

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article7456>



Africa

Russia in Africa: mercenaries and predatoriness

- IV Online magazine - 2021 - IV563 - December 2021 -

Publication date: Friday 31 December 2021

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Russia's return to Africa after the collapse of the Soviet Union dates from 2006. Since then, the rise of relations with the continent has been confirmed. It was symbolised by the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in 2019 and is now symbolised by the use of mercenaries from the Wagner company.

For the Kremlin, it was out of the question for world powers to establish themselves in Africa and for Russia to remain on the sidelines. Putin championed a multipolar conception of world order and respect for the independence of states. In cruder terms, it can be said that human rights violations by African governments are not an obstacle to economic or military agreements. Russia's economic weight in Africa is small. It ranks sixth after Turkey. However, it is a major supplier of arms. Indeed, almost a third of the arms on the continent are supplied by the Russian state agency Rosoboronexport.

Arms sales are often accompanied by military agreements. Thus, at least half of the African countries are bound by these types of agreements, which can range from training a few officers in Moscow to direct intervention in the country, as in the Central African Republic (CAR).

Wagner, the turning point?

The use of the mercenary company Wagner in Russia's African diplomacy is a new element that can be credited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs... of France. Indeed, in order to lift the veto maintained by Russia on the sale of arms to the Central African Republic, the Quai d'Orsay [French Foreign Ministry] advised Faustin-Archange Touadéra, newly elected president of the Central African Republic, to approach Russia to obtain arms.

Sergei Lavrov, the Russian Foreign Minister, took advantage of this unexpected gift from French diplomacy by proposing the replacement of French troops by mercenaries from the Wagner company. Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who was not France's favourite candidate, seized this opportunity as a way to consolidate his power threatened by armed opposition.

A militia like any other

Wagner is present in CAR through two companies, Lobaye Invest Ltd, a mining company, and Sewa Security Services. The latter is in charge of presidential security and fights, alongside the Central African Army, the various rebel groups from the Séléka that took power in March 2013.

The actions of the Russian mercenaries are extremely violent, particularly against the civilian population. Although a sort of omerta has been created around these crimes, tongues are starting to loosen. A recent United Nations report of March 2021 points to these massive human rights violations: summary executions, arrests and torture, rape, and the transformation of schools and public buildings into barracks. The mercenaries are paying for themselves on civilians by looting the reconquered towns. In addition, the Central African government has granted them permits to exploit diamond and gold mines.

Political versus military solution

With the deepening of the crisis in the Sahel countries, part of the population wants the Russians to come. They consider that this would be a guarantee of effectiveness, which Barkhane lacks, against the jihadists.

This illusion is obviously maintained by the Kremlin, which welcomes the idea of replacing French troops in the heart of the French-African preserve. This would only strengthen Russia on the international scene. In fact, Wagner would be no more, if not less, effective than Barkhane, as it does not have the heavy equipment of the French army - especially air power. Nor would it benefit from US intelligence support. Moreover, the myth of Wagner's "super warriors" has been largely dented by their stinging failure against Islamist fighters in Cabo Delgado, Mozambique.

The solution to conflicts on the continent, whether in the Sahel, Cameroon, or East Africa, will not come from armed interventions by Western troops or mercenary companies of any kind. Their interventions only aggravate the situation with a heavy price paid by the civilian populations. It is important to reaffirm a principle, which is sometimes forgotten: Africa has nothing to gain from being a military playground for the predatory powers of Russia, China or the NATO countries.

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