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Russia's Exploitation and Engagement in Africa

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ABOUT THE ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Helsinki process, formally titled the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, traces its origin to the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in Finland on August 1, 1975, by the leaders of 33 European countries, the United States and Canada. As of January 1, 1995, the Helsinki process was renamed the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE].

The membership of the OSCE has expanded to 57 participating States, reflecting the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia.

The OSCE Secretariat is in Vienna, Austria, where weekly meetings of the participating States' permanent representatives are held. In addition, specialized seminars and meetings are convened in various locations. Periodic consultations are held among Senior Officials, Ministers and Heads of State or Government.

Although the OSCE continues to engage in standard setting in the fields of military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns, the Organization is primarily focused on initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States. The Organization deploys numerous missions and field activities located in Southeastern and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. The website of the OSCE is: <www.osce.org>.

ABOUT THE COMMISSION ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, also known as the Helsinki Commission, is an independent U.S. Government commission created in 1976 to monitor and encourage compliance by the participating States with their OSCE commitments, with a particular emphasis on human rights.

The Commission consists of nine members from the United States Senate, nine members from the House of Representatives, and one member each from the Departments of State, Defense and Commerce. The positions of Chair and Co-Chair rotate between the Senate and House every two years, when a new Congress convenes. A professional staff assists the Commissioners in their work.

In fulfilling its mandate, the Commission gathers and disseminates relevant information to the U.S. Congress and the public by convening hearings, issuing reports that reflect the views of Members of the Commission and/or its staff, and providing details about the activities of the Helsinki process and developments in OSCE participating States.

The Commission also contributes to the formulation and execution of U.S. policy regarding the OSCE, including through Member and staff participation on U.S. Delegations to OSCE meetings. Members of the Commission have regular contact with parliamentarians, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and private individuals from participating States. The website of the Commission is: <www.csce.gov>.

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Russia's Exploitation and Engagement in Africa

July 30, 2026

Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Washington, DC

The briefing was held from 2 p.m. to 3 p.m., Room 210, Cannon House Office Building, Connor Lewis, Policy Advisor, Commission for Security and Cooperation in Europe, presiding.

Mr. LEWIS: All right. I think we will get started. Good afternoon and welcome, everyone. My name is Connor Lewis, and I am a member of the policy staff here at the Helsinki Commission. We chose to convene this briefing here today because, while Americans understand pretty well the horrors perpetrated by Russia in its war on Ukraine, perhaps less well understood is the scale of its activities in Africa and the consequences for African communities that have come as a result.

For years, Yevgeny Prigozhin's infamous Wagner Group operated across a number of African states, taking advantage of local insecurity to provide small-scale security support in exchange for privileged access to natural resources, strategic sites, or even direct payments. From the very beginning, these deployments were marred by accusations of human rights abuses, ranging from torture to extrajudicial killings. This was of little concern to their clients in places like Libya, Sudan, or the Central African Republic. Wagner and its associated business entities grew their footprint, becoming ever more useful to Moscow.

When French and other Western security partners were pushed out of Central African and Sahel states, disillusioned by colonial histories and troubled counterinsurgency operations, Prigozhin's mercenaries were there to step in. Often, Russian actors conducted extensive disinformation campaigns, vilifying the West and championing undemocratic leaders, directly shaping public opinion and even election outcomes. With Prigozhin gone, little has changed about the opportunistic nature of these interventions. Wagner's operations continue, though now mostly under the banner of the Africa Corps, and with the Russian Ministry of Defense exerting more control over their direction.

How has Russia managed to preserve and even expand its access and influence in Africa? Its atrocities are well documented, and it does not have a particularly strong record in its counterterrorism operations either. One need only look to Mali and Burkina Faso, where jihadists and separatists have taken control of huge swaths of each country. Extractive economic arrangements continue apace, providing little benefit to local populations, while propaganda and influence operations are propagated on an ever-larger scale,

pushing Russian narratives and even manipulating African men into signing contracts to fight and die in Ukraine. How should Western policymakers understand all of this?

To examine these complex dynamics, we have brought together today's panel of distinguished experts. Regretfully, one of our panelists, Mr. Philip Obaji, Jr., cannot be here with us today. His investigative journalism documenting Russian human rights violations, particularly in the CAR, is essential, and there are few better sources on how Russian security forces conduct themselves in Africa. I highly recommend you check out his work.

Here and testifying first today will be Mr. Mvemba Phezo Dizolele, who works as a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Institute at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. Previously, Mr. Dizolele served as the director of the Africa Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, as the Africa senior advisor at the International Republican Institute, and as the course coordinator for Central and Southern Africa at the U.S. Foreign Service Institute. He has monitored elections across Africa, including in the DRC, where he embedded with U.N. Peacekeepers. Mr. Dizolele has testified before both chambers of the U.S. Congress and is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. He is fluent in French, Swahili, Kikongo, and Lingala, among other languages.

Mr. Liam Karr is the Africa Team lead for the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute. A graduate of the University of Notre Dame, where he studied Political Science, History, and Arabic, Mr. Karr covers sub-Saharan Africa at Critical Threats, specializing in the Sahel and Somalia. His expertise on security threats across Africa has been published widely.

Ms. Kateryna Stepanenko is the Russia Team Lead and Deputy Director of the Cognitive Warfare Project at the Institute for the Study of War. She is a senior member of the team responsible for producing the daily Russian Offensive Campaign Assessments since 2022, and previously covered Russia's preparations for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Kateryna's published work has focused on Russian force generation and force centralization efforts, Vladimir Putin's decisionmaking patterns, campaign design, and pro-war nationalist Telegram communities. Kateryna's work and interviews regularly appear in leading media outlets. She is a native of Kyiv, speaks Ukrainian and Russian, and is a graduate of George Washington University's Elliott School of International Affairs.

Finally, before we begin, I want to give a special thanks to our former intern Reece McCarthy, whose passion for the issue of Africans coerced into fighting as contract soldiers for Russia in Ukraine laid the groundwork for this briefing. We would not be here without you, Reece, and thank you.

Now I will turn it over to our panelists. Mr. Dizolele.

Mr. DIZOLELE: Good afternoon, and thank you, Connor, for the opportunity to join you today and talk about Russia's expanding role in Africa and what it means for U.S. interests. Russia's renewed engagement in Africa is one of the most consequential geopolitical developments of the past decade. Although Moscow lacks China's economic resources and investment capacity, it has successfully positioned itself as a major security partner across parts of the continent. Its strategy is pragmatic rather than ideological. Russia is not trying to dominate all of Africa. Instead, it concentrates its efforts where relatively modest investment can yield significant strategic returns. Its influence is now

visible from Mali and Burkina Faso to the Central African Republic, Sudan, Libya, and beyond.

Through security assistance, political partnerships, resource extraction, and influence operations, Russia has expanded its footprint while challenging long-standing Western influence. The primary driver of Russia's engagement is regime security. Moscow offers governments facing insurgencies, coups, and political isolation what many leaders value most—rapid military assistance with few political conditions. Until the United States and many European partners—sorry—unlike the United States and many European partners, Russia rarely demands democratic reforms, stronger governance, or improvements in human rights. Instead, it offers military advisers, intelligence cooperation, equipment, and, increasingly, direct combat support through the Africa Corps.

A second objective is its strategic competition with the West. Africa represents nearly one-third of the voting membership of the United Nations. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, securing African diplomatic support, or at least neutrality, has become increasingly valuable. Many African countries abstain on key United Nations resolutions regarding Ukraine. This reflects a combination of historical relationships, disaffection with aspects of Western policy, and the desire to preserve strategic autonomy.

A third objective is economics. Russia's trade with Africa remains relatively modest, but it has aggressively pursued access to strategic resources, including gold, diamonds, uranium, timber, oil, and gas. In many cases, security agreements are closely tied to mining concessions or commercial contracts that benefit politically connected Russian entities, while generating revenue that helps Moscow finance its overseas activities and mitigate the effect of international sanctions.

Russia has also become increasingly active in the information space. Rather than trying to convince every African that Russia is a superior partner, Moscow's influence campaigns often seek to undermine confidence in Western governments as well, and amplify existing grievances, legitimize military government, and exploit political polarization. This effort combines social media networks, local influencers, State media such as Russia Today, and fabricated news sites that present themselves as independent African sites. Their success varies, but they tend to be most effective where public frustration with Western partners already exists.

At the same time, Russia's growing presence has raised serious concerns regarding governance and human rights. Numerous investigations by the United Nations, international human rights organizations, and independent researchers have documented allegations of extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, attacks against civilians, and other abuses with Russian-linked security operations. In countries such as Mali and the Central African Republic, security assistance has frequently been accompanied by opaque mining concessions, weak accountability, and economic arrangements that primarily benefit political elites rather than national development.

Yet, it is important not to portray African governments as passive victims of Russian influence. Africans are making strategic calculations. Many leaders view Russia as an attractive partner because it provides rapid security assistance, does not interfere—does not interfere in domestic political affairs, offers relatively affordable military equipment, and supports governments facing international criticism. After all, Russia has a veto vote on the Security Council. For governments confronting immediate security threats, disadvantages often outweigh concerns about long-term governance and institutional development.

This reality highlights an important point. Russia's success is not solely the result of its own strategy. It also reflects gaps in Western engagement in Africa. For the United States, competing effectively requires more than criticizing Russian activities. It requires offering African governments alternatives that are critical, practical, and helpful. Not tomorrow, but in the now. First, the United States should deepen long-term investment in institutions, not simply counterterrorism operations. Professional security forces, accountable governance, independent judicial systems, and effective civilian oversight create more durable stability than support focused solely on incumbent regimes.

Second, the United States should expand economic engagement through private investment, infrastructure financing, critical minerals partnerships, and development finance that generate broad-based growth rather than extractive relationships. Third, the United States needs greater flexibility—I will say that again—the United States needs greater flexibility in responding to African security crises. One reason governments increasingly turn to Russia is that Russian assistance often arrives more quickly than Western support. Improving responsiveness while maintaining accountability will strengthen U.S. partnerships.

Fourth, the United States should invest more aggressively in the information environment by supporting independent African journalism, strengthening digital literacy, and partnering with trusted local voices to counter disinformation, without appearing to wage—to wage an information campaign of its own. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, U.S. policy should recognize African agency. African governments are not simply arenas for great-power competition. They pursue their own interests and, increasingly, seek diversified international partnerships. In other words, they believe in choices and options. Sustainable U.S. influence will depend less on asking countries to choose between Washington and Moscow than on demonstrating that the United States remains the most reliable partner for long-term security, economic opportunity, technological innovation, and accountable governance.

In closing, Russia has succeeded in establishing itself as an influential security actor across important parts of Africa, despite relatively limited resources. Its model offers immediate political and security benefits for some governments, but often comes with significant costs, including opaque economic arrangements, weakened institutions, and credible allegations of human rights abuses. The United States possesses advantages that Russia cannot easily match—transparent investment, world-class educational partnerships, technological innovation, and support for strong institutions.

The challenge before the United States, however, is not simply to compete with Russia, but to demonstrate to sustain engagement and partnership—to demonstrate true sustained engagement, and that partnership with the United States delivers lasting benefits that align with Africa's own aspirations for peace and prosperity and sovereignty. Here, I think it is important to note that Africa is a very young continent. When we—that is, the United States—focus on all these security issues and forget that the average age in Africa is 19, we are missing the entire population that we need to be partnering with, which is this rising youth. That soon will become the adults that are making the decision. It is very important that the U.S. think of those youth, because that is the future of Africa, not what Russia is doing today.

Thank you, and look forward to your questions.

Mr. KARR: Before I start, I would like to quickly thank the Helsinki Commission for having me this afternoon, and alongside such distinguished panelists. You might hear me

making some similar points to Mvemba and his great opening comments. I am going to focus more on the Africa Corps in my opening comments here.

The Africa Corps has taken Wagner Group's mantle as a key tool of Russia's strategy in Africa. Opportunities arise for the Kremlin to get its foot in the door, and Africa Corps is one of the main tools it uses to seize these opportunities and set the foundations for new partnerships. Russia lacks the economic weight to seriously compete with the likes of the United States, Europe, or China in Africa, but it has found success as something of a chaos agent or a vulture that exploits insecure, corrupt, or poorly governed countries to bolster its own influence at the expense of African lives and wealth.

While Russia's entry point to many African countries can be opportunistic, Russia is pursuing strategic objectives in Africa. Through its African partnerships, the Kremlin advances its narratives and goals to diminish Western influence, lessen Russia's economic and political isolation, and create hybrid threats to the U.S. and its allies. Today, Russia has created a corridor of influence across parts of Africa that stretch from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean. The juntas in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, which comprise the Alliance of Sahel States or AES, lie at the core of Russia's network. While defense cooperation forms the foundation of this partnership, with over 4,000 Africa Corps personnel across the three countries, mostly in Mali, the AES is a multidimensional bloc for Moscow that advances all its strategic objectives on the continent.

The Sahel sits between two other Africa Corps anchor points that create a logistics corridor stretching from Libya to Togo. Africa Corps positions in eastern Libya have been critical to the Kremlin's ability to sustain operations in the Mediterranean Sea and sub-Saharan Africa after the fall of the pro-Russian Assad regime in Syria in 2024. Togo is a much newer foothold, where a small number of Africa Corps forces were deployed to jihadist-affected northern Togo in 2026 as part of a budding partnership that now allows Russian warships to use the Togolese Atlantic port of Lomé. The Kremlin is more broadly looking to strengthen its influence along key shipping lanes around the continent as well, at times using Africa Corps to gain a foothold.

Aside from Togo, a small Africa Corps contingent is present in Equatorial Guinea, and the Kremlin has a naval refueling agreement with São Tomé and Príncipe. The Kremlin has offered military cooperation to Madagascar, where at the very least Russian trainers are now present, as well as Sudan, in its efforts to gain access to their strategically located Indian Ocean and Red Sea ports. Russian businesses have also facilitated military-related shipments through Cameroon and Guinea as well.

Wagner and now Africa Corps have been the tip of the spear of Russia's engagement strategy as part of the broader regime security package that Mvemba was alluding to earlier, that form the foundation of the Kremlin's partnerships with vulnerable authoritarian governments. Russia offers African countries defense assistance, including boots on the ground, without the same preconditions, such as respect for democracy and human rights, or risk aversion as other defense partners.

Aside from combat operations, many Africa Corps deployments have Russian soldiers serving as something of a Praetorian Guard, and also helping train specific military units to insulate these Russian partners. Meanwhile, operatives linked to Russian military and intelligence services conduct information operations to bolster popular support for these regimes. Then, at the international level, the Kremlin protects its partners from scrutiny on their democratic and human rights records.

Russia's partnerships lessen its international isolation as well. African partners are political allies, and institutions like the U.N. are a mark of prestige that the Kremlin can tote as a great-power partner. Furthermore, Russia has cultivated this influence almost exclusively at the expense of the U.S. and its allies, which face diminished political influence and economic access in many pro-Russian areas. The Kremlin uses these partnerships to circumvent sanctions and break its economic isolation.

Growing Russian maritime access bolsters the sustainability of Russian shadow fleet operations. While Russian trade on the continent remains relatively small, the Kremlin's growing partnerships open new markets and business opportunities for Russian companies, especially concerning critical minerals and mining. The last true Wagner bastion of the Central African Republic continues to be a lucrative source of minerals and timber, generating hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars since Wagner arrived in 2018.

Last, the Kremlin has also created unconventional pressure along NATO's self-described southern flank in Africa that could be used in the future as hybrid war tools. The Kremlin has a track record of weaponizing migration to destabilize Europe, and it now has significant influence along key trans-Saharan migration routes that run from sub-Saharan Africa to Europe. The Kremlin has also begun using its shadow fleet to test NATO defenses. The growing Russian maritime access around Africa's Atlantic coast could help sustain shadow fleet activity in the future.

Looking ahead, the Kremlin's transition from Wagner to Africa Corps since the 2023 Wagner mutiny has made some of its partnerships vulnerable. African countries were attracted to Wagner because they offered what others could or would not—boots on the ground who are flexible, adaptable, and willing to support risky operations. Africa Corps has kept the regime security and information operation trappings of the Wagner Group, but much like the Russian Ministry of Defense that Africa Corps is nested under, Africa Corps is decidedly more risk-averse and less agile than Wagner. In many ways, these shortcomings make Africa Corps a worse-trained, worse-equipped, worse-behaved, and more expensive version of the state-to-state western model that African countries turn to Wagner to replace.

While the Kremlin currently lacks the capacity to substantially expand its footprint, it has continued to expand its influence by focusing on its regime security offer. Africa Corps currently doubles as a reserve pool for the Russian war effort in Ukraine, meaning that there are only roughly 6,000 Africa Corps soldiers in Africa. Despite these constraints, Russian forces have still managed to expand to several new countries in recent years with smaller deployments to countries where authoritarian leaders seek regime protection. Russia's capacity issues may not last forever, as the resolution of the war in Ukraine would almost certainly unleash thousands of more Russian soldiers on Africa.

The Kremlin views reintegrating hundreds of thousands of traumatized veterans back into Russian society as a serious domestic destabilization risk. Therefore, it is likely that many of these soldiers will not return to Russia. While most of the soldiers may remain mobilized along the front lines in Europe, it would take only a fraction of them redeploying to Africa to significantly alter the picture both in terms of what the West is dealing with and what Russia is offering to African countries that the West is unwilling to match.

To wrap up, the United States should not fear or lionize Russia's influence in Africa. Rather, the United States must identify opportunities, some of which Mvemba mentioned, to advance clearly defined strategic objectives according to its own strengths. Especially

considering Russia's struggles and abuses in the Sahel and other parts of the continent, there are plenty of African countries that want a defense partnership with the United States. Russia's economic impotency also makes its military-centric partnership offer of little appeal to most African countries. The United States must listen, build trust, and be ready to show up with its African partners, as well as improve its own communication strategy to counter Russian information operations and more effectively put forth a positive vision of a partnership with the United States.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

Ms. STEPANENKO: I want to express my sincerest gratitude to the Helsinki Commission for inviting me to share some of the insights from the Institute for the Study of War's analysis on Wagner's involvement in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and how it differs from its involvement in Africa. My testimony will also touch on the dilemmas and lessons that the Kremlin encountered when integrating Wagner forces into the Africa Corps. Finally, I would like to conclude with some remarks about the current Russian recruitment efforts throughout Africa in support of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Before 2022, the Russian government relied on various irregular formations and private military groups, such as Wagner, to support the Kremlin's unconventional security objectives domestically and abroad. Domestically, these groups ensured Putin's regime stability, while abroad they protected key infrastructure, conducted influence and destabilization operations, and supported counterinsurgency and insurgency missions, performed various electronic warfare and cyber campaigns, and trained foreign military personnel, while maintaining proxy and occupation regimes. Wagner was particularly known for these operations abroad, namely in Ukraine, the Middle East, and Africa.

The Kremlin likely did not intend to use Wagner forces as frontline units in large-scale conventional warfare in Ukraine. The Wagner Group was essentially a niche organization with highly specialized professional missions. The Wagner Group essentially offered the Kremlin plausible deniability when operating abroad, while Wagner mercenaries enjoyed special privileges and relative independence from the Russian Ministry of Defense's administrative outreach and bureaucratic ways. The Wagner had its own independent recruitment pipelines, its distinct and unique culture, and generous compensation for its members—privileges which allowed Wagner to focus on recruiting experienced, formal, special, and airborne forces for highly specialized tasks.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's failure to mobilize before launching the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 forced the Kremlin to rely on Wagner as frontline troops, resulting in Wagner drastically expanding in an unplanned manner while also retaining its quasi-independent structure. Deceased Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin claimed that Putin had asked the Wagner forces to join the war effort in Ukraine in mid-March 2022, after failures at the Battle of Kyiv. The Kremlin later authorized Prigozhin to spearhead a vast prisoner recruitment campaign across Russia in early summer 2022, using the Wagner branding. Wagner forces participated in numerous large-scale military campaigns in Ukraine, swelling up to 50,000 troops by fall of 2022. Wagner routinely committed gruesome war crimes during these battles, including beheading Ukrainian prisoners of war.

By relying on Wagner in Ukraine and empowering Prigozhin outside of the Ministry of Defense's control, the Kremlin effectively undermined the plausible deniability of the Wagner Group. Recently recruited Wagner veterans began demanding that the State for-

mally recognize their contributions to the war effort upon returning from the front lines, while the Kremlin remained steadfast in denying the existence of the other professional part of the Wagner Group, which continued to covertly operate in the Middle East and Africa. The Kremlin also appeared concerned that Prigozhin would sway Wagner forces and his personal connections in Africa and the Middle East to achieve his own political objectives.

The Kremlin therefore began an extensive centralization campaign in 2023 and 2024 that aimed to formally subordinate the Wagner Group, particularly the professional forces abroad, into its successor, the Africa Corps, under the administrative control of the Russian Ministry of Defense. The Kremlin simultaneously began to subsume Wagner forces in Ukraine into regular units of the Russian armed forces. The Kremlin successfully disbanded Wagner, largely retained Wagner personnel abroad, and transitioned to Africa Corps with greater State oversight by late 2024. The Kremlin also replaced Wagner's media conglomerate, even establishing the new Africa Initiative News Agency in late 2023. The Africa Initiative co-opts local journalists to disseminate pro-Kremlin narratives.

The Africa Corps likely inherited some of Wagner's recruitment pipelines in Russia and Africa. The Kremlin is now recruiting combat-experienced personnel through these pipelines to expand its regional military presence rather than deploy these recruits to Ukraine directly, a lesson learned from having Wagner perform two distinct functions at the same time. The Africa Corps is continuing to recruit former Wagner personnel and men with combat experience in cities like Moscow, St. Petersburg, and also in regions like the Republic of Tatarstan. Simultaneously, the Africa Corps and Russian Ministry of Defense instructors are continuing to train personnel in Africa—for example, training 125 Equatorial Guinean Presidential guard servicemen in May 2025.

Russia has also intensified its recruitment efforts across Africa, approximately in early to mid–2024, to augment its war effort in Ukraine. ISW has observed reports of Russian recruiters pursuing citizens of Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Togo, Ghana, Senegal, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and South Africa, among others. We have also observed reports of African recruits participating in combat missions in Kharkiv, Luhansk, and Donetsk Oblast of Ukraine. The Kremlin appeared to target citizens with prior military experience, as well as going after regular civilians. The Kremlin likely further expanded the recruitment campaign in Africa by mid–2025 via a network of informal recruiters and by using new deceptive tactics.

These recruiters lure African citizens by offering them full study abroad scholarships and jobs in Russia. They are also spreading social media ads and leaflets offering recruits over $2,000 in sign-on bonuses, Russian citizenship, medical care, and professional and civilian training. Russian recruiters also target African refugees and students who are located within Russia by threatening to suspend their visas. The Russian Ministry of Defense has also regularly used private businesses in Russia to offer fictitious employment contracts for recruits. Russian forces largely leverage African recruits to reinforce frontal assaults or bring up supplies to Russian infiltrators, including carrying mines.

In conclusion, the remaining Wagner Group elements in Africa, now the Africa Corps, are de facto under the Russian Ministry of Defense's administrative control, after previously enjoying privileges and some independence. They perform specialized security functions in Africa and are a strategic instrument in Russia's destabilizing activities and power projection on the African continent. The Kremlin has learned its lesson not to overly rely on independent, highly specialized private military company elements in com-

bat missions in Ukraine and likely maintains two separate recruitment pipelines. One pipeline, which is recruiting personnel with prior combat experience to support Russia's military presence in Africa, while the other one deceives and co-opts civilians to fight in Ukraine.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to testify, and I look forward to any questions.

Mr. LEWIS: Great. Thank you to our panelists for some wonderful opening statements. I am going to use my position as moderator here to ask a few questions, but in a few minutes, we will open it up to the audience for general Q&A. Think of questions, and I will direct you to approach the podium when the time comes.

First, Mr. Dizolele, does Putin's Russia have real credibility in the Global South? Understanding that the continent is not a monolith and attitudes differ vastly across local contexts, are populations in, say, Mali, or Burkina Faso, elsewhere, really buying the story of Russia and of its war in Ukraine that Russian propaganda likes to tell?

Mr. DIZOLELE: Thanks for the question, Connor.

I think we need to look at that through the eyes of the Africans, because there is a perspective that we have in Washington that is not the African perspective. For Africans, it is about choices and options. The war in Ukraine was a big deal, particularly in the West. It was not for Africans. Africans have their own conflicts that they have been dealing with—the DRC, Mozambique, Mali, the entire Sahel—bandwidth; there is a lot of that stuff. If—let us see how it was framed, right? It was framed that Russia, the bad guy, attacked a small country named Ukraine. Therefore, everybody should see this is a clear thing. Okay, fair, but the question is, like, if we have a relationship with Russia, which a lot of African countries have, and we do not have any problem with them attacking the other country, why should this be our fight? Yes? We have limited resources. Do we want to get involved? This is the challenge, right?

A lot of African countries will say, no, we do not—we do not want to be involved. Africans are used to being told when they have crises, find African solutions to African problems. Africans are wondering, why cannot you up north find a European solution to European problems, right? Which is—I think-if you are a policymaker in Washington, you want Africa to side with you. If you are an African, that is a very common, clear position, but also, we need to look at it within the historical context. Africans were always forced to choose. From day one, when these countries got their independence, they were thrust into the cold war. They had to choose. Then the Palestinian and Israeli conflict happened. The Arabs wanted the Africans to choose, and this went on and on.

Africans are saying finally, we [do not] want to choose. We [do not] want to—we do not want to choose between two camps. We have many other camps to choose from. Some of these issues we want to sit out, because it is not our problem. I also think the U.S. lost a lot there, because it is not so much about the credibility of Putin. It is about the national interests of each country. If we are going to ask Malawi to take a stance against Russia, what does Russia care about Malawi? It may not be better for us to save our influence with Malawi for some other issues that will come down the line that Malawi really cares about. So often we—I think we see Western problems as the world's problem. Africans see Western problems as Western problems, not as African problems. That is, I think, how I will frame it. Hopefully that helps.

Mr. LEWIS: That is great. Thank you so much.

Liam, it is hinted at a few times here, but since there has been so much movement in the Sahel and particularly Mali this year, I was hoping you might be able to get into whether this year's—earlier this year's events in Mali and around Kidal, how you are thinking about these developments. Is this a change in trajectory? Is this a continuation of something that has been happening for a while? Just how you are thinking about it.

Mr. KARR: Yes. Thanks for the question. I think in northern Mali in particular, and really across Mali, JNIM, the al-Qaida affiliate there, we are certainly seeing a bit of a shift, I would say, particularly in April of this year. JNIM kind of rekindled this partnership with Tuareg separatist groups. Really, in many ways, it was 2012 all over again for people who are familiar with northern Mali. Tuareg, more secular Tuareg separatists, and then al-Qaida-linked Salafi jihadist militants working together against a common enemy, the government of Mali.

Now, of course, Russia is there instead of France. I think that Russia and the current junta's, you know, actions really put JNIM and the Tuareg separatists on this kind of collision path to getting back together, if that makes sense, because the junta and Russia have taken a very brutal, no-holds-barred, no-reservations approach to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency, more broadly. It has labeled those separatist Tuareg groups as just as bad as JNIM, basically, and essentially discarded a 2015 U.N. peace deal.

These separatist groups were looking at the atrocities being committed by Malian soldiers and by the Wagner Group against their communities, and saying, well, JNIM doesn't do this, or we can work with JNIM so that they will not do this. The government and their Russian partners present a clearer and more present danger. We are seeing that partnership has really come to life since April. What that has led to is these offensives across the country. I can get more into where I see that going, and that is kind of an issue—not a separate issue, but another can of worms that I will not open. I do definitely think that we have seen a change, and that it is a problem for Russia and its prestige and credibility as it faces these setbacks in Mali.

I will just wrap up with that it is important to note that even though it is facing setbacks, it also, in some corners of the continent, might also be getting some credibility for hanging in there and reinforcing and standing by Mali and its other Sahelian partners, even though it is taking casualties and facing setbacks. As I mentioned during my opening statement, I do not think that the United States would be willing to put 3[,000]–4,000 troops in Mali right now. Russia is, and they are taking casualties for it. I think that is something that the Malians appreciate, so.

Mr. LEWIS: That is great. Thank you.

Ms. Stepanenko, why do you think, given the inevitable diplomatic fallout, Russia has so aggressively pursued these recruitment tactics in Africa, and further afield, but since we are talking about Africa today? Is the manpower situation in Russia so bad that this is a necessary measure? Or what do you think motivates this?

Ms. STEPANENKO: It is a wonderful question. Thank you so much. I think that Russia has embraced this informal recruitment campaign where it enlists local recruiters in various different countries, not just in Africa but also in Southeast Asia in Latin America. It still has quite a bit of plausible deniability, because a lot of this recruitment is done online through faceless individuals. I think that is what Russia is really banking on: The fact that no one can directly attribute it to the Ministry of Defense from the immediate sort of get-go.

Now, in terms of what the Russian recruitment situation looks like, the Ukrainian forces are administrating more losses on Russian forces than Russia is recruiting at this time. The Russian recruitment rate has been around 25,000 to 30,000 people per month. The Russian losses have been increasing steadily in 2026 to around 35,000 for every month. The difference here is that the Kremlin is essentially looking for any possible recruitment pools that it can find. It can be prisoners. It can be Central Asian migrants who are waiting for their naturalization documents. It can be individuals abroad. The Kremlin is trying to cede as much power and recruitment recruits as possible, despite the fact that the campaign itself is sort of stagnating.

What we found that—what was interesting was 2025 really sparked a year where it seemed a lot more systematic. In 2024, we, of course, had seen occasional instances of individuals being recruited in such coercive or deceptive measures. In 2025, it seemed quite widespread. That correlated quite nicely with the decline in the Russian sort of domestic recruitment rates. I will also note that the Russians are not getting that much force—that much manpower from foreign recruitment. Sometimes in certain countries they will get maybe 20 recruits. In Kenya, I believe the Kenyan intelligence services announced that they identified a thousand recruits that went to Ukraine. It is still not the predominant source of manpower for Russian armed forces, because Russia does rely on quite a bit of contract recruitment.

I would like to conclude that Putin is still very worried about mobilization. That is his biggest fear. It is his biggest vulnerability. He perceives this as a threat to his regime. Therefore, any other sort of minor diplomatic conflict is nothing compared to putting forth a war sacrifice so large on his—on the Russian people. Therefore, he—I think he is more tolerant of taking that risk, and going abroad, and facing some very unfortunate diplomatic encounters, such as the one that he had with Modi in December of last year about the return of Indian recruits. Therefore, for Putin, he still sees that center of gravity is his own society and the sacrifices that he has to ask of them to sustain this war effort.

Mr. LEWIS: Great. Thank you.

All right, I will now open it up to the audience for Q&A. If you would approach the podium, and—thank you.

QUESTION: Hey. I am David from Congressman Thanedar's office.

My question is, how much of an independent or autonomous or rogue actor is the Africa Corps? Obviously, less so than the Wagner Group, but I think there has been recent reporting on their sort of drug-peddling operations in the Central African Republic, as well as sort of abandoning the fight in Mali in certain situations. How independent or free from the Kremlin's influence are they?

Mr. KARR: I think that the Africa Corps, in particular, is much less independent and autonomous than Wagner was. I think, particularly, one of the things that I like to say and point to is that generally Africa Corps is much more aligned with Russia's strategic interests than Wagner was. The case in point is Sudan, where early in the Sudanese civil war the Wagner Group had links with the Rapid Support Forces there due to gold operations and more economic interests.

Then, after the Kremlin subsumed and shifted things to Africa Corps, it also flipped sides in the Sudanese civil war for the most part, where Wagner ties with the RSF [Rapid Support Forces] were mostly cut, and Moscow started courting the Sudanese Armed Forces because Russia's main interest in Sudan is not gold mining. It is a port on the

Red Sea coast. The Sudanese Armed Forces control the coastline, and so that is who they need to be working with. It is not necessarily as black and white as that. It is not totally, you know, Russia putting all of its eggs in the SAF basket. I do think that it shows that the Kremlin wanted to align military operations in Africa more with its strategic interests.

Then, just to conclude by talking on the Mali point, and CAR, actually. With the CAR, that is the last real kind of Wagner holdout. I could talk about that a little bit more, but in short, there have been issues both with the Wagner personnel in Central Africa, which is one of the main Wagner hubs, and has been since 2018, as well as the Central African leadership, who do not want those Wagner personnel to leave or to be uprooted or to be subsumed under the Ministry of Defense. That has been a whole saga. In short, that is part of the reason why they are still involved with drug running, mineral stuff, to the same level or in shades of what Wagner had been doing previously: Because there are still a lot of Wagner remnants.

Last point, on Mali, is that, yes, some Russian units retreated, but I think that was mainly they were caught by surprise, and it was a heat-of-the-battle thing. I do not think that is them acting autonomously, per se, any more so than you would have military units in battle. I think also since that initial offensive in April there was another big country-wide offensive and battle earlier this month, where Russian forces did not retreat from where they were getting hit. They reinforced this one small little garrison town in northern Mali to hold on to it at all costs, and it was this week-long battle. Russian soldiers were even executing Malian soldiers who were trying to flee or surrender. I would not say—to wrap up, they are very much under the control of the Ministry of Defense. I think that is true across most areas, except for CAR.

Ms. STEPANENKO: What was interesting about Africa Corps when we first started to see reports emerge in 2023 was how open the Ministry of Defense's leadership was with affiliating with former Wagner personnel with various different contingents abroad. This is something that we did not really see during Wagner days. For example, it would be Prigozhin or Dmitry Utkin openly affiliating with those efforts, but no one from the Ministry of Defense's representation. Some of the first visits that we saw to the region were from senior members of the Ministry of Defense. They openly posted pictures on the Russian Ministry of Defense website, and that was a huge inflection. The Kremlin had changed the way that it perceives Africa Corps and the way that it wants to present it to the world as well. I will note that a similar dynamic can be observed in the Russian cognitive warfare domain as well. The Russians, when Prigozhin was still around and the Wagner Group, had quite a bit of troll farms and a media conglomerate of its own. The Kremlin did similar centralization efforts. They started to establish state-affiliated entities in various different countries in Africa.

The one that I mentioned, of course, is the Africa Initiative. They regularly train journalists. They hold these special competitions for people to come in and learn sort of how to use AI [Artificial Intelligence] to generate content, how to write, sort of, journalistic reports. They go to Moscow for various internships and job opportunities. While the Kremlin is expanding its military presence in the region, they are also investing quite heavily to replace some of the places that used to be held by organizations like Voice of America. They are doing it a lot more openly with the label of Russian State media.

QUESTION: Hello. Oh, there we go. Hi. I am Alanna Novetsky with the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

I am curious—excuse me—if someone could talk a bit about Russia's nuclear diplomacy in Africa, specifically as it relates to civilian nuclear power. I know this is an area where several African states are looking to expand their energy independence through nuclear power. It seems like it is actually an area where the United States, or U.S. companies, have some good news stories to tell. I mean, there is plenty of bad news stories to sort of tell about Rosatom, and yet it seems like China and Russia are kind of eating our lunch throughout the region in that way. Could—yes, could someone expand upon that and talk about civil nuclear power?

Thanks.

Mr. KARR: Yes, that is a really great question. I think that Russian nuclear energy diplomacy is—alongside mining, like Mvemba was talking about in his opening statement—that nuclear energy is one of the few economic tools, economic non-military, really, that Russia does have. Russia is really—China is kind of there, but Russia is one of really the only ones as far as large-scale nuclear power plants. It offers a kind of comprehensive package through Rosatom that covers financing, construction, technical expertise, and education and knowledge transfer, getting it up and running, all of that kind of stuff. That is another case of an area of advantage that Moscow has identified, and it is pushing it, and has signed a bunch of deals with a bunch of African countries.

I do want to note, though, that there are several shortcomings with this. That is, one, every time Russia announces some deal, it is not cause for panic because these things take decades. They have super-long time horizons. Which is one of the reasons that they are useful, and that Russia is interested in them, is that if they sign these partnerships, this is a decades-long partnership that they are building. That also means that it is decades of follow-through, as the Russian economy is faltering due to sanctions, the war, and stuff like that. The actual follow-through over decades is something that we have not really seen. The furthest along some of these power plants are, I think, the one in Egypt, which I cannot remember if that is up and running yet or where that is on the scale. The one in Egypt is by far the most advanced. Then most of the others are just things existing on paper currently.

As far as the United States as well, there is a ton of opportunity for, like you mentioned, U.S. companies to get involved. Large-scale nuclear power plants are often not what a lot of African countries want. For one, many African grids cannot actually accommodate the energy generated by a large-scale nuclear power plant. As I mentioned, that takes decades to build. You know, you are not getting that energy for decades down the line, as well as the upfront cost is huge. There are a ton of U.S. companies investing in what are called small modular reactors. Those can, one, help smaller grids, be used in rural areas, be shifted around, and are also less prone to, like, the most dangerous kind of meltdown-type situation.

Many African countries are just as, if not more, interested in those. That is where the United States can, at the very least, compete, if not outcompete, Russia and China. I think that the nuclear energy field is definitely somewhere where Russia is exploring, but somewhere where the United States can, I do not want to say easily, but if it puts its mind to it, outcompete Russia.

QUESTION: Hi. My name is Nathan O'Hara. I am a policy fellow with the U.S. Helsinki Commission.

Looking at Central Asian states to frame this question, these countries' citizens are frequently also recruited by Russia to fight its war. These governments officially banned their citizens from fighting—I mean, sorry—fighting for Russia against Ukraine. Some governments, like Kazakhstan, have prosecuted citizens. I am wondering—and, of course, understanding that Africa is a much, you know, larger continent, it is not a monolith, and there are different, I guess, circumstances in each country, I am wondering if there are any similar examples of government interventions among African states, and to what extent African governments seek to curtail Russian influence and recruiting within their countries.

Thank you.

Ms. STEPANENKO: We certainly have seen quite a bit of intervention from certain countries. For example, I mentioned Kenyan intelligence revealing that there were a thousand recruits that went to Ukraine. I believe the government of Togo as well had collaborated or had notified Ukraine, or Ukraine has notified the government of Togo. There is certainly an engagement. Because—the challenge is that these operations and recruitment campaigns are so covert, they are also very small. Therefore, it is really hard to detect them and actually meaningfully suppress all of them from taking place.

The aspect of deception also makes it quite challenging to meaningfully deter someone from taking a lucrative opportunity to go to Russia, or to receive medical treatment, or receive citizenship, to travel. A lot of the time, we also see recruiters going after young people. Streaming platforms, various different video games, and Discord. All of these factors really contribute to making it really hard for any authority to actually meaningfully prevent it, because of that small scale and also because of how challenging it is to operate in sort of a modern information environment.

QUESTION: Thanks. Awesome. Good question, by the way. Emily Helsher [ph].

My question's a little bit related. I was wondering about some of the more authoritarian governments in Africa, such as Angola or Eritrea. Are they as complicit in the Russian-China-Iran alliance the way that the Western Hemisphere autocracies like Venezuela and Cuba are, actively providing Russia with propaganda operations and intelligence operations? Would you say some of these governments are at the same level as the Western Hemisphere autocracies? Or is it more decentralized, targeting the youth, and targeting in a very decentralized fashion?

Mr. DIZOLELE: I think Eritrea is a very unique case. I do not think we see a lot of autocracies in the way that you see, let us say, Belarus and those places in Africa. Angola, you mentioned. Angola, it is definitely nowhere near that. Angola has a strong relationship with Russia, but it dates from the days of the cold war. You know, Russia was very much close to Angola. There were Russian troops in Angola. There were Cuban troops in Angola. That relationship is very strong, but Angola has also embraced the United States. We are talking about the Lobito Corridor. We are talking about oil and gas and other activities that are happening there. AFRICOM is very present in Angola.

Eritrea is just different, because Eritrea has been kind of a recluse State. You know, they march to their own beat. They have a close relationship with the Russians and what people call the CRINKs of the world today. It is different, unique. I do not think of any other country in Africa that even comes close to Eritrea. Equatorial Guinea is a smaller country, but I do not think they see themselves as an extension of Russia or China, all that stuff.

I think when we think of Africa, we need to remember something simple. Africans want choices and options. Africans are not looking at the world through this ideology that we have in Europe, especially in Eastern Europe. Africa is not an ideological place. Not post-cold war. It is just not there. People do what they have to do to support whatever is happening now, right? Nobody's saying we are going to take Russia's fight, or we are going to take Ukraine's fight, or China's. No. People are—Africans are asking, what is in here for me? How can we leverage this?

I said earlier, if we look at the offerings of the United States, of the West, they come with a lot of strings attached, conditions attached, all kinds of things. If I am fighting now, I need help, and you talk to me about democracy and about this, and my house is burning, I am not interested, right? I am going to go to the neighbor maybe three houses down the road, who is willing to help now. Then we sort everything else out later.

Just a quick example. I was in Mali a while back, and we were talking to the Malian armed forces. This fellow said, look, you ask us a lot about Wagner. Back then, Wagner, kind of an African corps, was still rising. He said, "You ask us about these people." We just have security and defense agreements with Russia. We have always had it since independence. Our house is burning. Actually, the expression here says: If you have mice in your house, does the color of the cat matter? I need a cat here. If that cat is blue, it is fine. If the cat is yellow, it is fine.

In other words, he said, we have an agreement with Russia. We asked for help. They came. We do not have an agreement with Wagner, with Africa Corps. Now it sounds like a talking point, but it is also true. Their agreement is with the Russian State. If what comes to that process is Prigozhin or somebody taking that deal, then that is what they get, right? In the same way, when the U.S. engages with a foreign country and the defense attaché is what you get.

We should not frame the African mindset too much in this ideological prism. It is very—in the same way we say it is opportunistic on the Russian side—by the way, it is opportunistic on the Western side as well. We go where opportunities are. Well, the Africans are also opportunistic, right? It is; this is what we need. Who is offering it? We are going to sort the cost later, particularly if it is about regime survival. Regime survival is important.

If you are CAR, the Central African Republic, you feel pretty abandoned by everyone. You have been in war for almost thirty years. Every other six years, the capital falls to different groups, and so on. The French come, the French leave. You go over there, everybody's there, but nothing is working. This guy says, look, I have a proposition for you. We are going to protect you as head of State, and we are going to provide X, Y, Z. I am sure the guy is saying this is terrible, but this is all I have. That is—I think that is what I have said. We need to keep that in mind: That it is less rigid, less ideological, just more practical.

Mr. LEWIS: I think that is a perfect place to wrap up, if we do not have any more questions. Thank you so much to everyone who made it out today, and to those watching online. I think our panelists covered this fascinating topic very well.

Yes, thank you all.

[Applause.]

[Whereupon, at 3 p.m., the briefing ended.]

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