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Russian cognitive warfare in Africa: from the Sahel to the European Union

Abstract

The expansion of Russian influence operations in Africa, initially coordinated through the Wagner Group and subsequently under Africa Corps, has established itself as a significant factor in the transformation of the information and political landscape in the Sahel, with indirect implications for the European Union. Russia has exploited structural vulnerabilities in local information ecosystems to disseminate anti-Western narratives, contributing, in conjunction with internal dynamics, to reshaping social perceptions in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. The study argues that the impact of this strategy cannot be explained solely in terms of military capabilities, but must be understood as part of an architecture of influence based on disinformation and control of the information space. This network has contributed to creating environments less receptive to the European presence, eroding its capacity for dialogue and hindering its strategic projection on the southern flank.

Faced with this hybrid challenge, the EU has begun to formulate a response that combines coercive instruments with initiatives aimed at strengthening information resilience. The article concludes that only a comprehensive, sustained strategy, coordinated with African partners, will make it possible to counter these dynamics of influence and mitigate their effects on Euro-African security and stability.

Keywords

Russia, Sahel, Wagner, Africa Corps, Cognitive warfare

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1 Introduction and conceptual framework

The purpose of this article is to analyse the role of cognitive influence operations deployed by the Russian Federation on the African continent—with particular attention to the Sahel region—and to assess their potential implications for public opinion and democratic resilience in the European Union (EU). From a methodological perspective, the study adopts a qualitative approach based on the analysis of case studies, a critical review of academic and institutional sources, and a comparative examination of political, security and information dynamics in the Sahel. This approach allows for the identification of patterns of behaviour, significant correlations and emerging trends, although it does not seek to establish unambiguous causal relationships, given the complexity of the environment under analysis and the interplay of multiple endogenous and exogenous factors.

Building on this approach, the article is structured around two main hypotheses. The first argues that the activities of Wagner/Africa Corps in the Sahel can be interpreted as a key instrument within Russia's strategy for projecting power in hybrid environments, contributing to destabilising dynamics that indirectly affect European interests. The second posits that the growing Russian presence in the region is part of a broader process of reconfiguring the geopolitical balance in Africa, characterised by the relative decline of Western influence and the emergence of a more competitive and multipolar international environment.

The paper is structured as follows: following this conceptual framework, the operational evolution of the Wagner Group in Africa is examined, contextualising its activities through an analysis of the cases of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Next, the architecture of Russian influence in the African theatre is described, its strategic implications for the European Union and Spain are assessed, and the European institutional response is analysed, before presenting the conclusions.

1.1 The strategic framework: hybrid warfare and Russian projection in Africa

As discussed in the article 'Moscow stirs up the African hornet's nest: Russian disinformation operations in the Sahel', the geopolitical rivalry between Russia and the West has found in Africa one of its main arenas for indirect confrontation (Bello, 2024: 13). This confrontation can generally be analysed under the paradigm of hybrid warfare (Hoffman, 2007: 11–16), a term referring to the combined and coordinated use of conventional and unconventional means—military, economic, cyber, informational, etc.—to achieve strategic objectives without direct confrontation between states. Since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian military doctrine has reinforced its commitment to non-linear warfare or 'new-generation warfare', in which the boundaries between war and peace are blurred and non-state actors are exploited to weaken rival powers.

The Wagner Group (De la Corte, 2022: 3–14) has repeatedly been interpreted as a functional instrument within this logic since 2017: formally it was a private

paramilitary company, but in practice its actions suggested the existence of structural links with the Russian state apparatus. This led to it becoming an instrument at the service of Moscow's geopolitical interests, benefiting from the logistical support of the Russian state and providing the Kremlin with a cloak of plausible deniability (Kofman, 2016) to intervene in distant conflicts. However, the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, in August 2023, marked the beginning of a new phase: Vladimir Putin initiated a reorganisation process aimed at restructuring the mercenary apparatus and bringing a new entity called 'Africa Corps' under his direct control (Mehra and Demuynck, 2025: 5–20).

The transition was completed in June 2025, when Wagner announced its definitive withdrawal from Mali and the Africa Corps assumed full control of Russian operations on the continent. Unlike Wagner, the Africa Corps is not an autonomous entity but a paramilitary force directly subordinate to the Russian Ministry of Defence, composed of elite commanders from the Russian army and former Wagner fighters. This reorganisation sought to prevent any autonomous force from challenging Moscow again, whilst ensuring the continuity of Russian operations in Africa following Prigozhin's demise.

As will be discussed in this analysis, the expansion of the Africa Corps has accelerated significantly in the period between 2024 and 2025. In April 2024, the Africa Corps deployed an air defence system in Niger and, in September 2025, Russia and Niger began negotiations on the development of the country's uranium deposits. In July 2025, a high-level delegation from the Russian Ministry of Defence visited Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso to discuss the expansion of the Africa Corps' presence in the three countries. That same month, the Russian Duma ratified a military cooperation agreement with Togo providing for joint exercises, training of local soldiers and intelligence sharing, whilst the Russian ambassador to Benin announced similar plans for that country.

In parallel, the Alliance of Sahel States—formed by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso following their respective *coups d'état*—has consolidated itself as a new framework for regional cooperation. Although this bloc has been interpreted as a space for strategic convergence with Russia, it is more accurate to understand it as a structure driven by internal dynamics of the pursuit of strategic sovereignty, which in practice has facilitated greater political, military and economic rapprochement with Moscow.

In the realm of cognitive warfare, the transformation has been equally significant. Following Prigozhin's death, the Russian Ministry of Defence launched the African Initiative (African Initiative, 2026) in September 2023, a media platform that has maintained websites and Telegram channels promoting pro-Russian government content, and has been highly active in organising cultural events in the Sahel. This new structure replaces and expands the operations of the so-called 'troll factory' (SWI, 2023) associated with Prigozhin, now operating under a more direct degree of state control. Thus, following the *coups d'état* in Mali (2020–2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022) and Niger (2023), demonstrations and popular mobilisations have continued to be organised, featuring a proliferation of Russian flags and anti-

Western slogans, amplified through social media and local media aligned with Moscow. These expressions of rejection of Western influence have been widely linked, in various analyses, to disinformation campaigns and coordinated influence operations; however, their impact must be interpreted within a broader framework in which internal factors—such as the deterioration of security, the perceived ineffectiveness of international missions, governance crises or the persistence of postcolonial narratives—converge with external dynamics linked to geopolitical competition. In this sense, influence operations do not constitute an exclusive explanatory factor, but rather a catalytic element that helps to amplify pre-existing perceptions and reconfigure the interpretative frameworks through which certain sectors of the population assess the Western presence, potentially favouring—in combination with other factors—processes of social legitimisation of political decisions such as the withdrawal of French troops, the closure of European bases or a strategic reorientation towards Russia as an alternative partner. Thus, rather than replacing material reality, cognitive warfare appears to act by reconfiguring the frames of perception through which reality is interpreted, so that the transformation of public opinion responds not only to objective changes in the security situation, but also to a progressive reprogramming of interpretative frameworks through systematic influence techniques, which requires a more precise conceptual analysis.

1.2 From the information domain to the cognitive domain: conceptual clarifications

Within the spectrum of hybrid warfare, it is essential to distinguish between information warfare (Rid, 2020: 423–430) and cognitive warfare (Du Cluzel, 2022: 1–12), terms that are frequently confused but which imply qualitatively different levels of confrontation. The 21st century has witnessed a radical transformation in the forms of confrontation. The traditional dimensions of conflict—physical, maritime, aerial, space and cyber—no longer operate in isolation but overlap and interconnect. Cutting across all these dimensions is the information domain and, beyond this, the cognitive domain, which has progressively become the new strategic terrain par excellence (Hammes, 2006: 207–223). Unlike information warfare (Department of the Army, 2018: 1-4), which seeks control of channels and a monopoly on operational truth, and cyber warfare, which attacks the vulnerabilities of digital infrastructure, cognitive warfare targets the very processes of meaning-making. It is not content with the adversary being unaware of the truth; it seeks to make them distrust the very possibility of knowing it.

Thus, whilst information warfare manipulates the content—that is, what is known—cognitive warfare manipulates the container—that is, how one thinks. This distinction reinforces Du Cluzel's observation that traditional psychological operations seek to change 'what the target audience thinks', but cognitive warfare aims to shape 'how they reason and, consequently, how they behave' (2022: 1–12). Whereas the former seeks to make the adversary adopt our version of reality, the latter seeks to make the adversary lose faith in any stable version of reality and thus be

able to manipulate them from the very source of thought in a far more decisive and profound manner.

In this regard, it is worth noting that NATO understands the cognitive dimension as the realm in which the human mind becomes an operational theatre where actors confront one another strategically, and includes activities synchronised with other instruments of power to 'influence, protect or alter the cognition of individuals, groups or populations in order to gain an advantage over the adversary' (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023: 3). As Claverie, Prébot, Buchler and Du Cluzel point out, 'in cognitive warfare, all elements of information warfare, including psychological operations (PSYOPS), are integrated into military action and, at the same time, converge with influence operations (soft power) and cyber capabilities, which until then had been managed separately' (2022: 4).

Cognitive warfare is, in this sense, the militarisation of public opinion taken to its logical extreme: it does not simply seek to shape preferences, but to reconfigure the mental frameworks that make those preferences possible in the first place. This conceptual specificity—which distinguishes cognitive warfare from both traditional propaganda and cyberwarfare or information warfare—calls for a new operational definition that allows for a precise analysis of its application in the case of the Sahel.

1.3 Cognitive warfare: operational definition and dual temporality

Based on the above clarifications, the following operational definition is proposed to guide the analysis in this article: Cognitive warfare constitutes a specific form of non-kinetic strategic confrontation aimed at influencing a population's processes of perception, interpretation and decision-making, through the systematic manipulation of the human, informational and digital environment, with the aim of eroding their critical reasoning and reducing their political and social resilience.

And taking this definition as a starting point, it is worth noting that a critical dimension distinguishing cognitive warfare is its operation across two simultaneous and interdependent temporal registers: The first register is the slow one, that of erosion. In this phase, alternative narratives, seeds of doubt and conspiracy theories take root over months or years within the social fabric, fracturing community cohesion and eroding institutional trust. The 'society of transparency' is eroded in favour of a 'society of suspicion' (Han, 2015: 48). This register is preparatory and underground, invisible to traditional conflict warning indicators.

The second phase is the rapid one, that of detonation. Once the conditions of erosion have matured, an algorithmically amplified information crisis can destabilise and crack institutions within hours. Cognitive warfare exploits the viral spread of social media, algorithmic personalisation and generative artificial intelligence to create disruptive events. This phase is decisive and explosive, and its effectiveness depends entirely on the prior work of erosion.

The first paves the way for the second. Without the slow erosion of epistemic trust—without the population having internalised that 'everyone lies' or that 'truth is

relative'—the rapid detonation produces no lasting strategic effects. This temporal duality explains why cognitive warfare is particularly difficult to detect for traditional intelligence structures, designed for imminent kinetic threats, but not for processes of slow ecosystem contamination operating at a multidimensional level and in the medium to long term. The case of Mali clearly illustrates both these dimensions : the erosion took place between 2017 and 2022 through the gradual infiltration of anti-French narratives on social media, the systematic delegitimisation of the Barkhane mission through accusations of complicity with terrorists, and the normalisation of suspicion towards any information coming from Western sources. The tipping point came with the coup in August 2020 and the formal expulsion of French troops in 2022, events that found massive social support because the cognitive groundwork had been laid over many years.

As Colonel Fuente Cobo (2025: 1–17) points out, the transformation of Malian public opinion—from support for the French presence in 2019 to the acclaim for its expulsion in 2022—cannot be explained solely by an objective change in the security situation, but also responds to a 'reprogramming of perceptual frameworks' through techniques of systematic cognitive warfare (2025: 12). This interpretation is consistent with the specialist literature on disinformation and influence operations. Firstly, Thomas Rid, in his work *Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*, demonstrates, through a thorough historical analysis, that cognitive warfare techniques do not seek so much to fabricate entirely new realities as to intervene in existing perceptions, manipulating the interpretation of facts through the selective distortion of information (2020: 377–380). In a complementary vein, Bradshaw and Howard (2018: 2–9) provide empirical evidence that contemporary disinformation campaigns in digital environments are structured around the algorithmic amplification of emotionally resonant content, which fosters polarisation and reinforces pre-existing beliefs among target audiences. In the African context, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) has documented how external influence operations tend to operate in environments characterised by institutional fragility, mistrust of international actors and lingering historical grievances, acting as multipliers of existing social dynamics (ACSS, 2024: 5). Taken together, these contributions support the argument that the evolution of public opinion in Mali does not respond to a single explanatory vector, but rather to the interaction between internal structural factors and external influence strategies which, rather than generating new perceptions, reconfigure and reinforce pre-existing interpretative frameworks.

Bearing in mind this conceptual framework and its dual temporality, if we consider the case of Russia in Africa , Moscow has combined paramilitary support for coup regimes with cognitive warfare operations based on disinformation, propaganda and cultural manipulation, shaping a model of hybrid intervention in which both dimensions—kinetic and informational—operate synergistically. Within this framework, strategies of influence do not operate in isolation, but are embedded in contexts characterised by institutional fragility, crises of legitimacy and the persistence of postcolonial narratives, where they help to amplify pre-existing perceptions, grievances and interpretative frameworks, thereby reinforcing their effectiveness without the need to generate entirely new social dynamics.

2 The Wagner Group's operational activities in Africa

As highlighted in the article 'Across Africa, Russia is growing in influence. What might Moscow want?' (Princewill, 2025) and the analysis 'Wagner in the Sahel: a paramilitary, demographic and informational threat to European security in Africa' (Gazapo, 2025), the expansion of the paramilitary group in the Sahel has become a key factor in understanding the complex relationship between African and European security, as the paramilitary dimension—marked by the training of local troops and active participation in combat operations—is intertwined with strategies of disinformation, cognitive warfare and social control that contribute to weakening Western actors and reinforcing Russian influence. It is worth noting that Wagner's arrival in Africa occurred at a time of Western withdrawal and the rise of new alliances on the continent. Whilst Milosevich (2023: 59–84) has noted in his analyses that Moscow has been increasing its presence in Africa through synchronous actions combining the reactivation of networks established during the Cold War, political diplomacy, influence campaigns and the involvement of the paramilitary group Wagner, this description must be supplemented with a crucial clarification: the paramilitary group can hardly be understood as a fully autonomous actor, but rather as a functional instrument linked to the Russian state apparatus, even though it is formally presented as a private initiative.

The transition from Wagner to Africa Corps represents, as Garrido Guijarro has pointed out in his analysis of the reorganisation of the mercenary apparatus, 'a turning point in Russian-African relations' (2024: 1), given that 'the leader of Wagner was Russia's key man in Africa since the group began operating on the continent in 2017' (2024: 1). The Kremlin's objective, as the same author states, is 'to take control of Wagner's personnel operating in Africa and place them under the direct command of the Russian Ministry of Defence, thereby preventing another private military company or a post-Prigozhin Wagner from accumulating sufficient power and autonomy to once again become a threat to the Kremlin' (2024: 2).

However, this transition does not alter the essential nature of the instrument. As demonstrated by the analysis of the Ukrainian NGO Come Back Alive, 'Wagner was designed to serve as a smokescreen concealing the activities of the Russian Federation as a state; the practice of referring to the Wagner Group as a private military company with roots in the media is entirely incorrect' (Kucherenko *et al.*, 2024: 3). This conceptual clarification is fundamental insofar as Wagner can hardly be considered an autonomous actor in the strict sense, but rather 'a tool that diverted the attention of law enforcement investigators away from crimes committed directly by the Russian Federation or its violations of existing norms' (Kucherenko *et al.*, 2024: 3).

Its first known operations took place in Libya and Sudan (2017–2018), followed by the Central African Republic (2018) and Mozambique (2019). However, it was in the Sahel region that Wagner would find its main area of expansion. The strategic importance of this region for Spain and the EU cannot be underestimated: as Milosevich-Juaristi has warned in his analysis of the implications for Spain, 'Russia's penetration of the Sahel is highly detrimental', as Moscow exploits 'the lack of

legitimacy, institutional weakness and international isolation of some governments in the region to extend its influence, with three pernicious effects: as well as improving its geostrategic position, it helps to perpetuate authoritarian regimes and prevent the consolidation of legitimate institutions' (2023: 8). This warning takes on greater urgency if we consider that, in the words of the same author, 'if the Sahel is handed over to Russia, it will be very difficult to return to the region' (2023: 9).

2.1 Mali

Wagner's presence in Mali was formalised following the coup d'état in May 2021 led by Colonel Assimi Goïta. Invoking the defence of sovereignty and espousing an anti-Western narrative that was reinforced and amplified across various news channels, including those aligned with Moscow, the military leader severed counter-terrorism cooperation with France and the EU. In December 2021, some one thousand Wagner mercenaries arrived in the country with the stated aim of training the Malian Army (FAMA) and supporting the fight against Salafist-jihadist terrorist groups operating in the north and centre of the country.

In the early months, with operational advice from Wagner, Malian forces launched offensives that enabled them to regain control of a significant proportion of the territory that had fallen into the hands of terrorist organisations and transnational criminal groups. The Bamako government presented these advances as a military success, but the darker side of the alliance soon emerged: numerous international organisations denounced brutal human rights violations in the joint FAMA-Wagner operations. A tragic example was the Moura massacre in March 2022, where Malian soldiers and foreign troops attributed to Wagner summarily executed hundreds of innocent civilians accused of collaborating with Islamist extremists. The escalation of violence coincided with a rapid deterioration in Mali's relations with France, the European Union and the UN. Throughout 2022, Goïta's *junta* gradually expelled unwelcome international actors: first it forced the withdrawal of French troops from the Operation Barkhane, and then launched a campaign of harassment against the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA), accusing it of espionage and pro-Western bias. In June 2023, the Malian government demanded the immediate withdrawal of the peacekeepers, thereby completing the expulsion of all Western contingents from the country. This vacuum was gradually filled by Russia, not only through Wagner, but also through growing official diplomatic and military support from Moscow.

In 2025, Wagner's transition to the Africa Corps was consolidated, causing a major stir on local social media. In June of that year, Wagner officially announced its definitive withdrawal from Mali, completing the rebranding demanded by Putin and the transfer of operations to the Africa Corps, an organisation that was already under the direct control of the Russian Ministry of Defence following its creation in July 2023 as a result of the Russia-Africa summit held in St. Petersburg. As researcher Hanna Notte of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies has noted, 'Africa Corps has taken over most of the Wagner Group's former operations in Africa, elevating them to the level of official state-to-state relations' (2025: 4). However, the

transfer of functions and personnel from Wagner to Africa Corps did not result in improved security in Mali; the reality on the ground in 2025 calls into question the Russian narrative of effective security regarding the terrorist threat: In August 2025, the strategic town of Farabougou fell into the hands of the jihadists of Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM), marking a turning point in the conflict. Supply routes to Bamako are blocked, fuel prices have skyrocketed, and hundreds of thousands of Malian refugees have fled to neighbouring countries. This situation stands in stark contrast to the years prior to the Russian intervention; indeed, according to data from the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), jihadist attacks in Mali increased dramatically in 2024–2025 despite the presence of Wagner/Africa Corps (Nsaibia, 2024).

On the domestic political front, Wagner's patronage strengthened the military junta's position; Mali repeatedly postponed the promised elections and in 2023 adopted a new electoral and constitutional law that consolidated the military regime, all with Moscow's approval. In summary, between 2021 and 2025, Mali transitioned from being a key Western ally in the fight against terrorism to becoming a state increasingly aligned with Russia, closed to Western presence and dependent on Wagner/Africa Corps both for its immediate security and for its legitimising narrative.

2.2 Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso's trajectory has run parallel to that of Mali in many respects, albeit with its own particularities. After years of fragility in the face of the jihadist insurgency, the country suffered two *coups d'état* in 2022: the first in January, led by Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba, and the second in September, which brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré to power. Both usurpers justified their actions by citing a lack of results in the fight against terrorism and a loss of trust in traditional Western partners, notably France. From the outset, pro-Russian elements emerged within the coup circles. At the street demonstrations celebrating the September 2022 *coup*, Russian flags were waved and anti-French slogans chanted, a sign that public sentiment had already been cultivated beforehand by Russian teams dedicated to waging cognitive warfare. Following the same modus operandi as in Mali, various Facebook pages of dubious origin spread rumours that France was protecting the deposed president or even supporting the jihadists, whilst presenting Putin's government as the sole saviour. These campaigns helped shape public opinion to such an extent that the Traoré regime expelled the French ambassador and closed the French cultural centre, only to immediately invite Russia as a new partner country and strategic ally.

In early 2023, Burkina Faso called for the withdrawal of French special forces stationed in Ouagadougou and cancelled military cooperation agreements with Paris, severing ties of cooperation and collaboration that had been in place for decades. Although the Burkinabe government officially denied having signed a contract with Wagner, the local press itself has reported on the presence of Russian instructors, mercenaries and agents in the country. Furthermore, Moscow actively promoted

the heroic image of Ibrahim Traoré as a young pan-Africanist leader: traditional and digital Russian media, as well as fake profiles on various social media platforms, drew comparisons between Traoré and the iconic revolutionary former president Thomas Sankara. Moscow sought to present him as part of a new generation of sovereigntist leaders distancing themselves from Europe and aligning with Russia. In the same vein, in April 2023, the Burkinabe government announced a cooperation agreement with Russia on mining and hydrocarbons, opening the door to Russian investment in strategic sectors previously dominated by Western companies. Since the start of 2025, the Africa Corps' presence in Burkina Faso has been consolidated through the deployment of new air defence systems, infrastructure and contingents. A case in point is how the Dori airbase has become the Africa Corps' main operational hub in the region.

The security implications of all this have been significantly negative. On the one hand, Traoré, advised by Russian instructors on counter-insurgency tactics, launched an ineffective popular defence strategy by recruiting tens of thousands of civilian volunteers to fight the jihadists, who continue to carry out frequent attacks. On the other hand, there have been extremely serious massacres of civilians attributed to the armed forces, notably the one in Karma, where Burkinabe soldiers executed more than a hundred civilians from the Fulani ethnic group on suspicion of colluding with terrorists.

The persistence of these 'scorched earth' tactics (González-Ruibal, 2023: 379–408), despite their proven ineffectiveness against terrorism, illustrates a distinctive feature of Russian cognitive warfare highlighted by Pujol: 'the objective of influencing the way people and groups think, react and make decisions has shifted from tactical to strategic—an end in itself—and is increasingly easy to achieve' (2024: 48). In this case, the objective is not so much to defeat the armed enemy as to consolidate an authoritarian regime by delegitimising Western alternatives and normalising extreme violence as a method of governance. Despite the persistence of terrorism, the official narrative—amplified by pro-Russian spokespeople—maintains that France's expulsion was necessary and that tangible results will be seen in the long term thanks to unconditional cooperation with Moscow. In short, Burkina Faso has followed the script played out in Mali: military coups legitimised by anti-Western rhetoric, geopolitical realignment towards Russia and internal authoritarian consolidation, all accompanied by a propaganda and cognitive apparatus that helps to justify, entrench and reinforce each of these processes.

2.3 Niger

The case of Niger is of strategic importance as it was the last major Western ally in the Sahel until 2023 and is a critical supplier of uranium to Europe. On 26 July 2023, a coup d'état overthrew the elected, pro-Western President Mohamed Bazoum and installed a military junta led by General Abdourahamane Tiani. As in Mali and Burkina Faso, popular celebrations of the coup in Niamey featured Russian flags and attacks on French symbols, suggesting prior efforts at cognitive contamination

and pro-Russian agitation within Nigerien society. Indeed, in the months leading up to the coup, messages circulated on social media accusing France of exploiting local uranium (Bello, 2024: 1–19) and, as noted by the Robert Lansing Institute for Global Threats and Democracies Studies (RLI), fake news was also circulated alleging Western plans to divide the country, in contrast to implicit promises that an alliance with Moscow would safeguard national sovereignty (RLI, 2025).

The international reaction to the coup in Niger was particularly firm: the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) imposed severe sanctions and threatened regional military intervention to restore Bazoum. Against this tense backdrop, Russia sought to position itself as a strategic supporter of the coup-leading military junta. The Wagner Group publicly offered its services to the new rulers in Niamey to guarantee their security in the face of a possible ECOWAS intervention. At the same time, Russian propaganda stepped up its activity: the state-run media outlets RT and Sputnik defended the *junta*'s position and accused France of planning an invasion, whilst messages of support from the Russian people for Niger went viral on social media and any attempt by ECOWAS to reverse the coup was branded as neo-colonial. Ultimately, military pressure from ECOWAS did not materialise, and the Nigerien junta consolidated its power. In this new status quo, Niger shifted towards Moscow's orbit: in September 2023, it signed agreements to allow the stationing of Russian military instructors presented as technical co-operators, and in April 2024, local sources reported the arrival of Russian contingents under bilateral agreements.

Russia's consolidation of its presence continued in the years that followed. In April 2024, the Africa Corps deployed a form of air defence system in Niger, and in September 2025, Russia and Niger began negotiations on the development and exploitation of the country's uranium deposits. As noted by analysts at the Institute for the Study of War (ISW), Moscow seeks to secure access to Niger's uranium deposits as part of its broader strategy to control critical mineral resources in Africa (Bugayova *et al.*, 2019). In July 2025, a high-level delegation from the Russian Ministry of Defence visited Niamey to discuss the expansion of the Africa Corps' presence and the signing of new military cooperation agreements.

The French presence, by contrast, was completely dismantled: the French ambassador was expelled, French troops stationed in Niamey were withdrawn, and French military flights over Niger were banned. As for the crucial uranium sector—Niger has historically been a major supplier of uranium to France, giving this resource a strategic dimension in the context of European energy security (World Nuclear Association, 2024; Euratom Supply Agency, 2025: 7–15)—Russian interest in these assets has been explicitly highlighted in specific analyses. In particular, the report entitled *Russia Is Said to Seek French-Held Uranium Assets in Niger* states that Moscow has reportedly sought to gain a foothold in uranium assets previously linked to French interests in the country (Bloomberg, 2024). This move is also part of a broader strategy documented by analysts at the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in the report *Power Plays: Developments in Russian Enriched Uranium Trade*, which analyses how Russia has increased its presence in African extractive sectors—including critical energy and mineral resources—as part of its geo-economic projection (Dolzikova,

2024). In a related vein, Mykhailo Kucherenko, Oleksandr Burlaka and Oleksandr Demchenko, researchers at the Ukrainian foundation Come Back Alive, produced the report *Wagner Deconstruction* in 2024, in which they argue that Wagner's presence in Africa is part of a strategic design in which military, intelligence and economic dimensions are integrated, including access to high-value natural resources. Thus, rather than homogeneous global control, what is observed is a strategy of selective positioning in resource-rich enclaves which, taken together, expand Moscow's capacity to influence critical supply chains and have direct implications for European energy security (Kucherenko *et al.*, 2024: 38–67).

In short, Niger represents the consolidation of Russia's rise in the Sahel: the last pro-Western stronghold has fallen, and with it the EU has lost its main regional partner in the fight against terrorism and irregular migration. Conversely, Moscow has gained a key geostrategic ally and expanded its leverage over Europe by controlling critical resources and opening up a continuous corridor of pro-Russian regimes across the Sahel-Saharan belt.

3 The complex architecture of Russian cognitive influence in Africa

Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russian cognitive influence operations in Africa are not isolated initiatives, but rather a coherent strategic architecture that integrates multiple instruments. This architecture is structured around four interrelated operational vectors: the construction of anti-Western and anti-imperialist narratives tailored to local perceptions; the diversification and proliferation of dissemination channels, including state-run media such as RT or Sputnik; the intensive exploitation of the digital ecosystem through social media and messaging platforms, particularly following the creation of the *African Initiative*; and, finally, the implementation of cultural and social initiatives aimed at consolidating cognitive penetration within the community fabric. The interaction of these elements enables Russia not only to influence African public opinion, but also to generate indirect effects on European interests, by facilitating the displacement of Western actors, the reconfiguration of strategic alliances and the creation of geopolitical environments less favourable to the European Union.

At the heart of Russian propaganda in Africa lies a narrative—the first vector—of a purportedly emancipatory nature, according to which the continent is said to be immersed in a new struggle for liberation against European neo-colonialism, whilst Russia presents itself as a partner that respects African sovereignty and is free from the conditional practices associated with the West. Its strategic effectiveness lies in the fact that it not only reinterprets the colonial past and the geopolitical present, but also helps to erode the legitimacy of the European presence and, in certain contexts, makes its replacement by actors linked to Moscow more acceptable.

As for the diversification of traditional media channels—the second vector—it should be noted that Russia has drawn on a wide range of communication tools aimed at expanding, amplifying and normalising its narrative in the African public sphere.

In the realm of state media, RT and Sputnik launched services targeting Francophone Africa from the mid-2010s, bolstering their international reach following their ban in the European Union in 2022. Alongside these high-profile channels, local media outlets aligned with pro-Russian positions have also come to the fore, such as *Afrique Média*, a pan-African channel based in Cameroon that has served as a regional mouthpiece for anti-Western arguments and messages consistent with Russia's influence on the continent. Taken together, this diversification of channels not only increases the reach of pro-Kremlin narratives in Africa but also facilitates their transnational circulation, thereby fostering the creation of information environments hostile to European interests.

With regard to social media—the third vector—it is worth emphasising that cyberspace has become one of the main arenas for the deployment of contemporary cognitive warfare. An examination of reports by Freedom House, MLSA, NetBlocks, Access Now, Top10VPN or ProtonMail reveals that, between 2010 and 2026, millions of Africans joined social media: 'According to the latest available data, social media users in Africa have increased steadily, reaching over 384 million' (Adika, 2023). The African digital space offers particularly favourable conditions for the rapid circulation of emotionally mobilising content, coordinated disinformation campaigns and narrative amplification operations with the potential to impact both the African sphere and, indirectly, European strategic interests.

In this digital context, the launch of the *African Initiative* in September 2023 marks a turning point in the institutionalisation of Russia's media outreach in Africa. According to the African Digital Democracy Observatory (ADDO), this organisation was spearheaded by figures such as Sergey Anatolevich Volkov and Artyom Kureyev with the aim of establishing a platform specifically geared towards disseminating Kremlin-friendly content in the African digital sphere (ADDO, 2024). The *African Initiative* operates through domains such as afrinz.ru, maintains a high level of activity on social media, works in several languages and has established an operational presence in cities such as Ouagadougou and Bamako to adapt its campaigns to local contexts. Its significance has been highlighted in the report *African Initiative: From Public Diplomacy to Covert Influence Operations*, produced by France's Foreign Digital Interference Monitoring Service (VIGINUM), the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). In this strategic document, it is defined as 'the main vehicle for Russian activities of manipulation and information interference in the region and one of the main tools for the renewal of its information influence strategy in Africa' (VIGINUM *et al.*, 2025: 3). From this perspective, the *African Initiative* acts not merely as a platform for the dissemination of propaganda, but as an infrastructure designed to expand, coordinate and adapt narratives favourable to Moscow, discredit Western actors in African public discourse, and amplify operations of information manipulation and , the effects of which ultimately also impact European interests.

In line with this digital dimension of cognitive warfare, it is worth noting that Russia's influence in Africa has not been limited to institutional or semi-official platforms, but has also relied on operators specialising in propaganda amplification, disinformation and the building of networks of influence. One of the most notorious

was Prigozhin, who, in addition to leading the Wagner Group until his death in 2023, financed digital propaganda structures associated with the so-called 'troll factory' of the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and various misleading news portals (Kofman, 2016). In the African context, these dynamics included the use of front organisations, communications consultancies and informal influence mechanisms aimed at intervening in political and electoral processes.

Alongside this dimension more directly linked to the Prigozhin ecosystem, another key figure was Luc Michel, a far-right Belgian ideologue and promoter of the self-styled 'African Russosphere'. Before his death in 2025, Michel coordinated networks of websites, Facebook groups and pro-Russian associations active in the French-speaking African sphere, including platforms such as *Centrafrique Libre* in the Central African Republic and *Mali Web* in Mali. According to investigations published by the BBC, Libération, Le Monde and NPR, as well as the *Wagner Deconstruction* report produced by Ukrainian analysts at the Come Back Alive Foundation in 2024, his role was particularly significant in amplifying pro-Wagner messages in Mali and Burkina Faso between 2021 and 2022, as well as in establishing collaborative networks with local elites capable of replicating and legitimising the pro-Russian line in the media, political circles and spheres of social influence.

In terms of cultural and community outreach initiatives—the fourth vector—Wagner/Africa Corps has expanded the scope of its influence operations through actions targeting groups with the potential to reach wider communities. These include football tournaments sponsored by the Russian community, food donations with Cyrillic labels distributed in villages, and TikTok accounts where Russian mercenaries appear interacting with local cultural codes with the aim of humanising their public image. Beyond their apparent banality, these practices serve a strategic function: they seek to positively embed the 'Russia' brand in the collective imagination, counteract the reputation for violence associated with Wagner, and generate emotional bonds of symbolic closeness with the recipient communities (Bond, 2023). Added to this logic of social penetration are formats specifically aimed at young audiences, such as the video game *African Dawn*, promoted by *African Initiative* as an African adaptation of the popular *Hearts of Iron IV* and centred on contemporary events in the Sahel (African Initiative, 2024). Its appeal lies not only in its recreational nature, but in its ability to project pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives through an immersive format that is particularly appealing to younger generations, helping to reinforce the delegitimisation of European partners in the regional political imagination.

The combined effect of these four vectors—ideological narratives, multi-platform media, specialised operators and social penetration tactics—has significantly eroded the Western position across large swathes of the Sahel. As Michael J. Kelley (2024) noted in his analysis for the US Army War College, just as the Kremlin exploited political and social divisions in Western contexts such as the 2016 US elections, Russia has subsequently extended those same strategies of influence to African settings characterised by high institutional fragility, with the aim of capitalising on existing grievances, winning over support and shaping collective perceptions in favour of its geopolitical interests.

4 Strategic implications for the European Union and Spain

The expansion of Russian influence in Africa through Wagner/Africa Corps raises strategic implications of considerable scope for the European Union and, in a particularly sensitive manner, for Spain. These implications extend to the security, geopolitical, economic and cognitive spheres, insofar as the reconfiguration of the Sahelian environment alters security balances, triggers migration flows, modifies frameworks for regional and inter n cooperation, and creates less favourable conditions for the European presence and engagement on the southern flank.

In the security sphere, instability in the Sahel constitutes a significant risk factor for the EU, as it affects two critical areas: terrorism and irregular migration. The region has established itself as one of the main global epicentres of jihadism, with organisations affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State expanding their activities towards the Gulf of Guinea. In this context, the withdrawal of Western forces and the limited effectiveness of Wagner against insurgencies deeply rooted in the social fabric contribute to prolonging scenarios of violence with the potential for indirect spillover into Europe, whether through the movement of fighters, the expansion of affiliated networks or the worsening of conditions of regional destabilisation. At the same time, the deterioration in security and humanitarian crises are intensifying migratory pressure towards the Mediterranean and the Atlantic route, creating an environment in which these flows could be exploited, in certain contexts, as a vector of pressure or hybrid coercion on the EU.

On the geopolitical front, the loss of European influence in the Sahel represents a major strategic setback. As outlined in the previous sections, the expulsion of European missions and the gradual rapprochement of several governments in the region with Moscow are shaping a political environment that is less cooperative with the West and more receptive to Russian influence. Consequently, the expansion of Moscow's influence in Africa not only improves its geostrategic position on Europe's southern flank, but also contributes to eroding the EU's capacity for dialogue, weakening its institutional legitimacy as a security actor, and reducing its operational scope in the Sahel-Saharan region (Gazapo, 2025: 1–37).

On the economic front, a particularly sensitive area is that of strategic resources. Africa supplies Europe with critical raw materials—including uranium, gold, diamonds, cobalt and rare earths—so that the expansion of Russian influence over producing countries introduces added risks of dependency, interference and the political exploitation of these resources. This dynamic is particularly relevant in a European context still marked by the lessons drawn from its recent energy vulnerabilities. At the same time, the replacement of European firms by Russian or Chinese companies in extractive sectors reduces the EU's economic presence, weakens its capacity for influence and favours less transparent exploitation structures that better serve geopolitical interests outside Europe.

On a cognitive level, these external dynamics also have a feedback effect on European democratic resilience itself, insofar as they fuel narratives of Western decline, European ineffectiveness and the apparent effectiveness of the Russian

authoritarian model. This is not merely a loss of presence on the African ground, but also a contest over the strategic narrative concerning the southern flank. In this regard, Josep Borrell, former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and current president of CIDOB, has warned that Europe cannot afford to neglect the Sahel, precisely because the European withdrawal has been accompanied by a replacement—not only material but also narrative—by Russia: 'When I arrived in Brussels, we Europeans were present in all the Sahel countries […] now we are in none, and in our place is Russia […] the Africa Corps is throughout the Sahel and we are not' (Borrell, 2025: 1–15).

For Spain, given its geographical proximity, its ties with West Africa and its particularly high exposure to developments on the southern flank, these implications are especially significant. This translates into greater risks of indirect destabilisation, migratory pressure on the Canary Islands and Andalusia, potential impacts on economic and energy interests, and exposure to disinformation campaigns linked to the deterioration of the regional environment. In this context, General Víctor Bados has warned that 'Spain cannot remain a mere spectator of what is happening in Africa; it is essential to treat our partners as equals' (COPE Jaca, 2025). Overall, the loss of European influence in Africa increases the strategic vulnerability of the EU and Spain both externally and internally, consolidating the Sahel as a genuine forward frontier of European security.

5 The European response: from sanctions to cognitive resilience

Faced with the multidimensional challenge posed by Russian influence in the Sahel—in its informational, cognitive, security and geopolitical dimensions—the European response has gradually taken shape along two main lines. On the one hand, through coercive and punitive measures aimed at weakening the Wagner/Africa Corps networks and hindering their operations. On the other, through initiatives aimed at strengthening resilience against disinformation and improving the communicative response capacity of both the EU itself and its African partners. Although these responses remain partial and uneven in their development, they demonstrate that the EU has begun to recognise that the Russian threat cannot be addressed solely in military terms, but requires a comprehensive strategy of a political, informational and cognitive nature.

5.1 Sanctions and coercive measures

The European Union has resorted to the sanctions regime as its primary coercive instrument against Wagner/Africa Corps and their support networks. Since late 2021, the EU has begun sanctioning Yevgeny Prigozhin and senior Wagner commanders for their involvement in human rights violations and destabilising activities in Africa and Ukraine. Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, these measures were significantly expanded and, in 2023, Brussels formally included the Wagner Group and its associated media outlet RIA FAN on the sanctions list. This decision carried

significant political weight, as it conveyed the idea that Wagner should not be viewed merely as a local irregular actor, but as part of a destabilisation network with an international reach (Council of the EU, 2023).

The European legal framework has also been expanding. In October 2024, the Council established a specific regime of restrictive measures against hybrid activities linked to the Kremlin, including cyberattacks, disinformation, sabotage and the manipulation of migration flows (Council of the EU, 2024). Subsequently, in 2025, the EU adopted the 17th and 18th sanctions packages, which tightened the financial and logistical noose through restrictions on exports of dual-use technology and measures targeting mining companies associated with Russian networks in Africa (Council of the EU, 2025a; 2025b).

In addition, the EU has made part of its support for African organisations—such as ECOWAS and the African Union—conditional on the rejection of the use of mercenaries, and has suspended cooperation with governments that collaborate with Wagner/Africa Corps, as was the case with Mali. The European Parliament has reinforced this stance through resolutions condemning the group's atrocities and calling for its inclusion on the European list of terrorist organisations, thus reflecting a growing political consensus on the multifaceted nature of the threat (Gazapo, 2025: 1–37). However, sanctions have clear operational limitations: they hinder financing, raise costs and restrict room for manoeuvre, but are not sufficient on their own to dismantle ecosystems of influence that operate in a flexible, adaptive manner and are supported by local networks.

5.2 Strengthening cognitive resilience and cooperation in communication

Alongside coercive measures, the EU has progressively come to recognise that the response to Russian influence in the Sahel cannot be limited to sanctioning actors, but must include capabilities for prevention, resilience and narrative countering. This requires action both externally—in cooperation with African partners—and internally, by strengthening the resilience of European societies against information manipulation.

Firstly, the EU has begun to incorporate the fight against disinformation into its development cooperation programmes. In 2023, in coordination with the African Union (AU), a pilot scheme was launched to strengthen independent local media in the Sahel through grants, training for journalists and the promotion of local fact-checkers. At the same time, media literacy has been promoted through community workshops in countries such as Niger and Chad, aimed at young people and community leaders to improve their ability to identify hoaxes and critically analyse the digital environment. These initiatives are part of the concept of societal resilience (NATO, 2023), and their strategic importance lies in the fact that they seek to address not only the effects of cognitive manipulation, but also the structural vulnerabilities that make it possible.

Complementarily, the EU has collaborated with African governments that request it to improve their public communication capabilities, providing technical advice to

institutional spokespersons in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana in order to counter extremist or manipulated narratives on social media. In the same vein, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (ACSS) emphasised in 2024 the need to 'map the wave of disinformation in Africa' and invest in information transparency as a prerequisite for reducing the penetration of external campaigns (ACSS, 2024: 1–8). The EU-AU Summit in November 2025 reinforced this approach by reiterating the political commitment of both parties to initiatives aimed at combating disinformation, strengthening cybersecurity and responding to hybrid threats (Council of the European Union, 2025c).

Secondly, following an initial phase of inadequate communication, European institutions and several Member States have begun to develop a counter-narrative aimed at challenging the narrative in the African media landscape. In this context, France adapted its *France 24* channel and *RFI* with special programmes dedicated to debunking myths such as the false claim of French support for terrorists in Mali. In 2022, the EU, through the European External Action Service, reactivated its *StratCom Task Force* , which focuses on Africa and is tasked with identifying disinformation campaigns and responding with factual information. One concrete achievement was the public exposure on the EU's official social media channels of the identities of some of the Russian 'trolls' operating in Africa and the techniques they used: by ending their anonymity and exposing their fallacies, their credibility was successfully undermined.

Similarly, European public diplomacy has stepped up its presence in African debates and communication forums. The EEAS itself has noted that specific communication campaigns were carried out in sub-Saharan Africa to reinforce European messages and highlight the limitations of Russian support for the continent (EEAS, 2024b). In the same vein, initiatives such as EUvsDisinfo have begun to incorporate the analysis of unconventional formats of propaganda, including digital entertainment products such as *African Dawn*, understood not so much as anecdotal elements, but as narrative vehicles aimed at discrediting Western partners and projecting narratives favourable to Moscow among young audiences (EUvsDisinfo, 2024). Given that reversing adverse perceptions is a slow and structural task, this proactive public diplomacy should not be interpreted as a minor complement, but as an indispensable dimension of cognitive competition.

Thirdly, the EU has strengthened its mechanisms for early detection and rapid response to disinformation campaigns. The Rapid Alert System, established in 2019 among Member States, continues to function as a platform for real-time exchange on active information manipulation campaigns (EEAS, 2019). Added to this is the evolution of the Code of Practice on Disinformation, updated in 2022, which obliges large-scale digital platforms to improve their systems for identifying and mitigating fake accounts, coordinated networks and opaque amplification dynamics. In parallel, several European countries—including Spain—have incorporated media literacy measures into their education systems and are developing fact-checking campaigns aimed at strengthening citizens' resilience against manipulated content. The aim of these initiatives is not to eliminate disinformation entirely, but to make it more

difficult for narratives fabricated or amplified from places such as St. Petersburg, Bamako or Ouagadougou to penetrate the European public sphere without scrutiny.

Fourthly, the European response has tended to become increasingly integrated into broader cooperation frameworks with NATO and G7 partners. NATO, for its part, has developed the concept of 'Cognitive Defence' within its doctrinal framework and structures dedicated to countering hybrid threats, promoting the exchange of best practices to protect allied societies from information manipulation (NATO Allied Command Transformation, 2023). In parallel, several European states involved in the International Coalition for the Sahel—such as France, Italy and Spain—have coordinated with the United States and Canada strategic communication initiatives aimed at countering Russian influence in Africa. This multi-level dimension is essential because cognitive warfare does not unfold in silos: it simultaneously affects African security, the stability of the European neighbourhood and global geopolitical competition.

This analysis suggests that the European response is gradually shifting towards a more comprehensive approach, combining sanctions, social resilience, counter-narratives and cooperation with African partners. During its presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2023, Spain also promoted the idea of an EU-Africa alliance against disinformation and to counter Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), implicitly recognising that the information battle cannot be won from Europe and for Africa, but only with African actors and on the social ground where the legitimacy of the narrative is contested. However, this approach remains insufficient unless accompanied by a greater on-the-ground presence, sustained investment in the media and media literacy, and better coordination between external action, security and strategic communication as Borrell warned in his Speech on Disinformation and Foreign Interference (2024). Precisely for this reason, European response measures should not be limited to what has already been deployed, but should move towards a more ambitious framework for structural reinforcement.

5.3 Strategic reinforcement measures for the European response

In light of the limitations identified in the current response, the EU should move towards a reinforcement strategy structured around four complementary lines:

The first line concerns counter-narratives and communication outreach with a physical presence. The EEAS StratCom *Task Force* and the Rapid Alert System should not operate solely from Brussels, but should develop permanent or semi-permanent capabilities at key points in the Sahel region, particularly where the legitimacy of the Western presence is most fiercely contested. It is not enough to debunk hoaxes from a distance: it is necessary to fund independent local media, fact-checking in widely spoken regional languages, and community-legitimate information platforms capable of competing with structures such as the *African Initiative* in terms of social credibility. In strategic terms, the EU needs to invest in narrative capacity with an intensity comparable to that which Russia devotes to its influence mechanisms.

The second strand concerns economic security and the diversification of critical supplies. Given Russia's interest in extractive enclaves in countries such as Niger, as well as the structural importance of certain African resources to the European economy, the EU must strengthen its strategy for diversifying critical raw materials and reduce its vulnerability to potential geo-economic capture dynamics. This involves not only seeking alternative suppliers, but also offering Sahelian states more transparent and sustainable models of economic cooperation than those proposed by networks linked to Moscow or front companies associated with Wagner/Africa Corps. Resource traceability, contractual governance and transparency in the extractive sectors should become central to European foreign policy towards the region.

The third line concerns the preventive management of migration as a potential vector of hybrid coercion. The deterioration of security in the Sahel, exacerbated by the limited effectiveness of new military support and the persistence of jihadism, increases migratory pressure on the Canary Islands and the western Mediterranean. Although not all migration can or should be interpreted in instrumental terms, recent experience in other contexts has shown that migratory flows can be used, in certain contexts, as a tool for political pressure. Consequently, the EU should reduce its reliance on unreliable regimes for migration management, strengthen the capacities of African regional organisations such as ECOWAS, and design cooperation mechanisms that distinguish between the humanitarian dimension of migration flows and their potential geopolitical exploitation.

The fourth strand concerns endogenous and exogenous cognitive resilience. Internally, the EU should deepen the transition from voluntary codes of conduct towards more stringent regulatory frameworks for digital platforms , improving the capacity to detect and remove coordinated bot networks and manipulation campaigns operated from environments linked to the Kremlin. Externally, media literacy cannot remain a peripheral component of cooperation: it should be firmly integrated into educational, community and communication programmes developed with African partners. If cognitive warfare exploits structural vulnerabilities in perception, the European response must aim to create genuine 'cognitive vaccines' against information manipulation, both within its own societies and in those with which it shares an extended security space.

Taken together, these areas for strengthening do not replace current policy, but they do complement it. The European response will only be effective if it combines sanctions, resilience, narrative presence, economic security and structural cooperation with African actors. Without such integration, the EU will continue to react to the effects of Russian cognitive warfare when what it needs is to intervene earlier on the conditions that make it possible.

6 Conclusions

The expansion of Russian influence in the Sahel through the Wagner Group and, since 2024, the Africa Corps, suggests that the cognitive dimension has

become a central component of Moscow's hybrid projection in Africa. The analysis presented shows that the effectiveness of this strategy cannot be explained solely by military capabilities—indeed, its results on the ground have been limited or even counterproductive, as evidenced by the advances of JNIM in Mali despite the Russian presence—but rather by the articulation of an architecture of influence capable of influencing social perceptions, interpretative frameworks and narratives of legitimacy in contexts of high institutional fragility.

The cases of Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger demonstrate that Russian penetration has operated on pre-existing grievances, anti-Western sentiments and crises of internal legitimacy that were not created *ex novo* by Moscow, but were amplified and reordered in its favour through disinformation campaigns, propaganda, symbolic mobilisation and a sustained media presence. In this sense, cognitive warfare does not act by replacing material reality, but by reinterpreting it and endowing it with political coherence through discursive frameworks that serve Russian interests. Consequently, its impact should not be measured solely by the truth or falsity of the content disseminated, but by its capacity to alter the social reception of events and influence far-reaching political decisions.

The study also confirms the analytical utility of the dual temporality of cognitive warfare. In the Sahel, one observes, on the one hand, a phase of slow erosion, characterised by the gradual consolidation of anti-French, anti-Western and sovereigntist narratives, as well as by the systematic delegitimisation of international actors present on the ground, including MINUSMA; and, on the other hand, a phase of rapid detonation, in which political crises, *coups d'état* and strategic reorientations find a social base that is already primed to accept or legitimise them. The sequence observed in Mali, and to a lesser extent in Burkina Faso and Niger, suggests that the effectiveness of these operations depends less on immediate military victories than on their ability to influence the criteria by which societies interpret security, sovereignty and legitimacy. Europe, consequently, reacted late to prolonged processes of informational and cognitive erosion, detecting the visible effects of destabilisation more clearly than the enabling conditions that made it viable.

From a European perspective, the article argues that the effects of this Russian projection are indirect but strategically significant. It is not merely a matter of the loss of Western presence on the ground, but of the creation of political, informational and social environments that are less receptive to European engagement and more favourable to alternative geopolitical frameworks. This affects the EU on several levels: it weakens its capacity for projection on the southern flank, reduces its operational margins in security matters, increases its exposure to dynamics of instability with repercussions on migration and terrorism, and heightens its vulnerability to disputes over strategic resources and narrative hegemony in the Euro-African space.

In this context, the consolidation of the Africa Corps is of particular importance, as it marks the transition from a parastatal structure with some scope for plausible deniability to a paramilitary force directly subordinate to the Russian state. This transformation reinforces the argument that Russia's projection of power in the Sahel

cannot be understood as a marginal or informal phenomenon, but rather as a power policy with an integrated military, economic and information dimension. Hence, the European response cannot be limited to individual sanctions or ad hoc reactions, but must be articulated on the basis of a broader strategy of cognitive counteraction, structured around four complementary vectors: narrative and communicative presence on the ground, economic diversification and security of critical supplies, preventive management of migration vulnerabilities, and strengthening of cognitive resilience both within the EU and among its African partners.

The main contribution of the Sahelian case, therefore, lies not merely in demonstrating Russian expansion in Africa, but in highlighting that contemporary geopolitical competition is also waged in the cognitive domain, that is, in the capacity to influence how societies perceive, interpret and prioritise reality. From this perspective, Russian cognitive warfare has shown that it is possible to erode the Western presence and alter strategic balances without the need for decisive military victories, simply by colonising the information space until the replacement of some actors by others becomes more acceptable.

Hence, the European challenge is not merely one of security or communication, but of strategic credibility. Only by offering a credible narrative based on tangible results will Europe be able to reduce the appeal of the Kremlin's narratives.

For Spain, given its geographical proximity and its indirect link to stability in the Sahel, this issue also takes on a unique dimension. Its position on the southern flank gives it a particular responsibility in shaping and sustaining this response, ensuring that Europe's forward frontier in Africa remains—to paraphrase Borrell (2025: 1–15)—*our* frontier and not a space progressively ceded to actors who seek to undermine the EU's security, legitimacy and capacity for influence. Ultimately, the cognitive battle will not be won merely by refuting disinformation, but by demonstrating through concrete evidence that the partnership between Europe and Africa can translate into prosperity, mutual respect and shared stability. Europe must not only aim to contain Russian influence, but must also seek to build a democratic resilience that is genuinely capable of withstanding prolonged hybrid pressures.

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