



Geopolitical **Risk Index**

**Russia's expansion strategies
in Central Africa's gold mining sector:
Wagner Group**

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Table of contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Research Methodology	4
2.1 Research Objective	4
2.2 Research Relevance	4
2.3 Research Question	5
2.4 Research Methodology	5
2.5 Limitations	6
2.6 Future research	7
3. Africa's Potential for Russia and the Rest of the World	8
4. The Strategic Relevance of Gold for Russia	14
5. The Golden Sector for Central Africa	17
6. The Political Conditions of Central Africa	26
7. Case Study: Wagner Group	33
7.1 Founding	33
7.2 Mali	35
7.3 Burkina Faso	41
7.4 Sudan	45
7.5 Central African Republic	50
7.6 Niger	54
8. Case Discussion	59
9. Conclusion	65
10. Bibliography	67

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, Africa has once again become a continent of significant geopolitical importance, both for the West and for emerging powers. The player that has shown the greatest interest in expanding its presence on the African continent has been the Russian Federation. This has been particularly true since the invasion of Crimea and the subsequent Western sanctions in 2014.

In order to compensate for the economic damage suffered, Moscow has intensified its efforts to control its gold supplies, turning its attention to Africa. In particular, the Kremlin decided to enter into bilateral agreements with individual Central African countries in order to simplify access to the precious metal. This represents a fundamental movement within the global balance of geopolitical relations, with a shift in the axis of collaboration in Africa from Europe to emerging powers.

The aim of this research is therefore to explore the strategies through which Russia has developed its hold on the African gold sector, answering the following question: *“What are the recurring strategies employed by Russian companies and the Russian Federation to develop their influence over Central Africa in order to control the gold sector from 2014 to the present?”*. The objective is therefore to ascertain whether recurring patterns have been employed and whether these are commercial, military, or political in nature.

The decision to answer this question stems from the desire to provide multinationals in the gold sector with a tool for predicting the geopolitical evolution of a country following the strengthening of relations with Russia.

The current research is divided into six main chapters. The first chapter helps to understand the reasons why world powers are interested in Africa and why it is so important in geopolitical terms. The second chapter focuses on why Russia has placed so much emphasis on gold. The third chapter will look at the economic weight of gold

in African political decisions. The fourth chapter will explain the African political preconditions that have favored Russian penetration. The fifth chapter will introduce the Wagner Group and the strategies implemented to control the gold sector. Finally, the research will conclude with the discussion of the case, formulating the patterns used by Russia in developing its influence over African gold.

The main findings underline that Russia seeks specific economic, geographical, and political characteristics in order to forge relations with an African country. In addition to these preconditions, the Kremlin has also been able to develop its hold on the gold sector by repeatedly focusing on military exchanges, distancing African countries from long-standing trading partners, and controlling strategic facilities.

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2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research Objective

The present work aims to examine the patterns through which the Russian government, or its affiliates, penetrate the strategic sectors of other nations. The objective is to determine whether the techniques employed to gain influence are primarily based on the ability to establish political relations, commercial ties, or force-based interactions. In order to produce original content, the analysis has been deliberately limited to a single sector with significant international economic and monetary implications: gold (Arslanalp et al., 2023). This focus naturally led to the decision to concentrate geographically on regions that appear less aligned within the bipolar dynamic between Russia and the West (Mohamedou, 2024). Consequently, the scope of the study has been restricted to Central Africa, a region rich in gold resources (Sheaffer, 2025), characterized by political instability, and marked by dynamics that facilitate the entry of external actors into the gold industry (Mohamedou, 2024). The temporal frame of reference primarily spans from 2014 to the present, coinciding with the period in which Russia was compelled to intensify its efforts to secure access to gold in response to international sanctions (Salushev, 2014). Nonetheless, the analysis of certain political contexts in African countries extends to periods preceding 2014, as it is necessary to investigate the origins of national instability in order to fully understand the conditions that enabled Russian involvement.

2.2 Research Relevance

The rationale behind this thesis stems from the scarcity of direct and specific sources that thoroughly analyze the gold sector in Central Africa from the perspective of international influence dynamics. Indeed, research in this field often focuses exclusively on political, military, and international relations aspects, maintaining a

holistic view of nations without narrowing down to specific sectors such as individual minerals. While some studies on African geopolitics can be found, they rarely focus in depth on gold. The same applies to the geographical focus: references are often made to broader regions rather than to clearly defined individual countries. Therefore, the combination of these two underexplored areas of study makes the research topic particularly focused and rarely addressed in mainstream academic literature. Accordingly, the primary aim of this study is to fill a gap in literature concerning a current and internationally relevant issue.

An additional objective of this thesis is to offer a framework of interpretation and analysis for companies considering market entry into the African gold sector, particularly in evaluating the geopolitical risks posed by Russian interest in gold. Likewise, this study may prove useful to companies already operating in the African gold industry that require a geopolitical risk assessment concerning their existing concessions.

2.3 Research Question

Given the objectives and the relevance of the research outlined above, the present thesis aims to answer the following research question: *“What are the recurring strategies employed by Russian companies and the Russian Federation to develop their influence over Central Africa in order to control the gold sector from 2014 to the present?”*. This question is accompanied by an in-depth analysis of the principal instrument through which the Russian government operates, namely, the Wagner Group.

2.4 Research Methodology

In order to achieve the most comprehensive result possible, a structured research methodology was adopted with the aim of producing inclusive knowledge. However, it

was acknowledged that constructing a perfectly scientific methodology is particularly challenging without the use of automation tools. Consequently, a *Traditional Literature Review* (TLR) was selected, while nonetheless adhering to the guidelines of the *Systematic Literature Review* (SLR) approach as proposed by Aguilar-Tomasini in 2025 (Aguilar-Tomasini et al., 2025). Data was collected from scientific journals, academic papers, institutional and organizational reports, newspaper articles, and national databases. The research was concentrated on major academic search engines, namely: LibUniBocconi, EBSCOhost, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, Google Scholar, ScienceDirect, and the World Bank Report Database. A core set of keywords was then defined and searched across all databases using multiple combinations through the “AND” function, with occurrence either in the title or the abstract. The main keywords used included: Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Gold, Wagner, Russia, West, Concessions, and Mining. From the resulting raw data, sources were filtered based on duplication, subject area, content relevance, year of publication, and online accessibility. Up to this stage, the methodology remained closely aligned with SLR principles. However, once a large sample of available sources was obtained, further selection choices had to be made in order to refine the research scope, thus introducing TLR elements into the process. Sources were prioritized according to citation count, recency, and content relevance. In parallel, additional papers cited by the initial core sources were included, as well as further documents identified through TLR practices, particularly in cases where specific topics were underrepresented in the initial keyword-based search. Finally, the selected sources were grouped according to content and geographical focus and were subsequently analyzed.

2.5 Limitations

This thesis was carried out with the aim of obtaining the most objective and generalizable results possible, by applying a research methodology designed to achieve the most comprehensive outcome.

However, several factors may have influenced the conclusions reached. First, the sample available for analysis is limited, as the study focused on a specific area of the African continent. This decision was made both due to the higher concentration of Russian influence-related events in that region and the greater relevance of the gold sector there (Sheaffer, 2025). As a result, the research may be less applicable to generalized situations. Second, the use of qualitative analysis methods implies that the findings may be affected by the researcher's own biases (Collier et al., 1996). Third, the observed results may not be valid in the future or in different geographic areas, due to the current and continuously evolving nature of the dynamics involving both the African continent and Russia. Fourth, some inaccuracies may arise from limited access to data and information, which may be incomplete or report geopolitical dynamics imprecisely. Finally, the research has been supported by also journalistic articles, which may not have been written in a fully objective manner, as the authors themselves could have been subject to biases (Collier et al., 1996).

2.6 Future research

Future research could devote greater attention to the ability of Western companies to defend their State concessions and market share in response to the entry of new companies linked to the Russian Federation.

Additional studies could focus on the political or lobbying operations that Western companies might undertake to protect their State concessions or to reclaim mining sites that have been expropriated or to which access has been restricted.

Finally, further analyses could concentrate on different strategic raw materials, such as rare earth elements, on other countries involved in the control of the sector, such as China, or on alternative geographic areas, such as the nations of the Southern African region.

3. Africa's Potential for Russia and the Rest of the World

The current chapter will describe the main reasons for which both the Russian Federation and the Western countries are involved in activities concerning the African continent. This analysis will give a useful tool to understand the dynamics of Africa before and after 2014 that will be later described in subsequent chapters. Moreover, explaining the motivations behind the actions of the Russian Federation will be a fundamental reading key to acknowledge how it has pursued its objectives.

The conditions that generate attentiveness for the African continent can be classified accordingly to whom is the involved party: Western countries, Russia or both.

First, there are interests that are shared by both sides.

From the economic perspective, Africa can be seen as a growing market that has great potential for improving its economic relevance (World Bank, 2023), as proven by its GDP size that could move from the current \$2.8 trillion (Africa Development Bank, 2024) to a range between \$4 and \$6 trillion in 2030, based on how positive the investment scenario will be in the next few years (OECD, 2022). On top of that, industrial production is expected to face substantial growth (Zeufack et al., 2022), representing an interesting opportunity for developed countries to pick Africa as the continent where to relocate manufacturing processes (Signè, 2018). This process could be further enhanced by the expected increase in population and, thus, in labor force (Vollset et al., 2020). At the same time, a larger number of inhabitants can also represent an opportunity for developed countries to consider the continent as a new strategic destination market (Procopio, 2023).

From the perspective of natural resources, Africa represents a fundamental continent in terms of mineral deposits, quite often representing the largest reservoir in the world (Bassou, 2017).

Natural Resource	% of African to World Reserves	Main Extraction Countries	Main applications
Chromium	80%	South Africa	Stainless Steel, Refractory Materials
Cobalt	47%	DRC	Lithium-ion Batteries
Coltan	80%	DRC, Rwanda	Electronical Components
Diamonds	60%	Botswana, DRC, South Africa	Industrial, Jewelry
Gold	57%	Ghana, Sudan, Mali, South Africa	Monetary Reserve, Industrial
Graphite	21%	Madagascar, Mozambique, Tanzania	Lithium-ion Batteries
Iron	20%	South Africa, Guinea	Miscellaneous
Lithium	5%	DRC, Zimbabwe, Ghana, Namibia	Lithium-ion Batteries
Manganese	85%	South Africa, Gabon	Steel, Batteries, Fertilizers
Oil	14%	Nigeria, Angola, Libya, Algeria	Energy, Plastics
Platinum	80%	South Africa, Zimbabwe	Fuel Cells for Hydrogen Energy
Uranium	23%	Namibia, Niger, South Africa	Energy
Vanadium	41%	South Africa	Steel

Bassou, 2017; Bofo et al., 2024 – African Ore Reserves to World Reserves, Main Extraction Countries and Applications

In particular, the availability of rare earths and ores, determines that often African countries are involved in geopolitical interest from external players that intervene in order to fulfill their needs of raw materials (Holley et al., 2023). This process has recently sped up due to the transition to green technologies, determining a spike in demand for lithium, cobalt, copper and graphite (McLellan et al., 2019), increasing even more the influences coming from developed countries (Baskaran, 2023). The intervention from non-African countries is induced by a structural disadvantage, for which they own a limited share of ores, while often representing the largest consumers (Kohnert, 2024). This imbalance determines that multiple countries are increasingly developing bilateral agreements with local States to ensure direct access to mines and avoid interferences from third party market players (Bofo et al., 2024). Nevertheless, the focus of developed nations is also for ores that have a high intrinsic value, such as gold (Arslanalp et al., 2022), which will be analyzed more in depth in the next chapter.

Second, Russia carries interests toward objectives different from the rest of the world.

The Russian Federation's additional aim is to strategically create relationships with African countries in order to foster long-term cooperation. This comes with the willingness to stabilize economic dealings and obtain access to both resources and diplomatic support in international forums (Ferragamo, 2023). Indeed, since 2014's

Crimea invasion, Russia had to face increasingly complicated international affairs due to the isolationism stemming from the sanctions imposed by Western countries (Salushev, 2014). On the side, Russia’s collaboration with African States comes with the intention to prove its global reach of military power, demonstrating that it can be considered a reliable worldwide ally in case of conflicts (Narbone, 2024). Thus, an improved reputation for its defensive capabilities can be the basis for the development of a broader soft power exerted on other African nations, determining a larger number of countries supporting Russia’s actions and political decisions in international contexts (Narbone, 2024). Moreover, the direct consequence is that the Russian Federation could be allowed to open posts on the African continent in exchange, as happened in the last few years (Narbone, 2024). Indeed, before 2018 there wasn’t any directly controlled military post on the continent, as shown in the figure (Bugayova, 2019).



Bugayova, 2019 – Russian military presence in Africa before 2018

Meanwhile, the situation has already radically changed today.

Country	Year	Military Group Involved
Central African Republic	2018	Africa Corps
Sudan	2020	Africa Corps
Libya	2020	Russian Army
Mali	2021	Africa Corps
Eritrea	2023	Russian Army (Logistical Agreement)
Burkina Faso	2024	Africa Corps
Niger	2024	Africa Corps

Olech, 2024 – Russian military presence in Africa after 2018

The improved presence in African States determines that, on the other side, developed countries' influence on the continent is less effective and partially constrained, underlining another Russian objective: limiting Western soft power on the territory (El-Badawy, 2022).

In 2024, Badawi argued that it is possible to understand Russia's goals by implementing a *Neorealist Framework*, for which Russia seeks power balance in the international system and maximization of national security (Badawi, 2024). This determines that Africa becomes a key continent to counter Western's strong influence and to create the perception of a multipolar world, in opposition to the current unipolar system around United States' influence (Badawi, 2024). These conditions can also be analyzed under a *Neo-Imperialist Framework* which would read Russia's behavior as a way to determine spheres of influence or client States for economic benefit (Badawi, 2024). The two aforementioned theories have become particularly relevant since 2014. Indeed, since then, the interest for African countries became even more relevant for the Russian Federation as a way to compensate for the loss of export to Western countries (Salushev, 2014).

Third, Western countries have opposite purposes to the Russian ones.

The most common reason for which European and American governments are interested in the continent is to defend their current favorable strategic relationships

(Akum, 2023). This is particularly relevant since it gives the opportunity to establish military presence and influence on the territory, leading to better control of areas that are far from homeland (Lartey, 2024). Indeed, in the last 15 years, both the United States and the European Union were able to directly intervene in Africa in support of specific countries through respectively the Africa Command (AFRICOM) and, in example for Europe, the Forces Françaises de Presence (FFP). These represent permanent bases that have a fundamental role in strategic surveillance, intelligence, military governance and deterrence (Kitissou, 2014) (Paalo et al., 2024). Nevertheless, defending strong relationships also simplifies access to economic benefits, such as resources and commercial routes. The latter ones are mainly represented by the Strait of Bab el-Mandeb in the Red Sea and the Lobito Corridor. In the first route, Western countries are present in the territory adjacent to the infrastructures with the willingness to control smooth and regular operations, avoiding potential supply chain disruptions in their respective countries (Donelli, 2021). Indeed, its facilities have substantial impacts on the global economy. Through the Strait are moved 9% of worldwide maritime petrol traffic and 10% of worldwide containers, with the United States present in Djibuti with Camp Lemonnier for safety purposes (ITF, 2024). On the other hand, positive relationships are key to achieving access also to resources that are not necessarily rare earths, but also more common, such as oil and natural gas. This is particularly true for the EU which, apart from limited reserves in the Nordics, was for many years heavily dependent on Russian supplies. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine exposed the risks of this dependency, prompting European governments to deepen their relationships with African partners as part of a strategy to diversify the continent's energy portfolio (Weiner et al., 2024).

Another relevant set of motivations to be interested in African countries stems from the willingness to prevent more phenomena, such as migration control, terrorism control and illegal trafficking. In particular, the *Report on a new EU-Africa Strategy – a partnership for sustainable and inclusive Development* from the European Parliament in 2021 states “...security sector reform, justice reform, good governance, democratic

accountability and the protection of civilians are prerequisite for winning the trust of populations in their governments and security forces..." (EU Parliament, 2021). The statement underlines how the European Union strategy aims also at introducing stable democratic models within Africa so that less political uncertainty is obtained. This produces positive effects that are reflected in the local populations but also in Western countries. Indeed, once these models are implemented, they are able to ensure more governance stability, thus, longer lasting relationships (Tusalem, 2015), less migratory flows (Kalam, 2020) and lower crime rates (Piccone et al., 2017).

Lastly, the West's interest in Africa also lies in defending the current system of global governance, while countering attempts by Russia to undermine the economic superiority of Western powers (Badawi, 2024). This prevents the emergence of pro-Russian outbreaks, in a context that in the United States has been defined as *Revived Containment Model* (Chin et al., 2024), referring to the *Containment Idea* elaborated by Kennan in 1946. Today, the model remains quite similar to the one applied during the Cold War, with the use of a combination of military (i.e., Africom), diplomatic, economic (i.e., Camp Lemonnier) and cultural (i.e., democracy) instruments to contain the expansion of Russia's influence, avoiding direct conflict in order to just limit its ideological and geopolitical power. However, according to Chin, obtaining said results is almost impossible due to the *Africa Policy Trilemma*, for which the West cannot contemporarily pursue all three objectives at the same time: democracy promotion, fighting instability and economic competition with Russia (Chin et al., 2024).

The following chapter will further examine more reasons why Russia is interested in natural resources but with a sole focus on gold.

4. The Strategic Relevance of Gold for Russia

The present chapter will concentrate on the central role that gold has assumed since 2014 for Russia.

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, in an even more pronounced way, with 2022 Ukraine invasion, Russia has been subjected to sanctions from Western countries. These measures were mainly designed to weaken the overall economy and currency so that it is more difficult to fund further military campaigns in the short term (Silva, 2025). Thus, the most impacted sectors were energy, due to its GDP relevance for Russia, banking, for its function as economic stabilizer, and financial markets (Imbs et al., 2023). In particular, for the two latter sectors, access to the SWIFT network has been blocked for numerous banks, making it very complicated to safely transfer money from Russian banks to financial institutions from other parts of the world, especially Western ones. The main consequence is that the Russian Federation had to find alternatives assets to sustain its international trade activity and internal overall macroeconomic stability (Cipriani et al., 2023). Therefore, gold represented one of the possible solutions to partially solve the economic issues and bypass sanctions.

Gold is a physical and non-fungible real asset, meaning that lacks digital identification, making it impossible to be traced through information or financial systems, unlike traditional currencies such as Rubles (Finlay, 2020). Moreover, it is very complicated for Western countries to influence its intrinsic value, meaning that it is a good that cannot be influenced by sanctions. Thus, Russia can exploit these characteristics to exchange gold in lightly or opaquely regulated financial markets for stronger currencies that are accepted in international payments (Hunter, 2022). As a consequence, the Russian Federation is still able to trade goods outside its borders using gold as a parallel currency, ensuring more resilience in an environment of growing isolation (Arslanalp, 2023).

Another fundamental benefit of larger access to gold for Russia is that it is also utilized as an underlying asset to sustain the value of Rubles; indeed, having more gold reserves determines a better anchoring of the value of the currency (Zulaica, 2020). Since 2014, the Central Bank of Russia (CBR) has improved its gold accumulation plan to face rising financial instability given by Western sanctions and their subsequent weakening of the Ruble (Dreger et al., 2016). This policy works also toward another objective of the CBR, which is the de-dollarization of Russia's economic activity and reserves in order to avoid risks coming from unilateral decisions taken by the United States (Xu, 2022). Another issue emerging from 2022 Ukraine war for the CBR is the increase in State spending, in particular to fund military expenses (Cooper, 2025). As a consequence, Russia was obliged to issue more national debt which was risking becoming unbearable due to spikes in government bond's yields. Thus, gold represents also a guarantee for the repayment of national debt since it can be capitalized on the balance sheet of the State (Flandreau et al., 2021). This determines a lower default risk, which implies lower interest rates, and it reduces government spending. Yet, this last aspect got less relevant in the latest years since Russia opted for a technical default toward external Western debt repayments (Bianchi et al., 2023).

Alongside all the economic benefits of gold for Russia, there are some that are more strategic and that have the potential to strengthen international relations with countries non-aligned or hostile to the Western world. Since most of gold is extracted in African countries, Russia has the opportunity to access the ore without having to buy it from financial markets controlled by Western countries (Kennedy et al., 2025). Nonetheless, often times gold is not even bought with the traditional exchange of goods for fiat currency, given that Rubles are not considered an asset that is trustable enough and Dollars are scarce in Moscow. Indeed, frequently, Russia has to obtain extraction concessions in exchange for military support or security for local regimes (Kennedy et al., 2025). Often, the process is not even entirely carried out directly by the State, but through intermediaries or paramilitary groups, such as the Wagner Group (Kostiuk et al., 2023). This practice is commonly referred to as *gold for security* and leverages the

Russian ability to identify African countries with political instability, corruption or weak governance that are open to sell mining permits for alternative payments methods. The terms secured in this manner are frequently favorable to Russia, which gains privileged access to gold with lower expense and low transparency (Mohamedou, 2024). Consequently, relationships within the African continent are strengthened and Moscow has also the right to move military forces in bases spread all over Africa, as underlined in the previous chapter (European Parliament, 2024).

The overall consequence is that, for Russia, gold represents a way to obtain advantages that are economic, relational and strategic in pursuing goals of de-Westernization and bipolarization of the world.

The following chapters will focus only on countries situated in Central Africa that possess large gold deposits, such as Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. In addition to their mineral wealth, these countries also possess unstable governments, making them fertile ground for Russia's expansionist strategies (Zoatsa et al., 2022).

5. The Golden Sector for Central Africa

The current chapter will focus on providing an overview of the gold sector for each aforementioned country from an economic perspective in order to assess its relevance to the decision-making processes within the States.

Providing an exact and defined amount of gold availability for the countries within Central Africa is very complicated due to the scattered political situation of each nation and the scarcity and untrustworthiness of sources (Moyer, 2018). However, it is possible to have a broader idea of the real amount by analyzing singularly the main players of gold extraction of the region. By concentrating on the countries indicated in the previous chapter, it is possible to estimate, in a conservative manner, that at least ~1684 tons of gold deposits are present on the Central African region, as reported in the following table.

Country	Gold deposits (t)	Production (t)
CAR	28	1
Sudan	533	42
Mali	800	70
Burkina Faso	301	60
Niger	22	2
Total	1684	175

Blood Gold Report, 2023; Sheaffer, 2025; NordGold, 2016; Northern Miner, 2000; CEIC, 2025 – Central Africa
Gold Deposits and Production in Tons

These numbers refer to the most recent, trustworthy and conservative data available, in particular for Artisanal and Small-scale Mining (ASM). For a better perspective on the size and relevance of these numbers, it is helpful to compare it to the total amount located in Africa, which is conservatively estimated at around ~7500 tons (Sheaffer, 2025). The consequence is that the five aforementioned countries alone represent ~22.5% of the total potential gold that is present in Africa. At the same time, by

repeating the same reasoning for production, it can be observed that a total production of ~681 tons a year of gold (CEIC, 2025) is carried out in Central African nations, resulting in a conservative ~25.7% of total production.

While considering these 5 countries together can be useful, it is too simplistic. Each region is different with substantial heterogeneity of production type and political conditions. On one side, there are Mali and Burkina Faso that are recognized worldwide for gold extraction and deposit dimensions, while, on the other, Niger, CAR and Sudan are markets with a strong emphasis on artisanal production and on fragmentation.

Niger has never had a long tradition of gold production since most of its extraction operations are focused on uranium deposits. Yet, some positive research was carried out in order to then discover gold deposits in the Tillabéri region and in some desertic regions of the South Sahel (World Bank, 2022). However, due to its size and recency, production is quite limited and in the hands of small local extractors that distributed over 69 artisanal gold mines with only 3 of them directly controlled by the State (AMDC, 2011). The private and regulated part of the gold industry is still focused on the feasibility research for profitable mines by Chinese, Australian and Canadian large players (World Bank, 2022).

Niger's focus on gold emerged as a response to the severe drought of the 1980s, which prompted the country to look for alternative sources of income. Therefore, the government started a regulation campaign in order to provide a sound law system to better control ASM activity (OECD, 2018). This project lasted until 2016 when it was unexpectedly interrupted by a growing instability in the Sahel region that obliged the country to switch its military resources to anti-terrorism operations and to focus its investments on national security (OECD, 2018).

All these efforts gave birth to the gold mining industry within the country. To this day, the industry's weight on the national economy is still quite low, due to its artisanal

nature. There is no official statistic that certifies the importance of the sector, yet it was observed that gold exports account for 0.5% of GDP (World Bank 2, 2022). On the other hand, this information doesn't take into account the economic relevance of gold mining, which could be better proxied by mineral rent, and it is attested at 0.8% of GDP (World Bank, 2021). Thus, as a conservative estimate, it is possible to suppose that the overall gold economy weighs around 1% of the country's GDP.

The regulation efforts reflected also the weight of gold exports, with growing relevance throughout the last 10 years. In 2014, gold production and export were estimated at only 0.7 tons; yet this production was sufficient to represent 30% of the total mining sector revenues. Still, the value of gold exports remained marginal (2.9%) compared to that of uranium, which alone accounted for 51.7% of mineral exports (OECD, 2018). Finally, today, gold export represents ~31% of total exports, doubling uranium's figure (OEC, 2023). Such data suggest that even if gold represents a minimal part of the country's GDP, it is a very helpful tool to compensate the largely negative trade balance of Niger. At the same time, it hints that a large part of production is carried out in ASM, which doesn't allow for GDP tracking but only export tracing.

The main export destinations are United Arab Emirates with a 75% share, South Africa for 21% and France for 3% (World Bank 3, 2022). Nevertheless, these numbers are just a facade since the first two countries do not represent the final market. In particular, UAE is only a commercial hub that collects materials to sell them later to third parties (Ndoricimpa, 2024) and South Africa is the destination for raw gold to be refined and sold again to other nations (Hunter 2, 2022).

From an industrial perspective, the only developed mine is Samira Hill, managed by Société des Mines du Liptako, a controlled company of McKinell Resources and of a public company of the Nigerien government (Morningstar, 2025). The consequence is that direct employment stemming from the industrial activity is almost negligible; this stands particularly in contrast to the value of ASM estimated workforce of 450,000 people (AMDC, 2011).

Although all the aforementioned commitment in terms of regulation of the sector, challenges remain in relation to governance, regional instability and lack of technical and financial capacity which prevent the possibility to develop a fully integrated gold industry (Raga, 2023).

Similarly, Burkina Faso saw an improvement in its gold industry around 2008, following the approval of laws impacting the mining code that were aimed at attracting foreign capital (Kansole, 2021). This transformed their country and their artisanal production into the 4th largest gold extracting country in Africa (Kansole, 2021). The main mining sites that have been opened are Essakane, Taparko-Bouroum, Kalsaka and Mana, all located on the border with Mali, Ghana and Niger and mainly controlled by Western companies. Nevertheless, the country kept relying also on ASM, yet at a marginal level with peaks of ~30% of total production, leaving some space for more external actors to intervene in the sector (Raineri, 2020).

Nowadays, for Burkina Faso gold extraction is a long-standing relevant industry that has suffered from a poor management from multiple political actors. During Compaoré's 27-year regime, the privatization process of mining licenses was started; however, due to the unilateral nature of the government, this operation generated large inefficiencies in terms of concessions allocation (Werthmann, 2017). Most of them were assigned through Compaoré's private relationships, determining large economical losses for the State and clashes between industrial players and ASM (Werthmann, 2017). For this reason, following his resignation in 2015, a new Mining Code was approved, introducing regulations to achieve more transparency, more effective tax collection and more influence on the industry. Yet, to this day, the reform is not sufficient and most of ASM production is still fairly unregulated (Werthmann, 2017).

The regulation deficiency determines that a large part of Burkina Faso's gold sector is unregulated. This is particularly relevant when considering that gold extraction employs

1 to 1.1 million people, representing around 10% of the total workforce of the country (OECD, 2018). On the other hand, the National Institute of Statistics and Demography (NISD) of Burkina Faso sets this number at merely 140,000, underlining a large discrepancy (OECD, 2018). The size of the sector determines also that 16% of GDP is generated by the gold industry (Tossou, 2024) which also represents 95% of revenues of the mining sector (OECD, 2018) and 75% of total exports (EITI, 2025). Again, the most relevant export destinations are mainly refining hubs, like Switzerland, Mali and India with 84% of the total and UAE at 10% for the commercial side (Trend Economy, 2023).

As a consequence, gold is a key asset for the economic stability of Burkina Faso also because around 20.1% of government revenues are generated solely by this ore (EITI, 2025). Most of these are generated both by a 7% royalty on production and by minoritarian ownership in extraction companies (Tossou, 2024). Nevertheless, ASM production is still widely common, determining complexities in tracking and efficiently collecting tax revenues. In 2018, the government tried to reduce this point by issuing more mining licenses to international players so that they could fill the industry gap, yet this goal was never fully achieved (OECD, 2018).

In Mali, production flourished in the first 2000s with a strong focus on the South-West region where the main sites were Sadiola, Yatela, Morila and Loulo-Gounkoto, managed by a consortium led by both South African and Canadian companies (USGS, 2014). At the same time, the sector was also strongly represented by a non-industrialized part operating on a local level without the intervention of large firms, determining dual coexistence within the country (Parker et al., 2006). Nevertheless, industrial extraction, due to its nature, represents the majority of gold production within the country, with peaks of up to ~90% of the total (Diallo, 2025).

Mali's long standing gold industry helps setting it as the 5th largest African gold producer in 2020, equivalent to the 17th position in the world (Boire et al., 2021). Gold

represents a fundamental pillar of Mali's economy (Mainguy, 2011), contributing to 7-10% of its GDP and generating around 90% of the revenues of the mining industry (OECD, 2018). Since 2000, gold has also overcome cotton as the leading export product for Mali, representing almost 65% of the total international trades in 2017 (OECD, 2018), even though this growth has been mainly driven by price increases rather than larger production output (Sanoh et al., 2015). These data show how Mali's economy is strongly dependent on gold revenues, in particular for improving its trade balance, sustained mainly by exports toward South Africa and Switzerland for metal refining (97%) (Trend Economy, 2019).

Despite the central role in macroeconomics, employment created by gold remains marginal: the industrial sector engages only 11,000 workers, while almost 90% operates in the ASM (World Bank, 2015). Nevertheless, a large chunk of the population is still dependent on the sector, with around 2 million people influenced, representing almost 10% of the total population (Tremul, 2024). Direct ASM employs at least 200,000 miners (Mainguy, 2021) and, even if the category is lawfully recognized since 2012, it operates in a legal framework that is poorly controlled by local authorities (OECD, 2018). This determines a lack of efficiency which partially explains the low levels of ASM output that stand at only 7% of total gold extraction (Sanoh et al., 2015). The remaining part is controlled by large multinational companies mainly from South Africa, Canada and Australia which benefit from an advantageous fiscal system and an offer of more than 500 industrial mining licenses (OECD, 2018). The consequence is that the sector represents the first source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) for Mali (Roberto et al., 2019) which directly benefits the local government, with gold representing 17% of total State revenues (OECD, 2018); nevertheless, the local impact of tax revenues remains limited due to the ineffectiveness of redistribution mechanisms (Coulibaly et al., 2024). On the other hand, ASM proves to generate a better improvement on the local economy, yet it is more prone to halts given by conflicts or insecurity in the Sahel (OECD, 2022).

Sudan's gold industry assumed large relevance in its economy after the 2011's split with South Sudan due to the privation of revenues coming from oil production. Thus, the government shifted its focus to attracting FDI for finding gold deposits in the Northern and Eastern part of the country, with a focus on the Red Sea, River Nile e North State regions (USGS 2, 2014). A typical characteristic of Sudan's extraction activity is that it is carried out mainly by local gold finders that operate on a very small scale and independently (USGS 2, 2014). Nevertheless, regulation is quite weak and numerous gold outflows are not reported, determining an easy ground for the development of external players' interests (Soliman, 2025).

It is estimated that only gold exports represent around 5% of national GDP and 48.5% of international trade, with 97% of it directed to the UAE (Soliman, 2025). This strong dependence on such sector creates vulnerabilities for the economic stability of the country: an increase in gold smuggling could impact the whole nation. Indeed, this process is already currently happening (Collins, 2019). It is estimated that around 70% of total gold production is trafficked illicitly, with most of flows moving to Egypt and UAE, deceiving Sudan's government controls and taxation (Collins, 2019). The main consequence is that only a fraction of tax revenues is collected: in 2024, official exports produced around \$1.5 billion in revenues, but the government cashed in only \$200,000, underlining severe inefficiencies (Shereikis, 2025). These issues help partially explain the 2023 crisis, where Sudan saw a 40% decrease in the value of its economy and an 80% collapse in tax revenues (Sudan Tribune, 2024).

Another factor contributing to such worrying results is that ASM dominates gold extraction activities, representing 85% of total production (Factiva, 2023) and employing 2 million workers both directly and indirectly (Yale, 2025). However, despite its relevance, the formalization of this segment of the industry remains heavily lacking, causing high informality levels, institutional fragmentation and corruption, which all contribute to penetration of external players (Guibert, 2016). The aforementioned conditions stemmed also from a 2021 coup d'état which led government transparency to dip: in about a year, 32 tons of gold disappeared from the State's control, generating

\$2 billion in losses (Factiva, 2023). Local authorities had already tried reducing the issue of smuggling in 2012 by obliging ASM workers to sell only to Sudan Central Bank; yet this solution only pushed in the completely opposite direction (Guibert, 2016). This scenario is accompanied by an internal war that uses gold not only for Sudan's economy but also as a mechanism of power where both side of the clash use the ore to finance its equipments (Al-Ghwell, 2025).

The country's internal bipolarism also weakens mining institutions which are not able anymore to assign licenses to the best players, but only to the closest ones to the regime. Moreover, permissions are only assigned to non-Western countries as a response to the international sanctions applied to Sudan, mainly benefitting Turkey, China and Persian Gulf States (Guibert, 2016). The consequence is that gold is also used to build an even stronger bond with these States in order to compensate for the lack of relationship with Western countries (Guibert, 2016).

Thus, gold is not only a vital source of wealth for Sudan, but it is a strategic good that helps sustaining the political system, financing the internal conflict and consolidating external strategic alliances.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, the Central African Republic has a very underdeveloped sector where no industrial player operates on the territory (De Jong, 2020); the only mining sites available are small and concentrated in the Ouaka, Haute-Kotto and Haute-Sangha regions. There was only once an attempt to professionalize the industry in 2010 through the Passendro project, a new digging in the Ouaka region carried out by Axmin in Ndassima (Matthysen et al., 2013). The firm is a junior mining company founded in the 90s and listed on the Canadian Venture Exchange that has operated in Sierra Leone and Senegal, and it wanted to expand its business also in the CAR (Matthysen et al., 2013). Thus, the company decided to buy the exploration rights for the region of Bambari-Bakala in mid 2000s, concluding their feasibility studies in 2010 and confirming the potential profitability of the Passendro mine. As a

consequence, the Central African Republic government formally assigned Axmin a 25-year long mining license with the purpose of strategically improving the economic condition of the area, ameliorating government deficit and attracting more international investments. However, in just a few years, the CAR's political instability worsened, causing internal clashes that resulted in the de facto expropriation of Axmin Inc.'s assets, even though the firm had still the legal ownership of the mine (Coppolino, 2024).

In the CAR, gold is a much more marginal resource compared to the aforementioned countries. Its weight on the national GDP is not disclosed, but it is estimated at less than 1.7% (extractive and forestry sector combined), meanwhile its contribution to employment is even lower, with a 0.03% for the mining sector alone (EITI, 2022). Nevertheless, due to its high intrinsic value and the weakness of CAR's other industries, gold plays an important role in the trade balance, representing around 50% of exports (OEC 2, 2023). There is no trustworthy data of countries to which gold is exported, but the main destination for the whole economy is the United Arab Emirates with a 54.4% share (OEC 2, 2023) which, considering the weight of gold exports, can help assuming that most of the ore is sold to Dubai.

Production is mainly carried out by ASM, with around 600,000 people depending on it directly or indirectly (Matthysen et al., 2013); nevertheless, its governance is quite weak, facing most of the issues earlier described for Sudan. It is estimated that around 95% of gold extraction is smuggled avoiding State and fiscal control and this depends on ASM's nature, high taxation compared to peers and the absence of dislocated institutions within the rural extraction areas (Matthysen et al., 2013). As a consequence, local authorities gain more decisional power, but they are an easier target for corruption and incapability in implementing the 2009 Mining Code, causing the sector to be prone to penetrations from external players (Huggins, 2022). Similarly to Sudan, these conditions and an ongoing armed conflict determine that gold has both economic and political power in shifting the balance between the two facing sides (Huggins, 2022).

6. The Political Conditions of Central Africa

The current chapter will briefly describe for each country the political changes that created the conditions for external players to enter new markets or to modify standing international relations for the Central African nations.

Niger's political instability started following its 1960 independence from France and, before the 2023 coup d'état, it has suffered from regime overthrows for four times: 1974, 1996, 1999 and 2010 (Abbas, 2025). This indicates that the country was under military governments for about 20 years before 2011's return to democratic elections with Mahamadou Issoufou, which lasted as Niger president for two following mandates until 2020 (Abbas, 2025). The following vote in 2021 was won by Mohamed Bazoum for what happened to be a regular and democratic process, despite some public clashes and complaints about alleged irregularities (Reuters, 2023). However, Bazoum's mandate had to come to an end earlier than expected in 2023 due to a new coup d'état led by the former head of the presidential guards Abdourahamane Tchiani (Hassan, 2023). After the takeover, Tchiani proclaimed himself as the president of the National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland (CNSP), a military junta constituted to momentarily manage the transition toward a new regime (Balima et al., 2023). The new leader explained the coup by affirming that the previous government was not able to solve the national security issues and it was inefficiently administrating the State; yet there is no data to support the reason given for overthrowing Issoufou (Balima et al., 2023). In 2025, Tchiani formed a new government with him as the President, marking a significant change in external and internal political management of the country (France24, 2025).

Between 2023 and 2025, Tchiani was able to profoundly impact the nation's international relations by suspending the Constitution (Asadu, 2023). This allowed him to expel from Niger French military troops and to revoke all the cooperation agreements

lasting since 1960. The official explanation given for these actions was that allegedly France was interfering and supporting the deposed President. As a consequence, Paris had to recall its ambassador, determining that, in less than a year, France-Niger relationships were completely lost (Asadu 2, 2023). Another country suffering downturns in its relations with Niger were the United States despite a less critical White House and attempts to keep dialogues open. By March 2024, also USA's military troops started retreating from Niger's soil, determining a severe setback in fight and prevention against terrorism. Overall, Tchiani's regime took distance from all Western countries (Reuters, 2024). Aggravating the situation, Niger started a regional integration process with Mali and Burkina Faso, both military regimes, through the creation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), a sovereigntist and anti-Western bloc of countries with shared objectives about defense and development (APNews 3, 2023).

Internally, Tchiani operated toward a tightening of independent media repression and an improvement in pro CNSP propaganda (Hassan, 2023). Moreover, the country's economic conditions quickly worsened due to inflation, the stop in international aid and Western sanctions. These conditions led Tchiani to offer its abundant natural resources to external players, in particular, by offering new licenses and contracts for the mining and energy sectors to alternative countries, such as Russia, China and Turkey (NEI, 2024). At the same time, the leader took steps to review and suspend mining licenses signed by the former President, with specific focus on industrial players from Western countries, affirming that, under its leadership, there will be a more relevant presence of the State in the sector (Schwikowski, 2025).

Burkina Faso's history doesn't differ much from Niger's one, also due to their same foundation origin. The former was also founded in 1960 following independence from France and it faced multiple coup d'état throughout its history. It is considered that at least eight were carried out, without even considering the prevented ones and the 2014's leader swap (ACSRT, 2022). Indeed, the last democratically elected government reports to that year, where a growing popular discontent about the leader's

attempts to modify the Constitution led to revolts which determined the end of the regime (Obinna et al., 2024). The newly elected president Kaboré remained in office for two consecutive mandates, yet the second one ended prematurely due to a coup (ACSRT, 2022). On January 2022, Kaboré is deposed, and colonel Damiba forcefully takes over, proclaiming himself the leader of the Mouvement Patriotique pour la Sauvergarde et la Restauration (MPSR) as well as Head of State (ACSRT, 2022). The triggering reasons arose from the inability of the previous government to fight the problem of terrorism, the guarantee of the safety of the population and from a growing discontent within the army (Engels, 2025). However, in just eight months, the government suffered from another coup d'état from the army with captain Traoré leading it (ACSRT, 2022). The reasons given for these actions are very similar to the January 2022 case, but with a worsening of the terrorism problem, the troops' discontent and the new willingness to redirect international relations toward strategic alliances with alternative nations (Engels, 2025).

In the same manner as Niger, with the new political conditions, Burkina Faso starts hindering Western countries activities. Already in the first few months of the new mandate, Traoré expels the French ambassador, and he also requires the removal of all French troops from the national soil with the consequent closure of the European base of Kamboinsin (Engels, 2025). Following, the president defines Western countries as neocolonialists and not sufficiently cooperative in the anti-terrorism war in Burkina Faso, determining the subscription of Burkina Faso to the Alliance of Sahel States (Engels, 2025). On top of the cooling relations with the West, the country starts getting closer to alternative forces, such as Russia, Turkey and China (Wilén, 2025).

In internal policy, Traoré focuses on the forced militarization of the nation in order to mobilize the largest number of troops possible against jihadist insurrections (Mwinmaalo, 2025). At the same time, he increases his powers unilaterally, giving the army the faculty to confiscate goods and limit freedom of speech and political opposition. Jointly, he arranges the postponement of democratic elections, explaining that the country is under attack and it needs changes, thus a period of transition

(Mwinmaalo, 2025). Among these, there is the need for a more sovereigntist Africa that has to regain control over its natural resources (Mwinmaalo, 2025). This pushes Traoré to insert more State control over gold and mining activities, with the revision and cancellation of concessions to Western companies, considered hostiles, in favor of State or Russian actors (RFI, 2025). Lastly, the regime tightens the grip on ASM production in order to sustain public finances and to fund the higher costs for State defense (Mwinmaalo, 2025).

Mali's situation evolved very similarly to ones of Niger and Burkina Faso. The country obtains independence in 1960 from France, and it is subject to five coup d'états in 50 years (ACSRT, 2022). The last democratic government was elected in 2012 in which, through a coup, the previous regime is overtaken, and elections are held, starting the presidency of Ibrahim Keïta (ACSRT, 2022). Also in this case, through its second mandate, Keïta is subject to a coup, led by the colonel Goïta. Similar to what happened in Burkina Faso, the triggers were the inability to manage jihadist groups present in the country and widespread corruption, compounded by attempts to manipulate the 2020 elections and the economic and health crisis caused by COVID-19 (Obinna et al., 2024). Goïta justifies his actions explaining that it was needed a new government and, thus, it was necessary a transitional government that could accompany the country to new democratic elections (Reuters 2, 2023). However, this was not the case. In 2021, a second coup d'état is carried out by Goïta on its own government in order to reaffirm its central role in the political scene of the country, promoting himself from vice president to president (ACSRT, 2022). The new reasons given were that the previous head of the State was hindering the transition to new elections; however, to this day, Goïta has not yet announced a new voting (Obinna et al., 2024).

With its new leader, Mali's international relations suffered from a complete change in direction. The French withdrawal proceeded similarly to that of the previously mentioned countries, with first the recall of the ambassador and second the subsequent withdrawal of troops in 2022, with the closure of the military bases in Gao,

Kidal, and Timbuktu (Tull, 2022). Goïta accused Paris to have armed jihadist groups, and he also defines European presence as a form of occupation masked as cooperation (Tull, 2022). At the same time, the sovereigntist and pan African narrative is reinforced, describing France as the symbol of Western neocolonialism (Tull, 2022). On the other hand, the president intensifies the construction of new international strategic partnerships with alternative countries, such as Russia and China; in 2023, Mali also becomes part of the Alliance of Sahel States (Wilén, 2025).

Sudan's history is predominantly characterized by military regimes that have represented more than 50 years of government since its Anglo Egyptian independence in 1956. The longest regime had as a leader Omar al-Bashir from 1989 to 2019 (Berridge, 2023). Its political ideology was based on a strong grip on power with centralized decisions, political repression and forced Islamization (Hassan et al., 2019). During his years, he had to face a twenty year long clash with South Sudan's population demanding independence due to religious divergences and control over the Southern oil fields. In 2011, following a referendum, South Sudan becomes a State (Hassan et al., 2019). Later, this occurrence proved to be decisive for the fall of al-Bashir's regime; indeed, the exclusion from 75% of the country's oil-based economy has led to a collapse in tax revenues and a growth in deficit. At the same time, a shortage in basic necessities pushed for an inflationary spiral and a devaluation of Sudanese Pounds (Hassan et al., 2019). Therefore, the precarious economic conditions and a corrupted and mismanaged government caused the population to rebel to the point that the Sudanese military, to avoid State collapse, deposed Omar al-Bashir (Hassan et al., 2019). Subsequently, a military-civilian government was formed with the aim of leading the country in its transition to democracy (Ali et al., 2022). However, in 2021, a coup d'état led by Sudan Armed Forces (SAF) General al-Bhuran took place. The justifications provided were related to the safeguarding of internal peace, since political divisions were creating clashes. In reality, the democratic transition stopped, and, in 2023, a civil war broke out (Ali et al., 2022). The opposing

faction is represented by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) which has the aim of obtaining control over all the armed forces of the country and of avoiding its marginalization within the military hierarchies. On the other hand, the SAF is interested in controlling the Northern Sudan's mining sites, currently under RSF's aegis, since gold represents a fundamental tax revenue (Abdalla, 2023).

Since 2021's coup d'état, foreign policy has undergone a reversal due to the sanctions imposed by Western countries, which have all suspended economic aid. As a consequence, Sudan was forced to find new international partners which were found in Egypt for military purposes, UAE for commercial needs and Russia (Abdalla, 2023). Meanwhile, internally, the overall country's conditions worsened even more compared to al-Bashir's regime since there is no Constitution, no Parliament and no judicial apparatus. This has led to complete impotence of the institutions and the impossibility of governing the country (Kurtz, 2024).

The Central African Republic formed following its independence from France in 1960 and for many years it had to face uncertainty, reverberating on the present political condition (Ukpe, 2024). In particular, the events causing today's instability stem from 2003's Bozizé government. Indeed, following his coup d'état, some factions within the country started lamenting marginalization in political decisions. Thus, in 2007 CAR's leader signed the Libreville Agreements with which the government would have committed to greater integration of the rebel populations and more inclusivity in political and administrative decisions in exchange for a permanent ceasefire (Siradag, 2016). However, these agreements had weak implementation and were not shared with all rebel forces. Thus, in 2012, this part of the population formed a new armed group called Séléka to enforce their rights written in the Libreville Agreements, starting an internal war against State military forces, known as Forces Armées Centrafricaines (FACA) (Siradag, 2016). During 2013, the war led to the defeat of FACA with the dismemberment of the State military apparatus and to the coup d'état against Bozizé, with the rise to power of the leader Djotodia (Siradag, 2016). However, this government

was not able to last long since it was representing Séléka, a Muslim-majority group, leading to the formation of opposing armed troops with Christian origins called anti-Balaka. Following the outbreak of this new armed conflict, Djotodia's political conditions worsened even more due to the mounting international pressure from external countries that were not recognizing the government as legitimate (Siradag, 2016). In 2014, Djotodia resigns, and a transitional government takes over the leadership of the country. In 2016, new democratic elections are held, with the win of Faustin-Archange Touadéra, also reelected in 2020 (BTI, 2024).

During his years as leader of the country, Touadéra had to face complex challenges, and among these there was the recreation of the FACA army that had been dismembered by the Séléka group (BTI, 2024). Therefore, he opted for entrusting other countries for training the CAR's army, inviting Russia to provide experts that could help their specialists. Russia responded sending the Wagner group to support and help defending the CAR (Doboš et al., 2023). At the same time, in international relations, Touadéra was able to develop relationships with the Chinese government for more investments in infrastructures (BTI, 2024). Despite the CAR's openness to alternative countries, the nation was able to keep partially open its dialogue with the West, yet relationships have deteriorated recently.

Domestic politics has primarily focused on securing greater control over all the State institutions by the executive branch, including the judiciary. This was carried out in order to both increase Touadéra's grip on power and to stabilize the CAR's internal conditions, with the aim of more economic and social development (Doboš et al., 2023).

7. Case Study: Wagner Group

The current chapter will focus on studying the strategies employed by the Wagner Group to penetrate the gold sector and on finding generalizations in its activities. This analysis will later become the basis for the tracking of the patterns employed within all the countries.

7.1 Founding

The Wagner Group is a parastatal network of private companies and paramilitary militias founded in 2014 by Dmitry Utkin, a former Russian military officer, and Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian-born businessman with close ties to the Kremlin (Dörfler, 2024). The group can be defined as an armed force that has declared itself as independent; however, it is often considered the operational arm of the Russian Ministry of Defense, which employs it in situations where Moscow's official involvement is not possible (Larsen 2, 2025). The first operations in which they took part date back to the first war in Ukraine in 2014 and the Syrian civil war in 2015 (Dörfler, 2024). Since then, the scope of its operations has grown: to date, the Wagner network, or its successor Africa Corps, has been present in at least 12 countries, most of them on the African continent (Dörfler, 2024). In these countries, the group carries out national security activities, military training or technical consulting, exploitation of concessions, intermediation in unofficial commercial networks, and propaganda (Doboš et al., 2023).

The organization is based in St. Petersburg, and it is supported by a network of offices spread across all the countries in which it operates, replicating the hierarchical structure of a military army (The Moscow Times, 2022). This makes recruitment more widespread, although in practice the group mainly relies on ex-convicts, enabling the company to grow to tens of thousands of soldiers by 2023 (Dörfler, 2024). This activity is also possible thanks to its connection with Moscow (Larsen 2, 2025). However, the

relationship with the Kremlin is conflicting, as paramilitary forces are banned in the country, but at the same time, Wagner has always operated jointly with the State as a counterpart in public contracts (Larsen 2, 2025). In fact, the Kremlin has admitted to having almost entirely maintained Wagner's financial structure in 2022/2023 (BBC, 2023). In addition to these payments, the signing of contracts in favor of the holding company of founder Prigozhin has also been observed. As well as traditional forms of payment, the Wagner Group also benefits from agreements with African governments for concessions, income from related companies, and levies on the population of the occupied territories (Chin, 2023).

Wagner's activities are not always legal, which has prompted Western forces to sanction the group and its affiliated companies since its early years. In particular, the founders have been targeted for penalties since 2016 (Nikoladze, 2023), forcing them to modify their operational network through multiple front companies, networks of intermediaries, local partners, and financing through natural resources (Larsen, 2025). This situation continued until 2023 when, during the second war in Ukraine, a battalion of Wagner fighters revolted and attempted to march on Moscow (Dörfler, 2024). They were stopped the following day. Two months later, both founders died in a plane crash (Dörfler, 2024).

From that moment on, the operational structure underwent a forced reorganization under the leadership of the Kremlin, which imposed an oath of allegiance to the Russian State, converting the mercenaries into operators of the Russian Ministry of Defense (Dörfler, 2024). In particular, soldiers operating in Africa were redirected to the Africa Corps (Larsen 2, 2025).

The latter is a paramilitary group under the direct control of the Russian Federation, founded in 2023 to replace the Wagner Group in its operations on the African continent (Faulkner, 2024). In concrete terms, the creation of this group serves to reduce the risk of revolt by Wagner factions further away from Moscow and to strengthen direct control over Africa (Faulkner, 2024). However, a certain level of continuity can be observed in the key figures, albeit with greater State control, institutionalization, and legitimacy of

its operations. The differences lie in the missions, which mainly focus on training, protection, and counterterrorism, compared to Wagner's previous direct armed clashes (Bauer et al., 2025). However, it should be noted that the transition between the two paramilitary corps has been taking place gradually.

With particular reference to Africa, despite the transition to Africa Corps, continuity has been observed also in front companies. The most relevant for the current research are those linked to the gold sector or connected to agreements involving the exchange of precious metals. In Mali, it is important to mention Yadran, a Russian conglomerate also active in oil, involved in the Bamako refinery (Diallo, 2025). In Sudan, there is Meroe Gold, a subsidiary of M-Invest, which manages the Block 3A mining site (Soliman, 2025). In the CAR, Diamville SAU is present in the diamond sector (IPIS, 2025), while Lobaye Invest and Midas Resources in the gold sector, with the latter owner of the Ndassima mine (CSIS 2, 2023). Finally, in Niger, only Zarubezhgeologiya is present with a mining exploration concession (DNE, 2025) (Sputnik, 2025) (Sourou, 2025).

7.2 Mali

The evolution of Russian influence in Mali has developed on multiple fronts and over several years.

The first initiatives were observed following the coups of 2020 and 2021, which opened new political relations with forces such as Russia (ACSRT, 2022). This was also due to the simultaneous breakdown with Western countries. In fact, as early as the second half of 2021, the Wagner Group began to intervene on behalf of the Malian State against Tuareg rebels and Jihadist groups; this later materialized in arms deliveries and collaboration on the battlefield in military campaigns over a period of several years (Mohamedou, 2024).

Alongside traditional military support, Russia also worked to hinder Western countries through information channels, as in the Gossi case in 2022. In that case, Paris released

aerial footage accusing Russian mercenaries of staging burials in order to discredit French troops during their withdrawal and to justify the Wagner Group's presence in Mali (Burke, 2022).

These efforts in Mali only came to fruition for Russia a few years later, when the new mining code was approved in 2023, which served as an enabling tool for the subsequent expansion of Moscow's influence. In addition to increasing taxes on mining, the code required gold to be refined domestically, with the aim of increasing value capture in a sector that is heavily dependent on exports but escapes taxation (Mali Mining Code, 2023). In fact, ASM gold generates substantial undetected flows to commercial hubs that are often not even taxed (Smith et al., 2024). Centralizing domestic refining was seen as a fiscal and traceability remedy.

In connection with these events, in November 2023, the Malian government announced a non-binding MoU with Russia to build a refinery in Bamako (Diallo, 2023). The explicit goal is to control the entire gold production, while the implicit goal is to create a domestic bottleneck on a strategic asset in a context of geopolitical reorientation towards Moscow and Mali (Diallo, 2023). In concrete terms, centralization gives the State greater bargaining power in imposing policies on large operators (i.e., Barrick) (Acemoglu et al., 2020). This is the first step in Russia's gold influence in Mali. The project took shape in 2025 with the establishment of SOROMA-SA (62% State of Mali; 38% Russian partner Yadrin), the company responsible for the plant (Diallo, 2025). These operations also represented the final crystallization and institutionalization of relations between Russia and Mali, which are now based not only on military cooperation but also on economic and asset-based relations.

In parallel with the MoU, the State also tightened enforcement of the new code with export bans, gold seizures, arrests of personnel, and provisional administration of assets, particularly for Barrick Corp., owner of the Loulo-Gounkoto concession, one of the largest gold mining sites in Africa (Barrick, 2025). This has created leverage for Mali to impose new rules and realign the gold supply chain towards national or Russian infrastructure (Acemoglu et al., 2020). In particular, these provisions create fertile

ground for Moscow-based companies to enter the market. Barrick tried to defend its rights; however, in 2024, the Malian authorities seized about three tons of gold, forcing Barrick to suspend operations in January 2025 (Barrick, 2025). In June 2025, the Bamako Court, at the request of the government, decided to place the mine under provisional administration (Barrick, 2025).

It is no coincidence that Moscow was paying particular attention to the Bamako project, also with a view to potentially benefiting from a sanctions-proofing advantage (Glenn, 2023). This is because, since 2022, the G7 has banned new Russian gold (US Treasury, 2024), and setting up a refining hub in the Sahel allows African flows to be mixed with Russian capital, meaning that, formally, the gold is African, but Russia also benefits economically.

From a military point of view, the Wagner Group's operations have focused on three main operations related to the gold sector.

The first is the intervention in the Intahaka region. In early 2024, in collaboration with the Malian army, the paramilitary group took control of the gold-rich area of Intahaka (Inwood et al., 2024), the largest ASM site in northern Mali. This area had been contested for years by armed criminal groups operating without concessions (Inwood et al., 2024). However, despite the presence of the State, Intahaka cannot currently be considered an area officially owned by Mali. In fact, there is still only de facto control; there has been no transfer of legal ownership. To date, it appears to be a military and instrumental occupation (Inwood et al., 2024). The associated purpose of the site would be to impose State/parastatal control, security, and, most likely, levies on production or trade. Similarly, taxation purposes have also been associated with it. However, the peculiarity of this site is that, as it is not wholly owned by the State but largely by ASM, it makes possible for Russian contractors to tax or seize part of the production (ISW, 2024). In concrete terms, the strong Russian presence in Intahaka, together with domestic refining, underscores an even stronger control over the gold industry than may appear at the official level.

The second operation took place in Ménaka. Since 2022, the Islamic State has been in control of much of the region, and the Wagner Group has helped to limit its armed advance in Mali (ACLEED, 2023). This area is of particular interest to Russia, not for mining purposes but because it is a corridor for artisanal gold and trafficking linking sites in northern Mali with Niger (Khalifaoui, 2023). The region may therefore be strategic for gaining better control over gold flows and exports. For this reason, joint operations between the Malian State and the Africa Corps have been launched since 2025 with the aim of regaining complete control of the territory (ACLEED, 2023).

The last significant joint operation between Wagner and the Malian army took place in Kidal. In November 2023, the area was recaptured after more than 10 years of control by rebel groups (Faulkner et al., 2025). This region plays the same role as Ménaka in Russia's expansion strategy; it also has some ASM sites, similar to Intahaka, thus representing a hybrid for Russian gold mining purposes.

Following the withdrawal of the Wagner group in 2025, Africa Corps took its place, maintaining a significant presence in the country (RFI 2, 2025). The group has mainly played an operational and training support role, unlike Wagner, which had been more active in combat on the ground (RFI 2, 2025). Also in 2025, Russian diplomacy intensified, offering logistical support to the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) and providing assistance in the deployment of a joint military force of about 5,000 men, training, and advanced military supplies. In return, Russia secured the signing of new trade/energy agreements, extending the Russia-Mali relationship to economic exchanges as well as security (Reuters, 2025).

Below are the main strategies implemented by Russia in its expansion of control over Mali's gold resources.

- **Security enabling resources (Intahaka and Bamako)**

The best-known model, including in the literature, of the expansion of Russian influence in Africa for precious metals is *gold for security*. It is based on the direct

exchange of military cooperation for access to precious resources such as gold (Oluyemi, 2025).

However, in Mali, the exchange does not take place directly as a commercial transaction, as it begins with a phase of isolation by the African nation. This is followed by Russia's rapprochement with the aim of building political capital through diplomacy. This is followed by joint military operations based on informal reward agreements. These promises, together with political capital, are then transformed into industrial capital, which is the ability to influence State decisions about the country's industry, with particular reference to the gold sector (Nee et al., 2010). Industrial capital then translates into direct control of extraction sites, the creation of companies with mining concessions, and legal reforms favorable to Russian players (Anzolin et al., 2025).

Thus, in Mali, the *gold for security* model is only partially applied, as Russia has not yet established direct control over Malian mining concessions, but only over the refining stages. In fact, it is not a foregone conclusion that Russia aims solely to take over as a mining operator; indeed, it is possible that control over gold refining flows is sufficient for it to pursue its goals. This reasoning is even more valid given the easier operational management of the refinery, with the added advantage that, in doing so, ASM must also come under Moscow's control, which would not otherwise be possible with industrial mining concessions. Therefore, Mali can still be defined as a State with *security enabling resources*, a region where military activity generates political capital which is spent on industrial capital. For the time being, Mali still lacks the formal payment for security services to be a full model of *gold for security*, although this is already hybridly in place at the Intahaka site.

- **Removal of Western presence (Barrick)**

Russia is taking over the national political dynamics not only through security agreements, but also through propaganda tools, as can be seen in the Gossi case. This choice serves to fuel the already growing African nationalist movement, driven by the Alliance of the Sahel States (CSIS, 2024). In fact, Moscow aims to intensify

diplomatic relations in cases of growing nationalism or distancing from the West (Tsygankov, 2025). Russia often leverages widespread discontent with Western partners unable to provide security and steps in as a commercial and political ally (Tsygankov, 2025). In doing so, Russia is able to speed up the process of breakdown with developed countries to simplify its access to African States' resources. The reduced political presence of Western countries also creates greater complexity for Western companies, which are no longer supported politically by agreements with their own nations (Sun et al., 2021). The direct consequence is that Western companies are more likely to fall victim to forced nationalization of their mining concessions (e.g., Barrick) (Sun et al., 2021). The end result is that companies have less bargaining power, while Russia gains new trading partners.

- **Reallocation of mining portfolio (Intahaka)**

A direct consequence of the expropriation of concessions or the resumption of control of mining sites is the nationalization of mining assets, which can potentially lead to the reallocation of the mining portfolio (Bucheli et al., 2020). The consequence is a transfer of assets from private Western companies or rebels to the African State, and then potentially to Russian companies, which benefit from better political relations (Bucheli et al., 2020).

- **Infrastructure lock-in (Bamako)**

Another point of observation of Russian expansion focuses on Moscow's willingness to invest in Mali. In fact, this is not easily possible for Western powers due to the limitations they have imposed on themselves (World Bank 4, 2022). Mali is still a very underdeveloped country that benefits substantially from FDI (Epor et al., 2024), and therefore the possibility of having a trading partner such as Russia, which is freely able to invest, is a strong incentive to build good political relations (Polachek et al., 2012). Similarly, the development of large-scale industrial infrastructure demonstrates a good level of commitment and lock-in to the African country, predisposing it to reciprocate such operations with mining concessions or, in this case, refining concessions.

- **De facto takeover of deposits (Intahaka)**

Another strategy for controlling the gold sector stems from the case of Intahaka. The expansion and renewed conquest of the area, with the possibility of imposing taxes and levies on local producers, represents a further strategy for Russia to gain preferential access to gold. In this case, the expansion of influence is carried out through the use of force, albeit supported by the Malian State. Therefore, joint operations with the government, or on its exclusive mandate, may represent an opportunity to conquer territories rich in gold deposits with the implicit approval of the government (Neethling, 2023). The direct consequence is that Russia gains informal concessions or can indirectly take over from the player that was previously present (Neethling, 2023). In particular, in the case of Intahaka, the conquest took place but access to the resource is indirect, through levies and taxes on local producers.

- **Control of transport networks (Ménaka and Kidal)**

The alternative method of indirect control of the gold sector lies in developing influence not on deposit areas but on areas where gold is exported to and from other countries (Luning et al., 2017) (Fasanotti, 2022). Thus, the aim is no longer to provide security for resources, but security for the control of certain areas of the country. Sometimes, it is not necessarily just a question of security but also of regaining areas held by rebel groups. These areas then remain under Russian influence and offer the possibility of controlling goods in transit and local economy, assuming a strategic role in the gold supply chain linking the Sahel States with the commercial hubs of the UAE (Oxford Analytica, 2024).

7.3 Burkina Faso

The situation in Burkina Faso must be analyzed starting from the second half of the 2000s with the creation of Nordgold. The company was founded in 2007 as part of the metallurgical conglomerate of Alexei Mordashov, one of the oligarchs close to the Kremlin (Nordgold, 2025). The company is privately owned; however, it enjoys

excellent relations with the Russian State and benefits from Russia's diplomatic work (Au-Yeung et al., 2022). In 2008, Nordgold established a permanent presence in Burkina Faso by acquiring assets such as the Taparko mine from Canada's High River Ltd. and bringing Bissa and Bouly into production in the following years, consolidating its position as one of the country's largest operators (Engels et al., 2019). In this case, Russian gold mining relations date back to before the intensification of diplomacy in 2023, highlighting how the initial approach was corporate based rather than State agreements based (Engels, 2023). However, the evolution of Nordgold's presence in Burkina Faso suffered two setbacks in 2022. First, growing regional instability forced the company to close the Taparko mine due to force majeure (IFRI, 2025), and then the company was subject to Western sanctions, with the consequent obligation to remodel its refining chain towards the UAE (Hunter, 2022).

At the same time, the first relations between Russia and Burkina Faso began to develop following the first coup d'état in 2022: Ivanov, representative of Russian trainers in the CAR, offered to train the Burkinabe army (Gräns, 2023). Shortly thereafter, during the second coup led by Traoré, the first Russian flags appeared among the demonstrators in Ouagadougou, signaling a growing commitment to Russian propaganda on the part of the Kremlin (Engels, 2025). However, in 2022, Burkina Faso denied direct agreements with Russia or favoritism in the allocation of mining licenses, emphasizing the absence of formalization of the relationship (Gräns, 2023).

In 2024, the situation was reversed and a contingent of about 100 Russian soldiers arrived in Ouagadougou to support the local army in controlling terrorism and to provide protection for Traoré and the capital (Engels, 2025). In concrete terms, this decision was the result of the vacuum left by the West following its withdrawal, which was filled by Russia, enabling it to establish initial political ties with the Burkinabe State (Kauffmann, 2024). This operation marked the beginning of political and military cover for Russia, which had a strong interest in developing good relations with all the nations of the Sahel Alliance in order to protect its logistics and gold mining networks

(Fasanotti, 2022). In fact, this event was followed by a visit from Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, who announced an intensification of economic and security relations, with the promise of further armed support (Reuters, 2025). This materialized in April 2025 when an agreement was signed between the AES and Russia for military purposes, as already mentioned in the analysis of Mali (Reuters, 2025).

A few weeks later, Traoré granted Nordgold an additional industrial license for the Kourwéogo deposit, with Nordgold owning 85% and the State 15% (Reuters 3, 2025). Thus, the Russian company confirmed its position as the main partner in the gold sector for the Burkinabe State in the new course of nationalization and rebalancing of mines in favor of non-Western partners. Further reasons given for the choice were economic, in order to strengthen an economy weakened by insecurity and low tax revenues, and technological, in order to attract investments and development (Reuters 3, 2025). The decision to partner with Nordgold was proclaimed by AES as positive for both parties, even if the Burkinabe State owns only a minority stake in the deposit (Reuters 3, 2025).

It is also important to note the approval, in the following year, of a new mining code, which aims at greater nationalization and participation in mining assets, stricter local processing requirements, fewer tax incentives, and strengthened executive powers (UNCTAD, 2024). This decree took effect in April 2025 when the government transferred five gold assets to the State-owned company SOPAMIB. These assets came mainly from Western companies such as Endeavour Mining, SEMAFO, Gryphon Minerals, and Liliium Mining (Reuters 4, 2025).

Therefore, unlike Mali, where Russia's entry was on several fronts, in Burkina Faso there has been a more linear development of influence, as described below.

Corporate territorial presence → Diplomacy → Security → New licenses → Assignment to Russian companies.

Below are the main strategies implemented by Russia in its expansion of control over Burkina Faso's gold resources.

- **Security enabling resources (Nordgold)**

As in the case of Mali, the mechanism of influence appears very similar to the gold for security model; however, with Nordgold, it is different because it is formally a private company with normal licenses granted by the government, some of which were issued even before the tightening of relations between the two States. The peculiarity is that this falls within a context in which Russia offers political and military cover through the Africa Corps (Bryjka, 2024). Therefore, this condition also falls under the category of security enabling resources. In this case, political and military capital is still converted into industrial capital, but this takes the form of maintaining mining sites, offering new concessions, favorable mining reforms, and protection from asset nationalization. This pattern is similar to the case of Bamako in Mali. It should be noted that in the case of Burkina Faso, the timing of the agreement with the AES in early April 2025 and the new Nordgold license three weeks later is peculiar, but it does not represent a formal causality. What it mainly suggests is a climate of trust and political alignment.

- **Infrastructure lock-in (Nordgold)**

Although to a lesser extent than in Mali, the willingness of Russian companies to invest in countries such as Burkina Faso represents a strategic advantage over other countries (Badawi, 2024). In fact, even though the Burkinabe State has not been directly sanctioned by the West, it has lost some trade agreements, thus reducing FDI (Siegle et al., 2024); therefore, the *Infrastructure lock-in* offered by Nordgold represents an opportunity to compensate for the economic damage suffered.

- **Exploitation of corporate relationships (Nordgold)**

A further strategy is to exploit existing relationships between private Russian companies and African countries. This involves using companies close to the Kremlin, such as Nordgold, as a link to the local political class or the gold sector in order to open a window of dialogue with decision-makers (Bamidele, 2024). This exchange is then

complemented by diplomatic activity to promote the development of the Russian company's business. In this way, Russia gains greater influence over the country indirectly through private companies, thus facilitating a subsequent institutional approach (Bamidele, 2024). Similarly, if it is not possible to develop an institutional approach, Moscow can still access the resources held by companies such as Nordgold, given their proximity to the Russian central power.

- Removal of Western presence (SOPAMIB)

Similar to Mali, Burkina Faso has also undergone a process of distancing itself from the West (Engels, 2025). This has been partly facilitated by the Kremlin's propaganda, as can be seen from the Russian flags that appeared during the second coup in 2022. At the same time, Moscow's support for nationalist sentiment towards mineral resources has also helped to speed up the process of Western companies leaving, thereby facilitating the takeover by Russian players already well established in the country. However, this strategy is considered marginal in the case of Burkina Faso.

- Reallocation of mining portfolio (SOPAMIB)

Given the presence of a very influential player and excellent diplomatic relations with Russia, it is possible that a process of nationalization of gold assets could also lead to the reallocation of mining concessions in favor of Moscow (Bucheli et al., 2020). In this regard, the Kremlin has repeatedly moved to support the Alliance of Sahel States, a network known to be a supporter of rebalancing towards non-Western companies (Reuters, 2025). To this, the renewal of the mining code can be added as an enabling tool for nationalization, which is a crucial factor for the reallocation of the gold portfolio (UNCTAD, 2024).

7.4 Sudan

The situation in Sudan is more complex than in other countries because it has been internationally isolated since 1997 due to sanctions (Wang et al., 2023). This condition

leads to the inevitable need to develop relations with alternative powers, such as Russia. In particular, in 2017, Bashir feared that the West wanted to overthrow his government, and, for this reason, he participated in a meeting in Sochi with Kremlin leaders to seek protection and conclude bilateral agreements (Mateja et al., 2023). These pacts included military, political, diplomatic, and economic needs (Mateja et al., 2023).

In fact, Russia was one of the few countries large enough to meet all of Sudan's needs. Firstly, Moscow has considerable influence within international organizations, which was necessary to mitigate sanctions against Bashir (Cafiero, 2021). At the same time, Russia's open recognition of the State of Sudan was a useful aid in terms of international legitimacy (Cafiero, 2021). This was important because finding an ally willing to openly support a sanctioned regime was not easy (Telarico, 2023).

Another complex requirement for internationally isolated countries is the collection of FDI, which was not a problem for Russia to implement. In fact, in 2017, with the government concession, Meroe Gold opened one of the largest processing plants in Sudan, al-Ibaidiyya, introducing new technologies for treating gold (Soliman, 2025). This operation also provided a structural advantage for Russia, which became capable of controlling large flows of ASM gold and becoming a key player in the Sudanese gold supply chain (Soliman, 2025).

However, much of the 2017 agreement was based on military needs, to which Russia responded with the provision of training for Sudanese troops, advanced weapons, and military advisers capable of reducing internal unrest in the country (Doxsee, 2023). Similarly, the M-Invest group also provided technical support in creating propaganda campaigns in favor of the Bashir regime (Doxsee, 2023).

More recently, Russia's offer to Sudan has had to evolve due to the fall of its historic leader and the outbreak of an internal war between two sides of the same country (Soliman, 2025). For these reasons, Moscow has also offered itself as a trading partner capable of supplying raw materials and machinery that would otherwise be

inaccessible to the respective armed forces (Shereikis, 2025) (Mateja et al., 2023). In particular, efforts have focused on the gold sector with refining reagents and fuels; this choice means that the hold on the gold sector is not limited to processing but also includes the supply of the goods necessary for processing (Shereikis, 2025).

Finally, Russia's usefulness in recent years has also focused on the marketing of gold produced by RSF groups. In fact, Moscow was able to export the commodity to the UAE without going through official channels or, alternatively, act as a direct buyer of the precious metal (Abdalla, 2023).

This package of operations was accompanied by benefits for the Kremlin, which aimed to gain a foothold in the Sudanese gold industry. In fact, what might have appeared to be a service to Sudan actually satisfied a Russian need, namely rapid access to gold (Arslanalp et al., 2023). This operation did not always go through official channels, and Russia was therefore also able to benefit from the possibility of flying cargo planes directly from Sudanese bases (Elbagir et al., 2019). The same benefit was also observed in the granting of a naval base in Port Sudan for logistical purposes. However, the agreement is still being finalized, so the intended use is yet to be clarified (Abdalla, 2023).

The most direct form of payment provided to Russia following Sochi 2017 was the granting of mining concessions to M-Invest (Soliman, 2025). In particular, the most significant is Block 3A, one of the country's main mines, of which Wagner has been granted 30% ownership, with the remainder held by a company representing SAF (Soliman, 2025). Similarly, a further benefit linked to the extraction sites is the waiver of the State participation requirement in mine ownership, reducing the 30% share to zero (Kostelyanets, 2019). Finally, exploration agreements were also signed for the exclusive benefit of Russia (Kostelyanets, 2019).

At the same time, the need to have Wagner forces scattered across Sudan for training purposes has led to the expansion of their influence in some regions. In particular, Russia has opened logistics hubs that serve as land corridors for men and goods (ISW

2, 2024). In practical terms, these have been transformed into bases for the defense of cross-border gold routes in order to make gold accessible to markets in the CAR, Libya and Chad (Walsh, 2022).

However, Russia's position has become complicated over the last two years due to the internal war: Russia is financing both factions at the same time. On the one hand, it has a long-standing relationship with the RSF, which allows it to access gold resources (Crispino, 2024) (Larsen, 2025), while on the other hand, institutional issues must be discussed with the SAF, as representatives of the State (Nichols, 2025). At the same time, the RSF controls Darfur, a place of large-scale ASM gold mining and home to Russian logistics hubs; this region allows Russia to quickly access cheap gold, smuggle it easily, and find customers for al-Ibaidiya, making it a complex territory to abandon (Larsen, 2025) (Crispino, 2024). On the other hand, Russia cannot operate properly without the SAF, as it manages the collection of taxes on legal gold exports, provides legal gold concessions, awards military contracts, and is in charge of the Port Sudan project (Verhoeven, 2023). The situation is exacerbated by the fact that gold is the main source of income for both the SAF and the RSF (Soliman, 2025).

Below are the main strategies implemented by Russia in its expansion of control over Sudan's gold resources.

- **Gold for security (Block 3A)**

Unlike Mali and Burkina Faso, Sudan is the prime example of *gold for security*; Bashir and Russia have entered into a formal agreement to exchange military operations for gold concessions or competitive advantages in the sector (Soliman, 2025). However, there are still many similarities between the two models, represented first by international isolation and then by the building of political capital. The models differ in the lack of conversion into industrial capital, which becomes direct access to resources for the gold for security model.

- **Security enabling resources (al-Ibaidiyya)**

Although Russia has benefited from *gold for security*, this does not detract from the fact that it has also succeeded in implementing the security enabling resources model. In fact, the Sochi package of agreements also included the concession for the al-Ibaidiyya processing plant, thus representing the transition from political capital to industrial capital. This case is similar to what happened with the Bamako plant in Mali.

- **Economic control (Darfur)**

Russia has been able to expand its influence in Sudan thanks in part to its decision to exercise economic control over the gold sector. It strategically decided to offer a dual service to the RSF: ASM producers could choose to sell their gold directly to Russia or to collaborate with it in order to market it abroad, using Wagner as an international transporter (Soliman, 2025). In this way, the Darfur region and the RSF become dependent on Russia, as it offers both quick liquidity and easy access to markets outside official channels (Crispino, 2024). The same dependence also applies to imports of cyanide, a material necessary for gold processing, creating an additional factor that increases Russia's hold on the sector (Shereikis, 2025). In concrete terms, these operations have achieved a twofold objective for Russia: securing priority access to gold and making the Sudanese gold economy heavily dependent on the Kremlin.

- **Infrastructure lock-in (al-Ibaidiyya)**

In Sudan, Russia's strategy of expanding its influence through possible lock-ins with medium-term infrastructure investments and the import of new technologies for the development of the sector has been a chance (Soliman, 2025). In doing so, Russia can manage to consolidate its physical presence on Sudanese territory, becoming an absolutely key player in the country's gold supply chain. Yet, Russia has not always been able to fulfill its industrial obligations (Soliman, 2025). As a result, Wagner plays a delicate role for the SAF, as it spreads the State's presence in ASM areas, increasing the control on gold fluxes in further the tax revenues and the possibility of collecting gold from areas further away from the national refinery in Khartoum.

- **Control of transport networks (Darfur)**

A further strategic move by Russia to indirectly control the gold sector has been to develop territorial influence in Darfur through logistics hubs (Soliman, 2025). The aim here has been to become essential to the RSF, which can thus access cross-border trade and depend on Russian decisions for their economic survival. The case of Sudan appears different from that of Mali because of the influence developed without complete territorial occupation, but only through mainly commercial infrastructure.

- **Exploitation of corporate relationships (Al Junaid Multi Activities Ltd)**

An alternative strategy introduced by Russia can be linked to the case of the Singu gold site. Here, the operations are owned by Al Junaid, a company belonging to RSF leader Hemedti, which has based its business on the monopolization of ASM mines and commercial supply chains abroad (Crispino, 2024). To improve its network, it has decided to strengthen its relations with Meroe Gold in order to exchange territorial access and ASM labor for new technologies, parallel export channels, and protection for its leader (Crispino, 2024). This choice highlights Russia's willingness to adopt a bottom-up approach, starting with corporate agreements with businesses linked to the country's elite and ending with the creation of political capital. In fact, this cooperation with the RSF leader subsequently brought further indirect benefits such as the protection of Russian infrastructure from rebel attacks, reduced risk of expropriation and of license suspension by the State (Abdalla, 2023).

7.5 Central African Republic

Touadéra's election in 2016 opened a new phase for the CAR, but without the possibility of correcting the problems of the past, namely control of its provinces (BTI, 2020). This prompted the nation to open up to external partners in order to restore security for the president and for the regions occupied by Seleka and Anti-Balaka groups. Moscow was the first to offer support within the limits of the United Nations embargo on weapons imports (Jacobsen et al., 2023). Opening up to Russia provided the CAR with armaments supplies, trainers, and investments, as well as political cover

and mediation with armed groups (Jacobsen et al., 2023). These conditions led to the first informal agreements in 2017, in which Russia committed to sending specialists to train the FACA State army. This pact became formal in 2018, providing a legal and political umbrella for the Russian presence in the CAR (Bovdunov, 2023). Inevitably, this ended up bringing the two countries' diplomatic services closer together, giving Russia direct access to the top decision-makers in Central African politics.

In exchange for the services offered, Russia managed to secure mining concessions for Lobaye Invest mainly in Yawa, Pama, and Bangassou, as well as licenses to buy and sell diamonds and gold with Diamville SAU (IPIS, 2025). However, the most important concession offered was that of Ndassima and Passendro, two of the country's most promising gold mining areas (CSIS 2, 2023). What makes this transition even more important is that Passendro was owned by the Canadian company Axmin Inc. until 2013, when a group of rebels took control of it (Coppolino, 2024). The company has always claimed legal ownership of those lands; however, in 2020, the armed takeover by the Wagner group to eliminate the occupants also led to the definitive revocation of the concession for the Western company by the State, resulting in its exclusive use by Russia (CSIS 2, 2023). The other concession of particular importance for the CAR study is that of Bria, although this area specializes in diamond trading. This region is considered high-risk in terms of security as it is in the hands of Seleka forces and, for this reason, accessible only by force (Shoer, 2024). Given the circumstances, the Central African government has decided to give permit to Russia to intervene (Shoer, 2024). In fact, Wagner has managed to partially regain control of the region (Munshi, 2021). This episode highlights how Moscow is considered a reliable partner also in unlocking assets that would otherwise be inaccessible to the State.

At the same time, Russia was also occupied in training FACA troops (Hayrapetyan et al., 2022). Here too, the Russian strategy was to choose training camps that were both useful for training and geographically located in key areas of the gold supply chain. The most notable example is Berengo, which serves as a hybrid training hub and as

an operational rear base for Wagner's deployment in the territory adjacent to the gold-rich regions of Lobaye, Ouaka, and Mbomou (Schwikowski, 2024). In fact, the base will serve the purpose of carrying out protection operations for mining convoys and mining sites. The case of Berengo highlights how Russia has offered its services not to help the country across the board, but rather to protect its interests in gold, to lower its operational risks and to insert itself into local market dynamics.

At the same time, the CAR government was partially aware of this situation but knew that it could also benefit from it. In fact, there was a need to favor a partner capable of purchasing gold quickly and with few constraints; this ensured liquidity without going through formal channels or supply chains that were often unstable (Czerep, 2022). Russia's flexibility was a major advantage over other partners, as it did not impose any governance, transparency, or democratic constraints, as is customary for Western nations (Fentahun, 2022).

At the same time, Russia's footprint was not limited to gaining greater geographical and legal influence over Central African gold properties. In fact, Moscow also developed a propaganda plan to promote a positive image of Russia among the population, using tools such as social media operations, pro-Russian press and radio support, cultural centers, patriotic shows, street propaganda, and public monuments (Snigyr, 2024).

It is also useful to analyze areas where Wagner did not obtain any concessions but where it began operating anyway, namely Kaga-Bandoro, Birao, and Bambari. Actions in these areas are often joint operations with the FACA army and are aimed at regaining control of areas affected by rebel groups, restoring de facto control of the regions (ACLEDE, 2023). Each area plays a different role in the supply chains of precious materials. First, Kaga-Bandoro meets the need to protect the corridor between the North and the diamond fields in the center of the country (Schouten, 2017) (Quotidiano del Sud, 2023). Second, Birao is an important logistics hub for Sudan and Chad (IPIS, 2018); it also benefits from many rich gold deposits, making the area useful for absorbing local ASM gold production (Bellantone, 2025) (Traore et al., 2020). Third,

Bambari, given its proximity to Ndassima, serves as a security and sorting outpost for the Midas Resources-owned mine (Al Jazeera, 2021). What can be observed is that in the CAR, Russia's presence is often without State concessions and focuses on infrastructure bottlenecks with logistics, security, and market activities.

Below are the main strategies implemented by Russia in its expansion of control over the CAR's gold resources.

- **Gold for security (Pama and Bangassou)**

The *gold for security* model is also perfectly respected in the CAR. Russia's willingness and speed of access following the Central African Republic's request for help were crucial for Moscow to take over a gold-rich territory. In return, it was offered multiple mining sites, both easily accessible and in the hands of rebel groups (IPIS, 2025). This choice was also strategically useful for the CAR, which was able to reestablish control in certain regions, sharing some of the benefits with Russia.

- **Control of transport networks (Berengo)**

The Russian presence in the CAR can be described as fairly widespread, thanks in part to multiple operations to control cities not necessarily linked to gold extraction. In fact, Russia's efforts have not only focused on gaining access to the precious metal, but also on creating a secure logistics network that would allow for the reliable movement of goods (Schwikowski, 2024). This has been made possible by multiple logistics hubs that serve as bases for domestic and cross-border trade, such as Berengo, Bambari, Birao, and Bandoro.

- **Removal of Western presence (Ndassima)**

Following its initial introduction in the country in 2017, Russia simultaneously and progressively developed a propaganda plan that idolized the Kremlin's benevolence in sending military aid. Similarly, there were also actions aimed at worsening the image of the West (Snigyr, 2024). These elements contributed to the deterioration of Central

African Republic relations with the United States and the European Union, although a window for dialogue remained open, unlike in the AES. The main consequence is that the space left behind by the West has been filled by Russia, which has exponentially improved its relations with the CAR, thus securing more and more benefits. In addition, the West's withdrawal also took place through the elimination of rebel groups in Ndassima, which led to the de facto takeover of the territory and the subsequent revocation of the official concession to Axmin Inc. (CSIS 2, 2023).

- **De facto takeover of deposits (Ndassima)**

Another strategy implemented by Russia to develop influence in the CAR is to first gain control of the region and then consolidate its efforts with legal formalization, as in Ndassima (CSIS 2, 2023). However, in the CAR, this tactic also extends its effectiveness to territories that can be defined as blocked assets, see Bria (Shoer, 2024). In fact, Russia's willingness to use force to take over deposits that are not even accessible to the State means that Moscow is a key partner for the government in also regaining control of its own country.

7.6 Niger

The analysis approach for Niger will be implemented differently from previous cases, which focused only on observing, studying and elaborating geopolitical dynamics. In fact, this country will also be used as a test to verify which strategies and patterns used in other countries can be applied to the case of Niger. Therefore, the analysis will not only extract information, but it will also apply what has been previously described. This decision stems from the fact that Russian influence in Niger has only developed in recent years, particularly since December 4, 2023, when the first agreement between the two States for a memorandum of military cooperation was signed (France24, 2023). Therefore, the Russian presence is still in embryonic phase compared to the countries previously analyzed.

The factors that have created and are creating the conditions for the entry of the Russian actor into Niger stem from the aforementioned political instability, which led to Tchiani's coup in 2023 and the subsequent breakdown with the West. The reasons for the issues with the Western countries have already been mentioned in *Chapter 6*, but they extend to motivations that are even deeper than those stated by the Nigerien leader. In fact, Russia has been able to gain a foothold in Niger thanks to the opportunities it offers to countries dissatisfied with cooperation with the West (Kauffmann, 2024). Western efforts to protect African countries from jihadist attacks were insufficient to guarantee security; the same can be said for the perception of support and alignment in international organizations' meetings (CSIS, 2024). In addition, the West often pushed democratization too hard in countries that were sometimes not ready for it (Von Soest et al., 2016). Finally, the wave of nationalism and alignment with the Sahel alliance led to an inevitable divergence with the West (CSIS, 2024). In this context, Russia was able to fill all the gaps left by other countries through its diplomacy (Kauffmann, 2024).

Following the breakdown, Tchiani signed military cooperation agreements for the arrival of about 100 Russian military personnel and some air defense systems on Nigerien territory (Adeoye, 2024). This is too small a contingent to take the field in defense of the nation, but it is nevertheless of symbolic and strategic value, and it will serve to train local troops. Following the approval of the new mining code, the Nigerien leader also revoked and nationalized existing mining agreements with Western companies in August 2025, such as McKinel Resources / Societie des Mines de Liptako, which held the country's only large mining concession for the Samira Hill mine (*Reallocation of mining portfolio*) (Morningstar, 2025). At the same time, he signed a technical Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Russia's Zarubezhgeologiya for the exploration of precious metals, marking a clear opening to Russian capital within the country (*Security enabling resources*) (DNE, 2025) (Sputnik, 2025) (Sourou, 2025).

To develop this foothold, the Russian Federation has exploited a top-down approach, starting with close relations with the political elite and only obtaining concessions at a

later stage (Aliyev, 2023). From there, it exploited Niger's close relationship with the mining sector, transforming its political influence into industrial influence through Zarubezhgeologiya. The timing of the strengthening of relations was also very important, as the Russian effort was supported by a wave of nationalism in the central Sahel, which convinced Tchiani to nationalize the country's mining assets (Brando, 2025) (Baldaro, 2025). As observed in previous cases, nationalization of mines is fertile ground for the exchange of Russian training or investments in return for Moscow's takeover of gold concessions (Brando, 2025) (Baldaro, 2025). Nationalization of mines is not the modus operandi, but rather an enabling tool of the Russian strategy.

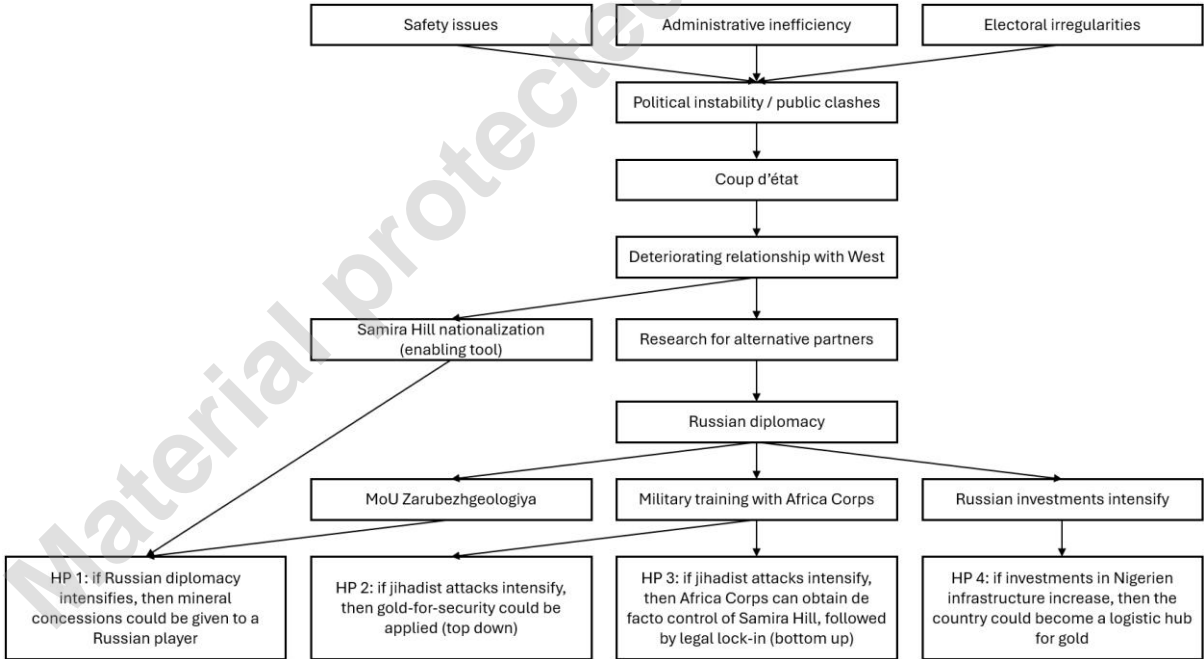
The means by which this was made possible were both political, such as diplomacy or support in international organizations, but also propaganda, as demonstrated by the presence of Russian flags at public demonstrations in the capital (*Removal of Western presence*) (Meisel et al., 2023). At the same time, Russia's willingness to invest capital in Niger despite sanctions showed that Moscow could be an ally not aligned with Western policies (IFRI, 2025).

Therefore, all the early warning signs that Russia looks for in order to classify a country as a fertile target for expansion in the gold sector are present in Niger, such as: MoU with Zarubezhgeologiya, military coup, breakdown with the West, forced nationalizations and unresolved national security issues.

These considerations, combined with patterns already observed, can help us formulate hypotheses about how the situation in Niger might develop with regard to Russian influence. Already in June 2025, the country suffered further attacks by Jihadist rebels (Muia, 2025), highlighting the need for greater investments in territorial defense. This represents a typical situation favorable to the entry of Russian armed forces in exchange for natural resources, in addition to the current limited presence of a single Moscow contingent on the Nigerien territory (Adeoye, 2024). The current situation cannot yet be limited to gold for security, as Russian companies have not yet engaged with the only mine in Samira Hill and the Africa Corps are limited in number and only for training purposes (ISW, 2024). Another possible development in Niger is that its

proximity to Mali and Burkina Faso, rich gold exporters (Trend Economy, 2023), could be exploited, making it easier for Russia to transport precious metals. This would be in line with the case where Russian expansion is driven by infrastructure and logistics rather than mining alone. The third possible development, already observed in other countries, is that diplomatic efforts between the two countries will intensify and that the Samira Hill concession will be awarded to a Russian player in favor of investments or the maintenance of good relations between the States (top-down approach). Finally, the last possibility that could be envisaged is that security in the Tillabéri region deteriorates and that this requires the direct intervention of Russian forces in order to regain control of the territory and the Samira Hill mine. From there, it would be very easy for Africa Corps to take de facto control of mining activities, followed by an administrative and legal lock-in to formalize ownership. The latter approach would follow a bottom-up logic.

What has been discussed for Niger can be summarized in the following diagram:



Analytical Diagram for Russia's Penetration in Niger

The case of Niger has been discussed with the aim of demonstrating the usefulness of this research in analyzing and helping to predict the potential geopolitical

developments and risks that may arise in a country following Russia's demonstration of interest in the gold sector.

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8. Case Discussion

An analysis of the Wagner Group's operations in Mali, Burkina Faso, Sudan, CAR, and Niger helps to highlight the similarities between these countries and the corresponding strategies implemented by Russia.

First, consider the common starting conditions for each country.

Structurally, it was observed that all share a wealth of raw materials, particularly gold, with the exception of Niger. This information, combined with widespread underdevelopment and poverty (Raleigh et al., 2013), indicates that the national economy is almost always strongly influenced by gold-related vicissitudes, see chapter *The Golden Sector for Central Africa* (Raineri, 2020). The main consequence is that any decision relating to the sector is likely to be influenced by the political class, which will play a key role in favoring some nations over others (Raineri, 2020).

From a historical perspective, it is recurrent that all the countries analyzed have been victims of long periods of authoritarian governments, both past and present. This situation fuels political instability in these nations, which manifests in multiple coups d'état or undemocratic changes of power, see *Chapter 6*.

Similarly, political preconditions that have favored Russia's entry can also be observed. In particular, for the AES, there is a growing wave of nationalism that combines with widespread discontent with the actions of the West, often seen as a neocolonialist force, which is therefore being pushed out of the country (Engels, 2023). Another common condition that can be extracted from chapter *The Political Conditions of Central Africa* is that the State administrative apparatus lacks in terms of general management and law enforcement. The consequence is that citizens often observe illegal and corrupt behavior in the political class, leading to recurring public protests and coups (Raineri, 2020). Finally, the factor that all countries have in common is the problem of security (Camara, 2020). For the AES' countries, this is represented by the

terrorist groups scattered throughout the territory (Camara, 2020), while for Sudan and the CAR, it takes the form of clashes between factions within the country.

The factors described above can be defined as those that have favored the achievement of Russian objectives. However, it should be emphasized that, especially from a political and popular point of view, Russia has played an important role, fueling internal discord and hatred towards the West through pro-Kremlin propaganda (Snigyr, 2024). Added to this is the careful choice of timing for intervention in the respective countries; in fact, Moscow's action often coincided with the fall of democratic governments or sudden changes in the country's political elite, fueling processes of change that were already underway. At the same time, it can also be argued that the timing of the intervention was dictated by the vacuum left by the deterioration of relations with Western forces.

As noted in the previous chapter, thanks to years of diplomatic efforts and economic agreements, Russia has managed to establish multiple positions of control over the gold sector in each country. The following table provides a summary.

Country	Entry trigger	Main control nodes	Exchange mechanism	Enablers
Mali	2022 Coup d'état	Bamako refinery and Intahaka site	Security enabling resources	New mining code
Burkina Faso	2021 Coup d'état	Bissa, Bouly and Kourwéogo sites	Security enabling resources	New mining code
Sudan	President Bashir's request for protection	Al-Ibaidiyya refinery and Block 3A site	Gold for security and security enabling resources	Internal conflicts
CAR	President Touadéra's request for assistance for security issues	Ndassima Pama, and Bangassou sites	Gold for security	Internal conflicts
Niger	2023 Coup d'état	Zarubezhgeologiya exploration MoU	Security enabling resources	New mining code

Summary of Conditions for Russia's Control Development over the Gold Sector

The table shows that there was a general similarity in the AES: all countries underwent a coup d'état as a trigger for Russian involvement. In fact, within three years, three governments were overthrown, radically changing the democratic presence in the Sahel. This factor undoubtedly leads to more authoritarian regimes, which tend to have

to ally themselves with alternative forces (Balci et al., 2025). The same similarity also applies to the enabling instrument that allowed Russian operators to gain greater relevance in the gold sector, namely the new mining code. In fact, this has often been revised within a few months of the new regimes taking office. This stems from the aforementioned importance of gold in the economy. The new leaders wanted to revise the laws governing the sector in order to impose stricter controls and higher taxes (Adeoye et al., 2025). This decision was necessary in order to access the resources to be offered to Russia to secure protection services. It can therefore be observed that the problem of armed rebel groups was the main driver of interest in Russia, as underlined by the fact that the most widespread exchange mechanism was security enabling resources.

A similar process can also be observed in the CAR and Sudan, but with much more direct and simplified access to resources given Russia's longer-standing presence. However, this case did not require reforms in the mining sector, which came in 2024, after the allocation of concessions to Russian players.

As for the active strategies pursued by Russia in Central Africa, they can be summarized in the following table.

Strategy	Mali	Burkina Faso	Sudan	CAR	Niger	Count
Security enabling resources	X	X	X		X	4
Removal of Western presence	X	X		X	X	4
Reallocation of mining portfolio	X	X			X	3
Infrastructure lock-in	X	X	X		(X)	4
De facto takeover of deposits	X			X	(X)	3
Control of transport networks	X		X	X	(X)	4
Exploitation of corporate relationships		X	X			2
Gold for security			X	X		2
Economic control			X			1

Summary of Russia’s Strategies Applied to Exert Control over the Gold Sector – Brackets indicate potential future developments, not a past strategy.

It can be observed that two expansion strategies can certainly be considered patterns repeated almost systematically by Russia.

The first is *security enabling resources*. This is applied in every country except the CAR. However, it can be pointed out that even in that country there are characteristics

very similar to the first strategy; in fact, although *gold for security* is different from *security enabling resources*, some might argue that the former is a subcategory of the latter. The justification behind this recurring technique is that security is the reason for Russia's engagement with African diplomats. At the same time, the problem of managing rebel groups is precisely the characteristic that Moscow seeks in the countries it wants to penetrate, as it can offer a solution (Vasudeo, 2024).

The second most common strategy is *Removal of Western presence*. Although it is not a tool that allows direct access to gold resources, it is part of an all-encompassing strategy to expand Russian influence. In fact, from a propaganda point of view, a purely transactional relationship between an African nation and Russia can be seen by the local population as a neocolonialist attitude, thus repeating the problems highlighted with Western powers. Therefore, Russia has committed itself to promoting a vision of the Kremlin as a nation that supports States and helps the population (Engles, 2023). At the same time, Russia has also set itself the goal of discrediting its previous partners in order to produce a natural transition to the country's new benefactors. However, the strategy of removing Western presence is also being implemented by reducing the number of Western players in the sector, so as to create vacuums that Russia can fill, especially in cases where the State entity does not have the capacity to exploit gold resources (Horak et al., 2024). In fact, Russian diplomatic efforts have accelerated the removal of existing companies, pushing for the revocation of concessions held by Western operators: Barrick in Mali, Endeavour Mining, SEMAFO, Gryphon Minerals, and Liliun Mining in Burkina Faso, Axmin Inc. in CAR, and McKinel Resources in Niger (Chapter 6).

Secondary to the first two strategies, there are *Infrastructure lock-in* and *Control of transport networks*. These are less frequent than the first two, as they have not yet occurred in Niger, but they are still plausible as their implementation would closely follow the cases of the other two AES States. Here, the focus for both strategies shifts to controlling the gold supply chain. *Infrastructure lock-in* aims to create direct influence by making Russia important in the gold processing or extraction. *Control of transport*

networks aims to create indirect influence by controlling the reliability of the gold logistics and commercial network. These aspects are possibly even more effective than other strategies as they produce a lasting dependence on Russia (Durocher-Yvon et al., 2019). In fact, a breakdown with Moscow would mean that countries would find themselves with a fragmented supply chain and growing uncertainty in trade relations. The consequence would be a significant economic impact on the country.

We can also mention the strategy of *Reallocation of mining portfolio*, which often does not translate into a benefit for Russia. In fact, this technique only creates the potential for the allocation of concessions, but does not always bear fruit, as it is heavily dependent on the host State.

The list ends with *De facto takeover of deposits*, which, however, is not sustainable in the long term unless mandated by the State or with subsequent legal lock-in. For these reasons, it cannot be defined as a pattern as it is only applicable in specific situations.

It is also interesting to note a certain operational similarity between the AES countries, as they share at least four strategies. This suggests that there is a plausible intention to follow a pattern at the regional level. In other words, in the case of similar and neighboring nations, attempts are made to replicate in all of them the strategies that have proven effective in other countries in the group. This replication process was facilitated for Russia by the timing, with States undergoing a coup d'état and change of leadership every year. This allowed Russia to intervene during the transitional phases and reproduce the winning strategies applied the previous year in another country.

It is important to note that, although both general and regional patterns have been observed, it is inevitable that Russia will still have to apply a tailor-made approach to each country it interacts with. This is because the gold sector is heterogeneous and poorly structured throughout Central Africa, and the interests of countries often differ. However, this research helps us understand that the patterns of *Security enabling resources* and *Removal of Western presence* are likely to be applied.

Therefore, in order to provide a concise and direct answer to the research question, Russian intervention could be typified with an initial phase of assessing the characteristics of the target nation. If these countries are rich in natural resources, underdeveloped, politically unstable, internationally isolated, and have security problems, then intervention is plausible. Next, diplomacy is intensified, offering military services as a reason for signing agreements. These pacts will include benefits for Russia, always linked to the gold sector. After that, expansion from within the country will proceed with propaganda activities to drive away Western actors. Finally, strategies for direct and indirect control of the gold supply chain will also potentially be implemented to ensure lasting control over the sector.

A final clarification should be made with regard to future developments in Russia's presence in Africa. In fact, the transition from the Wagner Group to Africa Corps means that the strategies implemented will be more institutional in nature and mainly linked to international agreements, given Moscow's direct ownership of the forces (Bryjka, 2024). Plausibly, there will also be a reduction in coercive acts or in participation in armed clashes (Bryjka, 2024). Therefore, the focus of the strategies will intensify towards techniques related to training, investments, and protection, as already observed in this research.

9. Conclusion

This research set out to analyze the patterns of Russian expansion in the gold sector in Central Africa with the aim of addressing the following research question: “*What are the recurring strategies employed by Russian companies and the Russian Federation to develop their influence over Central Africa in order to control the gold sector from 2014 to the present?*”

The study first examined the motivations driving the major world powers to engage with Africa and then focused specifically on the reasons underlying the importance of gold for Russia. Building on this foundation, it proceeded with an analysis of the weight of the gold sector in Central African countries and an assessment of the characteristics and developments shaping national politics. Finally, attention was devoted to the role of the Wagner Group and the strategies through which it operated. From these observations, the main patterns employed to establish control over the gold sector were identified.

The findings suggest that Moscow selects its partner countries based on their economic, geographic, and political characteristics. Indeed, economic reliance on gold production, political instability and security issues represent all the preconditions that favor the penetration of Russia within a country. After the selection of the target nation, the Kremlin exploits the safety challenges by offering protection services, thereby creating durable relationships with African nations in exchange for access to gold related benefits. Subsequently, Russia often consolidates its position by displacing traditional Western actors and rendering itself indispensable to the gold supply chain.

To respond to the research question, it is possible to state that Russia employs four main recurring strategies to penetrate African countries, respectively: *security enabling resources, removal of Western presence, infrastructure lock-in, and control of transport networks*. The first represents the most common one and it is based on the exchange between military forces and gold sector benefits. The second is implemented in order

to weaken the most relevant competitors in the gold sector. The last two are developed in order to create a long-lasting dependence of African countries on Russia's infrastructures and services. Furthermore, a pattern among neighboring countries was also observed, in particular within AES.

This research contributes to a fragmented and relatively underdeveloped body of literature on the relationship between Russia and Central Africa in the gold sector. Beyond addressing this gap, the thesis also aims to provide a useful analytical tool for businesses to assess the political context and anticipate potential developments of Russian influence in the respective countries. Further studies could focus on other strategic resources or different countries.

To conclude, Russia's expansion in the gold sector shows how natural resources represent a driving factor in new geopolitical strategies. Thus, Central Africa emerges not merely as a peripheral region, but as a crucial area in which the Russian Federation was able to expand its influence to improve its condition within the global system.

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