

Mapping Russian Illicit Finance in Africa: The Cases of Sudan and Madagascar¹

Catherine Owen^{2,3}

Summary

This briefing note shows how Russian foreign policy in Africa facilitates illicit financial flows (IFF) into and out of the continent through two case studies. First, in Sudan, gold-mining ventures, supported by military investments, are being exploited by Russian and Sudanese political elites hit by Western economic sanctions. Second, in Madagascar, Russian ‘political technologists’ influenced electoral processes by cultivating anti-Western sentiments and supporting Moscow-friendly candidates. Together, these case studies exemplify the range of tools – in the political, media, and military realms – employed by Kremlin-connected actors to advance Russia’s international economic interests by informal means.

Russia’s stated political ambitions in Africa seek to build what it considers ‘an independent centre of power in a multipolar world’.⁴ A further ambition is to create economic environments amenable to illicit Russian trade and finance. Illicit financial flows between Russia and countries across Africa are extremely difficult to trace – and have become even more difficult with the closure of the independent Russian media following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022.

The African continent is important for understanding how Kremlin-connected actors prepare the ground for illicit financial flows to and from Russia. The widespread lack of financial regulatory and oversight mechanisms in most countries across sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) mean that the tactics deployed by Russian agents to influence politico-economic outcomes are arguably both the most flagrant and the most devastating. In the wake of sweeping sanctions that effectively decouple Russia from the global economy, it is highly likely that illicit financial flows between Russia and countries across Africa will increase. Hence, it is essential to understand these tactics and their impacts.

1 For the full research paper see, Owen, C., Prelec, T. and Mayne, T. (2022). *The illicit financialisation of Russian foreign policy*, SOC ACE Research Paper No. 3. Birmingham, UK: University of Birmingham.

2 Catherine Owen is Senior Lecturer in International Relations at the University of Exeter. Previously she was British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow also at Exeter. Her research interests include the domestic and international dynamics of authoritarian governance. Prior to her appointments at Exeter, Catherine lectured in the Department of History and Civilization at Shaanxi Normal University, Xi’an, China. Her latest research is published in the *Journal of Chinese Governance*, the *European Journal of International Relations*, and the *China Quarterly*.

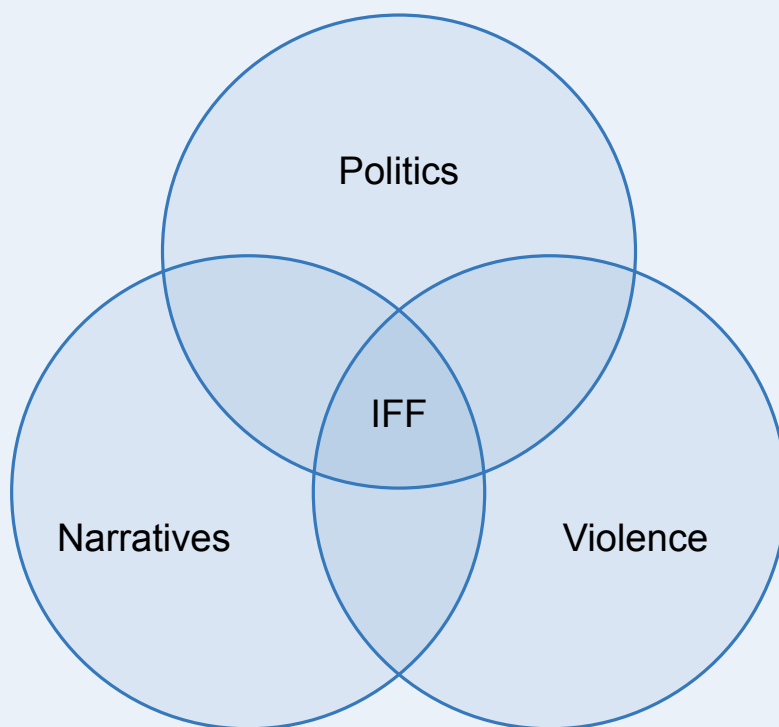
3 All correspondence to: C.A.M.Owen@exeter.ac.uk

4 Maslov, A & Suslov, D (2021). ‘Vozvrashcheniye v Afriku: Kak sdelat’ yego prioritetom rossiyskoy politiki’, *Rossiya v Global’noi Politike*, 16 November. Available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/vozvrashhenie-v-afriku/>

The briefing note maps the wider conditions in which illicit Russian finance may flourish. It reveals how anti-Western sentiment across the African continent is cultivated and exploited through diplomatic channels, as well as through processes of disinformation and political manipulation, to create an environment in which lucrative contracts to extract natural resources are awarded to Russian elites. The briefing begins with a summary of Russia's formal and informal engagements in Africa, before illustrating these wider tendencies in the case studies of Sudan and Madagascar. It concludes by highlighting the cooperation opportunities available to countries hit by Western sanctions, and argues that policy-makers must be prepared for a possible strengthening of illicit financial flows between so-called 'pariah states'.

This briefing note is one of three that map the conditions in which Russian illicit financial flows (IFF) flourish across three geographical regions: sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), south-eastern Europe, and western Europe. The briefing notes use a common framework to identify three vectors employed by Kremlin-connected actors to create a conducive environment for the investment of dirty money overseas. These vectors are 1) political activities, which blur formal and informal means of diplomacy and political influencing to promote Russia-friendly candidates and political parties; 2) media activities, which blur truth and falsehood, by constructing and disseminating alternative narratives; and 3) political violence, which blurs legitimate and illegitimate use of force to secure investment projects, destabilise regions and eliminate opposition. The intentional blurring of legality and illegality, licit and illicit, makes these channels of Russian engagement very difficult to prevent. The relationship between the three vectors and Russian IFF is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Mapping Russian Illicit Finance



Background: Russia's Formal and Informal Engagement in Africa

Russia's flagship diplomatic initiative is the relatively new Russia–Africa Summit. The inaugural event was held in Sochi in 2019, and was attended by representatives from all 54 African states, with the second summit planned in Addis Ababa in 2022.⁵ Highlighting the political opportunities available to Russia in Africa, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson stated, 'We must not forget that African countries are 25% of the votes in the UN, and for us the political support of such a large number of countries is also extremely important'.⁶ However, the Eurasian Economic Union (EaEU) and the African Union (AU) have yet to sign a partnership agreement, although the AU does have such agreements with nine other states and regional organisations. In terms of official bilateral visits, President Putin has made relatively few trips to the African continent: just four since 2012, compared with nine visits by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Most top-level meetings between Russian and African leaders take place in Russia – with six visits by African leaders to Moscow in 2018 alone.⁷

In terms of business, Russian ministries, state-owned companies, and billionaires have pursued similar interests in Africa. Priority spheres of interest are: mining and mineral exploration, the construction of oil and gas refineries, and the

sale of arms and military equipment. However, at the time of the Russia–Africa Summit, overall levels of Russian trade with African countries amounted to only \$20 billion, compared with China's \$200 billion.⁸ Russia's profits come mainly from the arms trade: it is the largest exporter of arms to SSA, supplying 30% of the region's weapons, compared with 20% from China.⁹ Rosoboronexport, the Russian state-owned enterprise that implements Russian government policy on international military cooperation, now cooperates with 17 countries across SSA.¹⁰

These formal activities are accompanied by informal components, which span media disinformation and the use of 'political technologists' to support pro-Russian electoral candidates, as well as military support and protest management through the use of semi-legal private military contractors (PMCs), including the Wagner Group. The US and other Western governments, as well as numerous journalistic investigations, have linked these disinformation and military organisations employed in African countries to the networks of Russian billionaire and Putin associate, Yevgeny Prigozhin. These reports suggest that his activities connect Russia's formal and informal engagements in the continent. Prigozhin-owned companies have acquired stakes in gold and diamond mines in Africa, which are often guarded by PMCs.¹¹ A major 2020 investigation by *Bellingcat*, *Der Spiegel* and *The Insider* showed that Prigozhin's illicit activities in the fields of military operations, media disinformation, and political influencing were directly linked to the Russian Ministry of

5 Russia's invasion of Ukraine has thrown the likelihood of this planned event into question.

6 Miroshnichenko, K & Mandrykina, I (2021). 'Rossiya — Afrika: staryye druz'ya i perspektivnyye partnery', TASS, 4 February 2021. Available at: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/10621831>.

7 BBC (2020). 'Russia in Africa: What's behind Moscow's push into the continent?', 7 May 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-45035889>.

8 Belenkaya, M (2020). 'Rossiya vystravayet strategiyu otnosheniy s Afrikoy', *Kommersant*, 9 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4484524>.

9 SIPRI (2021). 'International arms transfers level off after years of sharp growth; Middle Eastern arms imports grow most, says SIPRI', 21 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2021/international-arms-transfers-level-after-years-sharp-growth-middle-eastern-arms-imports-grow-most>.

10 Rosoboronexport (2021) 'Rosoboronexport increased its order portfolio in sub-Saharan Africa by \$1.7 billion', 7 June 2021. Available at: <http://roe.ru/eng/press-service/press-releases/rosoboronexport-increased-its-order-portfolio-in-sub-saharan-africa-by-1-7-billion/>

11 Although Prigozhin denies links to these PMCs, in 2020 the US treasury linked him to the Wagner Group's protest-management activities in Sudan. See: 'Treasury targets financier's illicit sanctions evasion activity', 15 July 2020. Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1058>.

Defence and its foreign intelligence agency, the GRU.¹² Prigozhin has recently begun financing films that portray PMC activities in a positive light. Denis Neymand, director of Prigozhin's most recent film, *Granite*, stated that 'the movie is about showing how Russian guys help Africans against evil forces'.¹³

A second Russian billionaire has begun to take an interest in Africa: Konstantin Malofeev. An ultra-conservative Russian Orthodox media mogul sanctioned by the US in 2014 for his role in financing rebels in Eastern Ukraine, Malofeev owns the nationalist internet news portal, *tsargrad.tv* and chairs the Moscow-based International Agency for Sovereign Development (IASD), set up to promote Russian business interests in Africa (although there is little available evidence of the activities of this organisation to date). Of ISAD, Malofeev stated, 'The agency's mission is to improve the quality of economic growth and increase the national prosperity of the countries with which we work. This requires that their sovereignty be strengthened and opportunities be provided for an independent domestic and foreign policy'.¹⁴ His remarks reveal the core principle of Russian engagement in Africa: providing political and military support for incumbents is key to wider economic engagement. Furthermore, Malofeev has been working with veteran far-right ideologue, Alexander Dugin, in order to promote a narrative through *tsargrad.tv* that portrays Africa as a key node in an anti-imperial, anti-Western twenty-first-century geopolitical shift.¹⁵

Key findings: Sudan and Madagascar

It would be wrong to assume that African countries are passive sites for Russian activity: the Sudanese and Malagasy heads of state have both courted Russian engagement, making trips to Russia in 2018. Russia has aided the two incumbents, with the deployment of PMCs in Sudan and the use of political advisors through a Kremlin-connected 'think tank', AFRIC, in Madagascar (although this support was dropped at the last minute when it became clear that the incumbent would not win the election). This assistance has paid off exactly as Moscow intended: first, Russia has received lucrative mining deals and promises of further investment opportunities; and, second, Sudan and Madagascar were among the 25 African states that either abstained or did not vote in the UN General Assembly resolution demanding the end of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 2 March 2022.

Sudan: Sanctions-hit elites cooperate on gold and defence¹⁶

In the last few years, Sudanese politics has been in a state of flux: in 2019, long-time ruler Omar al-Bashir was deposed in a coup, followed by a second coup in October–November 2021, which installed Sudanese Army General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan as the new head of state, with Sudan's gold magnate and commander of the paramilitary group Rapid Support Forces (RSF), General Mohamed Hamdan 'Hemeti' Dagolo, as his deputy.¹⁷ While influential civil groups favour

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- 12 Bellingcat (2020). 'Putin chef's kisses of death: Russia's shadow army's state-run structure exposed', 14 August 2020. Available at: <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2020/08/14/pmc-structure-exposed/>.
- 13 Sauer, P (2021). 'Prigozhin bankrolls new movie about Russian 'instructors' in Mozambique', *The Moscow Times*, 24 December 2021. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/12/24/prigozhin-bankrolls-new-movie-about-russian-instructors-in-mozambique-a75923>.
- 14 Malofeev, K (2019). 'Konstantin Malofeev: "Russia is a partner of strategic importance to Africa"', *Roscongress*, 15 October 2019. Available at: <https://roscongress.org/en/materials/konstantin-malofeev-rossiya-dlya-afrikanskikh-stran-yavlyaetsya-prioritetnym-partnerom/>.
- 15 Shekhovtsov, A (2020). 'Fake election observation as Russia's tool of election interference: the case of AFRIC', European Platform for Democratic Elections, p. 19. See also: *tsargrad.tv*. Available at: <https://www.epde.org/en/documents/details/fake-election-observation-as-russias-tool-of-election-interference-the-case-of-afric.html>.
- 16 The author thanks Dr Jihad Mashamoun for several very useful discussions on the subject of Sudanese politics, which informed this section.
- 17 BBC (2019) 'Sudan crisis: The ruthless mercenaries who run the country for gold', 20 July 2019. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-48987901>.
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closer ties with the West, the ruling duo seek to retain links to Russia – it may be suspected that secretive deals enriching the Sudanese military elites lie behind this loyalty to Moscow.

Notwithstanding Russian and Chinese vetoes of UN Security Council proposals to sanction Sudan's new regime, the US has unilaterally imposed far-reaching asset freezes and has suspended \$700 million in aid.¹⁸ Moscow, meanwhile, allegedly issued a 'green light' on the eve of the coup, indicating that it would support the new regime in the face of any Western sanctions.¹⁹ Less than four months later, in February 2022, Hemeti travelled to Moscow just before Russian troops invaded Ukraine – a move intended to solidify bilateral relations with Russia and demonstrate the consolidated nature of the new Sudanese regime.²⁰

Russian investment in the Sudanese mining sector predates the Burhan–Hemeti tandem. The Russian-owned gold-mining company Kush E&P has been active in Sudan since 2013.²¹ In 2017, the Bashir government signed a contract with Prigozhin-owned mineral exploration company, M-Invest, to commence gold-prospecting operations.²² Two years later, the Russian state-owned exploration company, Rosgeologia, signed several agreements to explore mineral deposits in the Nile Basin.²³ According to *The Telegraph*, Russian agents have been smuggling Sudanese gold to Russia for years thanks to close personal

relations with Hemeti.²⁴ This illustrates the convergence between the business interests of Russia's billionaires and the strategic goals of the Kremlin – these illicitly obtained yet substantial gold reserves may now be used to cushion the impact of Western sanctions on the Russian economy.

Moscow's interests in Sudanese gold has generated both formal and informal military cooperation, which is taking on greater significance following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In 2017, the Kremlin agreed with the Bashir government to establish a Russian naval logistics hub near Port Sudan on the Red Sea coast, one of several military bases currently planned in the African continent. Following his trip to Moscow in March 2022, Hemeti reiterated his support for the base.²⁵ In addition to countering US influence in Sudan and providing a military centre for Russian ambitions in the African continent, analysts suggest that this base will provide key logistics for Russia-financed mineral extraction operations.²⁶ The Wagner Group has been involved in training both the Sudanese army and Hemeti's paramilitary group, the RSF, as well as allegedly suppressing anti-government protests.²⁷ The RSF have also been observed providing security for Russian-led mining operations in the south of the country where six exploration licenses had been granted to Kush E&P.²⁸

18 France24 (2022) 'Russia ramps up ties with Sudan as Ukraine war rages', 11 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20220311-russia-ramps-up-ties-with-sudan-as-ukraine-war-rages>.

19 Dozhd (2021). 'Reuters: bol'nyye Sudana soglasovyvali perevorot s Rossiyei', 29 October. Available at: https://tvrain.ru/news/reuters_voennye_sudana_soglasovyvali_perevorot_s_rossiej-540929/.

20 Amin (2022). 'Sudan: Hemeti's Russian visit sends defiant message to US and EU', *Middle East Eye*, 8 March. Available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/sudan-russia-hemeti-visit-defiant-message-us-eu>.

21 See company website: <http://www.alliance-kush.com/>.

22 The Bell (2018) "Putin's Cook" set out to mine gold in Africa', 5 June 2018. Available at: <https://thebell.io/en/putin-s-cook-set-out-to-mine-gold-in-africa/>

23 Rosgeo (2019). 'Rosgeo has signed an Agreement with the Nile Province of the Republic of Sudan', 24 October. Available at: <https://www.rosgeo.com/en/press/news/rosgeologiya-podpisala-soglashenie-s-provintsiei-nil-respubliki-sudan/>.

24 Collins, T (2022). 'How Putin prepared for sanctions with tonnes of African gold', *The Telegraph*, 3 March. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/terror-and-security/putin-prepared-sanctions-tonnes-african-gold/>

25 Middle East Monitor (2022) 'Egypt displeased with Sudan over Russia military base', 7 March 2022. Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220307-egypt-displeased-with-sudan-over-russia-military-base-report/>

26 Rondeau, C (2020). 'How a man linked to Prigozhin, 'Putin's chef,' infiltrated the United Nations', *The Daily Beast*, 27 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/how-a-man-linked-to-prigozhin-putins-chef-infiltrated-the-united-nations>

27 Sputnik International (2019) 'Russia denies reports of alleged mercenaries quelling Sudan rallies – Embassy', 15 January 2019. Available at: <https://sputniknews.com/20190115/russia-sudan-rallies-1071493937.html>

28 Dabanga (2018). 'Miners blocked from working in S. Kordofan gold area', 11 September 2018. Available at: <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/miners-blocked-from-working-in-s-kordofan-gold-area>.

Madagascar: Russia-friendly candidates are advanced on an anti-Western platform

Madagascar is an important case that illustrates the dynamics of Russian political manipulation in Africa because it was the first country in which Russian advisors reportedly connected to Prigozhin sought to influence the electoral process, assisting politicians seen as friendly to Moscow.²⁹ Russia's political influencing in Madagascar comprised two elements: providing direct material support to pro-Russia candidates and fomenting wider anti-Western currents through which they could position themselves as an alternative ally. Although this strategy had limited success in the case of Madagascar, it has since been deployed to greater effect in other African countries, including the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic, Mozambique, and elsewhere.³⁰

In March 2018, then President of Madagascar, Erié Rajaonarimampianina, visited Moscow in order to attend an investment forum; here he reportedly met Putin and associates of Prigozhin.³¹ In the six months prior to Madagascar's 2018 presidential elections, about 15–20 Russian 'political technologists', working through a now-sanctioned think tank owned by Prigozhin, AFRIC, sought to influence elections. Russian operative, Maksim Shugalei, offered money to six presidential hopefuls, but then withdrew support to some at the last minute when it became clear that they were not going to win, and asked them to withdraw and transfer support to the leading candidate, Andry Rajoelina, who went on to win the election.

On the following day, Russian agents paid local students to attend a demonstration in front of French Embassy against Western neo-imperialism; however, because the demonstration had not been authorised, the Russian operatives were arrested, deported, and refused re-entry to Madagascar.³²

The Madagascar political influencing operation drew on links between pan-African activists working in Madagascar and Russian far-right ideologues, with the anti-imperial sentiment of the former dovetailing with the anti-liberal, anti-West ideology of the latter.³³ In 2021, the US treasury sanctioned the AFRIC think tank, as well as three individuals related to it, stating 'Despite posing as an African-led initiative, AFRIC serves to disseminate Russia's preferred messaging, often related to disinformation'.³⁴ Since then, there has been no reporting of the think tank's activities in Africa, leading to the assumption that these political disinformation activities are now conducted by other means.

Why did Russia want to influence this election? Similar dynamics to those observed in Sudan are evident in Madagascar, whereby formal intergovernmental cooperation accompanies private investments by Prigozhin-owned companies. In the run-up to the vote, Russian and Madagascan Defence Ministries signed a high-level agreement on military cooperation, committing to information sharing and joint military exercises.³⁵ Rosgeologia signed an agreement with Madagascar's Ministry of Mining and Oil, committing to long-term cooperation in the field of mineral exploration.³⁶ As with Sudan, Kremlin-connected business interests accompany these agreements: Ferrum Mining had

29 Shekhovtsov, 2020, op. cit.

30 Siegle, J (2021). 'Russia in Africa: undermining democracy through elite capture', *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 24 September 2021. Available at: <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-africa-undermining-democracy-elite-capture/>.

31 Proekt (2019). 'Master and chef: how Evgeny Prigozhin led the Russian offensive in Africa,' 14 March 2019. Available at: <https://www.proekt.media/en/article-en/evgeny-prigozhin-africa/>.

32 BBC News Africa (2019). 'Russia's Madagascar election gamble – full documentary – BBC Africa Eye', 8 April 2019. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6wH64iztZM0>.

33 Shekhovtsov, op. cit., p. 19.

34 US Department of the Treasury (2021). 'Treasury escalates sanctions against the Russian government's attempts to influence U.S. elections', 15 April 2021. Available at: <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0126>.

35 Gov.ru (2018a). 'Soglasheniye mezhdru Pravitel'stvom Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Pravitel'stvom Respubliki Madagaskar o voyennom sotrudnichestve', 29 December 2018. Available at: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/552051448>.

36 Neftegaz.ru (2018b). 'PMEF-2018. Rossiya pomozhet Madagaskaru v razvedke poleznykh iskopayemykh', 24 May 2018. Available at: <https://neftgaz.ru/news/Geological-exploration/201303-pmef-2018-rossiya-pomozhet-madagaskaru-v-razvedke-poleznykh-iskopaemykh/>.

been the largest Russian venture in Madagascar, signing a partnership with Kraoma mine in August 2018 before terminating the contract one year later. Although this failed cooperation highlights that Russian investment projects are not guaranteed, wider Russian cooperation plans are in preparation.³⁷

Implications

1. The importance of understanding the Kremlin's model of illicit finance, increasingly widespread across Africa.

What has emerged in Africa is an illicit finance-driven model of Russian international engagement in which informal political and, where necessary, military means are used to secure lucrative natural resource-extraction contracts. The African cases constitute the most extreme and brazen examples of the way in which this model of illicit finance is deployed to produce profitable results with relative impunity. The UK's ability to reduce the impact of this model in Africa is extremely limited. The UK must ensure that it does not trade or profit from the commodities obtained through this type of resource extraction.

2. African states are not necessarily 'pro-Russia' but certainly 'anti-Western', which Russian agents can exploit. Russia's war in Ukraine seems to be eliciting a new 'non-aligned movement' across many African states. This illustrates the depth of anti-Western sentiment across the continent, which Russia is

cleverly manipulating in order to advance illicit financial flows. Russian support is beneficial for African leaders seeking regime security; in return, they are happy to allow Russian actors – state-owned or private – privileged access to natural resource deposits. A greater presence of UK 'soft power' initiatives, such as civil-service training programmes, options for Africans to study abroad, and grassroots development programmes in Africa may slow the growth of anti-Westernism, but these views are deeply entrenched and will be extremely hard to change in the short and medium term. Nevertheless, in a regional geopolitical environment where anti-Western sentiments are re-shaping continental geopolitical alliances, the West disengages at its peril.

3. Western sanctions may lead to more illicit financial flows between Russia and Africa.

From the perspective of Russia, ties with mineral-rich African states such as Sudan, but also Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Mali and others, may enable Moscow to minimise the impact of Western sanctions. While the sanctions-hit Russian economy may not be in the position to financially assist Sudan in the short term, the fact that both have run foul of the West makes longer-term cooperation mutually advantageous. Already, Russian and Sudanese elites are enriching themselves through the illicit gold trade and it is reasonable to expect this type of activity to expand. More research into how Western sanctions are re-configuring the global economy is therefore essential.

³⁷ Madagascar Tribune (2020). 'Des projets de développement en préparation', 18 September 2020. Available at: <https://www.madagascar-tribune.com/Des-projets-de-developpement-en-preparation.html>

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