

Wagner Group Flows: A Two-Fold Challenge to Liberal Intervention and Liberal Order

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Abstract

Focusing on Wagner Group (WG) forces, liberal interveners too readily dismiss the scope of WG’s Africa engagements, including economic and political “flows” that, in combination, challenge liberal interveners’ taken-for-granted access in several states on the African continent. Operationalising the notion of “flows,” we present an analysis that foregrounds both the scope of WG’s Africa engagements and the challenges. We portray WG as a broad enterprise by attending to military, economic, and political flows. This broadening is relevant to how WG is understood to challenge liberal interveners. Besides country-specific challenges to liberal interveners’ access (notably in states where they have been asked to depart or co-exist with WG), a broader reading of WG’s Africa presence also foregrounds challenges at a different level, namely to liberal interveners’ assumptions about the inevitable attractiveness of the liberal international order. A liberal order that Russia has utilised WG’s Africa presence to contest. As such, challenges at the level of liberal order go beyond WG’s Africa presence and must, therefore, be viewed alongside other challenges to liberal intervention and order, from the Taliban’s takeover of Kabul to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. If liberal interveners’ missteps and historicity, as well as the scope of WG’s Africa engagements, remain underappreciated, then various challenges specific to the WG, but also broader challenges to liberal interveners’ assumptions about liberal order as self-evidently attractive, are too readily dismissed. Liberal actors’ dismissiveness may invite misguided responses and unintentionally become an enabling factor for WG’s influence in Africa.

Keywords

Africa; flows; liberal intervention; liberal order; Wagner Group

1. Introduction

Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine (since February 2022) and the Taliban's takeover in Afghanistan (August 2021) illuminate how multiple crises confront liberal interveners and the liberal international order. In different ways, "Kabul" and "Kyiv" (the theme of this thematic issue) deepen liberal interventionism's longstanding crisis. Linked to Ukraine in origin and presence is the Russian-owned paramilitary Wagner Group (WG), whose growing presence in Africa illustrates key challenges confronting liberal interveners. Such challenges are, however, not "only" about WG but also about Russia. Not only has the presence of WG in Africa shifted from "plausible" (Rabin, 2019) to "implausible" deniability (Stronski, 2020) in terms of the discernibility of its links to the Kremlin, a shift can also be observed in how some African leaders represent WG and Russia as interchangeable and announce increasingly more openly when they choose to partner with WG—in a move that often simultaneously implies de-selecting liberal interveners in favour not just of WG but of Russia. In several ways, WG's Africa presence challenges the liberal order that Russia also opposes when invading Ukraine. Thus, assumptions about liberal interveners as self-evidently attractive representatives of the global liberal order add to longstanding challenges that were accentuated much earlier, for example, with the fall of Kabul after two decades of liberal intervention presence (Dodge, 2021). As such, the presence of WG in Africa forms part of broader challenges to an often taken-for-granted narrative about liberal order and liberal values as self-evidently desirable, which is neither the case in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan nor in African states that partner with WG while asking liberal actors to leave.

Whilst WG activities in Ukraine changed immediately after WG leader Prigozhin's mutiny attempt (24 June 2023), no major changes were observed in WG engagements on the African continent during the two months between the mutiny attempt and the death of Prigozhin (23 August 2023). Initially, several indications suggested that WG would, at least in the short term, remain a relevant player in Africa, and continue to serve as a tool through which to boost Putin's global ambitions. These indications included Prigozhin being spotted at the July 2023 Russia–Africa Summit, shaking hands with Ambassador Freddy Mapouka, advisor to the president of the Central African Republic (CAR; "Prigozhin: Wagner boss spotted in Russia during Africa summit," 2023); no withdrawals of WG from Africa being observed (indeed, additional WG forces arrived in CAR prior to the July 2023 referendum; "Wagner forces arrive in CAR before referendum," 2023); and no African leader terminating their collaboration with WG. However, the future of WG's Africa engagements was seriously challenged with the death of Prigozhin. Nevertheless, despite these dramatic developments, analysing WG's Africa engagements still offers significant insights into a specific hybrid governance model, combining private and public actors. This model is one that, so we argue, will remain important beyond questions about the future of WG in Africa. Understanding the combination of military, political, and economic flows that have characterised WG's manifold engagements in Africa provides insights into how WG (or a similar actor) has come to represent an attractive alternative to liberal interveners, to their presence, and to the liberal order which their presence represents. Also, whilst the future of WG has been cast into doubt, nothing suggests a diminishing of Putin's ambition to challenge precisely that liberal order through means and in locations beyond the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine.

This article examines the political and economic dimensions of WG's Africa engagements beyond WG forces, arguing that WG is more than a successful enterprise, indeed a more widely applicable model. We then deepen the analysis of WG flows by looking at conditions that enable WG flows, including increasing sympathy for Russia's broader appeal to an alternative to the dominant liberal order, whose supposedly

undeniable appeal served as a taken-for-granted premise of liberal interveners' invitation to engage in African states. By appreciating the military, economic, and political dimensions of WG's African presence through an analytical lens that also foregrounds questions about enabling conditions vis-à-vis these flows, it becomes possible to recognise two ways WG's African presence adds to longstanding challenges confronting liberal intervention. The combination of military and political instruments offered by WG in return for access to economic resources (from mining to forestry) might be an attractive combination of factors. However, that attractiveness cannot be understood in isolation from external enabling factors, including anti-colonial sentiments and failures of liberal intervention to deliver improved stability, combined with the interest on the part of Putin in augmenting such dissatisfaction to buttress both WG and Russia's influence in an increasing number of African states. As such, WG may represent a potentially attractive and self-financing alternative not only to demands (elections), gaps (in security provision), and failures of some of liberal interventionism's Africa engagements but also to the global liberal order that these liberal interveners represent, and within which African states have long voiced a desire for genuine recognition. The WG model may likely be continued or copied by other private military companies (PMCs), either related to Russia or other countries, and hence, the analysis presented in this article remains valuable despite the unknown future of WG's Africa engagements. Importantly, the model has proven useful for Russia in gaining influence and access across the African continent. It is, therefore, likely that Russia (and other states) may continue using this model, whether the name is WG or not. Furthermore, challenges to and shortcomings of liberal intervention will also remain relevant to address, irrespective of the future of WG.

2. Situating WG: PMC Debates and Critique of Liberal Intervention

Focusing on WG, this article contributes to a field of scholarly work on both Russian private security and private security actors in Africa. Batora (2021, p. 1445) argues that a recent tendency for states to use PMCs to challenge opponents by getting "involved in various aspects of war without necessarily following all the norms and rules traditionally associated with war." Operating between private markets, military establishments, and cooperate governance, PMCs sometimes bypass norms and rules traditionally associated with war (Batora, 2021). Spearin (2018, p. 40) argues that while many governments hire private security actors, Russian PMCs are utilised specifically concerning Russia's "grey zone challenge." Earlier work on private security stresses how PMCs sometimes become integrated into the economy of the countries with which they engage. Leander (2006), for example, points to the executive outcomes model, where security is de facto swapped for extractive rights in the country (Leander, 2006, p. 60). Others show how outsourcing, privatisation and public-private partnerships have become normal ways for governments to reduce spending and bureaucracy within the security and military sector (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2009; Eichler, 2014). Much of the work on private security has focused on the political nature of the private security sector, in its interconnectedness with governments that employ them. Abrahamsen and Williams (2007) argue that private security actors do not entirely oppose state power but draw legitimacy precisely from their links to the state. This linkage entails a hybrid form of governance involving private, public, and local and global actors (Abrahamsen & Williams, 2007).

This article contributes to this literature by analysing WG in Africa as not only a military but also an economic and political player, foregrounding often-overlooked dimensions of WG's African presence. Focusing on WG's economic and political (also great-power political) dimensions allows us to unpack how WG's Africa engagements challenge liberal interveners in specific African states but also vis-a-vis broader

assumptions about the liberal order as self-evidently attractive. Attending to military, political, and economic dimensions challenges how the scope and variety of WG's Africa engagements may be underestimated if the focus is more narrowly on "semi-state security forces" (Marten, 2019, p. 181), i.e., WG forces that are or have been present in a handful of African states (so far Libya, CAR, Mali, Mozambique, and Sudan). Whilst the growing presence of WG forces in Africa is important, this dimension must be understood in collaboration with the *political* and *economic* dimensions of WG activities. Conceptualising WG as "more than mercenaries" (Ehl, 2023) not only presents a different map of WG's Africa presence but also highlights additional (e.g., economic) links between WG and Ukraine, and posits challenges to the liberal order. Pokalova (2023), looking at four African country cases, argues that WG is best described as a quasi-state foreign policy agent of influence working for Russia. She further argues: "Instead of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Kremlin has relied on Wagner to spread authoritarianism and illiberalism" (Pokalova, 2023, p. 16).

Moreover, the map of WG's Africa engagements changes significantly when including the political and economic dimensions of WG's engagements. Rather than a handful of African states with WG mercenaries, a map that incorporates political/economic engagements of WG covers more than twice as many states, including Madagascar, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Zimbabwe, Kenya, and several others (Stanyard et al., 2023). Finally, including these additional dimensions demonstrates how WG is an enterprise whose footprints in Africa entail links of significance beyond the African continent, including economic dimensions that may finance WG activities in Ukraine (before the mutiny attempt and subsequent death of Prigozhin) and/or help Russia endure despite sanctions.

Regarding the focus on liberal interveners, this article draws not only on PMC literature but also on critical scholarship on liberal intervention, stressing how the challenges represented by WG are best understood in a broader context of a longstanding critique of liberal interventionism, as argued in scholarly work, for example, on the neglect of African agency and related calls to decolonise liberal interventions (Sabaratnam, 2017). Our analysis critically unpacks key logic underpinning liberal interveners' explanations of WG's growing footprints in Africa. Adding this dimension makes it possible to underscore a broader tendency to neglect the *multiplicity* of crises that liberal interveners confront. Alongside misleading representation of WG are repeated flaws in liberal interveners' shifting accounts of WG's attractiveness in some African contexts. Nevertheless, focusing narrowly on WG risks externalising key reasons for liberal interventions' challenges. The repeated phenomenon of liberal interveners becoming un-invited in favour of WG cannot be explained simply as resulting from a great power vacuum created by liberal interveners downscaling or by Russian disinformation alone—which also erroneously risks portraying African partners as falsely informed in their choices. Across liberal interveners' shifting explanations—from vacuum to disinformation—is a shared logic. Both explanations deny African states significant agency *and* neglect the need for liberal interveners to address internal shortcomings.

In using the term "liberal interveners," the article neither intends to belittle differences between intervention actors as diverse as the US, France, and the EU nor to reinforce any simplistic idea of these actors as flawlessly liberal actors. We have unpacked a critique of their shortcomings elsewhere (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023). The point here is to stress that we will be specific and mention the EU when we, for example, discuss specific EU Training Missions in CAR or France, where we discuss Mali. That said, it is at the same time important to note that where WG's Africa presence challenges the influence of specific liberal interveners in specific African states, there is simultaneously a degree to which doing so serves a broader Russian ambition

of challenging not any single liberal intervener, but the liberal order which they represent (imperfectly). Interpreting the WG as challenging only the US or only France risks missing that broader picture of how the WG instruments have worked or been useful for Putin's Russia in undermining liberal order, challenging US, French, and European allies' areas of operations.

3. A Flows Framework

To make an argument about expanding WG footprints in Africa and about the logics that underpin liberal interveners' explanations thereof, we operationalise the notion of "flows" into a two-fold framework. As an analytical concept, "flows" has been used in various literatures, from anthropology to infrastructure scholarship, criminology, and migration studies. However, limited attention has been paid to the value of this concept in critical intervention studies and debates about the crisis of liberal interventionism. Analysing WG through a lens that stresses *material* and *immaterial* flows (Larkin, 2013; Law, 2006) foregrounds often overlooked links between Kabul (liberal interventions manifold crisis) and Kyiv, where WG partakes in the war in Ukraine and in Russia's global efforts to challenge the liberal world order—including via WG engagements in Africa. Few scholars have focused on flows in intervention contexts. Such scholarship includes analyses of specific nodes in material intervention flows—like ports (Hönke & Cuesta-Fernandez, 2018; Stepputat & Hagmann, 2019) or roadblocks (Schouten, 2022)—or analyses with a thematic focus—e.g., on financial flows and counterterrorism (de Goede, 2018) or humanitarian intervention and data flows (Jacobsen, 2021). We build on this scholarship when analysing WG flows. Applying this analytical lens helpfully demonstrates the scope of and enabling conditions underpinning WG engagements in Africa.

Specifically, we draw on the notion of "flow" developed in Larkin's account of "infrastructure debates" in anthropology (Larkin, 2013). Larkin stresses the importance of attending to both material and immaterial flows, to concrete flows (like mining equipment) and less visible flows (like expectations), and to how such flows are enabled or disabled by infrastructures understood as socio-technical platforms for mobility (Larkin, 2013). Contextualising the analysis of WG flows vis-à-vis questions about "enabling conditions" underpinning those flows helps situate how WG engagements in Africa challenge liberal interveners not just at the level of flows but also at the level of enabling conditions. This contextualisation helps place WG's Africa presence alongside other developments that also challenge assumptions about liberal order as undeniably appealing, including challenges posed by the Taliban's takeover of Kabul. Together, several developments challenge liberal interveners' ways of seeing themselves, including taken-for-granted assumptions. Instead of allowing the focus on WG to displace attention to challenges posed, for example, by the fall of Kabul, considering failures in Afghanistan alongside WG's increased engagements in Africa suggest a broader challenge to the assumption of liberal values and liberal order as self-evidently appealing, and as an entry-guarantee to liberal interveners.

In short, we explore three types of WG flows (military, economic, and political) and combine intervention studies and infrastructure insights. We suggest that the challenges these flows represent must be appreciated at two levels: the level of concrete flows and how they challenge liberal interveners' access, and the level of conditions and assumptions underpinning such access, with challenges at that level, jeopardising not only access but liberal order and the seemingly self-evident appeal of the liberal approach. Put differently, we operationalise flows as a lens through which to offer a broader reading of WG's Africa presence (three flows) and a broader reading of challenges at the level of enabling conditions underpinning liberal access—challenges

that WG is only one example of and which liberal interveners must appreciate not in isolation from, but as adding to, a wider set of challenges to the liberal order, which brings our argument back to Kabul and the takeover of the Taliban. This latter point is developed by taking seriously Larkin's focus on enabling conditions, which highlights a second type of challenge: not only to liberal access in a particular (African) state but to the broader attractiveness of liberal order as key conditions enabling the intervention presence through which that order is (re)produced—or not.

Based on this conceptualisation of flows and enabling conditions, the subsequent analysis first explores material and immaterial WG flows. Next, it explores enabling conditions to explain the broader significance of these flows. This two-fold analysis shows how challenges to liberal intervention presence are not reducible to WG but best understood by placing WG's Africa engagements alongside, rather than in isolation from, a broader set of challenges confronting contemporary liberal intervention and liberal order.

4. Analysing Military, Economic, and Political WG Flows

WG is an irregular military formation, consequently referred to as a PMC in Russia. The group previously worked largely as a shadowy (Larsen, 2023) grey-zone force, i.e., not completely state-owned but with too close ties to the Russian state to be considered solely a private entity. Yet, this changed during Russia's war in Ukraine, where WG, along with its founder Yevgeniy Prigozhin, took a more public position after acknowledging his role regarding WG. Initial reactions to Russia's war in Ukraine included voices arguing that this would end Russia's African presence. Yet this situation does not seem to be the case. WG flows not only sustain WG with soldiers, knowledge, equipment, and economic resources but are also enabled by, and at the same time strengthen, the Russian narrative of Russia as an alternative to a world order dominated by the liberal West, broadly understood.

4.1. Military, Political, and Economic Flows

In analysing WG flows that include military, political, and economic flows, we draw not only on the above-mentioned PMC scholarship but also on scholarship which has paved the way for attending to the influence of expertise and knowledge in the domains of international development (Fouksman, 2016) and security (Berling & Bueger, 2015)—not only in Western contexts but also in what others refer to as “South–South” knowledge travelling (Moe & Müller, 2018).

4.1.1. Military Flows

Apart from the Russian WG soldiers that flow from Russia to some African countries as WG fighters, WG also has an established modus operandi of recruiting “third country nationals” to their engagements worldwide. This recruitment method has sent Syrians to Libya (“Exclusive: Russian hiring of Syrians to fight in Libya,” 2020) and soldiers from CAR, Syria, and Libya to fight on behalf of WG in Mali (Etahoben, 2022). Reports also suggest that WG was sending soldiers from CAR and Syria to fight on behalf of Russia and WG in Ukraine (Obaji, 2022b; “Ukraine: Wagner Group begins relocating Syrian fighters,” 2022). Syrians for Truth and Justice (“Ukraine: Wagner Group begins relocating Syrian fighters,” 2022) confirms these military flows of WG fighters from Syria to Libya, establishing how thousands of fighters recruited in Syria were sent to work for WG in Libya (Assad, 2020; “Exclusive: Russian hiring of Syrians to fight in Libya,” 2020). Not only do

soldiers “flow” between different battlefields, but recruitment models—as a type of immaterial military flow—also shift between locations. Since WG began recruiting in Russian prisons, reports suggest that WG have also been recruiting from prisons in CAR, giving detained rebels the choice of going to trial in CAR or going to Ukraine to fight for Russia (Obaji, 2022a). Thus, attending also to immaterial WG military flows highlights how not only mercenaries but also recruitment models flow between different contexts where WG engages.

4.1.2. Economic Flows

Whilst WG forces are indeed important, focusing too narrowly on military flows risk neglecting other aspects that give a different account of WG’s engagements in Africa and of how—besides mercenaries moving between Russia, Ukraine, and Africa—these WG engagements in Africa also have other links to Ukraine, including funding streams. Scholars have argued that the economic side of the WG operations is “a well-entrenched economic system through which the group funds its operations as opposed to being financed through the Russian government” (Pokalova, 2023, p. 17).

CAR is currently the country where WG has the largest, most diverse, and most visible economic footprint (Stanyard et al., 2023). Since WG arrived in CAR in 2017, Prigozhin and WG, for example, took over parts of CAR’s diamond mining (All Eyes on Wagner et al., 2022; Laruelle & Limonier, 2021). WG is also engaged in various other economic activities in CAR, from timber production and export (“Come follow the redwood trees,” 2022) to gold mining (US Department of the Treasury, 2023), collecting coffee taxes (Etahoben, 2022), as well as producing and selling alcohol to local markets in CAR (Oliver, 2022). WG operates alongside the local forces (FACA) in areas where they use military power to secure access to natural resources, for example, near mines or forests (“Come follow the redwood trees,” 2022). Joseph Bendounga, head of the opposition party Democratic Movement for the Renaissance and Evolution of Central Africa, said about Russia’s economic presence: “In all areas that bring in money, including customs and taxes, the Russians are the masters” (Ehl, 2023). The economic embeddedness of WG in CAR indicates that—even given Prigozhin’s death—WG or a similar group is likely to stay and may have found a “business” model that could serve as inspiration elsewhere (Larsen & Jacobsen, 2023).

CAR is not the only country where WG has set up local branches of mining companies. The extraction of natural resources is part of WG’s modus operandi. Local mining companies are also set up in Sudan, Mali, and Madagascar. Russia and WG’s operations in Sudan similarly point to large illicit economic activity. Russian-owned companies, like the Kush E&P and the formerly Prigozhin-linked company M-Invest, have signed contracts in Sudan for gold extraction (Owen, 2022). Gold is allegedly smuggled out of Sudan to Russia, enabled by Russia’s close relationship with Mohamed “Hemedti” Hamdan Daglo, the deputy of the Sovereign Council of Sudan (Collins, 2022; “Sudan’s Burhan sacks RSF head,” 2023).

4.1.3. Political Flows

Why are Europe and the US so concerned about WG? Because WG represents more than just a business enterprise that uses violent methods as their standard operating procedure. The WG model also includes political aspects, like information campaigns, political strategists, and diplomatic agents (Dossier Center, 2019; Pokalova, 2023). The flows of such information campaigners were coordinated between Prigozhin’s

“head office” in Saint Petersburg and local offices in CAR. Likewise, campaigns to keep the then President of Sudan, al-Bashir, in power were buttressed by inspiration from similar campaigns from Russia (Popkov, 2019). Prigozhin also financed Russian political scientists from Saint Petersburg who worked under the frame of “the Africa Project” (“Kommersant: Yevgeniy Prigozhin finansiruyet rabotu,” 2018) in countries like Madagascar, South Africa, and Kenya during periods preceding elections. The previously Prigozhin-related Foundation for National Values Protection (FZNC), run by Maksim Shugalei and Aleksandr Malkevich, creates opinion polls that, for example, show France, the US, and the West as increasingly unpopular whilst presenting the country’s heads of state as well as Russia as increasingly popular. That foundation is or has been operating in Mali, CAR, Sudan, and Afghanistan (according to FZNC’s website, which has, since the time of writing this article, been taken down) and it is under sanctions from the US for facilitating Prigozhin’s international influence, also in Africa (US Department of the Treasury, 2021).

The anti-Western narratives that both WG-related entities and official Russian channels deliberately spread in Africa are highly critical of European states’ colonial histories and current interventions. They portray Russia and WG as supporting African states’ fight for sovereignty and recognition vis-à-vis former colonial powers and the dominance of Western states. Such narratives have, for example, circulated in carefully crafted animation videos, portraying WG as saving African states from the French depicted as zombies or greedy rats leaving the African population to starve, and as pythons terrorising Africa (Souley, 2023). Similar narratives are conveyed via movies produced by Prigozhin, for example, the Hollywood-style action movie *The Tourist*, produced in CAR, featuring local actors alongside Russian actors and portraying WG as saving CAR (Di Roma & Valade, 2022). The lead character, a Russian PMC member, distinguishes American interventions from Russian ones by explaining how “Americans say they fight for democracy; Russians fight for justice” (Shukla, 2021). Prigozhin would later repeat this phrase, for example, in his accounts of WG as an ideological army (e.g., on Telegram in 2023).

4.1.4. Military, Economic, and Political Flows Combined: A “WG Model”?

Not only is the future of WG mercenaries tasked with providing security assistance to several African states uncertain but so is the future of WG’s “broad network of shell companies and financial intermediaries,” including many in Africa (Doxsee et al., 2023, p. 1). Whilst these economic flows are important in their own right, it is significant to note, for the argument presented here, that they form part of a WG model that combines economic, military, and political flows into attractive combinations—for African leaders and as a flexible influence tool for Putin’s global ambitions.

For African leaders, combining economic and military dimensions in ways that enable the flow of mercenaries without an immediate bill is attractive, especially in cases where the rights granted to WG were not benefitting the leader much anyway. As in an example from CAR, one of “Wagner’s most significant gold mining operations” (Doxsee et al., 2023, p. 2) was granted to WG after CAR’s 2019 cancellation of two licences granted to Canadian firm Axmin (Stanyard et al., 2023). Not only was the combination of military and economic flows key in ensuring access to the mine in areas beyond government control, where mining companies need the state to guarantee their safe access to a mining area, WG offers to secure that access themselves. As reported, WG forces encountered casualties when confronting the rebel groups in the mining areas (Salih & Burke, 2023).

Furthermore, the cancellation also potentially indicates that CAR regarded WG's offer as more attractive, likely owing to how that offer was tied to an inflow of WG mercenaries to CAR to secure mining access and the security of the regime ("After a false start, the fate of the Ndassima mine could be settled in Abidjan," 2021). Another combination offered by the WG model, which is attractive for some African leaders, is the combination of military flows and political flows (e.g., political strategists), where the latter does not (in contrast to liberal interveners' security assistance) demand democratic elections as a condition for providing security, but may offer military assistance in tandem with political influence tools through which to help heads of states stay in power—rather than risk their position in a democratic election. Crucially, this is not meant to glorify democratic elections but also ones that liberal actors have applauded. Consider, for example, that sometimes elections are "won" not only with the most votes but also by violence.

Looking at military, economic, and political WG flows illuminates how WG is much more than mercenaries and foregrounds the significance of appreciating, for example, how WG serves as a political tool that feeds off, as well as boosts, the appeal of anti-Western narratives, and—also in that regard—challenge liberal access and liberal order via means that add to and are often used in combination with WG's economic and military flows into several African contexts.

4.2. WG Flows Challenge not Only the Liberal Intervener's Access but Also the Liberal Order's Attractiveness

Crucially, WG is also a tool of great-power politics, which, in that capacity, challenges not only access in an increasing number of African states but also the same assumptions about the liberal world order's presumed attractiveness that Russia's war in Ukraine challenges, albeit in quite different ways. Indeed, WG poses significant challenges to otherwise taken-for-granted assumptions by liberal interveners. Russia has long sought to establish itself as an alternative to a Western-dominated, liberal order, and this challenge did not begin with the war in Ukraine. However, appealing to the desirability of a new and more inclusive international order and placing Russia as an attractive alternative to liberal dominance has been an important part of Russia's strategy in its recent return to Africa.

4.2.1. WG Political Flows and Russia's Anti-Western Narratives

Narratives of this type also circulate in official Russian discourse. For example, in the declaration from the 2019 edition of Putin's Russia–Africa Summit, the signatories expressed their:

Firm intention to fully contribute to achieving international peace and security and to building a more just and equitable system of international relations based on the principles of respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, non-interference in internal affairs of states, preservation of national identity and civilizational diversity. (The Roscongress Foundation, 2019)

Signatories furthermore agreed to develop a dialogue based on a shared commitment to a "multilateral world order" (The Roscongress Foundation, 2019). The position of Russia and the US in these anti-Western world order narratives was spelt out in President Putin's address on 24 February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. Several passages from Putin's speech illustrate how Russia intends to create an alternative to the liberal (US-dominated) world order and how that intent is tied to narratives that challenge liberal

interventions, going back to before WG even existed (Putin, 2022). Articulated at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, this narrative is not new. At least since 2007, Putin has stressed how “the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world” (Putin, 2007), adding how “one state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations” (Putin, 2007).

Russia’s narratives challenge the West directly and indirectly by positioning Russia as protecting African sovereignty and negatively pointing to European colonial history and US dominance. These narratives have gained resonance in several African states. In Mali, for example, Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop said that “by choosing to strengthen cooperation with Russia, Mali...wants to show and demonstrate that we are not going to continue to justify ourselves for our choice of partners” (“Mali says no need to justify Russia as partner,” 2023). In CAR, the link between WG and Russia is obvious. As Fidèle Gouandjika, advisor to the president of CAR, explained:

We accept them [WG forces], and we would love to have France’s Foreign Legion, the mercenaries from France or the US, as in Iraq, to come and support us. We would have no problem with that. We don’t choose the colour of the water that puts out the fire in our country. (Di Roma & Valade, 2022)

Such statements illustrate how WG serves an important political function for Putin: If the President of CAR and his advisors do not distinguish between Russia and WG, inviting WG and welcoming their presence means prioritising a partnership with Russia—rather than with “liberal” interveners.

Although mobilised widely by WG in several African states, narratives of anti-colonialism and liberal interveners’ missteps, shortcomings, and disrespect for sovereignty were, however, not invented by either WG or Russia. Critical narratives had already formed, for example, the feeling that France, as the old colonial power of Mali, has betrayed Mali in recent years by focusing primarily on its own interest (Cold-Ravnkilde, 2023), which is crucial to explaining their resonance and the echoes that WG and Russia have contributed to creating, further augmenting existing challenges to the appeal of liberal world order. Appreciating the links to these broader Russian narratives about world order and how WG’s Africa presence is both enabled by and helps accelerate these political flows suggests that WG is also a political tool for Russia—enabled by and simultaneously enabling Russia’s global political influence. Enabling Russian narratives of alternatives to liberal intervention and liberal order is another crucial aspect of WG’s African presence. Put differently, insofar as WG at once enables and is enabled by political flows that call for a different world order, WG challenges liberal actors in ways that go beyond what a focus on mercenaries and military flows conveys.

5. So What for Liberal Intervenors?

Analysing WG through a lens that focuses on flows that make up this heterogeneous actor not only offers a different account of the scope of WG’s Africa presence but also invites asking how liberal intervenors fit into that analysis, including how they may themselves risk unintentionally enabling further WG presence, for example, if historical and contemporary missteps remain unaddressed by liberal intervenors, and if the liberal approach is not revisited to accommodate calls for an amended international order. If liberal actors dismiss the importance of engaging with African states around this question of a revised but still liberal alternative

to the current international order, such dismissal may boost—rather than undo—the anti-colonial echoes and thereby further “enable” WG access and also further “enable” the appeal of Russia’s proposed alternative to the current global order.

Liberal interveners’ explanations of Russia’s and WG’s expanding footprints in Africa were initially informed by a vacuum logic. As explained elsewhere (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023), this vacuum logic implies that where liberal actors withdraw, Russia fills the vacuum. Accordingly, sustained or up-scaled liberal intervention presence will prevent further Russian expansion. Considering the internal flaws of that vacuum explanation and the significantly expanded Russian footprint in Africa, the phenomenon that calls for explanation has changed. Russian presence has not only materialised in contexts where liberal interveners have left a vacuum, in the case of Mali, for example, France and several allies were asked to leave. Observers referred to a “traffic jam” to illustrate a situation not only in Mali but in the Sahel more broadly, which was not characterised by an absence of liberal interveners (Cold-Ravnkilde & Jacobsen, 2020; Cooke et al., 2017). What must now be explained is the more difficult question of how Russia, largely via WG, has successfully managed to displace liberal interveners even from states where they wanted to be present but where they are no longer invited or invited but on terms they cannot accept.

5.1. Unpacking Liberal Intervention’s Manifold Crisis

Interestingly, a change can be observed whereby liberal actors’ accounts of Russia’s attractiveness in Africa have shifted. Russian disinformation is now a dominant explanation. Disinformation does take place and may indeed represent significant challenges. We have seen that information campaigns have consequences for UN soldiers, French troops, and populations in African states where elections are influenced in non-transparent ways. Nevertheless, the idea that Russia’s increasing influence can be explained as resulting from successful Russian disinformation risks underestimating the extent to which disinformation “sticks” cannot be understood in isolation from liberal interveners’ own missteps (Blankenship & Ordu, 2022). Granting too much explanatory power to accounts suggesting that WG is invited to partner with African states as a result of disinformation both overlooks African agency and liberal interveners’ own shortcomings as key to why disinformation efforts stick.

While disinformation and broader weaponisation of information in Africa is an increasing tendency, presenting that as an explanation for WG’s growing presence in Africa entails at least two flawed assumptions. Disinformation as the dominant explanation of why Russia is attractive and why liberal actors are losing attractiveness creates a comfortable distance between Russian approaches and liberal actors themselves, leaving little space for critically reflecting on gaps and shortcomings in liberal interveners’ own approaches and missteps—historically and contemporary. Not only have liberal interveners’ approaches and security assistance entailed gaps (for example, when soldiers in CAR and Mali received training but no weapons; Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023), there have also been abuses and other missteps. For example, in CAR, allegations emerged in 2016 of international forces, including French peacekeepers, abusing children “in exchange for food or money” (UN News, 2023). Second, explaining WG’s growing presence solely as a result of Russian disinformation also disregards the agency of African heads of state by assuming that they are ill-informed and, hence, do not make decisions on behalf of their country on correct, well-informed grounds (implying that this was the case when liberal interveners were invited in as partners). This explanation falls back on a well-known dismissal of African agency and a longstanding debate in the literature. Explaining

choices to partner with Russia as a result of misinformation risks failing to pay attention to African agency and thus repeating (rather than amending) a longstanding shortcoming on the part of liberal interveners.

Paradoxically, these flawed assumptions may unintentionally help Russia gain further ground. Suppose Russia's increasing influence is only ascribed to disinformation. In that case, liberal interveners risk dismissing the importance of confronting their own role in bringing about conditions where Russia seems appealing, and—in explanations that carry on dismissing African agency—also risk affirming Russia's accounts of liberal actors as not recognising African partners as equals. Blinded by deceptive assumptions about liberal interveners' presumably self-evident appeal, dismissal of the agency of African heads of state, and an inability or unwillingness to engage with views that challenge the appeal of the liberal order, all risk leaving liberal interveners worse off, for example, where such dismissals create “blowback” effects for liberal interveners or where they are de-selected and/or accused of colonial and imperial mindsets in their cooperation with African states. Such “blowback” effects may unintentionally enable further WG presence on the African continent, for example, where liberal actors' manifold dismissals are used to present the WG and Russia as favourable partner choices. Elsewhere, we have argued that the vacuum logic rests on similar assumptions: a dismissal of African agency and the presumably universal appeal of liberal intervention actors (Jacobsen & Larsen, 2023). It is necessary to challenge those shared underlying assumptions to the extent that both of these quite different explanations of why Russia is seen as an attractive partner share similar assumptions rather than searching for another explanation.

6. Conclusion

This two-fold analysis of WG flows and conditions that enable those flows (including liberal intervention's missteps) sheds light on the scope of WG engagements on the African continent by attending to flows that are often overlooked in accounts that primarily attend to WG mercenaries and fail to challenge underlying assumptions about WG's and liberal actors' own presence. By discussing these two dimensions in parallel, it becomes possible to highlight a paradox: When liberal interveners dismiss the scope of WG, the significance of African agency, and their own shortcomings and missteps, for example, in explanations that largely accredit growing WG presence to Russian disinformation, such dismissals risk unintentionally serving as an enabling condition for further WG expansion. Crucially, such dismissive explanations are important because they *invite misguided responses*, for example, about the extent to which WG's expanded African presence can be countered by increasingly focusing on countering Russian disinformation. Besides the risk that liberal interveners may become “not very liberal” in their countermeasures, an overarching risk is the temptation to forefront explanations that allow liberal interveners to continue omitting more difficult, but crucially more important, discussions about their own missteps.

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Conflict of Interests

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