
Transformation of approaches of Russian Federation to organization of active measures on the African continent

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Abstract

The beginning of a large-scale invasion of the Russian Federation into Ukraine led to the deterioration of the economic situation in Russia due to introduction of a comprehensive sanctions regime by Western countries and the excessive costs, required to support the military campaign. Therefore, maintaining and intensifying activities on the African continent, aimed at gaining access to natural resources and sales markets, diversification of ways of circumventing sanctions, etc., will become increasingly important for Kremlin. Putin's regime will continue to use hybrid methods, in particular, private military companies (PMCs), to create or restore positions in countries of interest through infiltration of agents into decision-making bodies. Strengthening of Russia's positions in Africa poses a threat to the entire system of international security and stability as Russian leadership will highly likely continue to create sources of instability in Africa to disperse political, economic and security efforts of the leading countries of the democratic world, diverting their attention from aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine. Therefore, the issue of research and generalization of methods of influence used by Russian authorized bodies in the specified region becomes relevant to optimize the response strategy of Ukraine and other countries to emerging challenges and threats. Methodology. In the course of the research system-structural, comparative, narrative, retrospective analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction was used to process scientific information on the issue of Russian influence on African continent. Results. Based on the research results, means and methods of Russian influence on the African continent were studied and certain practical aspects of this issue were clarified.

Key words: active measures, special services, hybrid technologies, disinformation, information influence, cognitive war, Russia, Mali, Central African Republic, CAR, private military companies.

Introduction

The beginning of a large-scale invasion of Russian Federation into Ukraine led to deterioration of economic situation in Russia due to introduction of a comprehensive sanctions regime by the Western countries and excessive costs, required to support military campaign. Therefore, maintaining and intensification of activities on the African continent, aimed at gaining access to natural resources and sales markets, diversification of ways of circumventing sanctions etc., will become increasingly important for Kremlin.

Putin's regime will continue to use hybrid methods, in particular, private military companies (PMCs), to create or restore positions in countries of interest through the infiltration of agents into decision-making bodies.

According to the special representative of Ukraine for the Middle East and Africa Maxym Subh, deepening of Kyiv's ties with the African continent may lead to increased pressure on Russia, especially at the UN level (Kaledzi A., 2022). At the same time, strong presence of Russian Federation

makes it difficult for some African countries to directly condemn Moscow's role in the current war against Ukraine, and, accordingly, to force them to comply with sanctions regime against Kremlin. According to the director of the international bilateral relations department of the "Maidan of Foreign Affairs" Charitable Foundation Oleh Bilokolos, the dominant presence of Russia in Africa will be a significant challenge that Ukraine will have to face (Kaledzi A., 2022).

It is worth noting that after February 24, 2022 there was a significant shift in the focus of attention of Ukrainian political and economic establishment towards African continent. Thus, Volodymyr Zelenskyy held talks with the leaders of more than 20 African countries and announced opening of 10 new embassies in Africa; Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba visited 11 countries on the continent. Ukraine delivered 200,000 tons of grain as part of a "Grain from Ukraine" humanitarian project (Zdobutky MZS Ukrainy).

However, to change the situation in favor of Ukraine, it is not sufficient to intensify only state structures' activities, but it is important to involve private companies, universities, think tanks, NGOs etc.

Strengthening of Russia's positions in Africa poses a threat to the entire system of international security, as Russian leadership will highly likely continue to create as many sources of instability in Africa as possible in order to disperse political, economic and security efforts of the leading countries of the democratic world, diverting their attention from aggression of Russian Federation against Ukraine.

Therefore, the issue of research and generalization of methods of influence used by Russian authorized bodies in the specified region becomes relevant in order to optimize response strategy of Ukraine and other countries to emerging challenges and threats. In order to "win hearts and minds" of the population of African countries, Ukraine as well as Western democracies will need not only to effectively counter Russian disinformation in Africa, but also to push their own strategic narratives aimed at promoting democratic values.

Result and Discussion

Western researchers of Russian active measures state that in recent years Moscow has deepened ties in North Africa, expanded its influence in CAR and the Sahel region, and restored ties in southern Africa, including "frozen" (lost) since the "cold war" positions. Russia's approach differs from other external players by the fact that Moscow usually uses asymmetric (and often illegal) means of expanding its influence, in particular, use of mercenaries (PMCs), disinformation, interference in elections, support for coups, weapons in exchange for resources agreements etc. This inexpensive and fairly effective strategy is aimed at promoting Russian view of the world order.

It should be noted that in order to establish and strengthen positions in African countries, special services of the former Soviet Union carried out active measures aimed at creating the image of the Union as a non-engaged supporter of decolonized Africa, while the United States were depicted as "shadow players" pursuing their own geopolitical interests (Seibt S., 2023). KGB used the entire available arsenal of active measures, from publishing information materials in mass media to forging official US documents in order to expose CIA as an enemy that must be destroyed. For example, in 1964, having thoroughly examined psychological portrait of Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah, who was terrified of coups plotted and executed by the US special services, KGB specialists forged a CIA internal report, which described tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) of overthrowing current government. This led to the fact that the Ghanaian leader wrote a letter to US President L. Johnson, where he accused CIA of trying to "overthrow him at any cost" (Seibt S., 2023).

At the same time, not all operations of special services of both former Soviet Union and Russian Federation were successful: Soviet leaders believed that, given the amount of material and

financial aid and propaganda, African countries would have no other choice but to support the communist ideology and join the socialist camp. It should be noted that as of 1976, the USSR provided aid, mostly military and technical, to 17 African countries and kept about 2,000 military advisers on the African continent (Soviet Involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa). At the same time, data regarding participation of Soviet advisers in the socio-political life of African countries, their number and responsibilities in the former USSR were mostly classified in order to conceal participation of the Soviet Union in conflicts that periodically occurred in certain countries. However, the defeat of the USSR in the “Cold War” and its subsequent disintegration forced the leadership of African states to change their views on further development of cooperation with Russian Federation, which declared itself a legal successor of the Soviet Union.

It is hard not to notice similarity between former Soviet and current Russian narratives, which Kremlin promotes in African countries through active measures, in particular, using capabilities of Wagner PMC and so-called “troll farms”. Narrative analysis of speeches of Vladimir Putin and the leadership of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation at international events with the participation of African countries allows to assert that, like former USSR, modern Russia positions itself as an ally of the anti-colonial pan-African movement. A clear example of such policy is the propagation of anti-French sentiments in CAR and Mali.

The role of the military and military-technical cooperation should also be noted: while remaining a minor player on the African continent in terms of trade and economy, Kremlin, due to sale of weapons and military equipment, joint military exercises and, especially, through PMC activities, maintains strong defense and security ties with African countries. For example, in exchange for Wagner’s services in CAR (escort protection of the country’s high-ranking officials, including President Touadéra, assistance in arms deliveries from Russian Federation and provision of on-site military training), Kremlin received “possibilities of mutually beneficial development of Central African natural resources”, including access to the development of gold and diamond mining in the country (Droin M., Dolbaia T., 2023).

It should be noted that to ensure deployment in Mali, Wagner group launched a comprehensive campaign proven to be effective during conflicts in Sudan and CAR and based on the exploitation of African governments’ requests for security assistance, especially those who were not satisfied with amounts of aid from the so-called “collective West”. This campaign included three tiers: 1) disinformation and pro-government information warfare strategies, including fake sociological surveys, manifestations, demonstrations, etc. aimed at creating a favorable informational background and preparing public opinion for the government’s appropriate decision; 2) securing payment for provided services by obtaining control over extractive industries, particularly precious metal mining operations; 3) involvement in cooperation with government authorities, in particular, military and security pillars, by participating in their training, providing advisory and personal security services, and participation in counter-insurgency operations (Parens R., 2022).

Within the framework of the first tier Wagner and relevant governmental and non-governmental structures of Russian Federation launched active measures to prepare favorable information environment, in particular, to increase the level of support of PMC by local population. For this purpose, they used local population’s disappointment with the security situation in the country as a vulnerability and pretext. At the same time, they channeled popular irritation towards international forces, especially French Operation Barkhane, comparing their activities with “effective” operations of Wagner in CAR. For example, in September 2021 and January 2022, the Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC, an organization sanctioned by the US government for its ties to the Wagner Group) published survey results that allegedly showed growing, broad-based Malian support for the government’s collaboration with Wagner and disapproval of France’s

counterterrorism mission (Thompson J., Doxsee C., Bermudez Jr. Joseph S., 2022). In October 2021, Aleksandr Ivanov, head of the so-called Community of International Security Officers, associated with Wagner PMC, in an interview to the Malian press, praised the value that a PMC such as Wagner could provide Mali (Le représentant des «instructeurs» russes). Social media accounts shared images from unverified sources claiming to show Wagner instructors training Malian military, which were subsequently amplified by Kremlin-affiliated media (Thompson J., Doxsee C., Bermudez Jr. Joseph S., 2022).

Within the second tier, according to the commander of the Operation Barkhane General Laurent Michon, as of October 2022, an agreement was reached between Wagner and the government of Mali on the transfer of three gold mines to the concession of the PMC (Sahi T., 2022).

Within the third tier, Wagner operators together with units of the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) take part in counter-insurgency operations, in particular, in the regions of Segou and Mopti, against an Al Qaeda affiliated terrorist organization Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM).

At the same time, it should be noted that during 2022 the scale and complexity of operations carried out by Russian Federation in Africa are becoming more and more obvious. Namely, for the above-mentioned period more than 50 campaigns were detected and documented, in which various TTPs were used, including use of social networks to amplify disinformation messages through coordinated distribution of false and misleading content from non-authentic accounts (Mapping Disinformation in Africa).

Such operations take place at a time when a growing number of young people on the continent feel so-called "information hunger". According to statistics, citizens of Nigeria, South Africa and Kenya follow the news with one of the highest rates and use social media to find news more often than any other region (Newman N., 2022). The number of social media users on the continent has quadrupled since 2016 to nearly 400 million people today (Duerksen Dr. Mark (2023)). And all of these people want to know what is happening in their cities, countries and the world now, as well as what may await them in the future and how they can improve their life.

Rapidly changing military and political environment has created vulnerabilities that are intensively exploited by foreign powers, namely, Russia, China, and several Gulf States: approximately 60% of documented disinformation campaigns on the African continent are externally driven (Mapping Disinformation in Africa).

The main goal of such (dis)information campaigns carried out by the above-mentioned actors, including special services of Russian Federation, is to distort, confuse, polarize and cultivate mistrust in public communications to neutralize the exchange of competing ideas, transparency and accountability that contribute to democratic societies. Distorted information landscape resulting from such activities allows stakeholders to shape public narratives according to their political interests (Galal S. (2023)).

The unsuccessful rebellion of Y. Prigozhin led to structural changes in Wagner Group including redistribution of the former leader's private property in respective countries (Troianovski A., Walsh D., Schmitt E., Yee W., Barnes J.E. (2023)). In connection with the possible reassignment of Wagner Group or its military component under the control of the Federal Service of the Troops of the National Guard of the Russian Federation (Rosgvardiya) (Gruppa "Vagnera" vozvrashchaetsya), the beginning of a new phase of transformation of approaches of Russian Federation to active measures, including methods of information warfare, is possible.

Conclusions

Having considered evolution of approaches of the Russian Federation to influence operations on the African continent based on the retrospection method, main transformational changes were identified. They consist in the gradual shift from the use of official military personnel as military

advisers to private contractors to establish a footprint for further influence operations and promotion of Russian interests. Since the activity of the PMCs lies in the “blind zone of the jurisdiction of international and national law”, this gives Russian leadership the opportunity to distance itself from its participation in certain controversial situations

Comparative analysis of active measures supporting deployment of Russian PMCs in CAR and Mali shows similarity of templates consisting of three stages with the accompanying special information operation. This knowledge will allow relevant security authorities to predict Russian actions regarding planning and execution of special operations involving PMCs.

At the same time, alleged assassination of Y.Prygozhin by secret services of Russian Federation can lead to weakening of Wagner positions on the African continent, struggle for spheres of influence between security agencies, deployment of new PMCs (for example, Redut) to replace Wagner etc. This opens opportunities for respective players to effectively counter Russian influence in Africa, namely by means of information warfare.

Aforementioned can lead to the beginning of a new phase of transformation of Russian Federation's approach to organization of influence operations on the African continent, given that for the last decade in many countries “Wagner factor” has become an integral component of the entire state security system.

In order to counter Russian influence during the period of turbulence resulting from the interagency struggle for Prygozhin's legacy it is recommended to track illegal actions of Russian PMCs in the economic sphere to collect evidence on Russia's colonial policy towards African countries, as well as the facts of human rights abuse by Russian operators.

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