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**Letter from the Observatory**

# **RUSSIAN REPOSITIONING IN THE SAHEL FROM WAGNER TO AFRICA CORPS**



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## Executive summary

The deployment of Africa Corps marks a strategic shift in Russia's military and geopolitical influence in Africa, particularly in the Sahel, as the successor to the Wagner Group. Following Wagner's withdrawal from Mali on 6 June 2025, Africa Corps, a paramilitary entity directly controlled by the state under the auspices of the Russian Ministry of Defence and linked to the GRU (the Russian military intelligence agency), formalised and expanded Moscow's presence on the continent. This transition reflects the Kremlin's desire to institutionalise its operations, abandoning the denial of the past maintained by Wagner's vague and semi-independent status in favour of an approach and strategy directly controlled by the state. This repositioning consolidates Russian influence in the Sahel, now part of broader strategic objectives in a context of global geopolitical tensions and prolonged conflict with Ukraine.

Africa Corps thus provides an operational framework enabling its effective integration into the security structures of Sahelian states, particularly in Mali, where it operates alongside national forces, co-manages command posts and provides training in weapons handling, intelligence and operational discipline. With renovated Russian bases near Bamako and advanced military equipment such as BTR-82A armoured vehicles, Msta-B howitzers and Su-24M bombers, Africa Corps is strengthening its operational footprint. The Russian structure also provides protection for military leaders in power and key infrastructure, consolidating political support for military regimes without conditions related to democracy, let alone human rights.

**Pour ce qui est du recrutement des éléments d'Africa Corps et de la continuité de sa présence et de ses opérations**, environ 70 à 80 % du personnel est composé d'anciens combattants de Wagner. Cette approche lui garantit une continuité dans l'expertise et les tactiques. Ainsi, les efforts de recrutement se sont intensifiés depuis février 2025, ciblant des régions russes économiquement défavorisées ou périphériques, y compris certaines zones du Tatarstan, avec des primes attractives (jusqu'à 2,5 millions de roubles / 18 millions de F CFA). Ces efforts répondent aux défis de recrutement de la Russie en pleine quatrième année de guerre en Ukraine tout en renforçant la présence d'Africa Corps au Sahel.

There is indeed a genuine strategy motivated by a clear focus on the entire Sahel region. This Russian strategy in the Sahel via Africa Corps is based on four pillars: protecting military regimes, securing access to natural resources (such as the gold refinery near Bamako), establishing long-term partnerships in infrastructure and energy, and undermining Western influence, particularly that of France, which has historically been dominant. The agreements signed in June 2025 between Russia and Mali on nuclear cooperation and infrastructure illustrate this approach. By positioning itself as a champion in promoting and supporting 'regional sovereignty,' Russia also aims to counter Western and Ukrainian diplomatic efforts, particularly the expansion of Ukraine's presence through new embassies and humanitarian aid.

However, despite the change in form, the intervention of the Africa Corps continues to pose a real risk to human rights (massacres, abuses against certain communities, etc.) and is fully in line with the same logic of information warfare.

In reality, Africa Corps inherits Wagner's legacy of human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings and acts of torture, such as during the Moura massacre in 2022. These abuses, often committed with impunity, fuel discontent among certain communities and jihadist recruitment that exploits various grievances. At the same time, Russian influence operations, orchestrated by platforms such as African Initiative, amplify anti-Western narratives and denigrate democracy through local media, cultural events and disinformation campaigns. These efforts portray Russia as a stabilising force while accusing Western powers of developing strategies to destabilise the region.

The geopolitical implications of such a strategy of transformation and continuity of Russian influence through Africa Corps are significant. Africa Corps strengthens Russia's ability to project its power in a region undergoing geopolitical reconfiguration. By supporting regimes that have come to power through coups and countering Western influence, Russia's strategy will inevitably lead, if only through a logic of retaliation, to a future intensification of indirect confrontations involving actors such as NATO and Ukraine in the Sahel or their allies.

Russia's presence, which is part of a visible and formalised long-term strategy through Africa Corps, combined with sophisticated information warfare, positions Moscow as a key player in the changing balance of power, challenging any notion of Western 'domination' while securing lasting economic and diplomatic leverage in Africa.

## INTRODUCTION

### *'Mission accomplished. We're going home.'*

This was announced by the Wagner Group on its Telegram channel on 6 June 2025, signalling the end of its deployment in Mali. On the same day, Africa Corps assured that 'Russia is not losing ground' and announced that its fighters were entering a phase of active operations in the region, offering Bamako more substantial support. The official departure of Wagner forces comes after more than three years of joint operations with the Malian state, having worked to fill the void left by the withdrawal of French and UN forces. Closely linked to Russian military intelligence, Wagner has integrated itself into the Malian armed forces, reflecting Russian influence while contributing to counterinsurgency operations and strengthening the political foothold of the military in power. According to several reports, Wagner's presence in Mali has been marred by flagrant human rights violations, including abuses against civilians, such as the 2022 Moura massacre.

After Wagner's failed mutiny against Vladimir Putin in June 2023 and the death of its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in a plane crash two months later, the Kremlin had already begun to place Wagner's semi-independent paramilitary operations under official state control. Africa Corps was created shortly thereafter to replace Wagner in its role on the continent, providing a more formal instrument of Russian influence directly controlled by the state. Subordinate to the Russian Ministry of Defence and closely linked to the Main Directorate of the General Staff, better known as the GRU, its stated mission is to consolidate Russia's diplomatic positions and successes by military means across the African continent and beyond.



This report aims to provide an overview and analysis of the evolution of Russia's security positioning in relation to the Sahel Alliance and Africa as a whole, with a focus on Mali. It examines the integration of Africa Corps into African military structures and Russia's recruitment strategies for the African continent during its fourth year of war against Ukraine. It analyses the process of transition and transformation of the Wagner Group to the deployment of Africa Corps. This analysis also reviews Africa Corps' current involvement in ongoing conflicts against insurgents, and how Russian diplomacy and the media perceive and describe these processes. Finally, the report looks at how Moscow's initiative to deploy Africa Corps strengthens its support for military regimes in the Sahel and fits into the broader context of Russia's strategic interests in Africa.

## FROM WAGNER TO AFRICA CORPS: REORGANISATION OR STRATEGIC BREAK?

Wagner's move to Africa Corps effectively institutionalises the Russian state's military presence on the African continent. Official recruitment documents made available to the public reveal that around half of the personnel are Wagner veterans and indicate that previous service with Wagner is an asset, with preference given to former commanders. Other sources suggest that the number of veterans of the private military company within Africa Corps could be as high as 70-80%. Rather than a strategic reset, Africa Corps represents the Kremlin's effort to formalise and stabilise a network that had become politically too costly and difficult to control. The objectives remain largely the same, but the transition comes with one major change: the end of Russia's plausible deniability. Wagner operated in a grey area, unofficially and outside official structures, with the Kremlin often denying its links to the private military company. In fact, Africa Corps now officially engages the responsibility of the Russian state, whether for conduct on the battlefield, potential war crimes, or operational failures in the field. Currently in its fourth year of conflict with Ukraine, Russia appears to be facing

a major recruitment crisis. Despite this, the Russian Ministry of Defence has intensified and expanded recruitment within the Africa Corps since February 2025 in order to strengthen its ranks. These recruitment efforts have also been noted in the Republic of Tatarstan, a predominantly Muslim region of Russia. As part of this initiative, the regional centre 'Batyr' is responsible for enlistment, promising lucrative signing bonuses of up to 2.5 million roubles (approximately 18,000,000 CFA francs) and a monthly salary starting at 240,000 roubles (approximately 1,700,000 CFA francs) to encourage people from peripheral and economically disadvantaged regions of Russia to enlist. Many of these recruits had little military experience or were seeking contracts in the context of the war against Ukraine. A fairly illustrative case, cited by the director of the Batyr recruitment centre, concerns a young man from Altai Krai who attempted to enlist to fight in the 'special military operation' in Ukraine but was pressured to join the Africa Corps and serve in Mali. The intensification of recruitment within the Africa Corps corresponds to Russia's recent efforts to expand its military presence in the Sahel.



## RUSSIA: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE SECURITY FOOTHOLD IN AFRICA?

Wagner's military footprint in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Libya and the Central African Republic has been consolidated by the Africa Corps, which now uses newly renovated Russian bases in the Sahel, including one near Bamako airport. According to a Malian security source, the Africa Corps is also expanding its operations by establishing some 30 military bases and outposts across the country. Military equipment, including BTR-82A armoured vehicles, Msta-B and D-30 howitzers and surveillance drones, is being transported through a state-supported corridor via the Guinean port of Conakry on Russian ships subject to international sanctions. Some equipment is even reportedly being transported by air from the Libyan airbase at Al-Khadim. Russia has also strengthened its air strike capability in Mali with the deployment of a Su-24M tactical bomber, which reportedly crashed in mid-June.

Africa Corps has been directly integrated into the host state's security structures. In Mali, Russian personnel are co-deployed with Malian forces, operate from joint command posts and are integrated into national units. They also assume operational planning and coordination roles, particularly in areas marked by insurgent activity. Training programmes now include weapons training, as well as intelligence processing and internal discipline protocols heavily inspired by Wagner's former methods. Africa Corps agents are visibly present around key facilities in Bamako, providing personal security for senior military officials and working alongside gendarmerie units. As such, the Russian deployment aims to provide political support to military-led governments and consolidate long-term influence, without conditions of democracy or respect for human rights.

On 12 June 2025, the Africa Corps suffered its first major loss on the battlefield. A large Russian-Malian convoy was ambushed near Anoumalane, 40 km south of Kidal, by Tuareg separatists from the Azawad Liberation Front (FLA). The convoy had already been hit by improvised explosive devices the day before. Reuters news agency confirmed the deaths of at least 23 Russian fighters, many of whom were veterans of Operation Wagner previously deployed in Ukraine and Syria. African Initiative, a Russian media outlet close to the Kremlin, published information claiming that Ukrainian personnel were assisting armed groups in Mali, particularly Tuaregs, citing documents and drones allegedly recovered by Malian forces.

In July 2024, the spokesperson for Ukrainian defence intelligence stated that 'the rebels received the necessary information, and not just information, which enabled a successful military operation against Russian war criminals' during the battle of Tinzaouaten, but he has since denied providing drones to the Malian Liberation Army (ALF). Russian allegations about Ukraine's involvement are part of Moscow's broader efforts to portray the West as a destabilising force in the Sahel. In addition to Russia's gradual entrenchment in the Sahelian security environment, the deployment of Africa Corps also impacts the balance of power in the competition between powers in the Sahel, which has become a new arena for influence. Thus, the risks of proxy confrontations between NATO or its members and Russia are increasing in an unprecedented context of geopolitical reconfiguration.

## AFRICA CORPS AND THE WAGNER LEGACY: A CULTURE OF VIOLENCE?

Human Rights Watch reports document abuses involving Malian forces and Russian personnel since 2021, including mass executions, enforced disappearances, and indiscriminate drone strikes. One of the most notorious cases took place in Moura in March 2022, where more than 500 people were killed during a five-day operation carried out jointly by Malian soldiers and Wagner elements. These reports document the use of illegal and torturous interrogation methods, including imprisonment in containers and beatings with cables and batons, methods that have been used by Wagner in Ukraine and Syria. For some members of the public who are critical of the Malian forces, the latter seem unwilling or unable to rein in the Russian perpetrators, who carry out arrests deemed arbitrary or torture.

For others, Russian forces are independently extorting ransom from detainees, with little legal oversight or control from Malian authorities. The military jurisdiction in the country has also been accused of not taking sufficient action to punish abuses and other excesses during Wagner's counterterrorism operations. It is also said to block independent investigations and studies that have raised questions about immunities allegedly granted to mercenaries under previous agreements. JNIM has used these grievances for recruitment and propaganda purposes, presenting itself as the protector of persecuted populations. The atrocities, committed with complete impunity, have fuelled the civilian population's distrust of the government and served as an important recruitment tool for terrorist groups.

The status of Africa Corps as an official entity of the Russian state marks a break with the legal ambiguity surrounding Wagner due to its institutional affiliation with the Russian Ministry of Defence. Despite all the grey areas surrounding this new mechanism, Africa Corps has already been the subject of numerous important decisions outside the Sahel region. The United Kingdom sanctioned the entity in November 2024, and in June 2025, the European Parliament adopted a resolution on human rights calling for 'accountability for human rights violations and war crimes committed by the Wagner Group/Africa Corps'. Despite the change in legal status from private military company to state paramilitary group, some continue to deplore acts revealing a certain impunity that is said to have been inherited from Wagner's combatants, logistics and networks, as well as violence against civilian populations.

## AFRICA CORPS AND RUSSIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN AFRICA

Russia's current strategy in West Africa is defined by four key elements:

- Ensuring the protection of regimes through the deployment of the Africa Corps;
- Gain privileged access to natural resources;
- Establish long-term partnerships in the areas of infrastructure and energy with post-coup governments;
- Publicly undermining Western influence in a region long dominated by France and its partners.

These elements serve broader geopolitical objectives shaped by the fallout from Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the resulting isolation. African countries such as the Central African Republic and Mali offer Moscow commercial opportunities, as well as diplomatic leverage through votes at the United Nations, where Russian diplomats have sought allies to counter resolutions put forward by Western powers. This approach is reminiscent of the Cold War era, when the Soviet Union sought to draw newly independent African countries into its orbit and expand its influence by supporting so-called 'anti-colonial' and non-aligned movements.

The June 2025 meeting between Vladimir Putin and Colonel Assimi Goïta at the Kremlin seems to have formalised this alignment. The agreements signed cover civil nuclear cooperation with Rosatom (Federal Atomic Energy Agency), road and logistics infrastructure, and numerous construction projects. Although these agreements benefit infrastructure modernisation in these countries, some seem more specifically aimed at strengthening Russia's institutional presence. Moscow has also seized every opportunity to gradually oust France and the EU as privileged partners, presenting itself as the new champion of a new regional order and sovereignty.

Mali has granted Russia the economic opportunity to build and operate a gold refinery near Bamako, thereby advancing Moscow's strategy of integrating economic operations into secure political alliances in order to finance its vast war machine. Africa Corps, deployed in Mali and neighbouring countries, is said to be the guarantor of these agreements. Its role is not limited to combat and training, but extends to protecting extraction operations, involvement in the management of internal security (police) in these states, and continued cooperation with Russian state entities. In return, regimes that have come to power through coups d'état benefit from external support and personal protection without conditions related to democracy, human rights or economic reforms.

This strategic positioning can effectively counteract Western and Ukrainian engagement in the region. It should be noted that, since 2022, Ukraine has strengthened its diplomatic presence in Africa, opening eight new embassies, the most recent of which is in Mauritania, where it has offered to train regional armed forces and provide humanitarian aid to Malian refugees in the Mbera camp. These initiatives have drawn criticism from the Kremlin, which accuses Ukraine of supporting insurgents and undermining regional stability. In this geopolitical context, Africa Corps is a tool for projecting Russian presence in states that have severed ties with their Western partners or are pursuing a strategy of diversifying their partnerships and cooperation. Media and cultural initiatives, including the African Initiative, complement this approach with objectives in terms of influence and competition in the field of information.



## Between official accounts and the information war

Africa Corps is part of a broader strategic framework of Russian influence operations worldwide that rely on a sovereignist, anti-colonial and anti-Western narrative and are carried out through a range of media and diplomatic channels, as well as more targeted forms of messaging. At the centre of these operations is African Initiative, a Kremlin-aligned platform that amplifies narratives portraying Russia as a liberator of African states from neocolonial domination. African Initiative has also served to promote and legitimise Africa Corps in the transition process, presenting it as a stabilising force. Through conferences, bilateral visits and official messages, African Initiative emphasises Russia's image as a power capable of 'restoring order and dignity' in states that have experienced coups.

But beyond appearances, African Initiative plays a central role in a vast campaign considered to be disinformation. This is what media outlets such as Le Monde and Forbidden Stories have claimed, having investigated the means used by the group to establish its influence at the local level. The strategy consists of offering journalism training in Bamako, recruiting students as correspondents and organising cultural days with Russian personalities. The group is said to work in coordination with Russian intelligence services, producing content tailored to the local audience, often in local languages rather than French, and promoting the Kremlin's anti-Western worldview. In some cases, local journalists are invited to Russia or even to Russian-occupied Ukrainian cities such as Mariupol as part of efforts to build loyalty among these groups and encourage the dissemination of information deemed pro-Russian.

Rather than relying on alleged manipulation of information, the recommended disinformation strategy has become more sophisticated, with social media campaigns combining real information and the use of selective framing. Russia is said to be using paid local influencers to circulate content accusing Western countries of being responsible for insecurity in the Sahel region and portraying them as saboteurs, while praising Russian military and diplomatic support. The German media outlet DW reports that these individuals, known as 'buzzers,' are coordinated through the Telegram app and are often linked to official Russian embassies or affiliated media outlets such as Russia Today (RT). Thanks to this network, the African Initiative has become a key player in Moscow's information war in West Africa, shaping public opinion in favour of Russia's geopolitical objectives.

## CONCLUSION

The deployment of Africa Corps in the Sahel, replacing the Wagner Group, marks a strategic consolidation of Russian influence, combining an institutionalised military presence with sophisticated information warfare. The transition from Wagner, a semi-independent entity operating in a grey area with plausible deniability from the Kremlin, to Africa Corps, directly controlled by the Russian Ministry of Defence and linked to the GRU, responds to several imperatives.

After the failure of Wagner's mutiny in June 2023 and the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, the Kremlin sought to regain control of a network that had become politically costly and difficult to manage. Institutionalisation via Africa Corps allows Russia to formalise its commitment, stabilise its operations and assume direct responsibility for its geopolitical ambitions, while projecting a more coherent image of state power in the face of Western and Ukrainian competition.

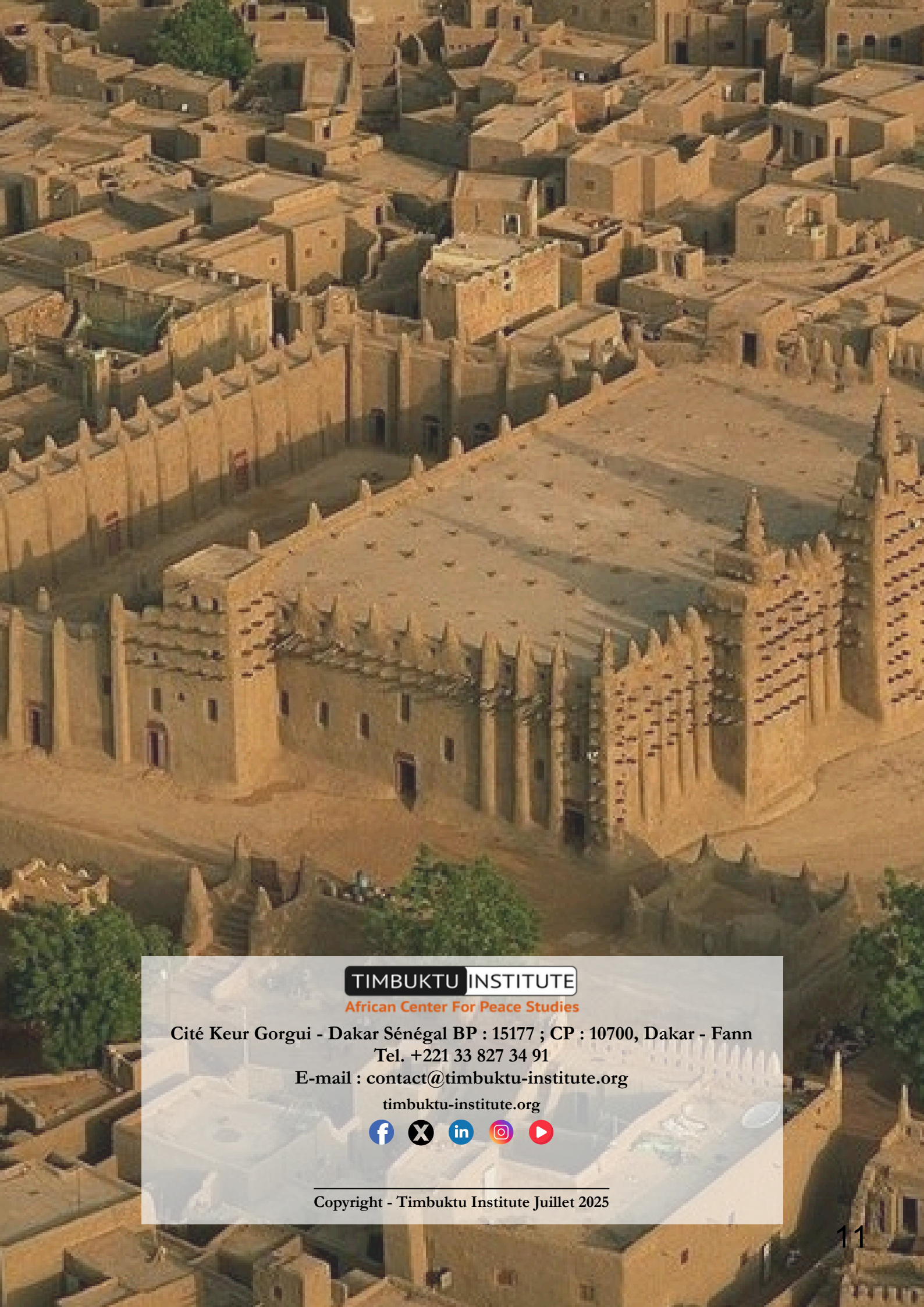
This strategy relies on influence operations orchestrated through various platforms such as African Initiative, which disseminate an anti-Western and sovereigntist narrative through local media, influencers who are said to be paid, and cultural initiatives such as journalism training in Bamako and visits by correspondents to Russia. By presenting Russia as a reliable ally against 'Western destabilisation', Moscow is shaping public opinion to legitimise its role and counter the influence of France, the EU and Ukraine, in particular by denouncing Ukrainian diplomatic and humanitarian initiatives, such as the opening of new embassies and aid to Malian refugees.

This rise in power is taking place against a backdrop of growing geopolitical rivalries, heightening the risk of proxy confrontations between Russia, NATO and Ukraine. Russian 'allegations' of Ukrainian involvement in attacks against Africa Corps, such as the Anoumalane ambush in June 2025, illustrate this potential escalation in the coming months.

By unconditionally supporting military regimes that have come to power through coups, Russia is undermining democratic dynamics and exacerbating regional instability. Human rights violations inherited from Wagner, such as extrajudicial executions and torture documented in Moura in 2022, persist under Africa Corps, fuelling community discontent. These abuses, often committed with impunity, reinforce jihadist recruitment by groups such as JNIM, which exploit the grievances of the population, thereby threatening security stability in the Sahel.

To address these challenges, Sahelian states such as Mali should diversify their partnerships to avoid excessive dependence on Russia. Inclusive governance, integrating local communities into peace processes, is crucial to easing ethnic tensions exacerbated by the abuses of Wagner and other Russian elements. The establishment of regional mechanisms to monitor foreign forces, accompanied by independent investigations into human rights violations, could limit impunity and restore trust between populations and security and defence forces.

Finally, enhanced coordination within the Sahel States Alliance, coupled with transparent communication and support from independent media, would help counter information manipulation from all sides. Without these adjustments, the Sahel risks becoming a lasting theatre of rivalries and proxy confrontations, where Russia's institutionalised influence, carried by Africa Corps and an aggressive information war between different actors, could deepen instability, compromising the prospects for long-term peace and development.



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