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# How the West can win back the Central African Republic

To shake Russia's position in the Central African Republic, Europe needs to stop reducing the country to a geopolitical sideshow

Even before Russia invaded Ukraine a debate was under way on how and why it was seeking to expand its spheres of influence worldwide, especially in Africa. The Central African Republic (CAR) is now an arena of geopolitical conflict involving the new 'player' Russia and the former colonial power France. The dynamic intervention of private Russian security firms is casting a harsh light on the somewhat lacklustre peace mission.

The Central African Republic may serve as a blueprint for a reorientation of African states on the world stage. This is also happening in Mali. Central Africa is not merely the object of an international trial of strength, however. Its government and population are rational actors in their own right. What drove the CAR government to enter into an agreement with the notorious Wagner Group? Why did the population welcome the Russian soldiers? Have the foundations been laid for a permanent partnership?

## Disappointment and Russian opportunism

The military cooperation is the result of government frustration with other international partners and Russia's clever manoeuvring. After the 2012–14 civil war the UN peace mission used its presence across the country at least to limit the fighting and to contain armed groups territorially. It was often slow in responding to rebel attacks, however, and failed to take the initiative. This gave both government and population the impression that only their own military could defeat the rebels.

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dilapidated state for some time, however. It practically disintegrated after the civil war. One widespread narrative had it that the UN arms embargo was preventing its rehabilitation. Russia has been able to exploit this mood to achieve supposedly a one-off exemption from the embargo and re-equip the Central African military with Russian arms. This also includes brief training in the use of these weapons systems by a few hundred 'military trainers'.

This cooperation really took off when a new rebel alliance beset the capital city in late 2020, threatening to topple the government. This assault was beaten back by the Central African army with the help of Russian mercenaries and Rwandan troops. What tends to be forgotten, however, is that the peace mission, too, made a decisive contribution to ensuring that the rebel alliance could not expand its territory. The army and Russian Wagner Group mercenaries hit back and recaptured practically all important towns and cities within a year. These rapid victories reinforced a narrative that the peace mission – which had not managed this in the course of seven years – is not a reliable partner against the rebels. The conviction was established that only a robust – even ruthless – approach on the part of the Central African military and Russian troops could defeat the rebel groups, who are hated virtually across the board.

## Russia's strong but shakeable position

But it's much easier to conquer territory than to control it. It's absurd for European and American actors to assume that the partnership with Russia is set in stone. Although to all appearances the general support for Russian troops – despite the increasing discovery of atrocities against the population – remains widespread, appearances (media reports, opinion polls, qualitative studies) can be deceptive. First of all, enthusiasm for an actor that was able to expel the rebels after 10 years civil war is scarcely surprising. Secondly, much media coverage is bought and paid for by Russian actors, while pro-Russian or anti-European demonstrations are staged. Thirdly, critics or even victims of Russian actions can hardly express their views publicly in an increasingly repressive environment. Nevertheless, on my recent visit at the beginning of the year I was astonished by the impressive degree of public approval.

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At the same time, clear fissures have been opening up in day-to-day cooperation. For example, some Central African contacts argue

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that while the army and Russian soldiers are perpetrating atrocities, the rebels – whom they are driving back – have committed more. In any case, it is suggested, this can be attributed to the confusion of war. If Russian atrocities continue, however, recollections of the period of rebel dominance will increasingly fade.

In one of the first towns to be recaptured last year – a longstanding rebel stronghold, which cannot be named for security reasons – the main topic of public debate, for example, was no longer 'liberation'. The focus now was on accusations of theft against Russian troops. Similar – often unjustified – allegations have undermined the legitimacy of French and UN task forces for years.

## What Europe has to offer Central African Republic

Europe is currently taking the wrong approach to dealing with the Russian presence in Central Africa. Military and budget assistance have been frozen as if it's already been decided that the Russians are here to stay. Since Russia invaded Ukraine, this approach also suggests that the CAR is to be punished for making a 'pact with the Devil'. This takes insufficient account of the rational actions of CAR actors and population. Russia was allowed into the country in full knowledge, as an alternative to what locals perceived as a failed Western intervention.

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Instead of relegating Central Africa to a sideshow in a major geopolitical contest the aim should be a serious partnership on an equal footing. Further Russian atrocities are coming to light every day. The Central African military are bearing the brunt of their racist attitudes. It is thus up to Europe to offer itself as an alternative. This means first and foremost taking CAR's security concerns seriously. The European training mission needs to be transformed into a nationwide support mission. In practical terms that means replacing the 2,000 or so Russian mercenaries – self-styled 'trainers' – with a comprehensive EU and UN training and logistics network. That's the least that Central Africa should be offered to persuade it to consider breaking off relations

with Russia.

Above all, however, it means finally moving away from prioritising the military and putting the emphasis on a broad-based civil partnership. A first step would be to open up more European embassies. At the moment only the former colonial power France has a local presence. Building up civil society institutions should be given broad support and a dialogue launched. Experience shows that this kind of approach is at least as successful in containing violence and fostering peaceful coexistence as military options.

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