

Opinion – The Russia-Ukraine Crisis and Central African Ramifications

Written by Ben Jackson

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BEN JACKSON, MAR 26 2022

Within a globalised world, it is unsurprising that the Ukrainian crisis will have an impact beyond the immediate borders of Eastern Europe. Russian military involvement in Africa has expanded over the past few years, with Mali having been well documented after the recent withdrawal of French troops. In a similar vein, Russian forces have been active in the Central African Republic (CAR), another former French colony that France withdrew from militarily. The CAR has become highly reliant on Russian military assistance for its security, and this dependency may grow into a wider issue the longer the conflict in Ukraine continues.

The history of the CAR is one of turmoil. Former President Francois Bozize rose to power in 2003 after a military coup, and his rule was immediately challenged by rebel forces in the so-called 'Bush War' between 2004 and 2007. In 2012, a number of rebel groups who had previously opposed Bozize joined forces alongside groups from Chad to form the Seleka Militia. After France refused to send troops to support the government, Bozize fled and the Seleka were able to take power, with leader Michel Djotodia declared as president. What followed was a control breakdown over the Seleka, which was followed by intestine fractures and rampant civil abuses, such as the looting of the capital Bangui. In response, local self-defence groups which included many former Bozize and armed forces personnel were formed. These groups, known as the anti-Balaka, were the only resistance to the Seleka, given the collapse of the state military during the Bozize years. Unable to control his coalition, Djotodia officially disbanded the Seleka in 2013, before himself resigning as part of a negotiated peace deal.

Following an interim government led by Catherine Samba-Panza and supported by a United Nations peacekeeping force known as MINUSCA, presidential elections went ahead as planned at the end of 2015. The former Prime Minister under Bozize, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, was elected President. However, he inherited a state which was wholly reliant on the MINUSCA forces to maintain a semblance of political control over the monopoly of violence that ravaged the country, with various rebel groups controlling vast swathes of territory to the north. The MINUSCA, assisted by French forces, was unable to bring about security to the CAR, and Touadéra decided to look elsewhere for support. At the time, Moscow was willing to support the embattled President, as relations between the two countries have strengthened over the years. In 2018, Russia sent 175 military instructors to the CAR to help train the armed forces, which had been non-existent for many years after being rendered immobile under a 2013 UN Security Council Resolution arms embargo on the country. However, in 2017 there was a partial lifting of the embargo to allow Russian weapons for the armed forces to be brought in. Officially, Moscow's military involvement with the CAR consisted in the despatch of armed personnel to train the local military forces.

Nonetheless, the majority of Russian military operations in the CAR are carried out by the Wagner group, a well-known Russian private military company. These mercenaries number far more than the official military advisors provided by the Russian state. In many ways their initial deployment, alongside Rwandan troops, was successful in defending the government from the rebel group Coalition of Patriots for Change (CPC), who were marching to take the capital in 2021. Following this success, the Wagner group launched a counterinsurgency which brought control for the authorities over the country outside the capital of Bangui for the first time in many years. Thanks to the Wagner group Touadéra was in a far stronger position than he had been when reliant on the French and MINUSCA forces.

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However, the counterinsurgency led to allegations of human rights abuses from the Wagner group. These include looting, indiscriminate killing and forced displacement of the local population. The UN has in recent times urged the CAR authorities to end its relationship with the group, leaving the President in a difficult position. However, this is also not the first time that foreign fighters have been accused of human rights abuses, with French troops having faced allegations that were eventually closed by the state prosecutor after differences in testimonies of the alleged victims.

Given that this call from the UN and fears over the Wagner group emerged prior to the recent invasion of Ukraine by the Russian state, it is unlikely that calls for an end to the relationship will have disappeared. Moreover, the Ukrainian crisis has increased the scrutiny on Russian activities globally. President Touadéra now finds himself in a position that is reminiscent of the Cold War, caught between the West and Russia. The dilemma for Touadéra is that his relationship with Russia has been beneficial and has seen relatively promising results in terms of security. Yet, this has negatively impacted his relations with France, the former colonial power, and the rest of the Western world.

Economic sanctions and a protracted war on its border could see Russian military personnel operating in the CAR required to return to join the more pressing conflict. While there has been no indication that this will be the case, it is certainly a possible outcome of the Ukrainian conflict. This would leave the CAR reliant on the inexperienced local forces and the MINUSCA, with the latter not being widely trusted by the population. Sanctions are already in place against the Wagner group, with the EU introducing them in December 2021, but the group has still been able to operate despite that. Furthermore, Moscow has always denied close links between the state and the group, even though the impact of wider sanctions against Russia and the war effort could bring these links to the fore.

Meanwhile, the response of the CAR authorities appears to have been to double down on their relationship to Moscow. Alongside its unsurprising abstention on the recent UN resolution, on the 24th of February a ceremony took place in Bangui in tribute to the Wagner group and its defence of the capital. It was organised by the National Galaxy platform, a group close to the government and regularly protesting against France and the UN. Few days before, four French soldiers were arrested at the capital's airport, which led to allegations surfacing online that they had been arrested because they were going to attempt to assassinate the President. This rumour was originated by a local website that is rumoured to be pro Russia.

The longer the Ukrainian crisis goes on, the more difficult it will become for the CAR government to play both sides.. While some groups, such as the National Galaxy platform, see the Russian mercenaries as saviours and vital for security, those who have been victims of the alleged human rights abuses will certainly see them in a different light. The President will eventually have to decide whether the potential risks of continuing to rely on Russian military support outweigh the chances that the CAR could be penalised for the relationship.

About the author:

Ben Jackson holds a BA in International Relations from Leeds University and an MSc from SOAS University in African Politics. He has worked on human rights issues in the Central African Republic, Sudan and other African countries for a human rights NGO. He currently works as a Senior Project Support Officer at the Institute of Development Studies and has contributed to working papers and journal articles for the institute.