



# **RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN AFRICA:**

**SCENARIOS TO INFORM  
GREATER DEMOCRATIC  
RESILIENCE**

## **About NDI**

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights.

Since opening its doors in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations and parliaments, safeguarding elections and promoting citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the fact that while there is no single democratic model, all democracies share certain core principles.

The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communication among citizens, political institutions and elected officials and strengthens their ability to improve the quality of life for all citizens. For more information about NDI, please visit [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org).

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# SUMMARY

**FOR RUSSIA, AFRICA PROVIDES OPPORTUNITIES** to limit the effect of sanctions, project global power and undermine the liberal international order. While Russia maintains legitimate trade with a number of countries including Algeria, Egypt and Eritrea, it is also engaged in several activities that threaten democracy on the continent. The Wagner Group, a military contractor with links to the Kremlin, has been involved in the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Mozambique and Sudan. The group is linked to human rights abuses and opaque deals in the mining sector. The Kremlin has deployed disinformation and other influence campaigns to shape public perceptions and electoral outcomes in several African countries. It has also provided illicit funding to political parties. What is less certain is how these and other aspects of Russia's involvement in Africa may change in the next three years and as a result of Russia's costly invasion of Ukraine and its embroilment in the war.

Between 2023 and 2025, more than 30 African countries are scheduled to hold national elections. Economic crisis, rising food insecurity, climate change and pockets of insurgency will create governance challenges and pockets of instability that could be exploited to undermine democracy. Despite these threats, a large and consistent majority of Africans prefer democracy to other forms of government. In addition, despite differences across the large and diverse continent, African civil society, independent media, legislators and the judiciary have held leaders accountable across a wide range of issues including corruption, electoral integrity, security sector reform, extractive industries, public finance management and service delivery. Continent-wide and subregional organizations have also played roles in advancing democratic norms. In a digital age where information sharing is much easier, "bright spots" for accountability and democratic progress have greater potential to create ripple effects in other countries.

Pioneered by the business community and subsequently adapted by governments, nonprofits and other organizations, scenario-planning is a strategic planning approach that is used to manage extreme uncertainty and complexity. Scenario planning is a uniquely powerful tool for adaptive decision-making because it utilizes a structured approach to storytelling to develop analytical insights into volatile and uncertain operating

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environments. These insights help decision makers develop “common operating pictures” that can inform coordinated decision-making.

This paper is the result of a scenario-building exercise that NDI conducted in October and November 2022 with African, American and European analysts. Through the exercise, NDI sought to better understand potential trajectories of Russian influence in Africa over the next three years (2023–2025), especially developments that could have implications for democracy on the continent. This scenario exercise involved: background papers on various aspects of Russia’s engagement in Africa; an online scenario-building workshop with African, American and European analysts; the development of four scenarios, each reflecting a different possible future identified during the online exercise; and further refinement of the scenarios based on consultations with selected analysts. Each of the four scenarios reflects a different combination of two key uncertainties: Russia’s capacity to project power in ways that undermine democracy in Africa and the opportunities for Russia to do so.


Scenario one, the **Emboldened Bear**, reflects high Russian capacity to project power with high opportunities for Russia in Africa. It describes a future where the Kremlin continues and expands both legitimate and illicit operations in Africa through disinformation campaigns, activities in the mining industry, nuclear energy deals and the provision of military contractors and weapons supplies. While the illicit operations have high costs for democracy in Africa, they yield high economic and foreign policy returns at low cost for the Kremlin and its proxies.

In scenario two, the **Bear Necessities**, as the war in Ukraine drags on and sanctions continue to bite, Russia aggressively seeks and protects alternative licit and illicit markets to circumvent sanctions, access strategic resources and maintain critical supply chains. Similar to scenario one, instability and other developments in Africa offer significant opportunities for Russia. However, in this scenario, the Kremlin faces more capacity constraints and entrenches its presence in a limited number of African countries.

In scenario three, the **Hamstrung Bear**, an extended war in Ukraine begins to weaken the Russian government and cause significant damage to the Kremlin’s international image. At home, Putin is consumed by the war, and the governing apparatus becomes paralyzed. Frustrated with the situation at home, Russian oligarchs and key individuals in the security apparatus seek more opportunities overseas. Similar to scenario two, Russia faces significant capacity constraints. However, here, the Kremlin’s opportunities are also limited due to increased African awareness and criticism of Russia’s destabilizing role in its periphery and in Africa.

Scenario four, the **Bear Exposed**, describes a future where Russia maintains high capacity to expand its involvement in Africa on multiple fronts, similar to scenario one. However, African civil society, institutions and selected leaders begin to highlight and push back against the corrosive effects of the Kremlin’s activities on the continent. Rising skepticism among Africans about whether Russia can deliver benefits for the continent limits the Kremlin’s opportunities.

Through forecasting or futuring, scenario development helps participants and end users anticipate change. This enables them to take more proactive, rather than reactive, steps to plan their work



and activities. NDI is disseminating this report to participants in the exercise as well as other donors and implementing partners engaged in democracy support activities in Africa. The Institute plans to brief international and African partners on the scenarios and engage them in identifying how and when they might need to adjust their strategies in response to mitigate the risks and seize opportunities arising from different scenarios.

All four scenarios illustrate that while limited and subject to change, Russia's operations in Africa are a serious threat to democracy and stability. However, if their extractive, abusive, exploitative, anti-citizen nature is exposed, they are also extremely vulnerable to public backlash. Due to Russia's war on Ukraine, upcoming elections in approximately 30 African countries, steady, significant support for democracy among African publics and renewed U.S. commitment to engaging Africa, the next three years present a strategic opportunity to shore up resilience to the Kremlin's attempts to undermine democracy in Africa. In the next year, NDI will use these scenarios to engage African, European and U.S. policy leaders on how, in this strategic moment, democracy and governance support organizations can position their partners to strengthen the democracy response to Russian operations that subvert popular demands for increased and improved democracy.

# BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

**RUSSIA'S SO-CALLED "SPECIAL OPERATION,"** which began in February 2022, marked a steep escalation of military aggression against its neighbor Ukraine. The war continues to have implications far beyond the immediate neighborhood of the conflict. To date, its direct and indirect impacts in Africa include: Kremlin-backed influence campaigns to shape perceptions of the war, rising food and fuel prices and growing concerns about the supply chain for much-needed fertilizer. During the fight against colonialism, the Soviet Union stood with liberation movements in Angola, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. During the Cold War, African countries used various tactics to navigate the tendency by both the West and the Soviet Union to treat them as pawns in broader ideological battles. In more recent years, and especially since 2014, Russia's engagement with Africa has increased significantly. However, unlike China, Western Europe and the United States, Russia's relations on the continent heavily focus at the elite level and outside military assistance, they do not involve extensive trade, investment or development assistance.

Today, Russia accounts for almost half of military equipment imports to Africa.<sup>1</sup> Between 2015 and 2019, Russia signed 19 agreements on military cooperation with various governments; many of the deals involved weapons sales.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Wagner Group, a military contractor with strong links to the Kremlin, has provided security services in CAR, Libya, Mali, Mozambique and Sudan.<sup>3</sup> Recent reports of significant human rights abuses by the Wagner Group in Mali are the latest in a series of similar violations in other countries where the group has deployed.<sup>4</sup> Abuses by the security actors responsible for people's safety and insecurity erode trust in government and make it difficult for people to exercise their rights. In the absence of democratic oversight, security forces can act with impunity and keep unelected governments in power.

Russian involvement in Africa in the extractive industries includes: Catoca, in Angola, the world's fourth largest diamond mine<sup>5</sup>; the CAR's diamond mines; Dian, in Guinea, the largest bauxite deposit in the world;<sup>6</sup> and Sudan's gold mines. Oligarchic and Wagner Group involvement in the mining industry raises concerns about opaque deals in the extractive sectors that violate

rights to information, create fertile ground for corruption, and are more likely to result in environmental damage that exacerbates people's living conditions and causes displacement. Russia is also partnering with Egypt, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda and Zambia to expand nuclear research and energy supply.

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Across the continent, the Kremlin has deployed disinformation and other influence campaigns to shape public perceptions and electoral outcomes.<sup>7</sup> It has also provided illicit funding to political parties and supported bogus observers who provide biased



information on electoral processes. Reliable, authentic information is critical to transparent, inclusive and accountable governance. It allows citizens to exercise their civic rights and responsibilities. The Kremlin's use of disinformation to shape perceptions of the war on Ukraine, its anti-democratic narratives and its efforts to artificially prop up selected regimes all pose direct threats to these fundamentals.

The war's indirect impact on Africa also has political implications. Globally, socio-economic conditions are a key driver of levels of satisfaction with political leaders and governments. Several African countries rely on Russian and Ukrainian imports for wheat grains, oils and fertilizer, and both Russia and Ukraine play important roles in global fuel supply chains. There are concerns that a prolonged war in Ukraine could leave an additional 1.2 million Africans in extreme poverty in 2022, with the number rising to 2.1 million in 2023.<sup>8</sup> Historically, around the world, citizen protests against hardship have either created windows of opportunity for reform or elicited a backlash from ruling officials who have restricted democratic freedoms. Since May 2022, Ghana, Madagascar, Malawi, Kenya, Sierra Leone and South Africa have seen protests over rising costs of living and other economic concerns<sup>9</sup>. Amid growing concerns about a looming debt crisis and a global recession, the potential for protests in African countries is likely to grow. Between 2023 and 2025, more than 30 African countries are scheduled to hold national elections, creating additional uncertainty.

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Despite these risks, Africa is also host to several dynamics that could help push back against corrosive Russian influences on the continent. Most of the Kremlin's engagement on the continent is limited to deals with elites, many of whom are seeking security for their own regimes. In contrast, a large and relatively consistent majority of Africans (69 percent) believe that "democracy is preferable to any other kind of government." In addition, they strongly reject other forms of government: military rule (75 percent), one-party rule (77 percent) and one-person rule (82 percent).<sup>10</sup> While there are differences across various countries, subregions and institutions, vibrant civil society has gained traction and experience in holding leaders accountable across a wide range of issues including anti-corruption, democratic governance, security sector reform and citizen-security, extractive industries, climate change, public finance management and service delivery. Independent media and civic organizers have exposed disinformation and corruption. Legislators have held the executive branch to account, and judicial bodies have acted to uphold democratic principles. Continent-wide and subregional organizations have also played roles in advancing democratic norms across Africa. Increasing regional awareness, exchange and coordination and lower barriers to sharing information through social media all mean that seemingly isolated movements can rapidly spread and adapt to local contexts. As a result, "bright spots" for civil society accountability victories and pushback against corrosive Russian influence can have ripple effects across the continent.

## Scenario Analysis

Pioneered by the business community and subsequently adapted by a wide range of organizations including governments and nonprofit organizations, scenario planning is a strategic planning approach that decision-makers can use in situations of extreme uncertainty and complexity. The process allows decision-makers to envision plausible, alternative futures and how they should respond in each eventuality. Scenario planning is a uniquely powerful tool for adaptive decision-making because it utilizes a structured approach to storytelling as a way of developing analytical insights into volatile and uncertain operating environments, helping policymakers develop “common operating pictures” that can inform and enable coordinated decision-making.

Effective scenario planning requires a clearly defined time frame and audience. This exercise focused on the period from 2023 to 2025. It is intended for use by democracy support organizations and activists with programming in Africa. Scenario generation also includes the identification of key certainties and uncertainties in the operating environment. Then, it plays out a range of alternative futures based on different configurations of the key uncertainties. This structured storytelling exercise makes it possible to identify indicators that allow decision-makers to observe which of the alternative futures is becoming more or less likely and adapt their policies accordingly.

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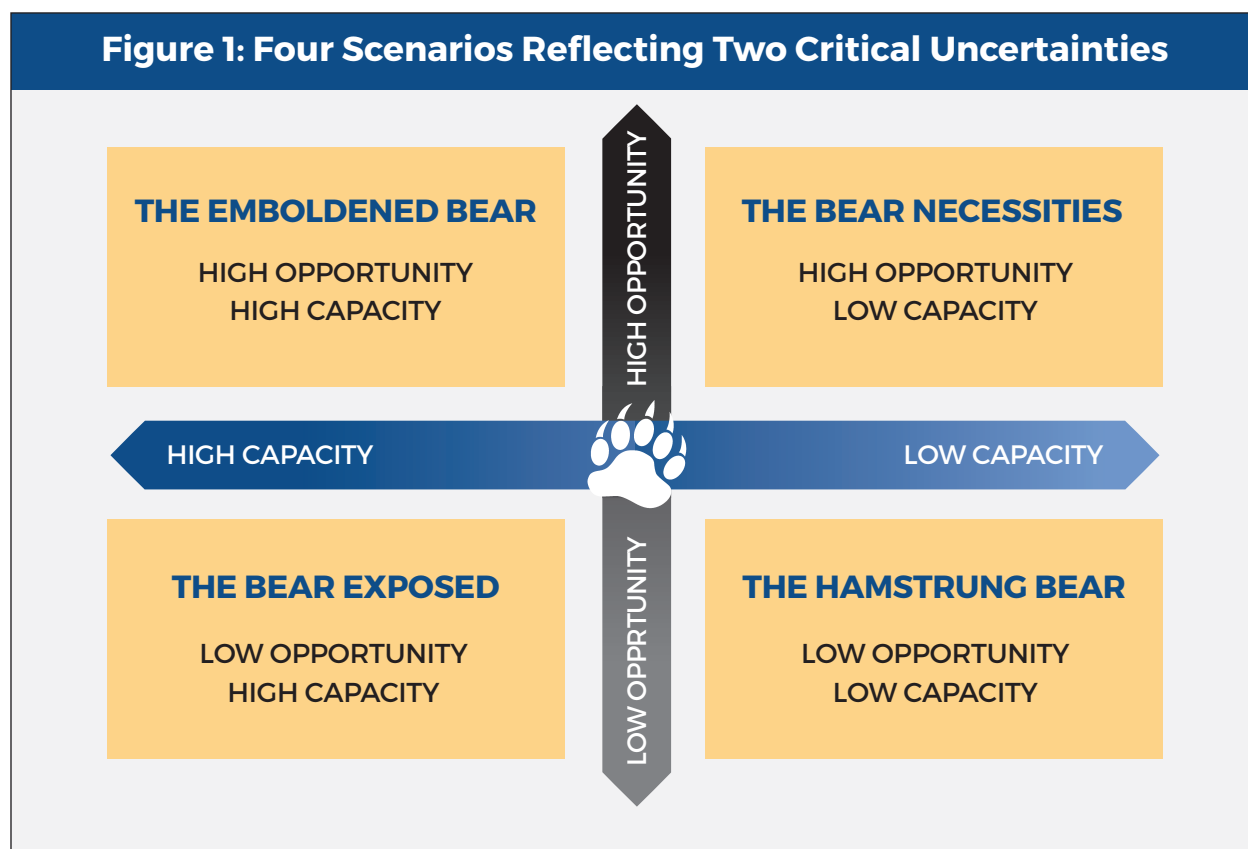
All four scenarios assume that Russia will continue using relationships in Africa to mitigate the effect of sanctions, project global power and promote the notion of a multi-polar world. Most of these activities will take the form of mercenary activity, opaque elite deals and disinformation that together threaten democracy on the continent. The war in Ukraine will not be resolved quickly. Many African countries will continue to face extreme economic stress due to debt burdens, food insecurity, climate change and the impact of the war on fuel prices and agricultural imports. Russian opportunities to corrode democracy in Africa will be greater in environments characterized by higher levels of instability and conflict, weak institutions, lower levels of oversight and advocacy by civil society and governing institutions, and lower levels of constructive engagement by other international actors.

This exercise focused on two critical uncertainties: Russia’s capacity and opportunity to project power in ways that undermine democracy in Africa. Russia’s capacity will vary based on how the war and sanctions affect its domestic political and economic conditions (including regime stability) and its approach to Africa. Levels of U.S. and European support for Ukraine could also shape how the war unfolds. Russia’s opportunities to continue projecting power in ways that

erode democracy in Africa will depend on the extent to which African civil society, media and other actors are able to push back against corrosive Kremlin-backed disinformation, opaque mining operations and military contractors. They will also be shaped by how various governments on the continent and international partners respond to and manage climate shocks, socio-economic crises, expanding insurgency and food insecurity.

Each of the four scenarios below reflects a different combination of capacity and opportunity. Given the different combinations, outlined below in Figure 1, there is some overlap across the four scenarios. Finally, Africa is a large and diverse continent, and dynamics differ across the 50-plus countries that call it home. Some parts of the continent rank higher than others in freedom and democracy indices, and patterns of instability vary across the continent. Each scenario describes general trends as well as potential variations across the continent. Given the diversity on the continent, it is also possible that parts of different scenarios may simultaneously play out in various subregions within the continent.

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# THE SCENARIOS

## THE SCENARIOS BELOW REFLECT:

- Background papers that NDI commissioned from experts on various aspects of Russia's engagement in Africa;
- An online scenario-building workshop with African, American and European analysts;
- Initial drafts of the four scenarios, each reflecting a different possible future identified during the online exercise; and
- Further refinement of the initial draft scenarios based on consultations with selected analysts who were unable to attend the group exercise.

## THE EMBOLDENED BEAR



### Overview

This scenario reflects high Russian capacity to project power with high opportunities for Russia in Africa. It describes a future where the Kremlin continues and expands both legitimate and illicit operations in Africa, through means that include disinformation campaigns, the provision of military contractors and weapons supplies, nuclear energy deals and activities in the mining industry. Instability resulting from socio-economic crises and pockets of insurgency create significant opportunities for Russia. While the illicit operations have high costs for democracy in Africa, they yield high economic and foreign policy returns at low cost for the Kremlin and its proxies.



### The Scenario

The war in Ukraine drags on into a prolonged and intractable conflict. In the United States, the 2024 elections threaten bipartisan support for Ukraine. Without clear leadership from the United States, pressure emerges from some European countries for Ukraine to negotiate an end to the war. Russia holds on to territory in the Donbas and Crimea and steps up rhetoric proclaiming itself a winner in Ukraine. Despite failing to mount successful offensives in Ukraine, the Wagner Group remains a key support to the Putin regime. The Russian president, who has been reluctant to conduct too many large-scale mobilizations, prefers the Wagner Group's more private, quiet recruitments to hold the defensive line. Russia sees increasing engagement in Africa as an opportunity to forge new alliances, generate economic opportunities to fund its war effort, and strengthen its global image. In the Kremlin, the influence of Wagner Group owner Yevgeny Prigozhin and other oligarchs and members of the security apparatus with economic interests in Africa rises. Russia pursues partially successful campaigns to convince African countries to vote against or abstain from votes in the United Nations and other multilateral forums against Russian interests.

Across Africa, economic pressures resulting from food insecurity, climbing fuel and fertilizer prices, unsustainable debt coupled with austerity measures required under International Monetary Fund (IMF) rescue packages, and a strong U.S. dollar drive more African countries to look to Russia as a trade partner. Russia takes advantage of these openings, expanding legitimate trade relations with its existing partners, including Algeria, Egypt, Algeria, Morocco and South Africa, and seeking new trade deals. African minerals and alternative payment systems help Russia dampen some of the effects of sanctions and obtain rare metal supplies for its technology sector. Meanwhile, food insecurity, the high cost of living and austerity measures resulting from the debt crisis breed popular discontent and protest movements around the continent.

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Russia doubles down on its strategy of exploiting instability and conflict. It continues to partner with the continent's political elite and military leadership through arms deals, training for security services and other military cooperation agreements. Insurgencies in the Sahel drag on unresolved and increasingly threaten to spill into coastal West Africa. Capitalizing on the perceived failures of Western peacekeeping forces in the Sahel and the Democratic Republic of Congo and its own seeming "winning strategy" in Ukraine, Russia showcases itself and its mercenary forces as a more effective source of security and stability. The Kremlin partners with vulnerable political elites, providing disinformation, election meddling and security services (in the form of the Wagner Group) in exchange for access to rare mineral extraction opportunities. As they face increasing opposition and a disenfranchised public, even leaders in more established African democracies see election rigging, disinformation and repression as attractive and acceptable options to maintain access to power and turn to Russia for support.

Expanded Russian-backed disinformation efforts across Africa fuel anti-Western sentiment further, stifling dissenting forces and muddying the information environment. As African perceptions of the West continue to deteriorate, Russia's stock on the continent rises. Civil society, researchers and independent journalists continue efforts to shine the light on Russian actions that undermine democracy on the continent. However, amid social and economic crises and increasing restrictions on civic organizing, they struggle to draw broader attention to Russian activities that undermine democracy. Democratic decline, authoritarian entrenchment, an increase in military coups and the spread of violent extremism create further instability upon which Russia seeks to capitalize. Meanwhile, constrained in its ability to recruit in Russia for operations in Africa, the Wagner Group takes advantage of social instability and rising conflict in Africa to recruit locally and in third countries.

While Russia and China compete for access to African minerals and other natural resources, both perceive their loose coordination, in Africa and in the global arena, as more beneficial in the long run. While their approaches differ, China and Russia continue to promote the superiority of authoritarian models in ensuring security and stability. When Russia's disinformation aligns with China's anti-Western interests, China amplifies it. In addition, the two powers coordinate in mobilizing African support to alleviate sanctions, limit condemnation of the war on Ukraine and challenge international norms around territorial integrity. Nevertheless, the relationship is not tension-free due to competition in the arms trade, extractives and renewable energy in Southern Africa and parts of the Sahel.



## Indicators

The following developments would indicate that this scenario is becoming more likely.

### Indicators of **high Russian capacity to project power in Africa:**

- Pirgozhin's power and influence continue to rise within the Kremlin.
- The Wagner Group expands its operations to more countries in Africa and begins recruitment in countries where it operates, as well as third countries such as Afghanistan and Syria.
- In African countries with upcoming elections, Russia deploys expanded and more sophisticated disinformation supporting biased election observer groups, especially in places facing instability.
- Russia increases its engagement with the continent's subregional and continent-wide organizations.
- The Africa-Russia summit takes place as scheduled in St. Petersburg in 2023, attracting several African heads of state and concluding the announcements of significant deals between Russia and various African countries.
- Following the St. Petersburg Summit, senior Russian government officials visit African countries that are key to the Kremlin's expanded strategy.
- Russia prioritizes access to a Red Sea port for oil tankers heading to China and India that would counter the significant military presence of the U.S., China and Europe in Djibouti.

### Indicators of **significant opportunities for Russia in Africa:**

- Protests and instability rise in Africa due to a combination of climate shocks, food insecurity, rising food and fuel prices, austerity measures amid the debt crisis and growing insurance.
- Russian-backed disinformation campaigns on the continent continue, expanding to reflect the growing presence of RT and Sputnik in Africa, increasingly pushing out dissenting voices.
- Governments struggle to manage and respond to social unrest and resort to securitized responses and crackdowns.
- Despite valiant efforts to hold governments accountable, combat disinformation and defend electoral integrity, civil society and independent journalists face a combination of closing space and funding challenges, with more and more assistance diverted to humanitarian responses.
- African leaders and international organizations remain silent on Russia's corrosive impacts on democracy on the continent.

## THE BEAR NECESSITIES



### Overview

Similar to scenario one, instability and other developments offer significant opportunities for Russia. However, in this scenario, given sanctions and steady criticism of the war, the Kremlin faces more capacity constraints and entrenches its presence in a limited number of African countries. It focuses its efforts where it has the deepest ties, a longstanding presence and the greatest chance of accomplishing its goals. It also continues low-cost operations through disinformation activities and private military contractors.



### The Scenario

Although the continuing war in Ukraine saps Russian resources and dents its international image, instability and economic crisis in Africa offer significant opportunities for the Kremlin to maintain military relations, information influence operations and trade at levels similar to 2022. Russia continues to see Africa as a continent where it can circumvent sanctions and challenge criticism of its activities. Moscow selectively sets anchor in one or two countries in each subregion, focusing on places where it is best placed to access minerals and other strategic resources most critical in alleviating the impact of sanctions. In countries neighboring these “anchors” Russia attempts to develop the relationships required for access to ports and other facilities that will maximize its profits in the anchors. It also tests border areas where insecurity may provide additional opportunities for its proxies and their influence. Given the Kremlin’s constraints, outside its anchors and their peripheries, its influence is largely in the form of disinformation campaigns.

In anchor countries, Russian oligarchs, who continue to serve as *de facto* Kremlin representatives, leverage long-standing relationships with African business elites, state-owned enterprises and political leaders to close lucrative opaque deals beyond the public eye and to deploy disinformation campaigns in support of their African allies. Russia doubles down in these countries, securing its shadow smuggling of gold, diamonds and other minerals with the support of its long-standing friends who offer logistics support centers for the Russian navy and merchant marines. For Russia, these smuggled minerals provide a way to ease some of the impacts of sanctions while allowing local elites security services and other ways to keep themselves in power and wealth. Increasingly, the Kremlin and its proxies and elites in those countries develop a form of co-dependency. Russia’s involvement in these countries enables it to influence votes in international organizations, bypass

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sanctions and continue to project some power on the continent. Amid socio-economic crises around Africa, regimes partnering with Russia attempt to strike deals with the Kremlin for privileged access to food, fertilizer, favorable disinformation and security support to help maintain their power. However, the results are mixed due to Russia's constraints. The Russia-Africa summit takes place after delays. However, the majority of participants represent "anchor" countries: given Russia's constraints, it is clear to more and more African countries that the Kremlin is not in much of a position to provide assistance.

As they grapple with instability arising from climate shocks, crushing debt, austerity measures and food insecurity, desperate regimes begin to explore options beyond Russia for their security needs and other assistance. Especially as the Kremlin seeks a foreign policy victory to counter its challenges in Ukraine, the Wagner Group remains selectively active in parts of the Sahel and Sudan, where it is already well established. However, split between its activities in Ukraine and in Africa, the group faces resource constraints that prevent it from expanding operations in Africa and push it to recruit more personnel from Russian prisons, third countries and local communities. The new recruits dilute the Wagner Group's cohesion, driving additional increases in human rights abuses and weakening the group's ability to satisfy its clients. The exposure of human rights abuses spurs pockets of protests. However, they are insufficient to generate meaningful responses from governments and international organizations on the continent who are more focused on managing socio-economic crises. The group continues to support established clients but is unable to expand its footprint in Africa.

The United States and Western Europe are increasingly focused on internal problems including increasing polarization, energy shocks and other economic fallout from the war on Ukraine. Democracy groups struggle to gain traction in exposing Russia's illiberal influence operations on the continent and its imperial ambitions in Ukraine.

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Moscow maintains mutually beneficial cooperation with Beijing in Africa; however, efforts remain siloed. While the Kremlin focuses on near-term resource extraction and long-term influence, China remains focused on establishing the infrastructure to institute its authoritarian political model. However, China supports Russia's efforts to gain support across the continent by either supporting a UN vote to block sanctions or abstaining from any further punishment of Russia in multilateral organizations. Given Russia's constraints, the gap between China and Russia's footprints on the continent widens further, and China begins to explore nuclear energy deals that Russia cannot.





## Indicators

The following developments would indicate that this scenario is becoming more likely.

### Indicators of **limited Russian capacity to project power in Africa:**

- Russia holds on to key territories but is unable to advance further in Ukraine.
- Sanctions against the Kremlin increase, and the war continues to drain the Russian economy.
- Wagner remains active in parts of Africa but is unable to expand its footprint, increasingly relying on recruits from local communities, third countries or Russian prisons.
- After delays, the Russia-Africa Summit takes place but it mostly attracts the few “anchor” countries where Russia has focused its engagement in Africa.

### Indicators of **significant opportunities for Russia in Africa:**

- Amid increasing cost of living, rising poverty levels and the austerity measures required under IMF deals, African publics increasingly blame the West for their socio-economic difficulties.
- Civil society and independent journalists on the continent struggle to highlight how Kremlin operations undermine democracy on the continent and are unable to hold political elites accountable for their part in these initiatives.
- Continental and subregional bodies and leaders in Africa fail to criticize mercenary groups or hold them accountable under the Convention for the Elimination of Mercenarism in Africa.
- The United States and Europe, distracted by their own political and economic problems at home, fail to develop and adopt proactive Africa strategies that could mitigate disenchantment with traditional development partners.

## THE HAMSTRUNG BEAR



### Overview

In this scenario, an extended war in Ukraine begins to weaken the Russian government and cause significant damage to the Kremlin’s international image. At home, Putin is consumed by the war, and because critical domestic and foreign decisions cannot happen without his approval, the governing apparatus becomes paralyzed. Frustrated with the situation at home, *siloviki*<sup>11</sup> seek gray zone opportunities overseas. In an attempt to maintain Kremlin-backed operations in Africa, which provide sanctions relief and manage competition among influential individuals at home, Putin encourages diversification among oligarchs and key individuals in the security apparatus. Similar to scenario two, Russia faces significant capacity constraints. However, here, the Kremlin’s opportunities are also limited due to increased African criticism of Russia.



### The Scenario

Despite struggling to advance its aims in Ukraine and globally, Russia attempts to continue exerting itself in Africa in order to demonstrate its status as a global power, gain leverage against the West and other rivals, and maintain or grow advantageous relationships. However, Russia’s political paralysis, economic constraints, the effect of sanctions and its continuing war in Ukraine fracture its capacity for concerted action outside that conflict. As sanctions begin to affect Russia’s access to the inputs and technology necessary to produce and repair advanced weapons

systems, it prioritizes producing weapons for the fight in Ukraine. Russia's own challenges in Ukraine, combined with unreliable supply and the need to find expensive workarounds, begin to dent its capacity as a weapons supplier in Africa.

Engagements in Ukraine deplete Wagner's forces, creating opportunities for other Russian actors to fill the gap. Military contracting, troll farms, hacking and ransomware syndicates and "private" online or broadcast media become attractive enterprises for more Russian actors with ties to the Kremlin. These actors expand their overseas operations to mimic and compete with Prigozhin's Wagner Group. For these Kremlin proxies, these arrangements expand wealth and provide backup options should things go badly in Russia; for the Kremlin, these ostensibly private

initiatives provide plausible deniability while reaping significant geopolitical benefits at relatively low cost to the state.

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Meanwhile, around Africa, increasing climate-related disasters displace populations and disrupt agricultural and pastoral production; food insecurity, already exacerbated by the Ukraine War, rises further. Fuel shortages and rapidly increasing prices limit access to fuel and electricity. Jihadist groups, rebels and bandits across the continent expand recruitment to capitalize on these

frustrations and launch new offensives in West, Central and East Africa. Conflicts in the Sahel further intensify, increasing the risk of spillover into coastal West Africa.

Still, Russia remains a security player on the continent, though it is less dominant and no longer a clear alternative to American, European or multilateral militaries. Russian engagements in Africa prioritize consolidating and maintaining existing and profitable partnerships, such as those in CAR and Sudan, and limit or forego opportunities where foes are better organized or determined, or profitability more tenuous. As Russia becomes increasingly associated with war crimes in Ukraine, its military contractors in Africa are likewise linked more to human rights abuses than to enhanced security. As crises proliferate and demand for security services begins to spiral, African leaders look beyond the Wagner Group to alternative mercenary groups from Russia and other countries. The St. Petersburg Russia-Africa summit, after being postponed due to spring war offensives, is sparsely attended. A number of the continent's top leaders stay home, because outside niche areas, Russia is clearly not in a position, at least while the war continues, to make meaningful financial or developmental commitments. Those who make the trip mostly return empty-handed, except for a few states that are ready to pursue nuclear power projects.

As African populations increasingly bear witness to the adverse impacts of Russia's engagements on the continent, the Kremlin responds by expanding its disinformation campaigns, which now target African institutions and civil society as much as Western critics. Though these campaigns see localized successes, in the broader African theater they ultimately attract

African attention to the dishonesty behind other Russian narratives. Those who previously credited or even supported Russia's false narratives begin to question them after credible African leaders and movements not associated with the U.S. or Western Europe become targets.

Barely camouflaged Russian election interference and disinformation in support of its clients cements relationships with those leaders, but draws more attention to these practices. Russia's support in multilateral forums begins to soften as exposure of such interference changes the domestic political calculus for some countries that have regularly abstained on votes important to Russia, but are not staunch allies. China, not wanting to be tarnished by Russia's overreach and public exposure, distances itself. China positions itself as a force for stability and aid through financial, trade and development assistance to mitigate Africa's growing instability, which Russia has contributed to. Increasingly, China also relies on its own private or police security forces to secure its Belt and Road Initiative investments on the continent. With growing instability in Africa and escalating economic shocks, the United States increases its security and humanitarian assistance and support for multilateral lending, including reforms to address concerns about past lending practices.

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## Indicators

The following developments would indicate that this scenario is becoming more likely.

**Low Russian capacity to project power in Africa** as illustrated by the following:

- Within Russia, rivalries within the power structure become more apparent, and competitors for Prigozhin's Wagner Group and Internet Research Agency emerge. Wagner or similar entities increasingly rely on recruits from Russian prisons, third countries or local communities.
- Unable to maintain its forces or the quality of recruits, Wagner's operations in the Sahel stall or begin to shrink.
- The St. Petersburg 2023 Russia-Africa summit is poorly attended and/or yields few meaningful commitments.
- African countries increasingly seek military or security assistance from non-traditional partners, potentially China, Turkey, other military contracts from Russia or elsewhere.

### Indicators of **limited opportunities for Russia in Africa:**

- African civil society increasingly speaks out about Russia's misdeeds on the continent, calling on Russia and its proxies to respect African sovereignty and cease human rights abuses, unfair resource extraction and election interference.
- African leaders, including Russia's historical partners, increasingly criticize Russia for its African activities or even the African consequences of its war in Ukraine.
- African civil society and media efforts lead to increased awareness, vigilance and the deployment of improved tools, reducing the effectiveness of Russian disinformation campaigns.
- African institutions, potentially including the African Union or the Economic Community of West African States, take steps to review and strengthen standards limiting the use of and strengthening democratic oversight of private military security companies and their use as mercenaries.

## THE BEAR EXPOSED



### Overview

This scenario describes a future where Russia maintains high capacity to expand its involvement in Africa on multiple fronts, similar to scenario one. However, civil society, media and academics on the continent begin to highlight and push back against the corrosive effects of Kremlin-backed disinformation, Russian involvement in the extractive industries and military contractors. Rising skepticism among Africans about whether Russia can deliver benefits for the continent limits the Kremlin's opportunities.



### The Scenario

Although the war in Ukraine continues, sanctions have a limited impact on Russia's ability to pursue influence operations in Africa. The Kremlin attempts to expand disinformation campaigns, the deployment of Wagner Group, and deals in the extractive industries. However, these efforts begin to lose traction. Fueled by investigative reporting and leaked documents that expose the extent and nature of Russia's corrupt bargains with elites, civic organizers raise critical questions around human rights abuses by private military contractors, opaque and predatory deals in the extractive industries and resulting environmental damage. Growing recognition of human rights abuses by the Kremlin and its proxies during the war in Ukraine, including the plight of Africans and other immigrants pressured to join Wagner Group forces in Ukraine, begin to expose Russian hypocrisy. In particular, stories similar to that of a Zambian national killed in Ukraine and the Kremlin's inability to provide answers resonate on the continent.<sup>12</sup> In selected countries, oversight by independent institutions, such as supreme audit institutions, legislatures and the judiciary, also expose predatory practices that implicate the Kremlin and the ruling elite. Developments in various "bright spots" begin to form the basis for a playbook for democratic pushback against foreign illiberal influences in Africa.

Amid growing concerns about climate change and its effect on the continent, pockets of insurgency, economic crises exacerbated by debt burdens and resulting austerity measures, and food insecurity, democratic activism and pressure for greater transparency and accountability in government intensifies. In several countries, protests that appear spontaneous and unstructured

yet sustained give voice to demands for greater accountability in government and the need to address pressing economic needs. Young people, who have no memory of Russia's support for liberation movements and who are disproportionately affected by the socio-economic crisis, play significant roles in the protests. These efforts shine a light on the limited public benefits of Russia's engagement on the continent, while noting certain African elites' complicity in these arrangements. Increasingly, anti-corruption activists and movements coordinate across borders and share experiences, particularly along language corridors. This backlash makes it more difficult for the Kremlin to continue operating as usual, and a playbook for democratic pushback against foreign illiberal influences in Africa begins to emerge.

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In certain cases, heavy-handed responses from domestic security forces and internet shutdowns only serve to further inflame people, and the protests snowball further. In countries where Wagner is deployed, the group's disproportionate response helps intensify criticism of the Kremlin and its proxies, raising questions about Russia's involvement on the continent. Among some of the 30 African countries expected to hold elections between 2023 and 2025, the polls serve as a crystallizing point for mounting citizen disenchantment with unresponsive governance and demands for more constructive relations with international partners. Using enhanced electoral observation techniques, civil society groups expose high levels of foreign influence operations, including disinformation and illicit political financing, surrounding key elections. In selected countries where elections are competitive, the polls usher in new leaders who commit to reviewing and renegotiating arrangements with the Kremlin and its proxies. They also commit to improving standards for transparency and oversight. These reform-minded leaders begin amplifying the need for shared subregional and continent-wide standards or principles of engagement between African countries and other countries. The rise of the reformers coincides with a more robust engagement by the United States in Africa in support of democratic development, including increased anti-corruption policies and programs, capacity building for African civil society on disinformation, cyber security and support for the cohort of countries undergoing elections, including observer missions, increased citizen access to information and improved election management.

As Russia's reputation on the continent dims, China seeks to publicly distance and distinguish itself while taking advantage of opportunities that the Kremlin cannot pursue. In countries where China already has high levels of arms trade and provides training to local law enforcement, it increases

its support to governments in an attempt to provide regime stability and prevent protests from escalating. The results are mixed, however, as in a few cases, China also becomes embroiled in heavy-handed responses that elicit criticism from African publics and the international community. In selected countries, China considers additional ways of easing debt burdens to mitigate socio-economic crises, using its influence in the media to highlight these concessions and other benefits of its activities on the continent as a way of further differentiating itself from Russia. Behind the scenes, however, China continues to coordinate with the Kremlin on shared interests, including influence in international institutions and promoting multipolarity.



## Indicators

The following developments would indicate that this scenario is becoming more likely.

**High Russian capacity to project power** in Africa as illustrated by the following:

- Sanctions have a limited impact on Russia's ability to engage African countries.
- Prigozhin's power and influence stock continues to rise within the Kremlin.
- In African countries with upcoming elections, Russia deploys expanded and more sophisticated disinformation supporting "zombie" election observer groups, especially in places facing instability. However, their impact is limited due to enhanced vigilance by citizen observers.
- The Africa-Russia summit takes place, as scheduled, in St. Petersburg. However, a number of African states either do not attend or only participate at ministerial levels.
- Russia increases efforts to secure access to a Red Sea port for oil tankers heading to China and India to counter the significant military presence of the U.S., China and Europe in Djibouti.

**Limited opportunities for Russia to project power** in Africa as illustrated by the following:

- Civilian-led protests, potentially including large numbers of women who play central roles in managing family expenses, erupt throughout Africa against the rising costs of living, corruption and environmental concerns. Protesters link their grievances to Russia's war on Ukraine and/or the Kremlin's involvement in their own countries.
- The United States backs its democracy commitments to Africa with enhanced support for civil society, anti-corruption movements and leaders, and free and fair elections.
- In African countries where Wagner is deployed, the group's abuses and failures spur protests and civic unrest leading to the group's withdrawal.
- Citizens push for action from governments and technology companies to increase efforts to counter foreign influence (including disinformation) in elections.
- Civil society, academia, independent journalists and independent institutions in Africa begin to exchange information about the Kremlin's playbook in Africa and lessons learned in building democratic resilience to its influence on the continent.
- In selected countries, accountability mechanisms, including parliaments, human rights commissions, judicial systems, regional bodies and anti-corruption bodies, begin to play a role in checking Russian ambitions.
- Selected leaders on the continent and in civil society begin calling for more transparent, just standards and principles to guide country- and continent-wide engagements with Russia and other foreign actors.
- African regional bodies act to review and strengthen protocols against mercenary operations in Africa.

# CONCLUSION

**RUSSIAN OPERATIONS IN AFRICA**, while limited, are a serious threat to democracy and stability. In Africa, the strategic intent of the Kremlin, including its proxy the Wagner Group, is to secure unpopular regimes and to destabilize the sources of democracy. Combined, disinformation campaigns, “zombie” civil society groups, illicit political finances and shadowy military contractors engaged through opaque deals disrupt and compromise the information, civic organizing and accountability mechanisms required for democracy to function.

Russia’s influence in Africa feeds on disenchantment with or the absence of the United States and Western Europe. It thrives on instability and accelerates it, often offering a fallback option for illegitimate, insecure regimes. These efforts offer few, if any, socio-economic developments for people. The Kremlin is in no position to provide significant or meaningful socio-economic assistance as African countries enter a period that will likely feature economic crisis, rising food insecurity, unresolved insurgency and climate shocks. The response to Russia’s shadowy, corrosive operations cannot be limited to security or technological sectoral initiatives alone: they must be centered on strengthening democratic resilience.

While the Kremlin’s operations pose a serious threat to democracy in Africa, they are also extremely vulnerable to public backlash if their extractive, abusive, exploitative, anti-citizen nature is exposed. The next three years present a strategic opportunity to expose the true nature of the Kremlin’s illiberal influence operations and their likely outcomes in Africa and to shore up resilience to democratic erosion. This moment is the result of Russia’s own hubris in escalating the war on Ukraine. It is also shaped by upcoming elections in some 30 African countries that present opportunities for citizens and leaders to engage each other on socio-economic development needs and greater accountability. This moment is also defined by geopolitical shifts, including a growing U.S. commitment to revitalizing and redefining partnership with African countries and African countries’ enhanced interest in developing independent foreign and economic postures, as seen in the push for a transcontinental trade agreement. Last, and perhaps most importantly, a persistent majority of Africans believe that democracy is the best form of government.

***Russia’s influence in Africa feeds on disenchantment with or the absence of the United States and Western Europe.***

In the next year, NDI will engage African, European and U.S. policy leaders on these scenarios to identify how, in this strategic moment, democracy and governance support organizations can position their partners to strengthen the democracy response to Russian operations that subvert popular demands for increased and improved democracy.

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