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**Soft Power à la Russe:
Russia's Playbook of Resource Diplomacy in the Sahel, 2014-2025**

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Abstract

This thesis analyses the evolution of Russia's influence in the Sahel between 2014 and 2025, focusing particularly on the intricate combination of narratives of soft power with practices of resource diplomacy to expand presence in the region. The analysis is guided by theoretical framework that draws on concepts from soft power theory and studies of Russian foreign policy, emphasising how narratives of sovereignty, anti-colonial solidarity and multipolarity function as instruments of international influence. Particular attention is given to Russia's engagement in three Sahelian states - Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where in the past decade political transitions and declining Western influence have created new and tempting opportunities for external partnerships. Furthermore, the thesis argues that Russia's strategic calculus within the continent has a complex and deeply intertwined ambition related to the former's foreign policy objectives. In this context, the Sahel provides an important case for understanding how Russia adapts its toolbox of power beyond its traditional geopolitical sphere and positions itself as an alternative partner in an increasingly multipolar international order.

Keywords: Russia, Sahel, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, soft power, resource diplomacy, foreign policy, natural resources

Word count: 16 104

Abbreviations

ASM - Artisanal and Small-Scale Mining

BRICS - Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa (intergovernmental organization)

COGEMA - Compagnie Générale des Matières Nucléaires

GDP - Gross Domestic Product

GPM - Groupe des Patriotes du Mali

ISIS - Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

MINUSMA - United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali

PMC - Private military companies

RT - Russia Today

UN - United Nations

UNSC - United Nations Security Council

USSR - Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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1. Introduction

The Sahel has long held a strategic position in Africa's political and geopolitical dynamics. Stretching across the southern edge of the Sahara Desert, the region connects North Africa with Sub-Saharan Africa. While the exact definition of the region varies across literature, it generally includes the states of Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad and Sudan, with some definitions also extending to part of Senegal, Nigeria and Eritrea. Due to Sahel's geographic position and environmental conditions, the region has historically been characterised by economic vulnerability, political instability and significant external involvement in its security and development frameworks.

Figure 1. Map of the Sahel region



Source: Britannica

During the colonial period in Africa - between 1880s and 1960s - European powers, particularly France, partitioned the continent driven by industrial resource demands, political competition and the so-called “Scramble for Africa”.¹ To add on to that, France's administrative, economic and political structures continued to influence the region even after the wave of decolonisation in the 1960s. In the decades following independence, many Sahelian states maintained close political, military and economic ties with their former colonial partner, creating a system of relationships often described as “Françafrique”.²

¹ Jeremy H. Keenan. (2006). Security & Insecurity in North Africa. Review of African Political Economy, 33(108), 269–296. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4007164>

² Glaser, A., & Steta, A. (2014): DE LA FRANÇAIFRIQUE À L'AFRICA FRANCE. Revue Des Deux Mondes, 91–99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44437422>

Following the Cold War, Western actors like France, the United States and international organisations as the European Union, remained deeply engaged in the region's security and development frameworks. Since the early 2010s, however, the Sahel has experienced escalating political and security challenges. The erosion of state authority in certain areas, the proliferation of insurgent groups after the 2011 crisis in Libya³, and a succession of military coups have substantially altered the political landscape. These changes have undermined traditional partnerships with Western powers and fueled increasing public and political dissatisfaction with external actors that had previously held dominant positions in the region.

Within this changing environment, new international actors have begun to expand their presence in the Sahel. Among them, the Russian Federation has emerged as an increasingly visible and influential partner in several Sahelian states - Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Russia's interest has taken multiple forms, including diplomatic outreach, security cooperation, media activity and economic partnerships in sectors such as mining and energy. These developments reflect a broader shift in Russia's foreign policy toward expanding its presence in Africa and strengthening ties with states that seek alternative international partnerships.⁴ And while Russia's foreign policy has traditionally been analysed primarily in relation to regions such as Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East, its growing involvement in Africa has only recently begun to attract academic attention. The Sahel, in particular, offers a revealing context for examining how Russia's influence projects extend beyond its traditional geopolitical sphere. Rather than relying solely on military or security cooperation, Russia increasingly combined economic engagement with strategic narratives focused on sovereignty, anti-colonial solidarity and the emergence of a multipolar international order.⁵ These practices are often described within academia as a form of "soft power à la russe".⁶ Unlike the classical understanding of Joseph Nye⁷ - which emphasizes attraction through cultural influence, political values and institutional appeal - Russia's approach appears to rely more strongly on pragmatic partnerships and narratives of geopolitical autonomy. In the Sahel, these narratives often intersect with economic

³ Terry, P. C. (2015). The Libya intervention (2011): neither lawful, nor successful. *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, 48(2), 162–182. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24585876>

⁴ Tsygankov, A. P. (2006). If Not by Tanks, Then by Banks? The Role of Soft Power in Putin's Foreign Policy. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 58(7), 1079–1099. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20451289>

⁵ Marlène Laruelle, "Russia's Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets and Channels of Influence", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 122, Ifri, April 2021

⁶ Le Soft Power à la russe, The French Institute for Strategic Research, https://www.irsem.fr/storage/file_manager_files/2025/03/infoveille-13-russie.pdf

⁷ Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, (80), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>

cooperation, especially through agreements in mining and energy sectors. Such practices can be understood within the broader framework of resource diplomacy, whereby access to natural resources and economic partnerships are integrated into foreign-policy strategy.⁸

Despite increasing media attention, scholarly research on Russia's activities in the Sahel remains limited. Existing analyses often examine security cooperation or media information campaigns as separate phenomena. However, developments in the region suggest that these elements are closely interconnected and form a part of a broader strategy through which Russia seeks to expand its geopolitical and economic influence. Understanding how narratives of soft power interact with resource diplomacy, therefore, offers valuable insights into Russia's evolving foreign policy toolkit and the ever-changing dynamics of external influence in the Sahel.

This thesis aims to contribute to this emerging field of research by examining how Russia constructs and deploys narratives of influence alongside economic engagement in the region between 2014 and 2025. By analysing both the strategic narratives promoted by Russian actors and their reception within Sahelian political and media contexts, the study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which Russia expands its presence in this strategically important region.

1.1 Research question

To better understand how discourse, foreign policy strategy and economic engagement are connected, this thesis centers on a main research question: **how does Russia combine ideological narratives - such as anti-colonial solidarity, sovereignty and multipolarity - with economic diplomacy to expand its influence in the Sahel?**

In this thesis, the term "broader trends" is referring to Vladimir Putin's shift and approach to Russia's foreign policy since the 2000s. Such trends are linked to the pursuit of multipolar order, a claim of sovereignty and strategic autonomy, all three combined with Russia's expansion of influence beyond Western-centric systems. As Dmitri Trenin argues, the course

⁸ GARRETT, N., & PICCINI, A. (2012). NATURAL RESOURCES AND CONFLICT: A NEW SECURITY CHALLENGE FOR THE EUROPEAN UNION. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19155>

of Russia's foreign policy under Putin had changed to establishing itself as an independent great power seeking acknowledgement as an equal player in the world order.⁹

2. Literature review

This chapter is a survey of the literature that pertains to Russia's increasing involvement in Africa, with particular emphasis placed on its involvement in the Sahel region. While this section does not aim to focus on the theoretical discussion regarding soft power, its purpose is to provide insight into how academics view Russia's motivations, means and consequences of re-engagement in Africa.

2.1 Russia's return to Africa

Russia's return in Africa has been gaining more academic interest in the last decade due to the formalization of political consultations at the highest level with the Russia-Africa Summits and palpable expansion of Russian economic, diplomatic and security relationships on the African continent. Although the current Russian involvement in Africa may be viewed as a relatively new geopolitical phenomenon, its origins lie much deeper in history. In fact, Russian involvement can be linked to Cold War military-technical cooperation, ideological solidarity movements and collaborations, many of which established institutional and relational foundations that still influence interactions today. In order to place Russia's current approach within a broader trajectory of selective re-engagement and geopolitical recalibration, it is imperative to comprehend this historical continuity.

In the time after World War II, the Soviet Union maintained its presence across Africa through aid provided to socialist-leaning liberation movements in their struggle against colonial powers.¹⁰ Soviet foreign policy viewed struggles against imperialism as ideological confrontations between themselves and Western countries, forming political and military relations with many African nations and liberation movements.¹¹ The historical relationship formed here led to enduring political memories that have an impact on Russia's image in Africa. It is important to mention that the end of the Soviet Union in 1991 resulted in a clear

⁹ Trenin, D. (2009). Russia Reborn: Reimagining Moscow's Foreign Policy. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(6), 64–78. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20699716>

¹⁰ Lawson, C. W. (1988). Soviet Economic Aid to Africa. *African Affairs*, 87(349), 501–518. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/722891>

¹¹ CLIFFORD, C., & GRUZD, S. (2022). Russian and African Media: Exercising Soft Power. *South African Institute of International Affairs*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40121>

withdrawal from Africa. Newly formed Russia, having serious problems internally with economic recession and reorganization, was forced to limit itself in its contacts throughout the world, and especially in Africa. In fact, until the late 2000s, Russia maintained a restrained policy in Africa.¹²

This changed when Vladimir Putin came into power. He adopted a foreign policy approach that highlighted the importance of rebuilding Russia's influence on the world stage and forming diversified international alliances. The involvement of Russia in African affairs was especially accelerated following the events surrounding the annexation of Crimea, during which Russia was subjected to severe sanctions imposed by the West and engaged in intense political disputes with Western countries.¹³ Under these conditions, Africa came to be seen as a key battleground in diplomacy, politics and economy. A landmark moment in the revived relationship was the Russia-Africa Summit held in Sochi in October 2019.

Besides being a significant diplomatic achievement for Russia, the Summit was also a platform on which Russia-African relations were reconsidered due to the new geopolitical dynamics. According to researchers, in the contemporary international system where there is a renegotiation of alliances, new geopolitical dynamics and increased rivalry between the competing forces, both Russia and the African nations have attempted to reconsider their ties.¹⁴ Additionally, the importance of the Summit is evident due to the proven readiness of Russia to expand its ties beyond historically friendly sentiments with African nations in the north, and focus on developing a bond with nations south of the Sahara where geopolitical tensions have been rising. Scholarly literature shows that Africa has now become an important geostrategic battleground for international actors because of rich resource deposits, strategic location, population expansion and international significance.¹⁵ In this scenario, the Russian engagement has now been oriented towards cooperation in the energy sector, mining, infrastructure, security and technology cooperation among other spheres.

These new developments have been explored largely within the broader context of the evolution of multipolar dynamics, especially in the context of Russia's participation in the BRICS forum, where collaboration with South Africa has enabled greater engagement with

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ CRIMMINO, R. (2018). PUTIN IN CRIMEA: Have Sanctions Run Their Course? *Harvard International Review*, 39(2), 16–18. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26617332>

¹⁴ Muresan, A. (Ed.). (2019). *The Russia-Africa Summit, 23-24 Oct. 2019*. Institute for Global Dialogue. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep19355>

¹⁵ RAMANI, S. (2021). Russia and China in Africa: Prospective Partners or Asymmetric Rivals? *South African Institute of International Affairs*. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep38659>

Africa politically and economically.¹⁶ Such platforms offer Russia changes to diversify diplomacy outside Western-dominated institutions. For African countries, such initiatives serve as an alternative option amid the increasing rivalry between world powers.

Importantly, Africa's role in its own agency could play a pivotal part in analysing Russia's resurgence. Most of the academic debate revolves around Russia's strategic motives, however, African governments are not passive recipients in other nations' games. On the contrary, they are actively manoeuvring themselves around external interests in order to secure their national development, security and economic objectives. Furthermore, the fact that the Soviet Union has been an advocate for anti-colonial struggles in the past is still very important today because it provides symbolic validation of current cooperation. On the other hand, the fact that the relationship was suspended after the end of the USSR led to an extended period of absence that Russia had tried to overcome since the beginning of the 2000s. The Russia-Africa Summit was thus not only a continuation of history, but also a new start to the relation.

2.2 Sahel as the new arena of external influence

In recent years, the Sahel has come to be recognized as one of the most disputed geopolitical spaces in international politics. Situated in a long belt of semi-arid land stretching below the Sahara Desert, the Sahel has been increasingly attracting the interest of outside powers who aspire to exert political, military and economic control in the area. According to a number of academic literature, the Sahel is more than just an unstable region - it represents a political environment defined by the interconnected crises of poor governance, armed insurgency, foreign military intervention and changing international coalitions. While Russia has been gaining momentum across Sahelian states, Western powers like France, whose presence has been marked across decades, has steadily decreased.

French involvement in the Sahel has to be analyzed against the backdrop of its long colonial history in Africa, which defined relations between the two on the basis of politics, economics and military power for close to a hundred years. While colonial rule officially ended in the 1960s and led to an end of France's colonial domination, several African nations became part of the post-colonial dependency system of French hegemony. Such a perspective has come to dominate the political discourse against France today.

¹⁶ DANIEL, R., & VIRK, K. (2014). South Africa, Africa, and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). In SOUTH AFRICA AND THE BRICS: PROGRESS, PROBLEMS, AND PROSPECTS (pp. 9–11). Centre for Conflict Resolution. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep05168.6>

However, the current involvement of France in the region became more prominent in 2013, after the political instability that occurred in Mali and the emergence of armed groups associated with Al-Qaeda in the north of the country.¹⁷ France undertook a UN-endorsed military operation under Operation Serval in order to counter jihadist occupations and restore the control of the Malian government. According to existing literature, the operation took place not only due to the spread of jihadists in the area but also due to the incapability of Sahelian states to deal with the problem and the lack of a response from regional actors.¹⁸ At first, France mobilised about 3000 soldiers, which was then increased in number.¹⁹ Though the intervention was tactically successful, as it drove out the jihadists from major cities in northern Mali, it is argued that this success was short-lived, as the insurgents adjusted to the new situation, spreading themselves to the greater Sahel region. This made the security environment increasingly complex, with many armed factions operating either individually or in collaboration with international terrorist organizations like Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The continued existence of insecurity in the area rendered the Sahel region one of the most insecure regions globally, further solidifying Europe's belief in its strategic importance.²⁰ Following this, France launched Operation Barkhane, which involved a military mission in Mauritania, Chad, Niger and Burkina Faso with a goal to address terrorism.²¹ In collaboration with other countries within Europe, France presented the situation of jihadism in the Sahel region as a global issue that required military intervention. However, although there was long-term engagement by France and other states from Europe with regards to this problem, insecurity kept spreading. In turn, this created dissatisfaction among people and contributed to legitimacy problems with regard to Western interventions. A similar anti-French trend was also evident in Burkina Faso and Niger, where the growing discontent about the French security presence had been expressed through public demonstrations and the rhetoric

¹⁷ BAUDAIS, V., BOURHROUS, A., & O'DRISCOLL, D. (2021). The peacekeeping, peacebuilding and security architecture in the Sahel. In *Conflict Mediation and Peacebuilding in the Sahel: The Role of Maghreb Countries in an African Framework* (pp. 20–29). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28281.10>

¹⁸ Shurkin, M. (2014). *France's War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*. RAND Corporation. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/j.ctt14bs2pj>

¹⁹ International Crisis Group. (2013). *The French Operation Serval*. In *Mali: Security, Dialogue and Meaningful Reform* (p. Page 6-Page 13). International Crisis Group. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep31970.7>

²⁰ Boserup, R. A., & Martinez, L. (2018). *Sahel: A EUROPEAN SECURITY CONCERN*. In *EUROPE AND THE SAHEL-MAGHREB CRISIS* (pp. 7–14). Danish Institute for International Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep17370.4>

²¹ King, I. (2022). *HOW FRANCE FAILED MALI: THE END OF OPERATION BARKHANE*. *Harvard International Review*, 43(4), 6–10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27278233>

employed by politicians.²² Thus, such a political environment provided an opportunity for other players, such as Russia, to take advantage of the situation by presenting themselves as anti-colonial and sovereignty-supporting states.

Another significant factor explaining the Sahel's growing strategic importance is the wave of post-coup political transformations that have brought major shifts in the region. The case of Mali, where two military coups took place in 2020 and 2021, represents a classic example of a political shift from cooperation with Western powers to a search for other allies. The same trend was observed in Burkina Faso in 2022 and in Niger in 2023, when the countries' military regimes undermined existing cooperation patterns, and issues of sovereignty and national independence became more politically relevant.²³ Scholarly literature on these events argues that the coups in the Sahel represent not only domestic politics, but also geopolitics.

The question being asked by scholars about the Sahel is: why has this area become particularly vulnerable to Russian influence? There are three explanations that may help answer the question. The first one relates to the structural inability in the region, implying poor governance and political uncertainty, which leaves room for foreign influence. The second explanation is related to the idea of historic memory, such as anti-colonial feelings and resentment against the legacy of France after decolonization. The third explanation pertains to political realism, suggesting that military governments seek partnerships based on immediate security needs rather than ideological alignment.

As per the literature, the receptiveness of the region towards Russian influence can be best appreciated by considering the interplay of these determinants instead of attributing it to any one factor.²⁴ Political instability provides opportunities, anti-colonial attitudes make people receptive, while fragmented security generates the need for alternative partners. It has been these determinants together that have made the region one where influence from outside is quite easily absorbed.²⁵

²² Boserup, R. A., Martinez, L., Lucht, H., & Cold-Ravnkilde, S. M. (2015). REGIONAL SECURITY DETERIORATION AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF LIBYA. Danish Institute for International Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13238>

²³ Michailof, S. (2016). Africanistan: Is the Sahel on the Road to Becoming Another Afghanistan? *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, (6), 174–187. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573622>

²⁴ Wilén, N. (2025). Stepping up Engagement in the Sahel: Russia, China, Turkey and the Gulf States. Egmont Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep69744>

²⁵ Nsaibia, H., Roy, E., Kazemi, E., Karacalti, A., Ashik, K., Mehvar, A., Africa Research Team, Pellegrini, S., Castro, B., & Bynum, E. (2022). The Sahel: Persistent, expanding, and escalating instability. In T. Lay, R. Kishi, C. Raleigh, & S. Jones (Eds.), 10 CONFLICTS TO WORRY ABOUT IN 2022: ETHIOPIA, YEMEN, THE

2.3 Resource diplomacy in African international relations

Natural resources have always played a pivotal role in the foreign policy of African countries, defining the dynamics of their cooperation, rivalry and involvement in international politics.²⁶ Academic studies have begun focusing more on the notion that countries endowed with abundant natural resources cannot be simply seen as a place for economic exploitation. Rather, they have become centers where politics and economics meet.²⁷ Under such conditions, the idea of resource diplomacy has emerged as an important approach to explaining how third parties exploit natural resources for political and strategic purposes.

In the case of Africa, resource diplomacy frequently relates to economic sectors like mining, energy and infrastructural development. The strategic minerals, which include gold, uranium, lithium and rare earth metals, have attained greater significance as they are not essential for the transition from traditional sources of energy to new energy sources and for technological and industrial development. Many African nations are gifted with substantial amounts of such minerals.

The importance of the significance of natural resources in the Sahel is vital. Gold mining is the backbone of the economy in Mali, in Burkina Faso is becoming increasingly significant despite the country's unstable nature and in the case of Niger, similarly to Burkina Faso, importance lies in the fact that the country houses some of the largest reserves of uranium globally, making it an important actor in relation to nuclear energy.²⁸ The French commercial interest in uranium extraction in Niger can be traced back through the activities of COGEMA, the company that is part of the AREVA group - now Orano.²⁹

According to researchers, access to these resources may not be limited to commercial considerations and, indeed, may be entrenched within wider political and security

SAHEL, NIGERIA, AFGHANISTAN, LEBANON, SUDAN, HAITI, COLOMBIA, AND MYANMAR (pp. 13–16). Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep39742.7>

²⁶ Ross, M. (2003). The Natural Resource Curse: How Wealth Can Make You Poor. In I. Bannon & P. Collier (Eds.), *Natural Resources and Violent Conflict: OPTIONS AND ACTIONS* (pp. 17–42). World Bank. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep02485.7>

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Naré, Clémence, Alec Crawford, Victoria Gronwald, et al. *Ilicit Financial Flows and Conflict in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger*. International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep47296>.

²⁹ Jeremy H. Keenan. (2006). Security & Insecurity in North Africa. *Review of African Political Economy*, 33(108), 269–296. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4007164>

considerations.³⁰ An example of this kind of arrangement is when external parties supply military, political or security assistance to developing nations in exchange for favorable access to key economic resources. This blurs the lines between economic diplomacy and politics, especially when it comes to the latter's role in securing economic resources, particularly in the context of countries that lack stability politically. Particularly, concessions for mining have been among the most prominent ways that this process unfolds. Through the use of contracts, licenses and partnerships, outside entities gain economic access, while at the same time building political ties with the ruling class.³¹ In politically volatile environments, these kinds of arrangements might even fulfill dual roles as both business deals and strategic alliances.

Building on this, it goes to the center of the debate revolving around the question of whether natural resources should be considered economic goals or political leverage. On the one hand, it may be seen as purely economic, involving economic needs, maximizing profits and diversifying sources. On the other hand, it can be perceived as purely political, where resources are used to achieve political ends.

Eventually, the academic debate seems to be moving more and more towards the understanding that such dimensions cannot be easily distinguished. Resource diplomacy in Africa usually exists at the intersection between economics and politics, where economic transactions create political leverage, while political relationships help establish economic relations.³² Such an intersection is especially valid when considering the situation in the Sahel region, where resource abundance, political insecurity and rivalry from both outside and inside world come together.

2.4 Information ecosystems and narrative competition in Africa

The study of information and media fields has emerged as a growing area of focus within the field of international relations studies, especially in moments where there is a combination of political instability, foreign interference and the rapid development of information technologies. This is the case for Africa, specifically the Sahel region, where the information landscape is not merely a platform for exchange but rather a space for struggle among various

³⁰ Harris, G. T. (2017). Access to Natural Resources. In WHY AFRICA MATTERS TO US NATIONAL SECURITY (pp. 17–18). Atlantic Council. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep26663.7>

³¹ Suzanne Dansereau. (2005). Win-Win or New Imperialism? Public-Private Partnerships in Africa Mining. *Review of African Political Economy*, 32(103), 47–62. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4006909>

³² Vogt, M. (2012). Natural Resources and Conflict in Africa: The Literature. In *Escaping the Resource Curse: Ethnic Inclusion in Resource-Rich States in West Africa* (pp. 4–5). Swisspeace. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11085.5>

actors seeking to define political perceptions, claims of legitimacy and narratives on security and governance.³³

In contrast to the conceptualization of media influence through the lens of theory-based soft power, this section takes inspiration from empirical scholarship on how narratives circulate and are reframed through the transnational media system. More specifically, the discussion centers around the increasing salience of state-backed media in Russia, multilingual content creation and local intermediaries that shape the reception. What matters is not the persuasiveness of the narratives but how they travel through different information landscapes and incorporation into domestic politics.

The emergence of social media platforms has served to further escalate these phenomena, with political messages being easily shared and spread through these platforms. Research indicates that political messaging through Russian-sponsored digital campaigns carried out in different African countries often results in the production of polarized content, where both Russia's engagement in Africa and criticism of western or European actors are emphasized.³⁴ While at the same time, researchers focus on the active role played by African audiences as participants who select, interpret and manipulate information according to their own interests.³⁵ It is not only about the strategic information dissemination by Russian media, but also about the need for alternative outlook on the global political reality, especially from the part of those who criticise the dominating worldview. Russian media become popular by covering topics which do not get enough attention in the West. The reporting tends to reflect an adverse portrayal of the actions taken by Western countries through intervention and peacekeeping in Africa, especially in the Sahel, which is marked by narratives of failure, instability and neo-colonialism.

The effectiveness and influence of such information strategies continue to be a matter of debate. Although case studies, including Mali, demonstrate that the narratives can potentially affect the politics and society at large, the general tendency of analyses is that the Russian influence depends largely on the local adoption of its narratives.³⁶ Only then do they gain political importance and relevance.

³³ Webmaster, & Webmaster. (21 Nov. 2021). Propaganda Machine: Russia's information offensive in the Sahel. Forbidden Stories. <https://forbiddenstories.org/propaganda-machine-russias-information-offensive-in-the-sahel/>

³⁴ CLIFFORD, C., & GRUZD, S. (2022). Russian and African Media: Exercising Soft Power. South African Institute of International Affairs. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40121>

³⁵ Madrid-Morales, D., Tully, M., Mudavadi, K. C., Matanji, F., & Diop, L. (9 June 2025). True Costs of Misinformation| Exploring Audience Agency in Countering Misinformation. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/21936>

³⁶ Carbone, G., & Ragazzi, L. (n.d.-b). The "rise of the rest" in global media and competition over news narratives in Africa - White Rose Research Online. <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/219394/>

Lastly, there is an acknowledgement from the literature that with the advent of increased connectivity via digitization, there have been substantial changes in the way information spreads within the continent of Africa.³⁷ With the increase in the use of the internet and social media platforms, the sphere of information dissemination has widened for government and non-government information initiatives alike, while at the same time raising issues about control and regulation.

Overall, the literature portrays African information spheres as hybrid and contested spaces where external players, local media and local audiences engage with each other. In this sense, Russian media power is able to achieve success only if it is localized, networked and entrenched into existing political or informational resentments.

2.5 Literature gaps

Despite a growing body of literature on foreign engagement in the Sahel, several important gaps remain that require further exploration. Firstly, there is a noticeable trend within current academic literature that tends to emphasize the military aspect of the issue, concentrating mostly on the activities of private military contractors and their contribution to counterterrorism operations.³⁸ While these studies provide valuable insights into evolving security architectures, they often privilege military and coercive dimensions of influence, leaving other forms of engagement unexplored.

Moreover, scholars appear to give insufficient attention to resource diplomacy as an approach for exercising political power. Whereas there is abundant research on the role of mining operations and foreign investment in the region, there has been relatively little consideration of how access to key resources such as gold, uranium and other minerals, fits into a larger strategy for geopolitics. Often, what may otherwise be considered resource diplomacy takes place solely in terms of economic exchanges.

Another reason for the gap is that in existing scholarship on influence, there is a division between the narrative and economic aspects of influence.³⁹ In other words, scholars tend to study either how the media operates, discourse is produced or propaganda is generated, but not the material engagements in conjunction with these activities. Such separation between

³⁷ Abdullahi, Aisha & Shehu, Mohammed. (2021). Digital Transformation in African Public and Private Institutions. *World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews*.

³⁸ Cold-Ravnkilde, S. M. (2018). International support of the G5 Sahel Joint Force: A FRAGILE MILITARY RESPONSE. Danish Institute for International Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep21356>

³⁹ Abhishek, A. (2021). Overlooking the political economy in the research on propaganda. *Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review*. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-61>

the conceptual and material aspects has been criticized for being increasingly artificial due to the close interrelation between the two.

There is also a noticeable lack of comparative studies and analyses in relation to the geopolitical region of the Sahel. There have been numerous researches carried out concerning countries like Mali, but such studies mostly remain case-specific rather than comparative in nature, where it is seen how certain processes take place in other neighbouring states in addition to Mali.

In particular, there are very few researchers providing a systematic analysis of the relations of Burkina Faso and Niger alongside Mali. This is an evident limitation given that these states have experienced closely related trajectories in terms of military coups, shifting external alliances and contested security government.⁴⁰ It is important to understand whether these tendencies of foreign policy are limited to these three countries or reflect regional developments. Specifically, there are far fewer examples that provide a systematic comparison among Burkina Faso, Niger and Mali within a unified framework.

To summarize, the absence of a structured comparative analysis of the region hinders a deeper integration of knowledge about the Sahel as a coherent political entity rather than a collection of separate national experiences. The need to overcome said limitation enables a more accurate evaluation of the role of external actors beyond their national borders and the regional forces shaping their interactions. By bringing together these dimensions, this thesis seeks to provide a more integrated understanding of how influence operates in the Sahel - one that connects narratives, material interests and local agency within a single analytical framework.

3. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological foundations of the thesis. It defines a research design, the rationale for using qualitative discourse analysis, the criteria for source and case study selection, and the analytical methodologies used in the study.

⁴⁰ McGowan, P., & Johnson, T. H. (1984). African Military Coups d'État and Underdevelopment: A Quantitative Historical Analysis. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 22(4), 633–666.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/160389>

3.1 Research design

This thesis adopts a qualitative research design to examine how the Russian Federation develops and implements narratives of influence in conjunction with economic involvement in the Sahel from 2014 to 2025. The research focuses primarily on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, where Russian influence has been notably significant.

The methodological approach is based on the idea that, first and foremost, Russia's impact on the Sahel is multi-dimensional. One of the reasons for this is the variety of different countries with distinct political and social complexities, which - at the same time - test and shape the form and effectiveness of Russian influence. This research examines various instruments of influence such as economic partnerships, security cooperation on national and international level, media engagement, cultural diplomacy and the operations of private military companies. The research design highlights discourse and document-based analysis to shed light on the construction and operationalization of Russian narratives concerning sovereignty, anti-colonialism and multipolarity.

This research is based on a broad database of sources such as official statements of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, policy documents on Russia-Africa, policy documents on Russia-Africa cooperation, media productions of Russian international broadcasters RT and Sputnik, reports of local and international news agencies and communications of Russian state-affiliated entities. Additionally, UN documents as resolutions, voting records and official statements are analyzed to examine Russia's use of its relation with Sahelian states in multilateral forums - most importantly, in relation to sanctions and diplomatic positioning in relation to the war in Ukraine.⁴¹ This material is intended for the identification of recurring patterns, metaphors and claims by which Russia positions itself as a strategic partner on the basis of financial and security cooperation.⁴²

Finally, the research recognises its limitations. It does not delve into nuanced conceptual differentiations among hybrid warfare, irregular warfare or "new-generation warfare"⁴³, but instead emphasizes the non-violent instruments of influence utilized within these contexts. The study further observes at how Russian influence is backed up in storytelling and interpersonal relationships, without attempting to measure its effectiveness quantitatively.

⁴¹ FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. The new "Russianism". How Russia is colonising Africa. IEEE Analysis Document 43/2024.

⁴² Laessing, U. (2025). For Russia, the Sahel is the New Cold War Front. Russian Analytical Digest, 331, 2-5. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-c-000784133>

⁴³ Building the „Russieafrique“: Russian influence operations changing the geopolitics in the Sahel. (2025). The Strategic Review for Southern Africa, 46(1 and 2). <https://doi.org/10.35293/srsa.v46i1.5077>

3.2 Case selection

The empirical focus on this thesis is on Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. These three countries have been selected because they represent the most significant arenas of Russian influence. Each country exhibits distinct conditions, providing a comparative lens through which to study the interplay of soft power narratives and resource diplomacy.

Mali serves as the primary case due to its historical ties with the Soviet Union, its strategic significance in the Sahel and the repeated political crises that created openings for alternative foreign partnerships, including coups of 2020 and 2021.⁴⁴ In Mali, Russia had to navigate the strong opposition and warnings of Western powers, particularly France, while gradually building influence through both economic and informational means. The close cooperation between Mali's military junta and Russian advisors exemplifies how Moscow leverages strategic narratives, soft power and resource diplomacy to consolidate presence.⁴⁵ Local actors such as the Groupe des Patriotes du Mali (GPM), actively amplified Russian influence by organizing campaigns featuring Russian symbols, engaging the Russian ambassador Alexei Doulian, and promoting messages of sovereignty and traditional values against perceived Western interference.⁴⁶ However, the mere appearance of Russian symbols of criticism of France does not necessarily mean ideological alignment with the Russian cause. In most instances, such sentiments were rooted in general discontent regarding the presence of France in the region for a long time, as well as security and governance concerns. Political leaders, activists, and media presence participate in these discussions by articulating sovereignty, anti-colonialist and strategic independence concepts according to their political environment.⁴⁷ These groups were not always a united front for the "pro-Russia" cause. Instead, they selectively endorsed ideas in line with the Russian narrative according to domestic politics, generational tensions and views of international cooperation.

Burkina Faso and Niger were included as comparative cases to trace how Moscow's strategies are replicated across the Sahel. The coups in Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger

⁴⁴ BAUDAIS, V., BOURHROUS, A., & O'DRISCOLL, D. (2021). The peacekeeping, peacebuilding and security architecture in the Sahel. In *Conflict Mediation and Peacebuilding in the Sahel: The Role of Maghreb Countries in an African Framework* (pp. 20–29). Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep28281.10>

⁴⁵ Human Rights Foundation. (2026, May 7). Russia's influence in Mali - Human Rights Foundation. <https://hrf.org/latest/russias-influence-in-mali/>

⁴⁶ LUISS School of Government. (2024). Russia's soft power strategies in the MENA region and Africa. Mediterranean Platform. <https://mp.luiss.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Russias-soft-power-strategies-1.pdf>

⁴⁷ Danish Institute for International Studies. (20 Feb. 2026). Rethinking Europe's approach to a defiant Sahel. DIIS. <https://www.diis.dk/en/research/rethinking-europes-approach-to-a-defiant-sahel>

(2023), marked by popular support for Russian involvement and the ousting of French influence, illustrate the diffusion of Russian instruments of influence beyond a single country. Studying these cases together allows the thesis to examine variations in how Russian narratives are received locally, how resource diplomacy is intertwined in distinct political environments, and how these interactions translate into international leverage.

3.3 Discourse and narrative analysis

This study applies qualitative discourse and narrative analysis to examine how Russian influence in the Sahel is constructed, communicated and operationalized through language. These analytical tools are used to identify how meaning is produced across different platforms on political, economic and social level, and how such meanings contribute to legitimizing Russia's presence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

Following Michael Foucault, discourse is understood as a system of knowledge and power that structures how reality is represented and politically interpreted.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the use of discourse analysis in this thesis is inspired by Fairclough and the interpretive approach in political science where language constructs political reality and legitimizes foreign policy action.⁴⁹ This could mean that Russian engagement in the Sahel is not only material but also discursive, as it is based on the production of legitimacy through language, symbolism and strategic framing. Thus, discourse analysis helps to determine how narratives of sovereignty, anti-colonialism and multipolarity are constructed and sustained across different spaces of communication. To build on this, George Kennan's definition of political warfare is also taken into account. According to him, political warfare is "the employment of all the means at a nation's command, short of war, to achieve national objectives"⁵⁰, meaning that these instruments are structurally analysed not in isolation but as interrelated components of a broader strategic framework. Within it, discourse is treated as one of the key instruments through which geopolitical aims are advanced, alongside economic and security engagement. The use of narrative analysis complements the approach by focusing on political storytelling and identity construction through the creation of identities and historical meanings within political communication. As Gerlad Prince stated, an approach incorporated in this thesis as

⁴⁸ Moussa, M., & Scapp, R. (1996). The Practical Theorizing of Michel Foucault: Politics and Counter-Discourse. *Cultural Critique*, (33), 87–112. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1354388>

⁴⁹ Fairclough, N. (1992). Discourse and text: linguistic and intertextual analysis within discourse analysis. *Discourse & Society*, 3(2), 193–217. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42887786>

⁵⁰ Corke, S.-J. (2006). George Kennan and the Inauguration of Political Warfare. *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 26(1), 101–120.

well, a fundamental distinction in narratology is that between the “story”, which is the way in which such is told, and “discourse” that relates to how it is told.⁵¹ Separation of this kind is crucial to analysing the construction of meaning through narrative form. Narrative analysis also explores how similar stories may have different meanings according to context, revealing the pragmatic dimension of narratives, such as ambiguity, inconsistency and variation of interpretation. Whereas discourse analysis looks at the bigger picture of constructing and interpreting meaning, narrative analysis explores the positioning of certain actors in stories of conflict, liberation and resistance.

The use of both methodologies enables the thesis to consider Russian influence as both a geopolitical tool and as a discursive process that involves the adaptation, contestation and redefinition of narratives by local agents. Instead of considering discourse as a tool for simple one-way communication, the research considers the way that Russian narratives engage with local political frustrations, power relations and shifts in attitudes toward foreign cooperation in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger.

3.4 Limitations

This research acknowledges several limitations. Firstly, the study relies on publicly available documents, media outputs and official communications. Certain operations, particularly those involving Russian private military companies (PMC) like the Wagner Group, are often confidential or denied, limiting the availability of verifiable information. Consequently, some conclusions regarding military and security influence are inferred from second reporting, which may carry bias.

Second, while the dual framework of discourse and narrative analysis allows for nuanced interpretation, there is an inherent risk of overemphasising intentionality in official statements or assuming coherence in media narratives that may be fragmented or shaped by editorial, political or commercial biases. Russian statements, whether from government officials, state-linked companies or media outlets, may serve multiple audiences simultaneously, ranging from domestic populations to international partners, which can result in ambiguous or strategically contradictory messaging. Similarly, Sahelian media may selectively amplify,

⁵¹ Prince, G. (1982). Narrative Analysis and Narratology. *New Literary History*, 13(2), 179–188.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/468908>

reinterpret or distort Russian narratives for local political purposes, reflecting domestic power struggle or popular sentiment rather than coherent foreign-policy alignment.⁵²

This complexity is embraced as part of the analytical approach rather than treated purely as limitation. By examining patterns, recurring themes and rhetorical strategies across diverse sources - from official statements and media reports to policy documents and UN records - this study seeks to capture the interplay between Russian intent and local reception. The goal is not to assume a single coherent message, but to understand how influence is constructed, contested and operationalized in practice, reflecting both the strategic design of Russian actors and the agency of Sahelian political and media environments.

Third, the study focuses on three Sahelian countries, which provides depth but limits the generalizability of findings to other contexts. As previously mentioned, the Sahel region is composed of countries with different political, economic and social context, making the applicability of Russian foreign policy specific and unique to each of them. These differences may yield different patterns of Russian influence, which could be attributed to external factors such as contrasting interpretation by local communities and leaders. Lastly, temporal limitations like the coverage in the span of 11 years (from 2014 to 2025) mean that ongoing developments beyond 2025 are not used in this analysis, thus the dynamics of Russian influence could have evolved further since.

4. Theoretical framework

This chapter outlines the theoretical framework that guides the analysis of Russian influence in the Sahel. It sets out key concepts used to understand how Russia builds and uses influence through non-military means, focusing on soft power, resource diplomacy and strategic narratives. The chapter starts with an assessment of Joseph Nye's contribution on the topic of soft power and how it is a key example of a framework for thinking about impact by attraction and legitimacy.⁵³ The discourse moves on to the critiques and alternative interpretations of the concept. Subsequently, then shifts to the Russian adaptation of soft power, and the main focus of this research, known as soft power à la russe, and its link to resource diplomacy as a strategic foreign policy tool. Ultimately, the chapter discusses the

⁵² Webmaster, & Webmaster. (21 Nov. 2024). Propaganda Machine: Russia's information offensive in the Sahel. Forbidden Stories. <https://forbiddenstories.org/propaganda-machine-russias-information-offensive-in-the-sahel/>

⁵³ Nye, J., & Philips, A. (2013). Joseph Nye. *The World Today*, 69(3), 32–34. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41963167>

concept of strategic narratives as a medium through which political influence is transmitted, legitimized and operationalized.

4.1 Soft power as a concept

Power remains one of the central concepts in international relations and foreign policy analysis. At its core, power is simply the ability of an actor to influence the behaviour of others in order to achieve desired outcomes. In traditional realist thinking, power is mostly about tangible resources such as military strength, economic capacity and coercive leverage.⁵⁴ This understanding highlights three central components of power - potential, dependency and the control of scarce resources. The existence of power does not necessarily depend on its active exercise. Rather, it lies in the potential to influence behaviour through access to resources, authority or strategic position. Power is therefore relational, existing within political and social relationships where actors compete over resources, legitimacy and influence.

Power, according to Joseph Nye, is defined as the capacity to influence others in order to obtain desired results.⁵⁵ However, Nye goes further to clarify that such an influence can come about in various ways. Historically, such a concept of power was understood as what Nye refers to as “hard” power, which was essentially the ability to affect others by way of coercion or inducement, using either military strength or economic influence.⁵⁶ Hard power, as the name suggests, uses concrete means of exercising influence.

On the other hand, Nye broadens the definition by identifying the three main ways in which power can be used. These are coercion, payments and attraction. The former two make up hard power, while the latter makes up soft power. Introduced for the first time in his book “Bound to Lead” and later discussed in greater detail in “Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics”, soft power means “the ability to get what you want through attraction rather than coercion or payments”.⁵⁷ Contrary to hard power, which forces others into submission, soft power works through preference shaping and legitimacy creation. This separation was further elaborated upon in the form of smart power, again formulated by Nye. The reason why such an approach was needed in the first place was the common

⁵⁴ Barthwal, T. (2013). POWER AND POLITICS IN ORGANISATIONS. The Indian Journal of Political Science, 74(3), 407–412. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24701051>

⁵⁵ Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. Foreign Policy, (80), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Nye, J. S. (1990). The Changing Nature of World Power. Political Science Quarterly, 105(2), 177–192. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2151022>

misconception regarding the possibility for soft power alone to achieve good foreign policies. In accordance with the definition provided by Joseph Nye, smart power means the clever use of both types of resources.⁵⁸ This definition is based on the recognition of the fact that attraction and compulsion are not opposite concepts, but rather, they work in tandem in the field of foreign policy. Soft power seldom supersedes hard power, yet it allows one to avoid using coercive methods due to its capability to mold other people's preferences beforehand. Furthermore, one of the essential elements that characterize Nye's theory is the evolving character of power in international politics. According to Nye, globalization, technology and the spread of information have redefined the architecture of international power, thus making the use of coercion less relevant in most cases.⁵⁹ As a result, power is moving away from hegemonic states towards international organizations, transnational entities and information systems. This development has meant that the role of intangible sources of power such as legitimacy and credibility has become more significant in international politics. Nye states also that the major sources of soft power include culture, political values and foreign policy. The main reason why culture acts as a source of soft power is that it incorporates attractive components. Political values, on the other hand, act as a source of soft power because they are practised consistently and have legitimacy. Foreign policies act as sources of soft power if they can be seen as moral, inclusive and legitimate.

What is important about soft power in the field of international relations is that it involves shaping political outcomes through persuasion rather than coercion. An actor that is considered legitimate and attractive faces little opposition and receives more cooperation from other actors. As stated by Nye, the growing significance of globalization, the spread of communication technology and information transfers across borders has decreased the relative importance of military power in many fields of international politics.⁶⁰ It now relies heavily on whether the actor manages to persuade the others and make them identify themselves politically. This way, political influence no longer depends on the material strength of the actors.⁶¹ Instead, it includes shaping legitimacy, preferences and political reality. Such a broader conception of political influence forms a crucial background for analysis of contemporary practices of influence.

⁵⁸ Wilson, E. J. (2008). Hard Power, Soft Power, Smart Power. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 616, 110–124. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25097997>

⁵⁹ Nye, J. S. (1990). Soft Power. *Foreign Policy*, (80), 153–171. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Nye, J. S. (2009). Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power. *Foreign Affairs*, 88(4), 160–163. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20699631>

4.2 Soft power à la russe

Whereas Joseph Nye understands soft power in terms of the capacity to affect others through attraction by virtue of culture, political values and legitimate institutions, the Russian concept of soft power differs from its liberal roots. The concept of the Russian use of soft power has been coined both in the Russian and foreign academic literature to denote Russia's unique understanding and practice of using influence other than military means.⁶² What distinguishes this concept from Nye's definition of soft power lies in its close connection to instruments that are material in nature. For Russia, it is important to note that ideological discourse is usually backed by economic interaction and security alliances. This method combines both the attraction and instruments of power, thus erasing the line between the two concepts - soft and hard power. Unlike the liberal idea of exerting influence by appealing to the ideas of democracy, Russian soft power focuses on pragmatism, sovereignty, strategic partnership and geopolitics.⁶³

The emergence of this type of adaptation began to manifest itself significantly more during the period after the turn of the 2000s in Russian foreign policy, especially during the time of Vladimir Putin, when Russia was attempting to restore its position as a world power following Western hegemony.⁶⁴ Russian foreign policymakers and analysts have come to see information, technology and political narratives as critical spheres of competition for the modern state. Differing from Nye's framework, in which attraction and coercion are distinguished, the Russian approach tends to integrate the ideological narratives with material means.

One of the main aspects of the soft power strategy of Russia involves sovereignty. The language of Russia's foreign policy is always oriented at the notion of sovereignty as the top priority in terms of international relations and implying non-interference, political autonomy and non-submissiveness.⁶⁵ The language of sovereignty gains traction in post-colonial societies like the Sahel region, where there still remains skepticism about any interference by Western powers. By advocating the notion of sovereignty for its own benefits, Russia

⁶² Marlène Laruelle, "Russia's Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets and Channels of Influence", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 122, Ifri, April 2021

⁶³ Russian Soft Power – A Different Concept | Ústav mezinárodních vztahů - Expertise to impact. (n.d.). <https://www.iir.cz/russian-soft-power-a-different-concept>

⁶⁴ ZONOVA, T., & REINHARDT, R. (2014). Main vectors of Russia's foreign policy (1991-2014). *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali*, 81(4 (324)), 501–516. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43580683>

⁶⁵ The concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, 31 Mar. 2023, MFA Russia, <https://sl1nk.com/p5634nd>

positions itself as a rival of Western countries including those that previously colonised the continent. This narrative of sovereignty-based partnership is also reflected in statements by African political leaders engaged in cooperation with Russia. For instance, President of Zimbabwe Emmerson Mnangagwa emphasized the ideological foundation between the two countries, stating that “the long-standing relations between Zimbabwe and Russia remain very solid and excellent, rooted in both our countries’ firm belief in the sovereignty right of countries to determine their own destinies. Russia has been a true friend of Zimbabwe’s in good and difficult times alike”.⁶⁶

Linked to sovereignty is the anti-colonial rhetoric that Russia often employs in its foreign policy.⁶⁷ The Russian discourse on politics often portrays interactions between the West and Africa in terms of continued dependency and political domination as a neo-colonial practice. On the other hand, Russia has positioned itself in history as the ally of the anti-colonial struggle and the advocate for self-determination. Such rhetoric appears highly successful in the Sahel region, especially in recent years due to an increase in anti-French sentiment. By doing so, Russia creates an image of solidarity with the African population, thus challenging the legitimacy of the West. This thesis does not assume that discourses against Western influence or colonialism in the Sahel are necessarily derived from Russian political rhetoric. Discourses such as these are based on a long history that includes memories of colonialism, disappointment with French military presence, economic frustration and domestic politics.⁶⁸ It is for this reason that this thesis is focusing on less trying to prove that Russia constructed these discourses, and more on the way Russian political rhetoric strategically resonates with local discourse and its dominant themes. Moreover, this narrative is strengthened through remarks by African political leaders who make a clear distinction between cooperation with Russia and Western powers. An example for this is Assimi Goïta, military leader of Mali, who stated: “for over a decade, we accommodated foreign forces that claimed to help us, but the security situation only degraded while our sovereignty was mocked. Malians have chosen to reclaim their destiny. Our partnership with the Russian Federation is based on mutual

⁶⁶ Meeting with President of Zimbabwe Emmerson Mnangagwa, 23 July 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71820>

⁶⁷ Singh, P. (2022). Russia–Africa relations in an age of renewed great power competition. Institute for Security Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep62820>

⁶⁸ Shifting sentiments in the Sahel: Anti-Franco or pro-Russia?, M. Ahmed Gain, 12 May 2023, Middle East Institute, <https://sl1nk.com/ljvfwj9>

respect, efficiency, and a shared commitment to state sovereignty, without any political blackmail or lessons in governance”.⁶⁹

At the Russia-Africa Summit held in 2019, President Vladimir Putin defined Russia’s approach to working with African countries as one where there were “no strings attached”.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, this thesis is not inclined to take such proclamations at face value. Declarations of such nature are to be viewed in the wider context of strategic discourse designed to contrast Russian to Western approach, which involves conditionality on issues like governance, openness and democracy. Although Russian partnerships are often described as ones that recognize sovereignty and political independence, they nonetheless create types of dependency that enhance Russian influence in politically weak states.

Although Russia never had any colonies in Africa, it does not imply that Russia and the Soviet Union were innocent of imperialism in their historical development. Indeed, official rhetoric often paints the picture of Russia being a supporter of anti-colonial and national liberation movements throughout history. Yet, this narrative must be interpreted with caution as it is being used strategically in contemporary times. In today’s context, anti-colonial rhetoric in Russia is used to undermine Western legitimacy by highlighting its past as an imperialist power. At the same time, conveniently omitting Russia’s own imperial ambitions and attempts at dominance and control over regions such as Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The efficiency of Russian narratives is achieved not only due to their spreading but also through the internalization of the narratives into the domestic political and information environment. The process of internalization means that the narrative stops being an intervention coming from outside but turns into an element of the local structure that is disseminated by the local people themselves. In other words, the narrative no longer works as external propaganda but becomes an indigenous interpretation of reality. The reason why the process is essential in appreciating modern modes of influence is that it changes the source of authority from the narrator to the system of replication. After a narrative is picked up and reproduced by governments, media channels, civil society groups or internet communities, its

⁶⁹ Enendu, C. (24 June 2025). Mali and Russia sign trade deal as ties strengthen.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c78nw1xy21no>

⁷⁰ Russia – Africa Summit – ASCIR. (9 Nov. 2019). <https://ascir.org/2019/11/09/russia-africa-summit/>

authority is validated through repetition and context modification.⁷¹ In such a case, the narrative becomes more resilient since it no longer depends on ongoing outside support but rather survives due to internal forces that can give it a new meaning. In the context of the Sahel region, this pattern becomes quite obvious through the spread of narratives about sovereignty, anti-colonialism and anti-Western attitudes on platforms that are not necessarily Russian in origin but are then incorporated into local politics. It is important to note that the Russian narrative can be quite convincing not necessarily because of its appeal but because it fits well with local political frustrations and colonial histories and disapproval of Western security and development policies.

One way in which this occurs is through the deployment of local intermediaries and communication channels that have been culturally adapted. Instead of just using direct government communications, the information strategy of Russia often uses local people, localized content and locally adapted media outputs.⁷² For instance, there are multiple languages used when creating content, including French, Arabic and English. Furthermore, the presence of Russian international media in Africa's information environment is more than evident, especially in relation to the French language. State-related Russian news outlets like RT and Sputnik have sought to increase their reach by producing content in different languages, including French broadcast and internet content, which would be relevant to the wider Sahel and Francophone Africa area.⁷³ In addition, Russia-related media in the region are said to include more cover and decentralized forms of influence. The African Initiative network - an online agency associated indirectly with Yevgeny Prigozhin - disseminates pro-Russian content in several languages across social media.⁷⁴

This aspect is crucial for the aim of this thesis. Instead of focusing on whether Russian involvement in the Sahel region qualifies according to the traditional Nye's definition of soft power, it is necessary to explore the particular role of soft power à la russe in the practice of resource diplomacy of Russia in Africa. In this respect, one can conclude that Russia employs resource diplomacy as a means of achieving practical influence over the African countries

⁷¹ Götz, E., & Kaas, J. G. (2024). RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE-SEEKING EFFORTS IN AFRICA: TOOLS AND TACTICS. In RUSSIA'S QUEST FOR INFLUENCE IN AFRICA AFTER THE 2022 UKRAINE INVASION: Instruments, causes and consequences (pp. 9–18). Danish Institute for International Studies. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep58116.5>

⁷² Ehl, D., & Ghaedi, M. (4 Feb. 2025). Russian propaganda: How Moscow uses disinformation in Africa. dw.com. <https://www.dw.com/en/how-russias-propaganda-machine-sows-disinformation-in-africa/a-71453082>

⁷³ CLIFFORD, C., & GRUZD, S. (2022). Russian and African Media: Exercising Soft Power. South African Institute of International Affairs. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep40121>

⁷⁴ Le Cam, M. & Eydoux, T. (9 Mar. 2024). African Initiative, the new bridgehead for Russian propaganda in Africa. <https://sl1nk.com/4rerppa>

through economic relations and anti-colonial solidarity. It implies the possibility of applying a modified version of Nye's approach by considering that Russian soft power works not as an appeal but as a tool for political influence.

4.3 Critiques to soft power

Though Joseph Nye's concept of soft power is regarded as one of the most significant concepts in international relations theory, it has received plenty of criticism and reinterpretation. The idea that soft power is an approach to influencing another state or country by shaping preferences through attraction rather than coercion has been commended for expanding the narrow materialistic view of power. Nevertheless, critics have raised concerns about the clarity of the soft power concept and the notion of attraction as a positive form of influence.

One of the primary critiques of Nye's theory concerns the ambiguity surrounding the concept of attraction itself. Nye views attraction as an option that replaces coercion in the international arena with the aid of such tools as legitimacy, cultural allure and value attraction, which help states form preferences of other actors. However, Nye's distinction between soft and hard power can be criticized as simplification of the connection between power and persuasion. According to Janice Bially Mattern, attraction is not some sort of natural occurrence but a social construct based on discourse, representation and language use.⁷⁵ Critiquing the theory of soft power, Mattern proposed another theoretical notion called "representational force", suggesting that attraction itself might imply coercive power that is used through communicative means. The present criticism calls into question the idea that soft power is non-coercive by nature. In addition, it does not appear as an alternative to the use of hard power but rather as its extension through other channels. Governments have the ability to manipulate stories, identities and political values in such a way that influences the preferences of their audiences while camouflaging their own strategic motivations.⁷⁶ Therefore, the use of soft power does not need to be apolitical and can operate as a subtle form of politics.

⁷⁵ Bially Mattern, J. (2005). Why 'soft power' isn't so soft: Representational force and the sociolinguistic construction of attraction in world politics. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 33(3), 583–612. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829805033003160>

⁷⁶ Kerry, J. (29 July 2004). Nomination acceptance speech. Democratic National Convention, Boston, MA. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A25678-2004Jul29.html>

5. Russian foreign policy doctrine and Africa strategy

Russian foreign policy does not follow the typical playbook of international rules or power politics. Russian foreign policy is deeply tied to how Russians see themselves, more specifically who they are as a nation, what role they play in history and where they stand in the world. And for Vladimir Putin, the ideas about Russian identity are not simply background noise - they are central. To be able to understand what Russia does on the world stage one has to grasp that the ideas about identity and sovereignty underpin everything. Russia's growing moves in Africa, especially in the Sahel, show broader ambitions including building new partnerships, pushing back against Western influence and presenting itself as another global ally. Africa has become a testing ground, a place where Russia mixes ideology, strategic alliances and business deals to serve its larger goals.

5.1 Evolution of Russian foreign policy after 2014

2014 changed a lot for Russia's policy. With Crimea's annexation and the fallout with the West, Moscow's position in the world took a sharp turn. Before, tensions between Russia and Western countries lingered quietly, but after 2014, those simmering disagreements turned into a real, long-lasting standoff. The case with Crimea shut down any ambitions of Russia for fitting into the Western-led global system. Instead, it started focusing more on leading its own way with more independence, more emphasis on sovereignty and a strong push for reshaping the world order.

When Russia annexed Crimea, the consequences came fast. The United States and the European Union imposed sanctions, targeting specifically the Russian economy - arms trades, oil tech and banking with Western companies.⁷⁷ The goal of such measures was to increase the economic costs of such actions and create pressure for policy reconsideration. These sanctions did not only play the role of an economic instrument of coercion but also a significant message and effort to separate Russia from the Western-led international order. But, ironically, rather than forcing Russia to play by the West's rules, these sanctions pushed Moscow to look elsewhere for partners and new alliances. Russia started reaching out to Asia, the Middle East and Africa. This new focus, which was more international and less Europe-centered, became a major trait of Russian foreign policy after 2014.

⁷⁷ Magen, Zvi, Pnina Sharvit Baruch, and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky. The Annexation of Crimea: International Ramifications. Institute for National Security Studies, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep08214>.

At that point in time, there were expectations from policymakers and experts that economic factors would cause Moscow to reconsider its strategic calculation regarding Crimea.⁷⁸ In reality, sanctions had little impact on the overall situation in the country. While the Russian economy contracted in 2015, the contraction was primarily exacerbated by the sharp decline in oil prices on the international market. The reason why this difference matters is that the connection between the sanctions and economic problems in Russia was less direct than expected. Hence, contrary to their intended purpose, the sanctions played a part in solidifying political legitimacy behind Putin as a leader.

After the annexation of Crimea, Putin's "popularity" soared up.⁷⁹ This is a typical example of the "rally around the flag" effect.⁸⁰ In fact, the annexation itself was viewed by Russian society through the lenses of historical justice and defense of national interests. This helped to consolidate nationalist sentiments and legitimize a new policy orientation towards the external environment. In other words, the domestic consolidation proved politically important, as it decreased the risks and costs associated with confrontation with the Western world.

5.2 Soft power as a foreign policy instrument in Russian strategic thinking

The growing prominence of soft power in Russian foreign policy reflects an important conceptual shift in how influence is articulated within Moscow's strategic doctrine. However, such development does not mean that the liberal conceptualization of soft power becomes the framework for Russia's foreign policy. Rather, such usage of the concept appears to reflect a redefinition of the term within a sovereignty-based discourse.

According to Joseph Nye's liberal approach, the concept of soft power refers to the capacity of states to influence other states by shaping their preferences based on attraction.⁸¹ Such preference shaping involves cultural and political values and the legitimacy of institutions. On the contrary, Russia's official strategic doctrine interprets soft power as a state-level instrument used to achieve foreign policy goals. Attraction, in this sense, cannot be seen as an independent social phenomenon arising out of the appeal of civil society, democratic

⁷⁸ Geiger, L. (21 Jan. 2025). 2014 Sanctions Against Russia Failed, is the Second Time the Charm? — Columbia Political Review. Columbia Political Review.

<http://www.cpreview.org/articles/2022/4/2014-sanctions-against-russia-failed-is-the-second-time-the-charm>

⁷⁹ Volkov, D. (23 Dec. 2014). Putin's ratings: anomaly or trend? Institute of Modern Russia.

<https://imrussia.org/en/nation/2135-putins-ratings-anomaly-or-trend>

⁸⁰ "Rally around the flag" effects in the Russian-Ukrainian war. (n.d.). Harvard Kennedy School.

<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/rally-around-flag-effects-russian-ukrainian-war>

⁸¹ Nye, Joseph S. "Soft Power." *Foreign Policy*, no. 80 (1990): 153–71. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1148580>.

structures or liberal politics in general. Instead, it becomes a matter of strategic control and coordination on the part of the state. As such, Russian views on the phenomenon of soft power are much more related to geopolitics and information warfare than to liberal notions of attractiveness. Correspondingly, this divide became more apparent following Vladimir Putin's re-election as president in 2012, when Russian officials began acknowledging the significance of information and culture in world politics. Soft power was described in official strategies not only as an additional means of diplomacy, but also as a way of protecting Russia's geostrategic interests in a global system that seemed to be controlled by Western ideology.⁸² Russian political leaders viewed the use of media outlets, non-governmental organizations, democracy advocacy and civil society networks by Western nations for political interference in independent countries as a longstanding practice. On its own, Russia's adoption to soft power has led to a centralized and state-dominated approach to influence projection. State-owned media such as RT and Sputnik have come to be the very core of Russia's foreign communication policy. While officially declared as a form of independent media standing up to Western domination in the sphere of international communication, RT and Sputnik are criticised for mixing public diplomacy and propaganda.⁸³ It is crucial to emphasize that Russian strategic thought frequently regards diplomatic, information, media operations, and security policy as interlinked areas, rather than isolated sectors. Such reasoning is tightly linked to notions often referred to as "hybrid warfare" or "new generation warfare", which suggests that geopolitical dominance can be reached not solely by military action, but also via the use of information, identity and perception management.⁸⁴ The ideas of Igor Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin have significantly shaped discussions centered around the strategic value of informational struggle for discrediting political opponents from within. Even though such claims are often exaggerated in Western analyses, they do provide insight into the significance of information power within Russian strategic culture.

On the other hand, it should not be romanticized or accepted blindly the role played by Russia in utilizing soft power in order to achieve its national interests in international relations. While the discourse of Russian diplomacy often promotes non-interventionism,

⁸² Soft Power Under pressure: continuity, adaptation, and the emerging role of the Gulf in Russia's soft power policies. (n.d.). Grc. <https://www.grc.net/single-commentary/309>

⁸³ Kling, J., Toepfl, F., Thurman, N., & Fletcher, R. (2022). Mapping the website and mobile app audiences of Russia's foreign communication outlets, RT and Sputnik, across 21 countries. Harvard Kennedy School Misinformation Review. <https://doi.org/10.37016/mr-2020-110>

⁸⁴ Schnauffer, Tad A. "Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-Linear War against the West." *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 1 (2017): 17–31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26466892>.

equality and sovereignty, Russia's foreign policy approach relies on highly instrumental calculations for the ultimate achievement of geopolitical influence and access. Indeed, despite the proclaimed principles of "equal partnership", Russia's political-security engagements are largely concerned with the interests of regime survival and strategic advantage over others.⁸⁵ In addition to that, the success of Russia's narratives in the Global South cannot be seen as an indication of its ideologies being embraced universally. To put it simply, Russia tends to gain from the political and legitimacy voids that other countries create.

5.3 Hard power vs soft power vs soft power à la Russe

The difference between hard power and soft power is especially critical when considering Russia's involvement in the Sahelian region today. As opposed to Western scholarship, which distinguishes between the use of coercion and attraction, Russia's policy is moving towards blending these two aspects into one strategy. The Kremlin avoids strictly operating only through either the use of coercive measures or attraction. On the contrary, Russia integrates its security support, information operations, narrative building and economic ties into a broader hybrid influence policy. On one hand, Russia's policies in the Sahel region can be said to follow an opportunistic trend that has been seen before, for example, in the Central African Republic, Sudan and Libya.⁸⁶ It is not to say that Russia causes unrest but rather, it uses existing weaknesses within the government institutions and existing power vacuum. This strategy becomes clear in those fragile states where attempts by Western nations to restore security, stability and legitimacy in governance were unsuccessful. Thus, Russia manages to enter through the very weak spots of these states.

Within such a framework, the Wagner Group was pivotal to the operation of the model. As the official narrative goes, the Wagner Group was created by the Russians as a private military corporation by Dmitry Utkin and Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2014. However, it served as the de facto arm of Russian foreign policy, enabling Moscow to increase its reach across the world without being held responsible for doing so.⁸⁷ Even though the use of mercenaries is contrary to many aspects of international law, Wagner was backed financially, politically and

⁸⁵ Vinjamuri, L. (ed.) et al. (2025), Competing visions of international order: Responses to US power in a fracturing world, Research Paper, London: Royal Institute of International Affairs

⁸⁶ Byrne, B. M., & Byrne, B. M. (24 Mar. 2025). Russia in Africa: private military proxies in the Sahel. Georgetown Journal of International Affairs.

<https://gija.georgetown.edu/global-governance/russia-in-africa-private-military-proxies-in-the-sahel/>

⁸⁷ GCSP Publication | The Wagner Group, Russia's Foreign Policy and Sub-Saharan Africa. (n.d.). <https://www.gcsp.ch/publications/wagner-group-russias-foreign-policy-and-sub-saharan-africa>

logistically by the Russian government.⁸⁸ It is also important to highlight the fact that the activities of Wagner were not limited to typical military operations. In such places as Mali, the Central African Republic and Sudan, Wagner soldiers took on roles as fighters, security guards, political advisers and resource extractors. The private company started running various disinformation campaigns intended to spread the positive image of Russia and negatively portray Western states, primarily France and the US.⁸⁹ Meanwhile, various affiliates connected to Wagner were striving for access to the mineral resource concessions and gold mines. Clearly, this example shows how the Russian strategy works - political and military interventions lead to resource diplomacy.

In Mali, for instance, Russian influence has been quickly rising since the coups of 2020 and 2021 that placed Colonel Assimi Goïta in power. Pressured by diplomatic sanctions and deteriorating relations with France, the Malian junta has been increasingly positioning Russia as an effective and respectful strategic partner. In late 2021, Russian military consultants and members of the Wagner private military group entered Mali, with the supply of weapons and military cooperation intensifying in 2022. At the same time, Russian depictions of France as an enduring colonial power were becoming firmly established in the domestic political conversation. Pro-Russian activist organizations like Yéréwolo have been staging protests against France and the UN peacekeeping mission, MINUSMA, while advocating for greater engagement with Russia. Yéréwolo is the name of a movement in Mali that has gained prominence in the context of anti-colonial and Pan-African discourse. It has given ideological military authorities after a coup in Mali, showing a change in domestic politics and alliances within the country.⁹⁰ Importantly, the informational and political power was paralleled by a rise in the interest of the Russians in the Malian gold industry, which is the cornerstone of its economy. The Russian investment in the development of the mining and refining infrastructure served as an example of the intertwining of economic and military interests. Thus, the discursive legitimization helped to gain access to the territory through economic means, and vice versa, the economic penetration further strengthened the political legitimacy of Russia as a regional ally.

⁸⁸ Camut, N. (6 Sep. 2023). Putin admits Kremlin gave Wagner nearly \$1 billion in the past year. POLITICO. <https://www.politico.eu/article/vladimir-putin-yevgeniy-prigozhin-russia-kremlin-gave-wagner-group-nearly-1-billion-in-the-past-year/>

⁸⁹ Wagner Group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Russia's Disinformation, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Russia's Disinformation in Africa - United States Department of State. (24 May 2022). United States Department of State. <https://2021-2025.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/wagner-group-yevgeniy-prigozhin-and-russias-disinformation-in-africa/>

⁹⁰ Cold-Ravnkilde, Signe Marie, Eva Stambøll, and Almamy Sylla. Rethinking Europe's Approach to a Defiant Sahel. Danish Institute for International Studies, 2026. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep78460>.

Conversely, Russia's Africa policy cannot be glorified as an anti-imperialist endeavor. There is an obvious inconsistency in Russia's anti-colonial stance and its inherently transactional style of partnership.⁹¹ While Russian politicians regularly criticize the West for exploitation and interventionism, Moscow's involvement can be characterized as focused on ensuring the survival of regimes, elite bargainings and resource access more than on fostering sustainability or institutional capacity. The hands-off policy that Moscow has been advocating has become popular exactly due to its non-democratic character. Nonetheless, such pragmatism further entrenches the existing autocratic practices and increases political securitization of politics in unstable countries. And this forms an interesting contradiction at the heart of resource diplomacy in Africa carried out by the Russians. While Russia succeeds in branding itself as an option outside the hegemonic tendencies of the West and as a supporter of sovereignty and multipolarity, its policies and activities often hinge on political instabilities and institutional weaknesses, as well as dependencies among elites, which allow Russian entities to exercise control over strategic resources and security institutions.⁹² In many instances, Russian involvement in Africa neither resolves structural factors underlying instability, such as bad governance, humanitarian disasters, economic disparities, and state weakness, nor tries to address them but rather accommodates them.

An even greater demonstration of the progression from one organization to another is seen in moving from the Wagner Group to the Africa Corps. With the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russia was becoming increasingly interested in establishing a more systematic approach to its presence on the African continent. The link between Wagner and Africa Corps is an indication that the involvement of Russia in the affairs of Africa is not about any particular group, but rather a strategic model involving a combination of factors including military cooperation, resource politics, information operations and political manipulation. Hard power and soft power are not two different tools employed by Russia as part of its strategy but complement each other to form one geopolitical strategy. Security cooperation creates avenues for economic exploitation, whereas rhetoric about sovereignty and equality creates political cover for the same.

⁹¹ Dickinson, P. (16 Nov. 2023). Vladimir Putin's anti-colonial posturing should not fool the Global South. Atlantic Council.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/vladimir-putins-anti-colonial-posturing-should-not-fool-the-global-south/>

⁹² Wi, D. (20 Nov. 2025). Russia's vision of multipolarity – spheres of influence and subjugation of nations. GEOPolitics.

<https://politicsgeo.com/russias-vision-of-multipolarity-spheres-of-influence-and-subjugation-of-nations/>

Aside from ideological narratives and anti-colonial symbolism, there is an additional element of pure pragmatism in Russia's increased involvement in Africa. One of the most crucial aspects of this strategy revolves around questions of international legitimacy and diplomatic survival after Russia's attack on Ukraine in early 2022. In response to Western attempts at economic and diplomatic isolation due to the invasion of Ukraine, Russia reached out to the Global South, especially Africa, seeking new partners and diplomatic backing within international organizations. From this point of view, the fifty-four votes which Africa can give to the United Nations General Assembly have great strategic importance for Moscow.⁹³ The policy of Russian diplomacy is aimed at making sure that there is no unity between all nations on their attitude towards the Kremlin, especially when it comes to the conflict in Ukraine. Despite the fact that most African countries did not openly support the position of Russia regarding its actions, some of them refused to vote against it in the UN Security Council.⁹⁴

On the other hand, the Russian overtures toward the African countries also have economic considerations. Given its current situation amid sanctions, trading limitations and disconnect from Western economies, Russia has been looking for other markets, sources of investment and strategic sectors beyond its borders. This is especially true when it comes to areas abundant in natural resources like the Sahel region, which can serve not only as a source for economic collaboration but also as a means to circumvent sanctions and generate income and geopolitical gains. The African governments themselves can also gain much from their relationships with Moscow. The right to veto of Russia, sitting in the UNSC as a permanent member, guarantees some political cover for regimes in trouble abroad. In many instances, Russia supported authoritarian or military regimes under threat from the outside world. After the fall of President Bashir of Sudan in 2019, for instance, Russia is alleged to have obstructed attempts by the international community to take a tougher stance against the regime in the UN.⁹⁵

In conclusion, the increasingly active involvement of Russia in the politics of the Sahel region reveals that the difference between hard and soft power in modern Russia is much

⁹³ FUENTE COBO, Ignacio. The new "Russianism". How Russia is colonising Africa. IEEE Analysis Document 43/2024.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Jazeera, A. (5 June 2019). Toll in Sudan army attack jumps as China, Russia block UN action. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/6/5/toll-in-sudan-army-attack-jumps-as-china-russia-block-un-action>

more blurred than in Western international relations theories. The tools of force, information wars, political symbolism and resource diplomacy work at once in the Sahel case, while for the West, each of them works independently. This means that the impact made by Russia on the region cannot be solely based on the attractive element, characteristic of soft power according to Nye's definition, or only on the element of force. It is created via a mixture of these methods, where the interdependence of security, anti-Western rhetoric and cooperation plays an important role. This approach can be called a version of "soft power à la russe".⁹⁶

This also illustrates the extent to which there is considerable strategic appreciation on the part of the Russians in terms of the political gains that can be made from instability in vulnerable regions. It seems that the Russians understand that in situations where state control is lacking and trust in institutions has collapsed and where outside forces have lost their credibility, it is more effective to use the more nimble approach of deniable power. This is reflected in the creation of entities such as the Wagner Group and more recently, the Africa Corps since these groups are inherently ambiguous when it comes to their nature - being military, political and economic in scope.

However, at the same time, the example of the Sahel strategy shows that Russian discourses have their own constraints and inconsistencies. Although the country portrays itself as the protector of state sovereignty and offers an alternative approach to Western paternalism, its actions usually serve to strengthen authoritarian regimes, militarization and elite dependence instead of promoting resilience and sustainability. The Russian narrative is appealing mainly due to its ability to reflect real issues related to the legacy of colonialism, failed Western interventions and power imbalances within the international community. Still, in terms of addressing these problems, the Russian position can be characterized by pragmatism and securitization, which suggests that Russia seeks to secure its geopolitical interests and ensure its strategic presence in the region. Hence, the influence of Russia on the politics of the Sahel should be considered not only from the perspective of ideology promotion but also through the lens of its pragmatic strategy in conditions of unstable politics.

5.4 Local reception of Russia

The increased presence of Russia within the region of the Sahel has brought about considerable controversy concerning the issue of how locals perceive Russia and whether Russia is indeed regarded as a viable alternative power. Russian flags, pro-Putin slogans and

⁹⁶ Le Soft Power à la russe, The French Institute for Strategic Research, https://www.irsem.fr/storage/file_manager_files/2025/03/infoveille-13-russie.pdf

anti-French protests have been common occurrences within these urban areas following the overthrow of military governments and the evacuation of French troops from the area.⁹⁷ It is important to bear in mind that anti-Western feelings do not always equal pro-Russia. In most instances, the resentment towards France stems from pre-existing dissatisfaction emanating from colonial experiences, paternalistic policies, economic disparity and the inability of stabilization efforts sponsored by the West to bring about significant improvements to the situation. In particular, the inability of France through its various military operations to stabilize the situation was a key driver of such sentiment. To many citizens in countries like Mali and Burkina Faso, Russia represented not only a geopolitical model to emulate but also an alternative force countering the dominance of France and the Western bloc.

The influence of the Russian narrative in Mali became especially evident following the 2020 and 2021 coups that led to Colonel Assimi Goïta and the Malian junta coming into power. Amid deteriorating relationships between Bamako and Paris, the Russian portrayal of France as a neo-colonial state was gaining prominence in local political rhetoric. Activist groups sympathetic to Russia, such as Yéréwolo and the Patriots of Mali Movement, held rallies in support of the junta while at the same time advocating for the expulsion of French forces from Mali and criticizing the MINUSMA.⁹⁸

In terms of government relations, the cooperation between Mali and Russia increased considerably with respect to military agreements, weapons supply and the deployment of Wagner employees from December 2021 onwards. The Russians have also shown support for mining and refinery facilities that relate to the country's gold industry. However, public reaction is more nuanced than the portrayal of images that favor Russia. While urban dwellers and some politicians have shown considerable appreciation for their interactions with the Russians, criticisms have also been raised about civilian deaths, human rights violations during joint military missions and the overall securitization of politics under the current regime.

⁹⁷ Tastan, N. (8 Aug. 2023). Fight against France cannot be carried out with Russian flags, say African experts. Anadolu. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/fight-against-france-cannot-be-carried-out-with-russian-flags-say-african-experts/2963607>

⁹⁸ Jvg, & Jvg. (3 Aug. 2025). The End of MINUSMA: Russia Competes with the UN for Global Influence. Georgetown Security Studies Review. <https://gssr.georgetown.edu/the-forum/regions/africa/the-end-of-minusma-russia-competes-with-the-un-for-global-influence/>

A comparable dynamic is seen in the case of Burkina Faso, under the rule of Captain Ibrahim Traoré, who came to power after the series of coups in 2022. It did not take long for Traoré to become an emblem of opposition towards the French influence among some sectors of the population in Burkina Faso. In particular, youth from the urban centers and people motivated by pan-African rhetoric on social media became supporters of anti-French demonstrations. The cooperation between Burkina Faso and Russia has been steadily building over time via diplomacy, security and political alignment within the Alliance des États du Sahel (AES), including Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Despite the fact that the level of participation by Russia in Burkina Faso is smaller in comparison with Mali, the news of Russian advisers, military cooperation and influence on the media suggest an ever-increasing connection between these two countries.⁹⁹ On the other hand, the regime in Burkina Faso utilizes the rhetoric of anti-imperialism as a means of establishing itself as a legitimate entity and as proof that there is still interference in the internal affairs by Western countries.

Reactions to Russia in Niger have escalated following the coup d'état staged by General Abdourahmane Tchiani in July 2023 against the Nigerien president, Mohamed Bazoum. Prior to this event, Niger had been considered by the West to be a strategic partner in the Sahel region and home to many Western forces. After the coup, there was an emergence of demonstrations against France in Niamey that featured Russian flags as symbols of support for Russia.¹⁰⁰ However, the example of Niger highlights once more how anti-Western mobilization cannot be automatically assumed to imply a broad consensus in favor of Russia. Until the military coup, Niger enjoyed a rather stable relationship with the Western world, and many Nigeriens were mostly worried about their safety, poverty and instability in politics, not geopolitics. Furthermore, it appears that Russia did not actively organize the military coup in Niger. Instead, Russia took advantage of the existing political void and worsened relations between Niger and the West. Thus, the junta's willingness to cooperate with Russia can be explained by practical considerations aimed at protecting the regime's survival, as well as wider regional trends where military regimes look for security alliances independent of democracy.

⁹⁹ Shifting alliances in West Africa: Measuring Russian engagement to. (25 Mar. 2026). European Union Institute for Security Studies. <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/shifting-alliances-west-africa-measuring-russian-engagement-support-counter>

¹⁰⁰ Mednick, S. (2023, July 30). French embassy in Niger is attacked as protesters waving Russian flags march through capital | AP News. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/niger-coup-mohamed-bazoum-military-junta-sahel-88ccaa2f004db44601e59475199c5fbc>

Across these three countries considered, the reception of Russia still appears highly conditional and dependent upon its specific context. The level of popular approval of Russia among the population correlates highly with anti-French sentiments and dissatisfaction with the prevailing politics. Yet again, this should not be taken to mean that the presence of Russia here would be unconditionally welcomed or that people's loyalty would be directed toward Russian geopolitics for any significant period of time. For many in these regions, Russia appears to serve as another external actor able to challenge the established international order rather than a developer and transformer of these societies.

6. Resource landscapes and Russian entry in the Sahel

Natural resources play an integral part in the political and economy of the Sahel region and have been gaining prominence as a key element in comprehending the evolving international relationships in the region. Although matters related to security and political instability tend to be prominent in conversations about countries in the Sahel, the significance of extractive industries within this region, specifically gold in Mali and Burkina Faso and uranium in Niger, indicates yet another facet of geopolitics at play.

6.1 Resource landscapes and opportunity structures in the Sahel

Natural resources in international affairs are hardly ever apolitical economic entities. In politically unstable regions, the issue of access to valuable resources become entangled with that of sovereignty, regime security and foreign policy orientation. For countries in the Sahel, this phenomenon has been gaining momentum, with outside powers interested not only in accessing the minerals through economic channels but also in establishing their political leverage via resource-based cooperation. This interplay between natural resources and foreign influence should be thus seen less as an economic process and more as a political one, within the context of political economy.

The importance of natural resources to Russia is not confined to its economic benefits in the Sahel. Russia's increased involvement in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger reveals that it uses resource diplomacy in its overall foreign policy strategy. By means of mining treaties, energy collaboration and strategic concessions, Russia has been able to build economic and political

foundations in a region where the West has wanted.¹⁰¹ These instances of engagement highlight the nature of material cooperation as a tool for building influence, as it helps build political ties in addition to fulfilling geopolitical interests.

On the other hand, it is impossible to discuss the concept of resource diplomacy without taking into consideration the discursive aspects of Russian foreign policy discussed in the previous chapter. Economic deals tend to become politically legitimate through a discourse of sovereignty, equality and an anti-colonial approach. In other words, soft power and resource diplomacy should not be seen as different tools, as they both complement one another in order to create an influential policy framework. Discourse can help gain access to strategically important spheres, whereas actual cooperation may increase political legitimacy.

6.1.1 Mali: gold, political fragility and external dependence

Mali represents one of the most illustrative cases of the relationships between the presence of rich natural resources and the state of political instability, which leads to strategic opportunities for foreign players. In particular, as one of the largest African producers of gold, Mali takes a special place in the context of the world's extractive economy, where gold forms the basis of the country's exports and national economy.¹⁰² At the same time, the state experiences a long-term situation of political instability, institutional weakness and an increase in insecurity, creating favourable conditions for the intervention of external actors.

The structure of Mali's gold mining industry mainly revolves around the system of concessions and licensing, which regulates exploration and exploitation. These mining licenses are issued by the government to foreign enterprises through mechanisms that seek to encourage investments while guaranteeing government participation in the earning from such ventures.¹⁰³ On paper, this licensing scheme would offer the government both regulatory powers and financial gains. However, in reality, the efficiency of this process largely relies on effective institutional capability and political stability since, without them, it could easily be subjected to negotiations and even subverted through political bargaining.

¹⁰¹ Florian Vidal, "Russia's Mining Strategy: Geopolitical Ambitions and Industrial Challenges", *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, No. 43, Ifri, April 2023.

https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/migrated_files/documents/atoms/files/vidal_russiaminingstrategy_2023.pdf

¹⁰² Mali, The Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI), <https://eiti.org/countries/mali>

¹⁰³ Naré, Clémence, Alec Crawford, Victoria Gronwald, et al. "Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks for Gold Mining in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger." In *Ilicit Financial Flows and Conflict in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger*. International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), 2022. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep47296.4>.

Gold makes up almost 80 per cent of all exports from Mali and earned about \$4.3 billion through its exportation in 2024.¹⁰⁴ Based on estimates provided by the World Gold Council, Mali produced almost 100 tonnes of gold in 2024, with both artisanal and formal sources included, making Mali the second-biggest producer in Africa after Ghana. However, this estimate is much higher than the official production by state estimates, indicating the prevalence of artisanal mining and smuggling in the industry. It is precisely because of this disparity that one can conclude that despite the presence of abundant resources in the country, the state does not have full control of the entire chain of extraction of resources.

The regime of regulation witnessed radical changes during the tenure of the military administration. In 2023, Mali promulgated its new mining code that provided for enhanced involvement of the state in mining projects, permitting the government to own a maximum share of 35 per cent in such ventures, wherein it can have a free-carried interest of 10 per cent, a purchased interest of 20 per cent and a reserved interest of 5 per cent for private Malian citizens.¹⁰⁵ In institutional terms, this move denotes the attempt made by the military regime to exert greater control over the extraction of strategic mineral wealth.

The period since 2012 has been marked with political instability for Mali, where it also led to the weakening of the government structures and changes in foreign policy directions. The initial stage of the political upheaval started with the fall of President Amadou Toumani Touré following a coup staged by Captain Amadou Haya Sanogo, amidst growing insecurity in the region and rising jihadist movements. While the election of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta in 2013 represented a return to constitutional rule, he failed to manage several critical issues including increasing insecurity, corruption allegations and growing public unrest. Despite significant military assistance from France via counterterrorism missions, the insecurity escalated, reducing the legitimacy of the Malian government and Western allies involved in security operations. Another coup d'état took place in August 2020, initiated by Colonel Assimi Goïta, which led to the resignation of President Keïta. A transition government was formed temporarily, but it too faced another coup in May 2021, which enabled Goïta to gain control and become president. Under his rule, the political alignment of Mali became different through declining diplomatic relations, withdrawal of Western military personnel - significantly the UN's MINUSMA operation. Colonel Goïta

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Mapping Mali's gold and natural resource wealth (5 May 2025)

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/5/5/mapping-malis-gold-and-natural-resource-wealth>

redirected his focus on search for new alliances in addition to seeking military and political support, especially that of Russia. Such political disconnection clearly reveals the fragile nature of Mali's political governance due to the instability of its leadership and the continuous state of insecurity that facilitates foreign intervention through alliance with the government of the country.

6.1.2 Burkina Faso: extractive expansion and regime insecurity

Apart from industrial production, artisanal and small-scale gold mining (ASM) has also shaped Burkina Faso's economy, with rising popularity of gold in recent years.¹⁰⁶ Whereas industrial mining continues to account for most of the documented foreign exchange earned through the mining industry, artisanal mining has developed into an immense economic subsector which is deeply woven into local socioeconomic structures. Artisanal mining in Burkina Faso supports the livelihoods and incomes of hundreds of thousands of people, both directly and indirectly, as it offers one of the few economic opportunities available in impoverished regions of the country lacking in economic alternatives. Yet, at the same time, the explosive growth of the ASM sector is leading to severe problems of governance for the state. The majority of artisanal production occurs beyond any official regulations, thus being very hard to measure or regulate by taxation and control on behalf of the state.¹⁰⁷ As a result, substantial amounts of gold flow within unofficial market circuits, including even the illegal cross-border trade between Burkina Faso and other West African countries. Thus, the state is experiencing difficulties in collecting revenue and generating semi-autonomous economic spheres.

Recently, one of the crucial shifts in the extractive governance in Burkina Faso has been the reformation of the legal and regulatory system indicating a wider change of trends toward resource nationalism amidst the context of political turmoil. In particular, the adoption of the newly developed Mining Law (Law No. 016-2024/ALT) on 18 July 2024 and its entry into effect at the end of the same month signify major changes to the earlier 2025 system of regulation of the mining industry.¹⁰⁸ In general, the new legal provisions indicate the expansion of state control over the mining industry, which, in turn, is characterized by high

¹⁰⁶ Naré, C., Crawford, A., Gronwald, V., Ostensson, O., Bakx, J., Jorns, A., Grundel, H., MacDonald, A., Traoré, M. B., & Aboubacar, S. (2022). Ilicit Financial Flows and Conflict in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep47296>

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ New Mining Code enhances State participation and oversight, 18 July 2024, <https://investmentpolicy.unctad.org/investment-policy-monitor/measure/4815/burkina-faso-new-mining-code-enhances-state-participation-and-oversight>

levels of gold production, making it the main export commodity for the state. Thus, according to the law, the government is guaranteed a minimum free share amounting to 15 per cent of any mining enterprise, with a possible expansion of paid shares up to 45 per cent.¹⁰⁹ In addition, the new law further includes provisions on more stringent local content laws, requiring compulsory local processing of the minerals extracted, as well as greater involvement of local investors in mining activities. As far as governance is concerned, the intention behind such provisions is to reduce dependence on the international community in the entire process chain and ensure that more mineral wealth stays within the national economy.

Nevertheless, such regulatory changes take place amid the backdrop of ongoing political instability and insecurity, both of which have been defining features of Burkina Faso from 2014 to 2025. This decade represents an erosion of the post-transitional political arrangement established after the 2014 people's revolt that ousted the incumbent president Blaise Compaoré, who had been ruling the country for decades. Despite the optimistic assessment of the transitional period as a restoration of constitutionalism, the following years proved that there were significant structural challenges within the state. After 2015, the rise of insurgency related to terrorist movements associated with Al-Qaeda and Islamic State completely disrupted the stability of the country and turned it into the epicenter of the broader Sahelian security crisis. This decline in security occurred alongside a gradual breakdown of legitimacy within the national political environment. The elected government of President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, which initially appeared to be continuing civilian rule, grew increasingly linked to an incapacity to manage rising levels of violence, the fragmentation of state authority and increasing popular discontent. From 2019 through 2022, levels of insecurity greatly increased, particularly in the north and east of the country, where state authority began to wane before the emergence of armed and community defense groups.

In January 2022, Kaboré's forced resignation took place, another coup d'état followed in September, resulting in the establishment of governance under Captain Ibrahim Traoré. This quick succession of political regimes is not merely a result of political elite divisions, but rather an expression of the larger challenges that have arisen as a consequence of the security situation that had developed over a long period of time. In the period between 2022 and 2025, this militarized transformation has only reinforced the presence of a very fluid political

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

environment characterized by poor institutional continuity and policy making that is heavily influenced by immediate security issues and consolidation priorities.

6.1.3 Niger: uranium geopolitics and strategic repositioning

Niger is located in an important part of the Sahelian landscape due to the strategic importance of its uranium reserves and growing significance of gold in its mining industry. The country is one of the largest producers of uranium worldwide, accounting for more than 70 per cent of its export revenues and about 5 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP).¹¹⁰ It is the most important geopolitical commodity in Niger's economic framework. Uranium mining in the country is not merely an economic process but also the bedrock of Niger's foreign relations, connecting the country with the international supply chain of energy and existing patterns of foreign dependency.¹¹¹ At the same time, Niger also mines tin, gypsum, coal and phosphates, but these industries play a minor role.

Historically, Niger has been marked by foreign exploitation tied to French interests, fuelling perception of unscrupulous motives that key resources are mined without significant domestic gains, creating resentment about sovereignty and economic rights.¹¹² This issue was additionally complicated by the emergence of sentiments in the region against French interference and dominance due to the military involvement in the area. Such external dependence led to a sustained dominance in Niger's uranium extraction sector, especially in companies that were linked with the French nuclear energy industry. This made uranium not only a product of trade but also a tool of strategy that was incorporated within the dynamics of Franco-Nigerian relations. This imbalance was one of the factors that made resource extraction highly intertwined with the country's politics and security issues.

A significant change in the political landscape emerged after the 2023 military coup that led to the rise of General Abdourahamane Tchiani into power and the beginning of a period that was distinct from what had been witnessed under the previous civilian government. The new military leadership led to a shift in Niger's foreign policy, especially in its interactions with the West and France. There was a clear shift towards the use of sovereignty language that highlighted the importance of natural resources of the state against foreign domination of its governance. In addition, restructuring after the coup had implications for the governance

¹¹⁰ Niger, African Minerals Development Centre, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, <https://knowledge.uneca.org/ASM/Niger>

¹¹¹ Tertrais, Bruno. Uranium from Niger: A Key Resource of Diminishing Importance for France. Danish Institute for International Studies, 2014. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep13277>.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

structure of the extractive industry in Niger. There were clear signs from the new rule that interest is now turned toward renegotiating mining contracts and rebalancing the gains from the uranium mining industry. Control over resource flows becomes part of negotiations over sovereignty, legitimacy and external alignment. Although the technical and operational structure of the uranium industry remains complex and internationally integrated, the political direction has shifted in favor of state control and diversified foreign policy.

The extractive geography in the country is also extremely unequal since industrial mining is mainly based in the north of the country, where extraction of uranium has played an important role alongside coal and some mining of industrial gold.¹¹³ In contrast to this, gold mining is usually associated with artisanal and small-scale mining, especially in areas like Liptako, in the West and Ziner and Maradi in the south.¹¹⁴ This sector carries importance due to the socio-economic perspective, despite partial visibility in recorded data. Although it officially contributes very little to the GDP, in reality, its contribution is much larger due to informal production and trade across borders. More or less 450 000 people are engaged in ASM activities, implying that at least 20 per cent of the population relies on it as their source of income.¹¹⁵ The ASM sector is particularly critical in giving insight into the internal political economy of resources within Niger. Gold is extracted from at least 69 ASM sites in the country, with many of these mining sites using chemical extraction techniques like cyanidation for the processing of the ore. Only a few of these sites are regulated by the government, either in terms of tax revenue generation or technical supervision. According to estimates, the ASM sites produce about two tonnes of gold per year. The lack of regulation in the sector makes it difficult to quantify the exact figures, which is reflective of broader state capacity issues.

6.2 Resource diplomacy and strategic influence in the Sahel

With the increasing geopolitical significance of the Sahel, resource diplomacy has become an essential means of securing greater political influence and strategic access to key economic industries for external actors. In today's Sahelian environment, natural resources are no

¹¹³ International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2021. Study on Border Community Perception of Border Security and Management in the Liptako-Gourma Region. IOM. Ouagadougou.

¹¹⁴ Naré, C., Crawford, A., Gronwald, V., Ostensson, O., Bakx, J., Jorns, A., Grundel, H., MacDonald, A., Traoré, M. B., & Aboubacar, S. (2022). Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks for Gold Mining in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger. In *Ilicit Financial Flows and Conflict in Artisanal and Small-Scale Gold Mining: Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger* (pp. 7–21). International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD). <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep47296.4>

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

longer seen as purely economic tools but rather elements that play a part in broader political and security affairs. In countries plagued by extended periods of instability, gold, uranium and other extractive resources have come to be associated with issues of national sovereignty and regime survival. Under such circumstances, foreign actors are unlikely to interact with the region using only economic approaches. On the contrary, the latter tend to be supplemented by political discourse, as well as security alliances and diplomacy that aim to legitimize extended presence. Thus, resource diplomacy in the Sahel involves not only tangible, but also discursive aspects. In fact, access to key economic sectors can be made easier by using discourse focusing on the issues of sovereignty, anti-colonialism and collaboration.

This connection is more than obvious with regard to Russia's growing engagement in the region, which can be described as having both economic, political and security aspects in the context of a broader policy of influence-building. Instead of considering military cooperation, economic deals and other forms of symbolism in different terms, Russia's involvement appears to combine these factors into a cohesive strategy of engagement. In that way, the Sahel region exemplifies how resource diplomacy is a means of pursuing influence rather than simply and only a mechanism for economic gain.

6.2.1 Russia's resource diplomacy in Africa

Resource diplomacy by Russia towards Africa in modern times can be said to have developed within the larger framework of the shift in Russia's foreign policy after 2014 and the growing efforts to find new alliances outside the Western bloc. After the annexation of Crimea and the strained relations between Russia and both the United States and the European Union, the importance of Africa was recognized once again in Russia's foreign policy considerations. Under such circumstances, Africa became more than just a diplomatic ground for increasing its political influence. Russia's deteriorating relations with the West considerably changed its foreign policy objectives. Growing sanctions, diplomacy of containment and economic pressure forced Moscow to seek cooperation with non-Western nations like those in Africa or the Middle East. Russian political leadership became more inclined towards viewing the existing international system as characterized by hypocrisy and neocolonialism. This became especially evident at the Russia-Africa Summits held in Sochi in 2019 and in St. Petersburg in 2023.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ Russia-Africa Summit. (28 July 2023). President of Russia. <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71826>

But under the language of “partnership”, there are different approaches and strategic calculations taking place. The involvement of Russia in Africa suggests that concepts such as sovereignty and anti-colonialism often exist side by side with strategic considerations and practical economic needs, especially regarding access to natural resources. This means that the use of Russian resource diplomacy cannot be viewed as only an economic arrangement, but as a larger process by which Russia tries to convert its political influence into material gains. Thus, this line of thought within the context of Russia is linked to larger trends that emerged in military and political thought within the country. Thinkers associated with the concepts of “information warfare” and “net-centric warfare”, including Igor Panarin and Aleksandr Dugin, maintained that it was possible for political gains to be made in the modern world not just through war, but through the manipulation of information, political discourse and public perception. In this way, influence through information became an effective tool that could undermine enemies without necessarily brute military power alone. This is why the Kremlin has invested considerable effort into promoting state-controlled media channels, strategic communication techniques and messaging that would be more appealing to the African audience. The prolonged military involvement of France through Operations Serval and Barkhane did not succeed in ending insurgent movements, while France was eventually seen as perpetuating a neo-colonial dependency relationship and its politics and ineffective strategies for maintaining security. In states like Mali and Burkina Faso, popular resentment towards France began to grow in addition to insurgency movements. Again, this gave Russia the opportunity to capitalize on such sentiments as a force that respects state sovereignty and provides "unconditional" backing. This trend became even more evident after the coup in Niger in 2023. The country was long seen as one of the key West-friendly states in the region as well as one of the last democracies in central Sahel. However, following the coup, protests held in the capital city against French domination included not only Russian flags but also explicitly pro-Russian slogans due to dissatisfaction with the domination of the West.¹¹⁷ There is little evidence that Russia played any role in orchestrating this coup, nevertheless, it was successful at taking advantage of the political vacuum that followed.

¹¹⁷ How Russia uses fragility in the Sahel region, Jasmin Aust, 15 Nov. 2023, <https://lossi36.com/2023/11/15/how-russia-uses-fragility-in-the-sahel-region/>

7. Conclusion

Through the interrelated frameworks of resource diplomacy, strategic narratives and notions of soft power, this thesis has examined the development of Russia's influence in the Sahel for the period from 2014 to 2025. The study's focus on Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger showed that Russian involvement in the region goes beyond military cooperation or transient geopolitical opportunism. Rather, Russia's expansion is a reflection of a larger foreign policy approach combining political positioning, economic interests and narratives to increase Moscow's worldwide influence in a multipolar and increasingly competitive world.

One of the main conclusions of this thesis is that, through the intentional mobilization of narratives of sovereignty, anti-colonial solidarity and multipolarity, Russia has effectively positioned itself as an alternative partner to Western dominance. In a region marked by protracted insecurity and discontent with French and wider Western intervention, the Russian approach has acquired a hold. Such narratives were able to gain political traction in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger due to military takeovers and the alleged shortcomings of foreign interventions.

This theory has maintained, however, that the success of these narratives should not be seen as a proof of the Sahel's unwavering ideological support for Russia. Long before Russia increased its involvement in the Sahel, there was anti-French sentiment and skepticism. These complaints stem from long historical memories of colonialism. Russia did not create these frustrations, but rather deliberately adapted its rhetoric to conform to the preexisting political environment. In this way, the Russian influence has been operating more through the strategic exploitation, localization and amplification of attitudes already present. The political leaders of the countries part of this case study have mostly operated in accordance with pragmatic geopolitical considerations rather than strictly ideological alignment with Russia. They have sought for alliances that can offer political backing, security cooperation and economic opportunities without the requirements and sacrifices frequently associated with Western interventions. In this situation, the appeal towards Russia became attractive due to its portrayal as a flexible geopolitical partner ready to engage. As a result, the increasing Russian presence in the Sahel should be seen less as a total ideological "turn toward Russia" and more as a reflection of the practical attempts made by African leaders to strengthen regime survival, diversify external alliances and renegotiate their place in the international order.

The thesis has further shown how the Russian strategy differentiates from Joseph Nye's first definition of soft power. Russia's interpretation of it is more practical and strategically useful than Nye's paradigm, which focuses on appeal through culture, political values and institutional legitimacy. Soft power à la russe is based on a combination of political rhetoric, material incentives, security cooperation and anti-Western stance rather than universal values of cultural appeal. This strategy has been evident in the Sahel through high level summits, economic agreements and media influence.

Crucially, this thesis has remained critical of Russia's self-representation as a player that supports sovereignty and opposes colonialism. Moscow is often portrayed in Russian political discourse as a partner free from political conditionality associated with Western nations and as a protector of state sovereignty. However, Russia's true geopolitical aspirations and strategic goals are frequently hidden by such rhetoric. In addition to being a historical allusion to Soviet support for liberation movements, the ideology of anti-colonial solidarity also functions as a modern geopolitical tool meant to erode Western legitimacy and bolster Russia's own standing abroad. Furthermore, Russian influence in the Sahel is neither consistent nor fully cohesive, shown through a comparative approach across Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Every country has unique political circumstances, past experiences and local reception patterns. Yet, comparable regional themes are evident, such as the decline of Western power, the politicization of the discourse around sovereignty and the pursuit of alternative international alliances.

Russia's activities in the Sahel show how, rather than relying solely on traditional military dominance, modern geopolitical power functions through a combination of narratives, economic engagement, symbolic politics and selective security cooperation. Resource diplomacy is not merely a strategy for economic gain, but it also functions as a means by which Russia gains political leverage and strengthens the credibility of its overall narratives. As a result, it becomes more difficult to distinguish between soft and hard power, particularly in situations where material interests and rhetoric are closely related.

In the end, the Sahel is more than just an unstable area on the periphery. It is a strategically important area where questions of sovereignty, resource control and global order intersect. Russia's expanding influence is a reflection of both a rise of a more competitive and fragmented international order. In an era increasingly characterized by multipolarity, an understanding of Russia's role in the Sahel is therefore crucial for both analyzing current

Russian foreign policy and comprehending the broader transformation of global power connections.

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