux Document, n.d.). Although the document is non-binding, Russia has not even signed it, strengthening the fact that Russia is using private military companies as a foreign policy instrument. Therefore, it is quite obvious that the great powers do not want to regulate the private military companies because no binding international law was proposed, nor will it be ratified by states, as they are being used by the states in order to achieve their own national interest.

From another perspective, besides the lack of international legislation on private military companies, to acknowledge that indeed the private military companies are a foreign policy instrument we must look at things more into detail. More specific, by analyzing the statute of the PMCs in other states. Two of the best examples for this statement are the United States of America and China because they are the most influential states in the international system, and they are known to be using private military companies.

In the United States there is no law specifically designed to regulate the private military companies. Despite this, the American PMCs are regulated by the Arms Export Control Act, under which the State Department licenses these companies and monitors the implementation of contracts concluded with them (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). According to the Section 38 § 2778 (a)(1) of the Arms Export Control Act, the president is authorized to control the import and export of defence services in order to promote the foreign policy of the United States and shall provide foreign policy guidance to individuals involved in these kind of services (The United States Congress, 2023). According to 22 *CFR* § 120.32 - *Defense service*, the term “defense services” refers “to the furnishing of assistance (including training) to foreign persons, whether in the United States or abroad in the design, development, engineering, manufacture, production, assembly, testing, repair, maintenance, modification, operation, demilitarization, destruction, processing, or use of defense articles” (The United States Congress, 2024).

According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, the private military companies from the United States are often led by high-ranking retirees from the Pentagon, the CIA and the State Department and their personnel are trained in the facilities of the Ministry of Defence (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023). In the context of the Ukrainian war, the Russian MFA named several American private military companies present in Ukraine, which are used to promote the United States’ interest: Academi, DynCorp International, Cubic Corporation, Forward Observations Group and Sons of Liberty International (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

In the case of China, the fact that the private military companies are used as a foreign policy instrument is even more obvious. For example, The Regulation on the Administration of security services in China states that the Chinese authorities must



own 51% of the private military company in order for the company to be opened (Geocase, 2021). Moreover, the Article 78 of the Chinese National Security Law states that “State organs, mass organizations, enterprises, public institutions, and other social organizations shall cooperate with relevant departments in employing relevant security measures as required by national security efforts”, meaning that the Chinese private military companies are used in the interest of the Chinese state (Spearin, 2020).

These PMCs are often used to protect other Chinese companies and their lucrative projects overseas. For example, Dewei Security Group Limited offers its services in Africa to the China Road and Bridge Corporation, China National Petroleum Corporation and Chinese Poly-GCL Petroleum Group Holdings (Spearin, 2020). According to Christopher Spearin’s article, among the reasons why these private military companies are used are: they offer a common working language (as their main clients are other Chinese firms), the cost is lower than other options, and the Chinese personnel are preferred over foreigners, given sensitivity to protecting the confidential information of state-owned enterprises, and the personnel with military, police or government experience background pass the loyalty test (Spearin, 2020). According to the report of the Council of the European Union mentioned in the Introduction, there was a constant growth in the Chinese private military companies, with an estimated 20 to 40 Chinese PMCs operating abroad, as their aim is to pursue the state’s economic and geopolitical interest along the Belt and Road Initiative (Analysis and Research Team, 2023).

Thus, according to the arguments presented, it can be concluded that currently there is no international legislation that regulates private military companies, and after analyzing the national legislation of the United States of America and China, it is obvious that these companies carry out their activity in the interest of the state, being used as a foreign policy instrument. Therefore, we must acknowledge the fact that other states, such as Russia, also use private military companies in their own interest, as a foreign policy instrument. In order to support this statement, a more detailed analysis of Russia’s national laws is necessary, as was done in previous cases.

### **3. The Situation of the Private Military Companies in Russia**

To comprehend the role of private military companies as a foreign policy instrument employed by the Russian Federation, it is essential to examine the legislative framework governing this issue just as we did in the previous chapter. Furthermore, an analysis of the other Russian PMCs would provide valuable insights.

On initial examination of the Russian legislation that is intended to regulate private military companies, it becomes evident that the situation is far from straightforward. In accordance with Article 208 of the Criminal Code of the Russian



Federation it is illegal to create an armed formation and to participate in one that is not provided for by a federal law. In addition, article 309 of the Criminal Code prohibits mercenarism (Parliament of Russia, 1996). Despite the existing legal framework, the prohibition of private military companies is not explicitly mentioned. In an interview for France 24, Oleg Krinitsyn, the Director of RSB Group (one of the most known private military companies from Russia), stated that “Russia inherited its legal system from the Byzantine Empire, which means that whatever is not explicitly banned is legal” (France 24, 2015). Moreover, in the same YouTube video produced by France 24 in 2015, Dmitry Gorovtcov, a Russian MP from the A Just Russia Party, stated that his party had proposed legislation that would designate the Russian state as the primary beneficiary of private military companies operations (France 24, 2015). Even though a law has not yet been adopted to legalize the private military companies, there are indications that these entities are being utilized as an instrument of foreign policy by the Russian state.

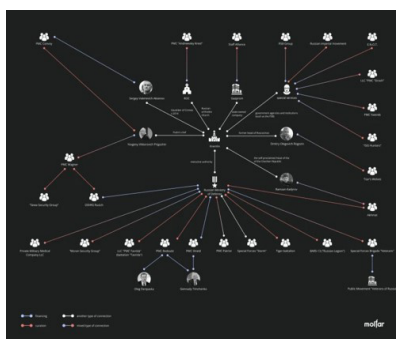
In addition to the extant legal framework, a further issue that arises is that a conceptual distinction persists between mercenaries and private military companies. In accordance with the provisions set forth in Protocol I of the Geneva Convention, the term “mercenary” is defined as any individual who:

- a. is specially recruited locally or abroad in order to fight in an armed conflict;
- b. does, in fact, take a direct part in the hostilities;
- c. is motivated to take part in the hostilities essentially by the desire for private gain and, in fact, is promised, by or on behalf of a Party to the conflict, material compensation substantially in excess of that promised or paid to combatants of similar ranks and functions in the armed forces of that Party;
- d. is neither a national of a Party to the conflict nor a resident of territory controlled by a Party to the conflict;
- e. is not a member of the armed forces of a Party to the conflict; and
- f. has not been sent by a state which is not a Party to the conflict on official duty as a member of its armed forces. (International Committee of the Red Cross, n.d.)

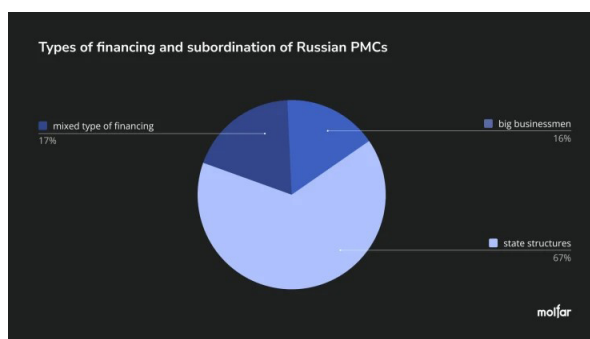
At the same time, the people who are working in the private military sector does not refer to themselves as mercenaries, but as contractors. The Cambridge Dictionary defines a contractor as “a person or company that signs a contract to supply materials or workers to perform a service or a job” or “someone who works or provides a service for a company for a limited period of time, but is not an employee”(Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). In light of the aforementioned conceptual differences between mercenaries and private military contractors, as well as the legal basis, two key points emerge: a) the Wagner Group and the other similar entities are not mercenary groups, but private military companies; b) according to the laws, the

Russian PMCs operate in a grey area, as they are not legal, nor illegal in the Russian Federation.

When analysing the other private military companies in Russia, we learn that all of them have something in common: they are linked to the Kremlin (see Figure no. 2). The largest OSINT Agency in Ukraine, Molfar, conducted an investigation on 37 Russian PMCs, looking for their source of funding and the type of subordination (Molfar, n.d.). The investigation concluded that 16% (6 PMCs) are/were financed by businessmen, including well-known ones, such as Yevgeny Prigozhin and Gennady Timchenko, and Oleg Deripaska; 67% (25 PMCs) have ties to Russian state institutions (Ministry of Defence, FSB, the government, the Russian Orthodox Church) through funding and management subordination, and another 17% (6 PMCs) have mixed types of funding, both public-private or from multiple private donors (see Figure no. 3) (Molfar, n.d.)



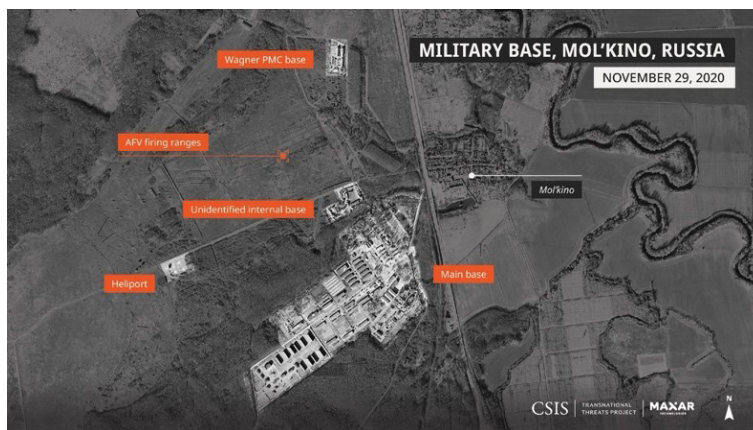
**Figure no. 2:** Russian PMCs linked to the Kremlin  
(Source: Molfar)



**Figure no. 3:** Russian PMCs's source of funding  
(Source: Molfar)

After looking over the legal situation of the private military companies and knowing that most of them are linked to the Kremlin, and it can be stated that the Wagner Group operates under the Russian government will, as it is illegal to create an armed formation and to participate in one that is not provided for by a federal law. Moreover, according to some sources within Wagner, following the death of its leader, the Wagner Group operates under the Russian Ministry of Defence, and now the MoD no longer charges Wagner for the rented military transport vehicles (Giustozzi, 2024). Furthermore, at the end of June 2023, it was decided that Prigozhin enterprise would be divided: the domestic commercial enterprises were taken into possession by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), the communications businesses would be placed under the supervision of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), while the foreign military components would be placed under the control of the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) (Watling, Danylyuk, & Reynolds, 2024).

As reported by Al Jazeera, the command of Wagner's overseas operations was assigned to General Andrei Averyanov, a GRU officer (Cordall, 2024). Another piece of evidence that supports this statement is the fact that the Wagner Group operates a training near the location of the 10th Special Mission Brigade of GRU Spetsnaz in Mol'kino, Russia (Catrina Doxsee , 2022). According to the satellite imagery, the Wagner base includes approximately nine permanent structures of varying sizes and different vehicles are present in the facility (see Figure no. 4) (Catrina Doxsee , 2022). A report published by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) states that between 2014 and 2023 the Wagner Group received contracts estimatedd at over \$10 billion from the Government of the Russian Federation. Furthermore, between May 2022 and May 2023, the Russian state allocated approximately \$1 billion for remuneration and compensation payments to Wagner's personnel. Additionally, the same report indicates that in Ukraine, the Wagner Group received a considerable number of heavy weapons from the Russian Ministry of Defence (Watling, Danylyuk, & Reynolds, 2024).



**Figure no. 4:** The Wagner Group base near the Mol'kino military base  
(Source: Center for Strategic & International Studies)

#### **4. The Presence of Russian PMCs in Mali**

The Wagner Group is one of the most prominent Russian private military companies around the globe. The Russian company was created in 2014 by the ex-intelligence officer, Dmitry Utkin, and the businessman, Yevgeny Prigozhin, to engage in covert military operations outside of Russia (ACLED, 2024). Since its creation, the private military company has been involved in a number of conflicts worldwide.

The Republic of Mali is one of the main states in which the Wagner Group is known to be active. According to the Molfar investigation aforementioned, the



Wagner Group seems to be the only Russian private military company to operate in Mali (Molfar, n.d.). Since Wagner's arrival in this African state, a sufficient corpus of open-source information regarding the PMC has become available, aiming to provide an overall picture of the situation. Even though the Wagner Group leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, was killed in 2023, the Russian PMC continues to operate in Mali under the name of the African Corps. According to a Royal United Services Institute report, this Russian private military company has been present in the African state since December 2021, and is still operating there as of March 2024 (Giustozzi, 2024).

In an analysis conducted by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, it was revealed that upon their arrival in Mali, Wagner troops initiated the construction of a base, which is presumed to be utilized by Russian and Wagner operatives in proximity to the exterior of Bamako's Modibo Keita International Airport (see Figure no. 5) (Thompson, Doxsee, & Jr., 2022). In order to understand the overall picture, we must mention another important aspect, namely that according to a report published by the Royal United Services Institute, at the peak of the Wagner Group's operations in early 2023, the group had approximately 2,000 personnel deployed in Mali. By February 2024, the private military company had reduced its personnel to around 1,000. Additionally, the report also cites sources within the Russian PMC indicating that the group is unable to fulfil the Malian government's requests for supplementary assistance and is encountering challenges in replacing personnel. Nevertheless, the Russian authorities have indicated their intention to replace the Wagner Group in Mali with the Redut PMC (Giustozzi, 2024).

Moreover, in 2023, the United States alleged that the Wagner Group was responsible for destabilizing the Republic of Mali and was complicit in the withdrawal of United Nations peacekeepers from the country. Furthermore, the White House national security spokesperson, John Kirby, has stated that the United States has obtained information indicating that Mali's government has paid more than \$200 million to Wagner since late 2021 (Holland & Psaledakis, 2023). In the same year, a document was leaked that revealed that the Wagner Group met with "Turkish contacts" with the intention of purchasing weapons and equipment from Turkey. As indicated in the document, the Wagner Group intended to utilize the equipment in Mali and also planned to resume the recruitment of prisoners from Russia's jails (Cohen & Hansler, 2023).

Thus, after observing these aspects related to the presence of the Wagner Group in Mali, it is necessary to analyse its activities. According to a report of Foreign Policy Research Institute, the activities that the Wagner Group and other Russian PMCs carry out on the African continent include fake news and disinformation campaigns, military aid, and payment through mining and extractive industries (Parens, 2022). For example, the report mentions that Maxim Shugaley, an associate of Yevgeny Prigozhin, conducted a disinformation campaign through a public opinion

poll “purporting to show 87 percent support among Malians for the government’s outreach to Wagner” conducted by the Foundation for National Values Protection, an organization sanctioned by the US Treasury Department for disinformation activities (Parens, 2022). On the same topic of disinformation, the Wagner has solid operations. According to Le Monde, the group bought the loyalty of several media outlets across Africa. In the case of Mali, several media outlets were approached by the private military company to promote their interest by offering the journalists approximately 150 Euros for publishing an article (Cam, 2023). The same Le Monde article mentions that several anti-France protests from 2021 were financed by the Wagner Group with approximately 6,100 to 10,600 Euros each (Cam, 2023). In addition to the disinformation campaigns, the CSIS analysis aforementioned reveals that various social media accounts have shared images depicting Wagner troops engaged in training exercises with Malian forces (Thompson, Doxsee, & Jr., 2022).



**Figure no. 5:** The suspected Wagner Group base outside the Modibo Keita International Airport (Source: Center for Strategic & International Studies)

As mentioned in the first chapter, Mali is a country rich in natural resources. Meanwhile, one of the Russian PMCs activities on the African continent revolve around mining and extractive industries. Dr Watling, Royal United Services Institute Senior Research Fellow, stated for BBC that the Wagner Group’s operating mode is standard for the Russian groups, in which the group covers its operating costs with other economic activities carried out in parallel, and in the case of the African states this is done through mining concessions (Inwood & Tacchi, 2024). According to the same BBC article, the Wagner Group managed to secure valuable natural resources in every country they operate. In February 2024, the Wagner Group managed to take control of the Intahaka, the largest artisanal gold mine in Mali, located near

the border with Burkina Faso, which was disputed for years by various armed groups such as CSP rebels and the Group for Support of Islam and Muslims (JNIM) (Agenzia Nova, 2024).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the Wagner Group's activities in Mali exemplify its role as a critical instrument of Russian foreign policy in Africa. Since its arrival in late 2021, Wagner has not only provided military support to the Malian government but has also engaged in disinformation campaigns, resource extraction, and influence operations that consolidate Russian influence in the region. These operations reflect the group's broader strategy of leveraging economic, informational, and military tools to secure financial gains and political objectives. The group's involvement in mining and extractive industries highlights its reliance on local resources to sustain its operations, while its media and disinformation activities reveal its capacity to manipulate public opinion and undermine competing powers, such as France and the United States. Despite recent challenges, including personnel shortages and leadership changes, the Wagner Group remains a significant actor in Mali, shaping the geopolitical landscape of the region.

### **Conclusions**

Throughout the article, several arguments were presented to support the statement that the Wagner Group or the African Corps is used in Mali as a foreign policy instrument by the Russian state. Moreover, after the analysis of the legal status of the private military companies not only in Russia, but in the United States of America and China, we can state that the PMCs are used as a foreign policy instrument by other states too. It is obvious that PMCs, though often operating in a legal grey area, serve the interests of the state by extending military influence, securing economic resources, and advancing political objectives without direct involvement of national armed forces.

The Russian Federation's approach to PMCs, particularly through the Wagner Group, illustrates a sophisticated model of utilizing such entities as tools of statecraft. Despite the absence of specific legal frameworks for PMCs in Russia, the connection between these groups and the Russian government is undeniable, with PMCs operating under state sanction or influence, particularly in conflict zones like Mali.

Mali's complex geopolitical landscape underscores the interplay between internal instability, resource wealth, and external influences. Following the years of domestic turmoil, including successive coups and the withdrawal of Western forces, the nation has experienced a growing security vacuum that external actors, particularly Russia, have sought to exploit. The arrival and continued presence of the Wagner Group in Mali exemplify the use of private military companies as tools of foreign policy, particularly by states like Russia, where such entities operate in



legal and operational grey areas. The Wagner Group's activities in Mali, ranging from military operations to disinformation campaigns and resource exploitation, demonstrate the multifaceted role of PMCs in expanding Russian influence in Africa. The involvement of PMCs in Mali, as well as in other parts of the world, highlights broader trends in global security dynamics. Countries such as the United States and China also leverage PMCs for strategic purposes, albeit under different regulatory frameworks and with varying degrees of state control. In the Russian context, the Wagner Group and its successors, now more explicitly aligned with the Kremlin's agenda, reveal a deliberate strategy to advance national interests abroad while maintaining plausible deniability. For Mali, the ramifications are profound. The reliance on PMCs such as Wagner reflects the Malian government's urgent need for security support but also deepens its dependency on foreign powers. This raises questions about sovereignty, long-term stability, and the potential for exploitation of Mali's natural resources. As Mali navigates these challenges, its experience serves as a cautionary tale of how weak states, rich in resources but mired in instability, can become arenas for global power struggles, with far-reaching implications for their people and sovereignty.

The lack of binding international regulations regarding PMCs reflects a broader reluctance by major powers to subject these entities to stringent oversight. As a result, while the role of PMCs in global conflicts is undeniable, the challenge remains for the international community to establish clear frameworks that regulate their activities and address the risks they pose to sovereignty, stability, and the international rule of law. Ultimately, the growing presence of PMCs in global conflict zones signals a fundamental shift in how states, particularly powerful ones like Russia, project military power and pursue their national interests. This shift highlights the need for a more comprehensive and binding international legal framework to address the increasing reliance on such entities and their impact on global peace and security.

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