



## RUSSIA'S QUEST FOR GREAT POWER STATUS: THE CASE OF SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA POLICY

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### ABSTRACT

As the Russian Federation gained power in the 2000s, the Kremlin intensified its criticisms of the unipolar international system and argued for a multipolar system in which it would have a great power status. In order to be recognized as a great power, it has espoused the social competition strategy which seek to challenge and surpass those in high-status states in areas where they are powerful. This study focuses on Russia's Sub-Saharan Africa policy and discusses that in line with social competition strategy even though the region is not directly linked to its security and with which it has relatively weak historical ties, Russia has been competing with the countries like the United States and France that are perceived as great powers and have a major influence in the region. In this context, the policies and activities that Russia has pursued to bolster its influence in the region are analyzed together with its strengths and weaknesses. In the article, it is argued that Russia's economic constraints limit its sphere of influence, and Moscow attempts to compensate for this through military cooperation agreements, anti-Western narratives, disinformation activities and political support to the leaders whose policies align with Russian interests.

**Keywords:** Russian foreign policy, Sub-Saharan Africa, status, multipolarity.

## BÜYÜK GÜÇ STATÜSÜ HEDEFİNDE RUSYA: SAHRAALTI AFRIKA POLİTİKASI ÖRNEĞİ ÖZ

Rusya Federasyonu 2000'li yıllarda güç kazandıkça, Kremlin tek kutuplu uluslararası sisteme yönelik eleştirilerini yoğunlaştırmış ve içerisinde büyük güç statüsünde yer alacağı çok kutuplu bir sistemi desteklemiştir. Bu doğrultuda büyük güç olarak tanınmak için yüksek statüye sahip devletlere güçlü oldukları alanlarda meydan okumayı ve onları aşmayı hedefleyen sosyal rekabet stratejisini benimsemiştir. Bu çalışma Rusya'nın Sahraaltı Afrika politikasına odaklanmakta ve sosyal rekabet stratejisi ile uyumlu olarak Rusya'nın güvenliğiyle doğrudan ilgisi olmamasına ve görece zayıf tarihi bağlara sahip olmasına rağmen bu bölgede büyük bir nüfuza sahip olan ve büyük güç olarak algılanan Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Fransa gibi ülkelerle rekabet ettiğini tartışmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Rusya'nın bölgedeki nüfuzunu artırmak için izlediği politika ve yürüttüğü faaliyetler güçlü ve zayıf yönleri ile birlikte analiz edilmektedir. Makalede, Rusya'nın ekonomik kısıtlarının onun nüfuz alanını sınırlandırdığı ve Moskova'nın bunu askeri iş birliği anlaşmaları, Batı-karşıtı anlatı, dezenformasyon faaliyetleri ve Rusya'nın çıkarları ile uyumlu liderlere siyasi desteği vasıtasıyla telafi etmeye çalıştığı ileri sürülmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Rus dış politikası, Sahraaltı Afrika, statü, çok kutupluluk.

### Introduction

The Russian Federation, which was established as the successor to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), had to face serious political, economic and social crises throughout the 1990s. However, Vladimir Putin, who took control of the country with an increasingly authoritarian approach in the 2000s, was able to recover the economy with the help of the rich

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natural resources and began to follow an assertive foreign policy. In this regard, Russia did not refrain from using military force and attacked Georgia in 2008, annexed Crimea in 2014, provided military support to the Assad government starting in September 2015, and launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

As Russia has become more assertive, Putin has increasingly become critical of the unipolar order led by the United States (US). In his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, he claimed that the unipolar system “is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world” (The Washington Post, 2007). In a speech in July 2024, he stated that the multipolar world has now become a reality and legitimized this with concepts such as a just world order, the defense of legitimate rights and the protection of traditional values (Teslova, 2024b). In October 2025, Putin also stated that there has been a transition to a polycentric period in the world where no country could dictate its own rules, and described this multipolar world as a more democratic system where many actors have an impact on the outcomes (Aktas, 2025). While Putin believes that the multipolar system in which Russia would be a great power will ensure the security of his country, he also uses this rhetoric as a soft power tool in foreign policy (Chebankova, 2017). This understanding also finds a place in official documents. For instance, in the Russian Federation Foreign Policy Concept document updated in 2023, it was stated that Russia stands by Africa for a more just and multi-centered world, while also arguing that the neo-colonial policies of some developed countries lead to economic and social inequalities on the continent (The Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2023).

As Russia gains economic and military power, its desire to be recognized as a great power in the international arena has also strengthened. In this context, Russia seeks to establish a buffer zone against the perceived Western threats in accordance with its strategic culture. Therefore, it strives to expand its sphere of influence in its near abroad while simultaneously seeking recognition as a great power, particularly by Western states. Seeing itself as a great power, Russia believes it has the right to exert influence in the post-Soviet region (Götz & Staun, 2022). However, it should be noted that Russia has wanted such recognition since the Tsarist period (Neumann, 2008) and one thing that groups with different political ideologies in Russia agree on is that Russia should be a great power, not an ordinary state (Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 74). Putin, who shares this approach, stated in a speech he made on December 29, 1999 that “Russia was and will remain a great power” (Sakwa, 2008).

In this regard, the number of studies on the impact of Russia’s quest for status on its foreign policy has increased. Nadibaidze (2022) argues that Russia’s great power identity is the factor influencing its position in discussions on autonomous weapons systems. In this context, she argues that Russia supports a multipolar system in which it will be an influential actor. Schmitt (2020), in his study focusing on the post-2014 period, emphasizes that Moscow has pursued a diplomatic practice in multilateral institutions that prioritizes status recognition, at times putting even before security concerns. Freire (2019) explains Russia’s active policy, including the use of military force, in post-Soviet territories as a goal of status recognition. Freire and Heller (2018) claim that Russia’s lack of willingness to change its policy towards Ukraine despite facing sanctions and experiencing economic problems after 2014 is an indication that the issue cannot be evaluated solely from a rational perspective. They argue that Russia’s major power identity, its greater propensity to take action in strategic regions even if the costs are

high, and domestic political factors have also an impact on the decision-making process. Koçak (2023) also discusses Russia's military presence in Syria within the context of its status-seeking.

However, the aim of being recognized as a great power with global influence prompts Moscow to be active not only in Russia's vicinity, but also in other regions. Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine can be seen as important in terms of measuring how much influence it has on a global scale. When the crisis was put on the agenda of the United Nations Security Council, the resolution on ending Russia's military aggression was not accepted due to the Russian veto (The United Nations, 2022a). On the other hand, at the emergency special session of the United Nations General Assembly convened upon the call of the Security Council, a resolution containing condemnation of Russia and demanding the end of its attack on Ukraine and withdrawal of its troops was adopted with 141 votes in favor on March 3, 2022 (The United Nations, 2022b).

Although 28 of the 54 African countries that are members of the United Nations (UN) supported the resolution, it was striking that almost half of them adopted a different position. Indeed, 17 of the 35 countries that abstained from voting and 8 of the 12 countries that did not participate in the vote were African countries. It is also noteworthy that one of the countries that abstained was South Africa, one of the leading countries on the continent. Moreover, another African country, Eritrea, was one of the 5 countries that voted against the resolution. Furthermore, the anti-French and pro-Russian demonstrations after the military coups in Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso in recent years, and the efforts of the military administrations to improve their relations with Moscow have also fueled interest in Russia's influence in Africa (Ndzendze & Manyana, 2022; Kachur, 2022; Ramani, 2021; Duursma & Masuhr, 2022; Kanet & Moulioukova, 2022; Generoso, 2022; Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021; Antwi-Boasiako, 2022; Pokalova, 2023).

In this context, Russia's policy towards Sub-Saharan Africa, whose importance in international politics is rapidly growing due to its economic growth potential as well as its energy and critical mineral resources, will constitute the focus of the study. It is assumed that shedding light on the Kremlin's policy towards this rising region which is not in Russia's near abroad or directly related to its security will contribute to the literature by revealing the strategies, activities, strengths and weaknesses of Russia towards being recognized as a great power with global influence. Yet, developing economic relations and making investments in a region with great potential could be a goal for any state regardless of the status-seeking motivation. For this reason, this study also highlights the political and military dimensions of Russian foreign policy. In the article, it is argued that Russia attempts to demonstrate being a great power with a global reach through its Sub-Saharan Africa policy, and in line with the social competition strategy, it competes with the Western countries that deny the great power status to it and also have more influence in the region. However, Moscow's economic constraints restrict its influence in the region, and therefore it is trying to compensate for this through military cooperation agreements, anti-Western narratives, disinformation activities and political support to the leaders whose policies align with Russian interests.

This study examines Russia's policy toward the region, drawing on official documents, statements, academic studies, and reports on the subject. The first section of the study will provide a literature review on the concept of status. The second section will examine Russia's strategy for its policy towards the region with its economic, political and military dimensions. The

conclusion will provide an overview of Russia's motivations and strategies in Sub-Saharan Africa as part of its status-seeking ambitions along with the strengths and weaknesses.

### **1. Status in International Relations**

As MacDonald and Parent (2021, p. 360) underlines status "consists of collective beliefs about a state's standing and membership, based on valued attributes, and is recognized by voluntary deference." There are three prominent approaches in the status literature. The first, the rational-instrumental approach, argues that states prioritize high status due to the advantages and privileges it brings (Renshon, 2017). However, states with similar material capabilities may have different status expectations. Götz (2021, p. 232) gives the example of Germany and Russia having different status goals in this regard. Therefore, it is important not to overlook ideational factors and the second approach, the social identity theory, explains states' desire to achieve high status through the inherent need for respect exist in humans. In this context, states may take steps to enhance their status even if their actions do not provide material contributions (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). The third approach, the constructivist perspective, emphasizes that states seek status in international politics in accordance with their own identities. For this reason, ensuring ontological security is seen as the main factor that prompts states to pursue their goals (Murray, 2019).

Regardless of the motivation for status-seeking, being recognized as a great power in international politics brings with it certain advantages. The policies and actions of countries with this status are more likely seen as legitimate, which also reduces the costs and risks of the policy pursued. Besides, the great power status provides the political elites with the opportunity to gain support from various segments of society and to weaken their opponents. In addition, the fact that other great powers seek consultation and compromise on critical issues reinforces the importance of having this status (Volgy et al., 2011, p. 10; Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, p. 233).

As Šćepanović (2024, p. 82) summarizes, in status literature, the level of military power, influence in international organizations and forums, hosting important events and level of diplomatic contact are generally emphasized as the criteria for being a great power. Volgy et al. (2011, p. 12) also point out that great powers are active outside their own regions. Krickovic and Chang (2020, p. 224) argue that states cannot become great powers only through their own efforts, and that other countries must also attribute such a status to the country in question. Thus, Russia's recent intensified search for global influence seems to be related to its aim to make other countries recognize it as a great power.

States can follow three strategies to achieve higher status: social mobility, social competition, and social creativity. Social mobility requires adopting the values and practices promoted by high-status states to gain their acceptance as one of them. Türkiye's efforts towards European Union membership (Parlar Dal, 2019), Japan's adoption of Western norms after World War II (Larson, 2019), and Ukraine's efforts to enhance its reputation in the West through participation in peacekeeping operations following its founding (Dobrescu, 2023) can be cited as examples of this strategy. At this point, the ease of status elevation and the legitimacy of the existing status hierarchy become crucial. In this context, not being consulted on a critical matter or its interests not being taken into account demonstrate whether a country is considered as a great power by others. The reflection of the grievance in the discourse of political leaders is crucial,

showing that the status hierarchy is not perceived as legitimate. As mentioned in the introduction, Putin's statements or the Foreign Policy Concept documents reveal how Russia criticizes the current system. This brings us to the second strategy, social competition. Within the framework of social competition, states seeking to ascend in status seek to challenge and, if possible, surpass those in high-status states in areas where they are powerful. This can manifest itself through practices such as arms races, competition over spheres of influence, and military intervention against smaller states. The primary motivation here is not increasing power or ensuring security, but rather the goal of influencing the perceptions of other states. Russia's support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya (Šćepanović, 2023), India's desire to be recognized as a great power and its acceleration of nuclear tests in the late 1990s, Wilhelmine Germany's competition with Britain in strengthening the navy and acquiring colonies, and Japan's shift to expansionist policies in the 1930s, believing it was not recognized as a great power by the West, are examples of this strategy (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, pp. 7-9). The third strategy, social creativity, requires states to emphasize and highlight their areas of strength or perceived advantage. In this context, policies such as adopting a different foreign policy approach, like the non-aligned movement in the Cold War, or promoting a different economic development model can be elements of social creativity (Larson & Shevchenko, 2019, pp. 2-13). The emphasis placed on South-South cooperation by the rising powers within the G20 (Parlar Dal & Dipama, 2019), Estonia's efforts to increase its influence in Africa through cooperations in information and communication technologies, along with defense and development (Crandall & Sulg, 2023), and France's promotion of its role as the guardian of the liberal order (Rieker, 2018) could be given as the examples of this strategy.

After the collapse of the USSR, Russians found that they were not seen as a great power by other states anymore (Freire & Heller, 2018, p. 1189). Facing many difficulties, Russia was open to dialogue with the West in the 1990s and made liberal reforms in the political and economic fields (Krickovic & Pellicciari, 2021; Clunan, 2009; Larson & Shevchenko, 2019). Therefore, it is possible to say that Russia followed a strategy based on social mobility in this period to be seen as a great power by the West (Krickovic & Pellicciari, 2021; Koçak, 2023, p. 144). However, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) eastern expansion and intervention in Kosovo, the decline in the UN's importance in security related issues, the eruption of the Iraq War despite Russia's opposition, and the US's support for the regime change and democratization movements in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, known as color revolutions, in the early 2000s led Russians to think that their interests and positions are not taken into account and Russia is not recognized as a great power despite the social mobility strategy (Freire & Heller, 2018, p. 1189; Heller, 2014, p. 4; Larson & Shevchenko, 2010, p. 90). Especially after the Kosovo intervention in 1999, Russia abandoned the strategy of social mobility and espoused the strategy of social competition (Schmitt, 2020; Heller, 2014).

## **2. Russia's Return to Africa**

Before moving on to Russia's policy towards the Sub-Saharan Africa, it would be useful to touch upon the USSR's policy towards Africa in general, as Russia strives to advance both its initiatives and anti-colonial narrative through the political, economic and military connections established during the Cold War. The region became an area of interest for Moscow as part of the aim of developing relations with third world countries after Stalin's death in 1953 (Kanet & Moulioukova, 2022, p. 428). The USSR took the advantage of not having a historical burden in

the region, unlike the West which has a colonial past, to support independence movements in an ideological context (Stronski, 2019, p. 3).

During this period, the USSR signed cooperation agreements with 37 African countries and provided economic aid in areas such as agricultural development, health services and infrastructure (El-Badawy et al., 2022, p. 5). It also provided education opportunities and military assistance to governments and groups it had close relations with. By providing approximately 50,000 African students with the opportunity to study at Soviet universities between 1960 and 1991, the USSR was able to leverage its soft power tools by fostering a positive image among Africans who, after graduating, attained prominent positions in their own countries (Geröcs, 2019, p. 319). Currently, there are three African presidents who studied in the USSR: Angolan President João Lourenço, Ghanaian President John Mahama, and Namibian president Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah (Andreeva, 2025). Moscow also provided military assistance to the Mozambique Liberation Front (FREELIMO) during Mozambique's war of independence, provided military support to the government in Ethiopia, and enabled approximately 200,000 Africans to benefit from Soviet military training between 1960 and 1991 (Stronski, 2019, pp. 3-4; Geröcs, 2019, p. 319). Despite the cooperation in the military field, it is difficult to say that the USSR reached a level of economic cooperation with African countries that would eliminate the influence of the West in the region (Clapham, 1996, p. 148). Nevertheless, the support and aid that the Soviet Union provided to African countries made it possible for Moscow to gain a positive image in the region.

However, the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent political and financial turmoil in Russia affected negatively its African policy. Accordingly, President Boris Yeltsin ordered the closure of nine embassies and four consulates in Africa. Moreover, he cut aid to the region and demanded from regional countries to pay back the loans they received from the Soviet Union (Giles, 2013, pp. 6-7; Nkuna & Shai, 2022). Russia's return to African politics was only possible in the mid-2000s after an economic recovery and a certain stability in domestic politics and a significant influence on near abroad in foreign policy had been achieved. President Vladimir Putin's visit to South Africa, one of the prominent countries in the region, in 2006 was a concrete step taken in this regard (BBC News, 2006).

The visit also corresponded to the period when Russia adopted the social competition strategy. The widespread view on Russia's Africa policy is that it took action later than its rivals. During his visit to the region in 2009, President Dmitry Medvedev commented that Russia was "almost too late" in developing relations with Africa (Shchedrov, 2009; Giles, 2013, p. 9). Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Mikhail Bogdanov also shares this view, stating that the problems his country experienced in the post-Cold War period pushed the issue of cooperation with Africa to the background, and that in this process, actors such as China, Türkiye and India, along with Western countries, filled this gap (Interfax, 2022).

While contacts between Russia and African countries have rapidly intensified in the following years, the Russia-Africa Summit held in 2019, which was attended by 43 African leaders, is important in terms of demonstrating Russia's diplomatic activity and goals in the region (Ramani, 2021, p. 3). At this point, it should be reiterated that hosting important events and engaging in intensive diplomatic contacts are among the indicators of great power status. Many Russian companies participated in the two-day summit, and more than 50 memorandums of understanding were signed, foreseeing investments exceeding \$12 billion (Kanet & Moulioukova,

2022, p. 431). However, although 49 countries sent delegates to the second Russia-Africa Summit held in 2023, only 17 countries participated at the head of state level. This indicates a lower level of participation than both the first summit in 2019 and the US-Africa Summit held in December 2022 (Obe & Amare, 2023). It is possible to assume that African countries do not want to damage their political and commercial relations with the West or be seen as too close to Moscow after Russia's attack on Ukraine. Considering that the economic investments of Western countries in the region are well ahead of Russia, this situation constitutes one of the most important obstacles to Russia being more influential in African politics and being perceived as a great power, as will be examined in the next section.

One of Russia's important foreign policy tools is its veto power in the UN Security Council, of which it is a permanent member. Indeed, the Kremlin does not hesitate to use this power to support political leaders it has links with. In this regard, a resolution to impose an arms embargo, travel bans and financial freeze on certain Zimbabwean government and security officials, including President Robert Mugabe, on the grounds that the government's harsh policies against the opposition were a threat to peace and security in the region was vetoed by five countries including Russia in 2008 (The United Nations, 2008). In addition to Zimbabwe, Russia vetoed certain sanctions against Sudan during the leadership of Omar al-Bashir, as well as against Eritrea and the Central African Republic, with which it has close relations. The vetoes in question were associated with the principle of national sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, which are among the principles heavily emphasized in Russian foreign policy discourse. Moreover, the sanctions were presented as a means for the West to impose its values on African countries (Giles, 2013, pp. 12-13; Ramani, 2021, p. 9), thereby Russian vetoes were instrumentalized as a criticism of the unipolar system and promotion of anti-Western narrative.

Nevertheless, a study examining the resolutions of the UN Security Council between 2014 and 2020 found no significant convergence between the votes of Russia and the three African members (Singh & De Carvalho, 2021). Furthermore, all three African countries voted in favor of the resolution in the UN Security Council demanding Russia to end its military attack on Ukraine (The United Nations, 2022a). Therefore, Russia does not seem to have enough influence in African politics to create change in UN Security Council votes. This situation also reveals the limits of Moscow's capacity to lead in the international arena, which is one of the indicators of the great power status. However, the votes of African countries can be effective in shaping public opinion in the UN General Assembly, which includes 54 African countries. In that regard, the weight of African countries among those who abstained or did not participate in the vote held in the General Assembly on March 3, 2022 is striking and reveals the importance of examining Russia's policy towards the region.

### **3. Russian Foreign Policy towards the Sub-Saharan Africa**

This section of the article will focus on Russian foreign policy toward Sub-Saharan Africa. Unlike North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa is a region with which Russia has relatively weak political and commercial links and is not critical to its security. Therefore, security concerns or historical ties cannot explain Kremlin's interest in the region. However, a country seeking recognition as a great power is expected to wield global influence. Besides, the Sub-Saharan Africa attracts attention due to its young population, urbanization and economic growth potential, energy resources and critical minerals (International Energy Agency, n.d.). The need for renewable energy sources is enhancing the value of critical minerals, and it is estimated that the demand

for nickel will double, the demand for cobalt will triple, and the demand for lithium will increase tenfold by 2050. The fact that the Sub-Saharan African region contains 30% of the known critical mineral reserves has naturally enhanced its importance in international politics (Chen et al., 2024). Hence, it is not a region that can be ignored for a state that wants to increase its status.

However, every state would aim to develop its relations with countries and regions that offer investment potential. Therefore, simply developing economic relations and increasing trade volume with Sub-Saharan Africa does not mean that these efforts stem from a quest for status. To argue that Moscow's interest in the region extends beyond this and that it is seeking influence in line with the strategy of social competition, it must be demonstrated that Russia competes with influential great powers in the region in economic, political, and military fields. In this context, we will first evaluate Russia's economic relations with the region, followed by a closer look at its political and military policies.

### **3.1. Insufficient Progress in Economic Relations**

Although efforts have been made to develop trade relations with the region since the 2000s to make Russia a global actor, no serious progress was made until facing with Western sanctions in 2014. The most concrete step taken in this period was the Kremlin's statement that it had wrote off a significant portion of the debts of African countries from the USSR period (Lyudmila, 2014). In this way, the positive image from the Soviet period was intended to be maintained. However, by making it a condition to carry out development projects in return for debt cancellation, the way was also opened for Russian companies to gain privileges in these areas (Kachur, 2022, pp. 516-517). Therefore, a soft power application such as debt cancellation was intended to be transformed into economic gain.

After the Western sanctions in 2014, one of the Russian economic initiatives was the establishment of an institution called the Russian Export Center under Vnesheconombank in June 2015 to prevent the sanctions from disrupting investments. This institution provides various supports to Russian exporters and operates to advance trade with Africa (Kachur, 2022, p. 523). Another organization established in this regard, AfroCom, was tasked with ensuring economic coordination in the region (Geröcs, 2019, p. 321). Furthermore, Russian investments in the Sub-Saharan Africa have spread to the financial sector, and Vneshtorgbank opened a bank in Angola, in which it had a majority stake, and then began operating in Namibia and Ivory Coast (Arkhangelskaya & Dodd, 2016, pp. 167-169). Gazprombank also expanded its presence in the region, starting in South Africa in 2014 (Nkuna & Shai, 2021, p. 7). Moreover, the Association of Russian Banks and the West African Bankers Association signed a memorandum in 2023. Accordingly, cooperation is envisaged in education and the development of new technologies (TASS, 2023). In addition to banking, there are also Russian investments and cooperation in the field of telecommunications and satellite systems (Geröcs, 2019, p. 330).

Meanwhile, natural resources in Sub-Saharan Africa began to attract more attention from Russia. Considering that accessing and extracting natural resources that have not yet been put into operation within Russia is costly, Moscow has turned to countries in the south of Africa, where the costs are lower. Apart from Russia's own needs, the fact that actors such as the US, the European Union, China and Türkiye are also in this race has increased the urgency of the situation for Moscow in accordance with the social competition strategy. For this reason, while many Russian companies are involved in projects targeting the region's natural resources, the



aim is to also have an influence on prices (Gerasimchuk, 2009, p. 30; Arkhangel'skaya & Shubin, 2013, p. 16; Besenyő, 2019, p. 137).

In this context, Russia is active in the extraction of valuable minerals such as coltan, cobalt, gold and diamonds in the Democratic Republic of Congo and uranium and diamonds in the Central African Republic (Hedenskog, 2018). Furthermore, various agreements have been made for the exploration and extraction of minerals such as platinum and gold in Zimbabwe and diamonds in Angola (Reuters, 2018; Devitt, 2019). Thus, Russia has become an important actor, especially in the platinum, gold and diamond sectors (Ramani, 2021, pp. 7-8). Regarding oil, the Russian company Rosneft signed a memorandum of understanding with the Nigerian company Oronto in 2018 for a cooperation covering 17 countries (Paraskova, 2018). In addition, a contract was signed in Uganda in the same year to build an oil refinery (Gerőcs, 2019, p. 327).

Another area where Russia is looking to invest, both to expand its political influence and to make economic gains, is nuclear energy. Currently, only South Africa has a functional nuclear power plant on the African continent. However, Russia has signed nuclear cooperation agreements with 20 countries on the continent (Caprile & Pichon, 2024, p. 10). The fact that Russia provides state-supported loans is an important factor in Russia's ability to surpass its competitors in this field. Moreover, Russia does not demand any additional conditions regarding uranium enrichment and plutonium reprocessing technologies other than the obligations of the International Atomic Energy Agency and the regulations of the Nuclear Suppliers Group on nuclear trade. This also makes Moscow more attractive than Washington in this field. In addition, the fact that it takes back spent nuclear fuel is also effective in countries that do not have a permanent waste storage infrastructure to turn to Moscow (Schepers, 2018).

It should be emphasized that despite all these efforts in the fields of trade and energy, Russia has not been able to bring its economic relations with the region to the desired level. Accordingly, the fact that Russia's trade volume with Sub-Saharan Africa remained at \$4.3 billion in 2022 reveals that the targeted level of success has not been achieved, especially considering the US's trade volume with the region is \$41 billion and France's is \$23 billion. Moreover, when we consider that China, which wants to increase its weight in international politics like Russia, has a trade volume of \$124.5 billion with the region, and India has reached \$60 billion, Russia's relatively inadequate position in regional trade becomes more striking (World Bank, n.d.).

The fact that Russia produces very few of the products demanded by consumers in the region and its inability to provide sufficient technology and investment resources to regional countries that want to modernize and strengthen their infrastructure limits cooperation opportunities. Furthermore, the uncertainty about the future of the Russian economy, which is dealing with sanctions, prevents future investments from materializing. Although Russia is competitive and signed many cooperation agreements in the field of nuclear energy, there are question marks about their commercial viability. In fact, the only country that currently benefits from Russian nuclear technology is South Africa (Stronski, 2019, pp. 9-11; Ferragamo, 2023). Moreover, the lack of transparency in the implementation of initiatives in this field can cause reactions in the countries of the region with relatively developed democracies. In this context, the \$76 billion deal for Rosatom to build nuclear reactors in South Africa was met with serious backlash from the opposition and civil society of that country, the relevant deal was annulled by the court on the grounds that it was unlawful and unconstitutional, and the process later led to the resignation of President Zuma due to corruption allegations (Imray, 2023). All these factors

prevent Russia from becoming a larger trading partner in the region and thus hinder its goal of competing with major powers.

### **3.2. Expanding Influence through Military and Political Bonds**

Its advanced military industry is one of the strengths the Kremlin has capitalized on to bolster its political influence and compete with other great powers in the region. Moreover, Africa has always been an important export market for the Russian arms industry since the Soviet period, which allows Moscow to gain a foothold (Neethling, 2020, p. 25). Indeed, Stronski (2019, p. 14) describes this situation by stating that “guns have opened many more doors for the Kremlin in Africa than butter”. The ongoing political instability in Africa, the West’s inadequacy in the fight against terrorism, and the anti-Western sentiment based on colonial period also pave the way for Moscow’s initiatives (Issaev et al., 2022, p. 429). Moreover, the fact that Russian-made weapons are cheaper than Western ones and the armies of many African countries have Soviet-era stocks that are compatible with modern Russian weapons is also a supporting factor. Besides, the military contracts signed by Russia include provisions for modernizing or repairing Soviet-era equipment, and they do not include any conditions for the protection of human rights, which makes Russia more attractive for some leaders (Stronski, 2019, pp. 14-16).

With these advantages, Russia has long been the country that exported the most arms to the African continent. However, especially in 2020, Russia’s military exports in general have started to show a downward momentum. Indeed, for Russia, which exported arms to 31 countries around the world in 2019, this number dropped to 12 in 2023, and it lost its second place in arms exports behind the USA to France (Wezeman et al., 2024, pp. 2, 5). It can be assumed that the countries that are wary of the sanctions imposed by the West have been turning to countries other than Russia for arms purchases. Russia’s own need for arms due to the Ukraine war can also be another reason. Russia lost its leadership to China in the Sub-Saharan Africa region in the list of countries exporting arms between 2019 and 2023. Accordingly, China ranked first with 19%, followed by Russia with 17%, France with 11% and Türkiye with 6.3% (Wezeman et al., 2024, p. 8).

In addition to arms sales, Russia also signs agreements for mutual military training programs with the regional countries. Thus, the Russian Ministry of Defense plays a role in the training of military personnel and provides them with the opportunity to receive training within Russia (Hedenskog, 2018, p. 2). Therefore, other than increasing its military exports, Russia expands its influence through military cooperation programs. Furthermore, Russia’s emphasis on the US and France’s failure in fighting against terrorism in Sub-Saharan Africa also contributes to the legitimization of paramilitary organizations such as the Wagner Group in the region (Kachur, 2022, p. 521).

Although Wagner is known worldwide for its activities in Ukraine and Syria, the organization is more active in Africa. According to Russian law, the establishment of private military companies in the country is not allowed. However, using the Russian private military companies, which operate in line with Kremlin’s policies unofficially, allows the Russian state to avoid international law and human rights regulations, and hide military losses from the public, since the number of deaths and injuries in these companies is not included in the Russian Ministry of Defense data (Rácz, 2020). As noted by experts at the UN, there are various findings that the

Wagner Group violates human rights and international law with practices such as arbitrary detention, torture, disappearance of people and summary execution (The United Nations, 2021). It should also be noted that after the failed mutiny of Wagner in Russia in June 2023 and the death of its leader Yevgeny Prigozhin in plane crash in August 2023, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov went on a trip to the region and gave assurances that the services provided by the group would continue. Wagner's activities in Africa appear to have been taken over by a group called "Africa Corps" (Murphy, 2024).

The Wagner Group's most notable activity in Sub-Saharan Africa is to obtain privilege to mine in regional countries in return for the political and military support it provides, thus increasing Russia's access and influence on natural resources. In this regard, it is providing military training, combating anti-government forces and suppressing the opposition in countries with which it has agreements. In addition to military activities, it conducts disinformation activities by organizing fake polls and implementing counter-demonstration techniques, thus providing political support to the governments. Therefore, it should be noted that the Wagner Group operates also in political realm. In this context, the media and social media tools affiliated with Prigozhin promotes Russia's anti-colonial past from the Soviet era and targets France (Marten, 2023, p. 52; Parens, 2022).

Although the Kremlin frequently refers to the principle of non-interference in internal affairs on the international stage, it has not hesitated to support leaders close to Russia in elections. In this context, Emmerson Mnangagwa was provided campaign support through advisors in the 2018 elections in Zimbabwe (Maslov & Zaytsev, 2018). At the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum held on 5-8 June 2024, Mnangagwa hailed Putin as his "dear brother", stated that he protected Russia's independence and territorial integrity, and criticized the West (Reuters, 2024). In addition to Zimbabwe, individuals affiliated with Prigozhin were also seen operating in the election campaigns in Madagascar and South Africa. Moreover, they advised Sudanese authorities on various issues, from the suppression of protests to economic reforms (Reynolds, 2019, p. 9). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, efforts were made to ensure that leaders close to Moscow won the elections through political advisors and disinformation experts (Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021, p. 387).

Disinformation activities are one of the tools that the Kremlin has used significantly along with supporting specific political leaders in elections through organizations related to Prigozhin (Grossman et al., 2019). Russia's official media outlets also play a role in these activities. At a time when Western media outlets are reducing their activities in Africa due to financial reasons, Russian state media have signed agreements with local media companies on the continent to provide free content. Furthermore, African journalists are being trained, which also contributes to the Kremlin's propaganda efforts (Brown, 2025). Russia's disinformation activities that include interfering with the internal affairs of other countries, contradict the official statements on opposing external intervention in national sovereignty. On the other hand, it provides Moscow the opportunity to control the narrative and intensify anti-Western sentiment. This facilitates Moscow to pursue its social competition strategy against the West in the region.

Along with these activities, the Kremlin also resorts to soft power in the region. In this regard, companies affiliated with Prigozhin sponsored a beauty contest and a new radio station (Reynolds, 2019, p. 9). Furthermore, funds have been provided in the fields of science, technology and education in Africa in addition to the scholarship opportunities provided to Africans in

Russia through state companies such as Rosatom (El-Badawy et al., 2022, p. 19). Indeed, at the beginning of the 2022-2023 academic year, the number of higher education students from African countries in Russia exceeded 34,000 (Statista, n.d.). Moreover, at the Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, Putin announced his intention to establish a medical research center in Guinea that would contribute to the fight against infectious diseases such as Ebola and to open Russian-language courses in Southern African Development Community countries (Simoncelli, 2019).

Russia strives to use military cooperation agreements in a way that serves its political and economic interests in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this way, it aims to gain as much advantage as possible from the tools at its disposal to compete with the West in the region. One of the regional countries where Russia, and especially the Wagner Group, is most active is the Central African Republic, which gained its independence from France in 1960 and is facing with political unrest and instability. Russia increased its contacts with the Central African Republic in 2017 and began to supply light weapons to the country with permission from the UN (Stronski, 2019, p. 16). An agreement was then reached between the two countries in the field of military training. In addition, a Russian, Valery Zakharov, was appointed as President Faustin Archange Touadera's security advisor, while the President's close protection began to be provided by a Russian group (Pokalova, 2023). Furthermore, it was recently announced that Moscow was negotiating to acquire a military base in the Central African Republic (Teslova, 2024a). During this process, the way was also opened for Wagner's entry into the country, and Russia began to have a significant influence in the country, where France had previously had a strong one. The Wagner Group played a major role in keeping President Touadera in power with the political and military support it gave, and in return the companies related to Prigozhin obtained privileges in the field of mining (Pokalova, 2023, p. 10).

Another country where Russia is active is Mali, which gained independence from France in 1960. Since its establishment, Mali has been in armed struggle and turmoil (Pokalova, 2023, p. 14). After Tuareg separatists and the Islamist militants took control part of the country, France started a military operation named Operation Serval in Mali in 2013, followed by Operation Barkhane in the Sahel region. The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) was also established to support the political process and contribute to stability in Mali. Yet, all these efforts have failed to yield positive results. Currently, Al-Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara are the most powerful terrorist groups in the Sahel region (Sippy & Boswall, 2025). In 2021, when France started to withdraw its troops from the Sahel region, Russia intervened through the Wagner Group, similar to what happened in the Central African Republic (Parens, 2022). At this point, it is worth noting that relations between the military administration that seized power after the coup in August 2020 and France have rapidly deteriorated (BBC News, 2022). Moreover, the Malian government requested that the UN peacekeeping force end its mission on the grounds that they could not solve security problems, and this process was completed on December 31, 2023 (BBC News, 2023). The Wagner Group supported the military regime in Mali not only in the military but also in the political field. In this context, anti-French publications were made, a front was taken against the pro-democracy groups in the country and propaganda activities were carried out in support of the military regime. In return for this support, the Wagner Group gained access to Mali's natural resources (Pokalova, 2023, pp. 15-16).

Russia is also an actor in Sudan through the Wagner Group. The Russian state has sold military equipment to Sudan since the early 2000s (Besenyő, 2019, p. 141). Wagner personnel provided political support and were involved in military training programs to protect the regime of Omar al-Bashir during his time in power (Marten, 2019, p. 197). In return for this support, the companies associated with Prigozhin obtained privileges to extract gold from Sudan. Initiatives in this regard began especially after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and accelerated with the increasing sanctions following the attack on Ukraine in 2022. In this context, Russia, which is trying to combat sanctions by avoiding international financial control systems, has tried to achieve this goal through gold (Elbagir et al., 2022). In a study conducted on this subject, it was claimed that Russia earned more than \$2.5 billion from the gold trade in Africa from the attack on Ukraine in February 2022 to December 2023 (The Blood Gold Report, 2023). Another goal of the Kremlin in Sudan is to have a naval base in Port Sudan, a port city, and it reached an agreement with the new government in February 2025 (Rukanga, 2025). Having bases in various parts of the world enhances the prestige of a state and Russia would join the US, China and France that have naval power in the region through this port in line with its social competition strategy.

One of Russia's best customers in the arms market in the region is Angola, with which it has had good relations since the USSR period. Moscow has reaped the fruits of this relationship with the agreements of the Russian diamond company Alrosa on diamond mines in Angola (Besenyő, 2019, p. 140). In Mozambique, the private military companies, including Wagner, were asked for help in order to fight against radical groups. During this process, Russian companies were granted privileges in some natural gas fields (Love, 2023). In 2024, Russia also sent troops to Equatorial Guinea for the protection of president and training of the army (Rukanga, 2024).

Another Sub-Saharan African country where Russia has increased its influence in recent years is Burkina Faso. Indeed, following the coup that took place in the country in 2022, demonstrations were held in which reactions to France and support for Russia were seen. The new administration in the country also changed its foreign policy course from the West to Russia. In this context, the Burkina Faso administration entered into military cooperation with Russia against the radical groups, like JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara, and Russian soldiers began to deploy in Burkina Faso in November 2023 (Yarga, 2024). During this process, an agreement was signed for Russia to build a nuclear power plant in the country, and permission was also granted for Russian companies to access gold mines (Africa News, 2023).

A similar process has been experienced in Niger, which had close relations with the US and France in the past, and after the coup in 2023, the new administration that came to power in Niger initiated a change in foreign policy. The regime, which is fighting against radical groups in the country, demanded the withdrawal of American soldiers, and made an agreement with Russia on military training and equipment supply (Knight et al., 2024).

Thus, the military regimes that came to power after the coups in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022 and Niger in 2023 aimed to cut ties with France and gain the support of Russia in their fight against radical groups. Indeed, these three countries formed the Alliance of Sahel States, a defense pact, in 2023 and then established a confederation in 2024. In addition, these three countries announced their withdrawal from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), which was supported by France, at the beginning of 2024 even though they

were among the founding members (Isilow, 2024). It can be argued that Russia's anti-Western and especially anti-French propaganda has found support among the people of some countries in the region, while it has been successfully using its positive image from the Soviet period in this direction. The West's inadequacy in the fight against terrorism has also opened new doors for Moscow to establish security partnerships and gain influence in the region.

Declining American and French political influence in the region also facilitates Russia's initiatives. After the problems it encountered in Somalia in 1993, the US relegated the region to the background of its foreign policy agenda. However, its interest has increased again since the 2000s. Various factors have played a role in this, including diversifying and securing energy supplies, expanding its share of the region's growing market, and combating terrorism. Activities in this context have focused primarily on security assistance and capacity-building programs (Ryan, 2020). However, the rising power of China shifted the US's attention to Asia and the inability to address Africa's security challenges have further weakened the American influence in the region and provided opportunities for Russia.

France's historical ties to the region are much deeper than those of the US. After decolonization, France attempted to maintain its presence in the region through unilateral interventions (Chafer et al., 2020). However, since the late 1990s, it has been striving to make its interventions within a multilateral framework by cooperating with regional organizations in Africa and the European Union. This strategy does not only aim at legitimizing its policies and curbing anti-French sentiment in the region, but also at associating France's international identity with multilateralism. However, Paris does not shy away from taking unilateral action when it deems it necessary to intervene. Furthermore, even when conducting these unilateral operations, it is careful to immediately contextualize them within a multilateral framework by cooperating with regional and international organizations (Erforth, 2020; Recchia, 2020). However, the failure of these operations to resolve security challenges in the Sahel has severely damaged France's image in the region and paved the way for Russian mercenary groups.

Türkiye, another rising country in African politics, has increased its presence in the region since the late 1990s. In this context, Türkiye is striving to expand its influence by leveraging both hard and soft power. The training of Somali soldiers and the establishment of a military base in Mogadishu can be given as some of the examples of hard power practices, while Yunus Emre Institutes and Maarif Schools' educational activities and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency's (TIKA) development projects constitute the soft power elements of its regional policy. Moreover, opening embassies and the increasing number of flights by Turkish Airlines to Africa also contributed Türkiye's efforts to gain a foothold in the region (Heibach & Taş, 2024). Furthermore, Türkiye also plays a mediator role in regional conflicts, like the one between Ethiopia and Somalia (Tekin, 2024). As a result of these efforts, Türkiye's trade volume with Africa in 2023 exceeded \$35 billion (Berker, 2024). Ankara has also established a strong diplomatic presence with 44 embassies on the continent, and became the fourth largest arms exporter to the region (Berker, 2024; Parens & Plichta, 2024). In addition, diplomatic summits such as the Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit held in 2021 have paved the way for new agreements in the political, economic, and military fields. However, it should be noted that Türkiye's financial constraints have a restrictive effect on its capacity in the region (Heibach & Taş, 2024; Donelli, 2018).

At this point, it is also worth mentioning China, another major power with significant influence in Africa. While Russia prioritizes its military capabilities as its strength, China utilizes economic tools. Both countries criticize the US and France's unilateralism in the region and emphasize multilateralism. This is also reflected in the Security Council votes. Thus far, both countries have been careful not to harm each other's interests in the region. However, it should be noted that China is cautiously monitoring the activities of the Russian private military companies, as the latter's activities pose a risk of undermining China's economic investments (Ramani, 2021; Spearin, 2025).

### **Conclusion**

Since the Tsarist era, Russia has viewed itself as a great power and wanted Western states to recognize it as such. Indeed, even during the 1990s, when it grappled with political and economic problems, it implemented liberal political and economic reforms in line with its social mobility strategy, aiming to both resolve its internal problems and be recognized as a great power by the West in global politics. However, due to ongoing political and economic turmoil and the realization that it was not being consulted by the West on international matters, it began to pursue a different strategy. With increased self-confidence, fueled by the stability and economic recovery achieved in domestic politics and influence exerted on near abroad during the Putin era, Russia has increasingly prioritized social competition strategy since the mid-2000s.

This article focuses on Russia's policy in Sub-Saharan Africa, a region not directly linked to its security and with which it has relatively weak historical ties. A great power is expected to wield not only economic influence but also political and military influence in various regions of the world. Therefore, this article examines Russia's policy toward the region within this context, shedding light on its competition with other great powers within the framework of its social competitive strategy. Furthermore, one of the article's aims is to reveal the tools Russia employs, along with their strengths and weaknesses, to pursue such a strategy.

One of the main findings is that Russia's economic constraints have narrowed its sphere of influence, and it has attempted to compensate for this through military cooperation agreements, anti-Western narratives, disinformation activities and political support to the leaders whose policies align with Russian interests. In this context, Russia has been competing with the countries like the United States and France that are perceived as great powers and have a major influence in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Another finding in the article is that Russia's activities in the region, in line with its social competition strategy, gained momentum after 2014. The economic reason for this can be explained by Western sanctions. On the other hand, Russia's political and military activities in the region also reveal the traces of its social competition strategy, which suggests that there are factors beyond economic considerations in this change, and that Russia, with its increasingly strained relations with the West, is seeking to assert its global influence by competing with them in their sphere of influence.

Currently, Russia's economic constraints restrict its influence in the region and make it difficult to have a great power status on a global scale. Yet, Russia is still competing with the West in the region to be recognized as a great power that should be respected. In this regard, Moscow is not only trying to develop its relations with countries that are excluded by the West

and under sanctions. As was the case in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger in the last few years, Russia is trying to reduce the weight of actors such as the US and France in the region through the political and military support it provides to bolster its own influence. The fact that Sub-Saharan Africa is rich in energy resources and valuable minerals but hosts many countries that are politically unstable and struggling with radical groups gives Russia the opportunity to use its strength to expand its influence. Although the Putin administration emphasizes the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states at the rhetorical level, as can be seen in the example of Sub-Saharan Africa, it does not hesitate to violate this principle in line with Russian interests. The Sub-Saharan African region will likely continue to attract Russia's attention in the future with its political and economic potential.

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