

KLEPTOCRATIC COOPERATION IN AFRICA

HOW RUSSIA AND CHINA UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 showcased to the world the grave national security threat that kleptocracy poses to democracy. The bizarre and short-lived mutiny in Russia by Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group in June 2023 put a spotlight on one of the shadowy global tentacles of Russia's influence. At a time when Moscow is increasingly isolated diplomatically and economically, the Wagner Group's corrosive commercial interests and cozy relationships in parts of Africa with some of the continent's most diplomatically isolated regimes reveal the extent to which a global kleptocratic support network has taken shape.

The two essays in this report highlight ways in which two global authoritarian powers, Russia and China, provide surge capacity to kleptocratic networks in Africa. In his essay, "Criminal States, Militarized Criminals, and Profiteers: Russia, Africa, and the Evolving Ecosystem of Transnational Kleptocracy," J.R. Mailey (senior expert at the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime) dissects the Wagner Group's illicit activities in key parts of Africa. The Wagner Group's activities are complex, but Mailey zeroes in on the fact that the military support offered to African kleptocrats has little to do with providing security and stability for the African people. Rather it is focused on extracting resources, advancing geopolitical goals, and serving as a brutal cog in the authoritarian mutual support machinery. Even if the ultimate fate of the Wagner Group remains unclear, these trends are unlikely to abate. The opaque economic relationships that the Wagner Group has developed on the continent no doubt are too lucrative for the Kremlin to surrender.

China's party state and its proxies are entrenched in corrupt networks in Africa as well. Chinese-linked kleptocratic networks are tapping into like-minded networks on the continent, helping to embolden and empower local kleptocrats seeking to enrich themselves at the expense of their populations. Andrea Ngombet Malewa's (activist and founder of the Sassoufit Collective) essay, "How China Fuels African Kleptocratic Networks: The Case of Congo-Brazzaville," highlights the ways in which Beijing facilitates Congo-Brazzaville's deeply kleptocratic regime. In addition to long-standing Chinese involvement in the timber and extractive industries, Ngombet's analysis spotlights the

establishment of a Sino-Congolese Bank for Africa that could allow kleptocrats to bypass the transparency requirements of Western-linked banks, thereby affording opportunities to launder money with impunity. This development has significant implications for accountability norms worldwide.

Civil society and independent media seeking to identify and expose kleptocratic networks in Africa face enormous challenges. They often lack the resources, specialized knowledge, and skills needed to track illicit financial flows, and the complex vehicles kleptocrats use to move money around the world. Resource-rich regimes in countries such as Congo-Brazzaville, Sudan, and the Central African Republic already suffer from gaping deficits in accountability and transparency. Despite these odds, both authors identify critical steps to elevate civil society's essential work exposing and combatting kleptocracy:

- Given the knowledge deficits about Russian and Chinese activities in kleptocratic networks, **nongovernmental organizations should focus on educating the public on the true nature of Russian and Chinese activities in their countries, as well as on the financial, social, and ecological costs of initiatives pushed by Beijing and Moscow;**
- Leading authoritarian regimes, China and Russia first among them, rely on lucratively financed media enterprises to distort and manipulate information about their own activities. Accordingly, **civil society should challenge authoritarian narratives, for instance those that use long-standing anti-colonial rhetoric to justify their corrupting activities and support for kleptocratic networks;**
- Since the threat corrosive kleptocratic networks pose is inherently transnational, **there should be concerted efforts to bring often-isolated civil society activists and journalists across regions together and to encourage collaboration and cross-border learning;**
- **Civil society organizations should meticulously document the activities of authoritarian actors in their countries,** with the hope that this information could later be used to hold perpetrators accountable for their actions;

Transnational kleptocracy is a global challenge; it is not limited to Russia. China is playing an under-appreciated role in global kleptocratic networks, including in Africa. An effective response must tackle this pervasive, complex challenge at a systemic level. Until countries committed to the rule of law act collaboratively to tackle this challenge, kleptocratic mutual support networks will continue to adapt and elude the measures taken against them.

ENDNOTES

Criminal States, Militarized Criminals, and Profiteers: Russia, Africa, and the Evolving Ecosystem of Transnational Kleptocracy

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How China Fuels African Kleptocratic Networks: The Case of Congo-Brazzaville

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