

A New Battleground Between The West Alliance And Russia? In The Context Of Niger

Dr. Anar Aliyev

Istanbul Nisantasi University, Faculty of Economics,
Administrative
and Social Sciences, Department of International Relations,
Istanbul, Turkey
E-mail: anar.aliyev@nisantasi.edu.tr

Abstract

In the last year, military coups in Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Burkina Faso and now Niger have resulted in changes of government in all countries in the Sahel region, leading to the concept of “coup contagion” being applied to continental Africa. This geographical concentration of coups points to the need to take into account features of the Sahel sub-region that may have shaped current coup dynamics. A decade of insecurity in the Sahel, as a consequence of deeper structural and historical issues, requires us to emphasise a number of proximate or intermediate factors that have contributed to the conditions that have shaped the rise in military coups. In addition, African countries’ strategic location and natural resources drew them into the sphere of global and regional competition before and after the coup. The possibility of the emergence of a new area of conflict between the Western Bloc, in which the United States and France play a leading role, and Russia over Niger constitutes the basic investigation part of the study. The military takeover in Niger, which the US and France used as a geographical and military base in the fight against radical terrorist groups, put the geopolitical interests of these countries at risk. Subsequently, the Kremlin's presence in African countries through the Wagner Group and private military companies has fuelled the geopolitical rivalry between the Western Bloc and Russia. This study focuses on the role of Niger, which is at the centre of this new field of competition, in the power-sharing between the Western Bloc and Russia. By analysing the geopolitical and political

economy relations of both sides with Niger, this article will answer the question of which side gains how much benefit from the Niger field in the struggle for influence and whether this benefit is political economy or geopolitical.

Keywords: military coup; political economy; terms of trade; terms of geopolitical; Niger; West Bloc; Russia; Africa.

Introduction

In addition to being the largest country in the Sahel region geographically and the richest country in terms of uranium resources, Niger was also important for the Western Bloc as it had the only civilian government in West Africa after the military coups in the region. Niger, which was used as a base for US and French operations against radical terrorist groups, was ruled by Mohamed Bazoum, who was elected President in the country's first democratic elections in 2021. With the 26th July military coup, the military junta seized power in the last country of the Sahel region ruled by a civilian administration and a new process began in shaping domestic and external dynamics. There are many reasons why a military coup in Niger has more significance and importance than a military coup in an ordinary African country. First of all, the geopolitical interests of the Western Bloc, particularly the USA and France, in this area make Niger important. Then, Russia's transfer of extraordinary military and economic resources to the region through private military companies, especially Wagner, after its opening to Africa, reveals a new area of competition between the Kremlin and the Western Bloc in Niger. Finally, Niger's natural resources, especially its uranium reserves, have whetted the investment appetite of many countries. All these factors have put this "ordinary" African country on the world's agenda and created a debate on whether a new battlefield between the Western Bloc and Russia will emerge.

In this study, the geopolitical and political economy factors between the Western Bloc and Russia are analysed in the case of Niger, and an investigation is carried out on what kind of policy the parties pursued in the pre-and post-coup period. Firstly, the geographical, geopolitical and political economy of Niger has been

analysed in terms of how and to what extent it is an important country in the field of global and regional competition. Then, the geopolitical and political economy aspects of the relations between the Western Bloc, specifically the USA and France, with Niger were uncovered and the impact in this field was mentioned. Similarly, the analysis of Russia-Niger relations has been done in terms of geopolitics and political economy, and the extent of the Kremlin's influence in this area has been scrutinised. Thus, it is attempted to answer the question of which side has an interest in relations with Niger and whether this interest is geopolitical or political economy. Finally, after the relationships between the Western Bloc, Russia, and Niger have been presented in terms of geopolitics and political economy, the future of the relationships between the post-coup military administration and both sides is presented with the findings, and the potential preferences of the junta regime are presented alongside the reasoning.

Literature Review

The Paris-Moscow conflict in the Sahara-Sahel region, which began at the end of the previous decade, is largely considered to be a consequence of the weaknesses of French foreign policy in the region, which Russia has sought to exploit for its political and economic interests. The hotspots of this conflict were initially Libya and Mali, but later Burkina Faso and Niger also became part of this geopolitical competition. In general, the Franco-Russian rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel region is expressed as a phenomenon of the upcoming era of multipolarity and a new scramble for Africa (Nadzharov, 2023, et al.). Affected by Western economic sanctions due to its role in triggering and sustaining the current crisis in Ukraine, the Russian Federation seems to be looking for solutions to help maintain its energy dominance in Europe and increase its economic, military, political, and diplomatic power. In this context, African resources, upon which the international economic system depends, come into play for the Kremlin. How to counter Russia's increasingly aggressive influence in the Sub-Saharan and Sahel countries, traditionally within the sphere of influence of the Western Bloc, and how China will react to this geopolitical offensive, are important question marks. It remains to be seen in which direction this rivalry between the Western Bloc and Russia

over Africa will proceed and whether it will turn into new areas of conflict (Popescu, 2018).

On the other hand, Bartosiewicz, a scholar in the field, highlights the potential areas of conflict between France and Russia in Africa, particularly in the Sahel region, where French influence is predominant and the Russian presence challenges French interests (Bartosiewicz, 2022). Another author, Kohnert, discusses Russia's presence in Africa, focusing on Russia's relations with African elites, its support for authoritarian leaders, and its efforts to influence elections in natural resource-rich states (Kohnert, 2022). Giles particularly highlights Russia's interest in Sub-Saharan Africa as a centre of natural resources, potential arms sales, and political support (Giles, 2014). Besenyo notes that Russia's presence in Africa is not a new phenomenon and underlines the changing balance of power in the region with the re-emergence of the Kremlin as a rival to the West and China (Besenyo, 2019). In summary, these studies reveal the geopolitical and political economy rivalry and conflict between the Western Block and Russia in Africa, suggesting that Russia has increased its presence in the region and has been able to undermine US and EU sanctions by challenging Western norms in line with its interests.

Method of Study

This study analyses the relationships of the Western Alliance, led by the US and France, with Russia in the context of Niger. Niger is one of the areas where the possibility of confrontation between the parties has emerged after the military coup. The study examines the relationships of both sides with Niger from a geopolitical and political economy perspective. The study first analysed the widespread military coups in African countries on the basis of a theoretical framework through the concept of "contagious coup". In this context, the multidimensional aspects of a total of 252 military coups between 1952 and 2022 were analysed under three headings: triggering factors, proximate factors and structural/institutional factors. Then, the geopolitical and political economy of Niger in the field of regional and global competition were analysed and the dimensions of the interests of the Western Bloc and Russia in this field

were examined. Within the scope of this examination, it is argued to what extent both the Western Alliance and Russia have an interest in the Niger field and whether this interest is geopolitical or political economy. For this purpose, Niger's bilateral political economy relations with both the Western Alliance and Russia are presented in all their dimensions. Then, it is determined to what extent which side has geopolitical and political economy superiority in Niger. Finally, the findings on which side the junta that seized power after the military coup will establish a strategic partnership with, within the scope of the Western Alliance and Russia, and whether this possible strategic partnership will lead to any conflict with the other side, are determined.

Country Profile

Located in the centre of the Sahel, Niger is a landlocked country bordering seven African countries. After gaining independence from France in 1960, this African country, which has been characterised by a series of coups and political instability for decades, has a population of approximately 24 million and a surface area of 1,267,000 km². According to World Bank data, around half of the country's population lives in extreme poverty. This Saharan African country, which has been at the centre of the world agenda with the recent military coup, also has to host people fleeing from the civil conflicts in Nigeria and Mali. As of 31 August 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identified 294,467 refugees and approximately 350,000 displaced persons in the country. According to IMF data, the country's 2023 real GDP growth rate is 6.1 per cent, with an inflation rate of 2.8 per cent. Although the official language of the country is French, Arabic, Hausa, Zarma, and Tamachek (Tuareg) and Buduma are among the other local languages used in the country. Muslims constitute approximately 98% of the country's population (ninety percent Sunni Muslims), although a small number of Christians and other religious groups also live in the country.



Map 1: Political Map of West Africa

Source:

<https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/west-africa-map.htm>

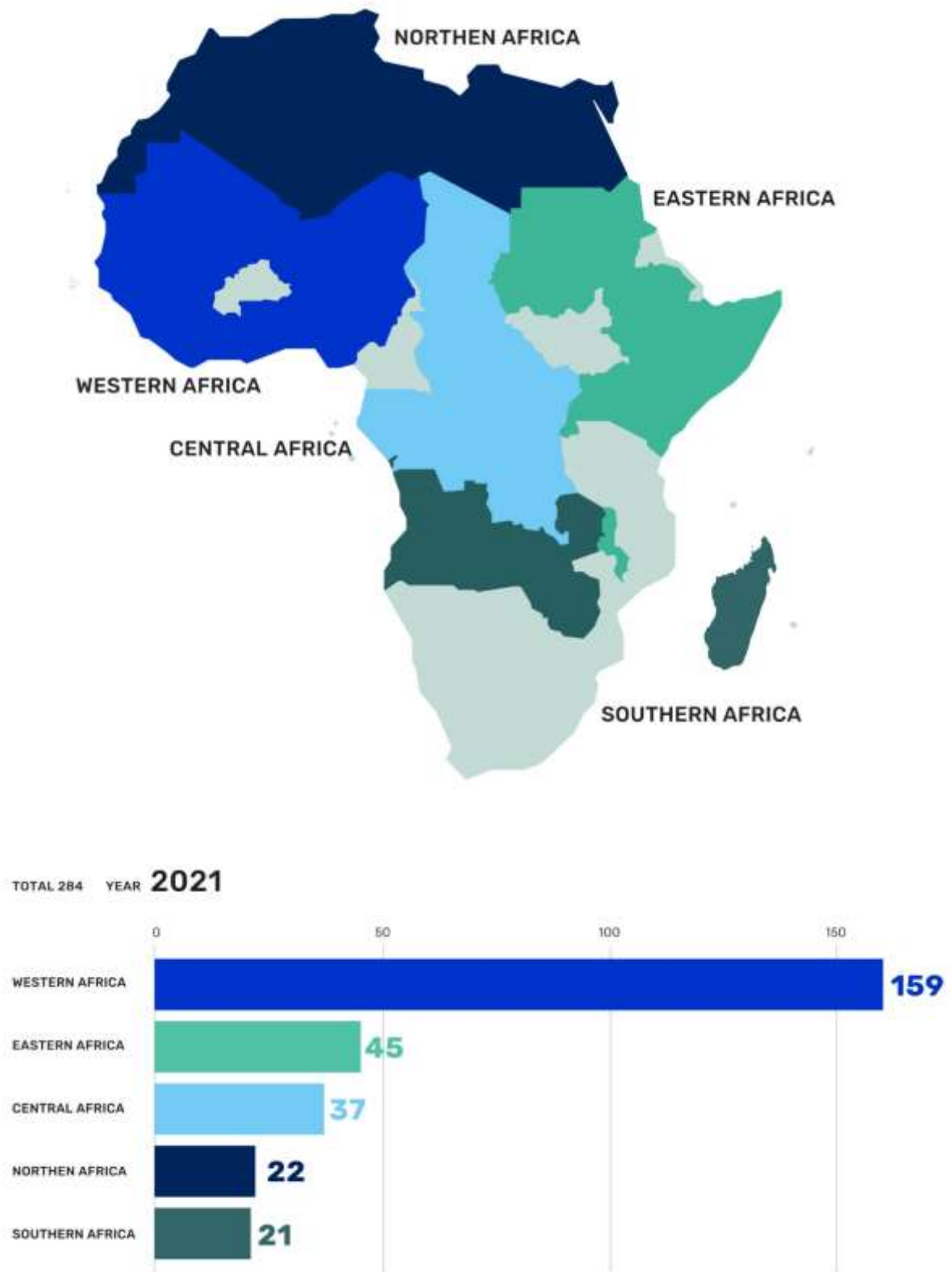
Ongoing threats to Niger's security generally stem more from the Libyan civil war, the conflict in northern Mali and several jihadist insurgencies in the region. French and US forces are the main countries assisting Niger to counter these threats. In Niger, one of the African countries most prone to military coups, Mohamed Bazoum, a former interior minister, was sworn in and inaugurated as president in April 2021 in the first democratic transfer of power since the country's independence in 1960. However, the country's first peaceful and democratic transition since independence in 1960 was disrupted when Bazoum was ousted by a military-led coup in July 2023. The leader of the presidential guard that removed President Bazoum, General Abdourahmane Tchiani, also known as Omar Tchiani, had been in charge of the presidential guard since 2011 and was promoted to general by former

president Issoufou in 2018. In this uranium-rich country, where France and the United States have military bases, Russia has recently been trying to establish a sphere of influence after its opening to Africa. It is seen that Niger, which seems to be the most stable country in West Africa in terms of factors such as the change of power through a relatively democratic election, the formation of partial political stability and the positive outlook of the country's economic growth rates, has been dragged into a political deadlock with the July 2023 military coup and may become a new area where a possible proxy war between the Western Bloc and Russia can be experienced.

The Country's ill fate: Military Coups

The report published by the United Nations that a total of 252 military coup attempts took place on the African continent between 1952 and 2022, 98 of which were successfully concluded, reveals the continent's misfortune with coups. West Africa is the leading region on the continent with 152 attempted military coups. Sudan, another Sahel region country, is the country with the highest number of unconstitutional government overthrows in Africa with 6 military coups in 1958, 1969, 1985, 1989, 2019, and 2021. Additionally, 10 military coup attempts failed in Sudan. Many factors play a role in such intense military coup attempts on the African continent. These factors can be categorised under three headings: triggering factors, proximate factors, and structural/institutional factors.¹

¹ UNDP, "Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa", 2023, <https://www.soldiersandcitizens.org/en/about>



Map 2: Africa - a historical epicentre of world coups

Source: <https://www.soldiersandcitizens.org/en>

Triggering factors: Some analysts argue that the electoral processes increased political tensions in the country, which accelerated the process leading to the coup. It is

also claimed that unfavourable economic shocks across the country served as triggering events. During the Cold War period, military coups in the African continent were mostly geopolitically motivated and were the result of the intentions of the Eastern and Western Blocs to have a say on the continent in order to maintain their influence in the region. In recent military coups, although geopolitical weight is again prominent, it is seen that local dynamics also play an effective role. Although a full understanding of coup-triggering factors requires a detailed analysis of the intimate dynamics between political actors, military groups and individuals, the cause-and-effect chain in the process leading to military coups in some countries gives us some clues in terms of triggering factors. As a result, factors such as discontent with the way political power is governed, an economic crisis, a number of events that would pave the way for an insecure environment, the sudden or assassinated death of the head of state, and historical dynamics between the military and civilians can be listed among the triggering factors.

As can be seen from the map and table above (Map 2), West Africa is the main base for coups on the continent. In the past year, military coups in Mali, Chad, Guinea, Sudan, Burkina Faso, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and now Niger have resulted in changes of government in all countries in the Sahel region, leading to the term “coup contagion” being applied to Africa as a whole. This geographical concentration of coups points to the need to take into account features of the Sahel sub-region that may have shaped current coup dynamics. A decade of insecurity in the Sahel, as a consequence of deeper structural and historical issues, compels us to emphasise a number of proximate or intermediate factors that have contributed to the conditions that have shaped the rise in military coups.²

As one of the causes of coups d'état processes, we will first focus on one of the most important proximate factors: insecurity. A new source of instability has emerged in Africa since 2011, when separatist and armed groups attempted to declare an independent state in northern Mali in the Western Sahel region. The overthrow of

² Miller, M. K., Joseph, M., & Ohl, D. (2018). Are coups really contagious? An extreme bounds analysis of political diffusion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62(2), 410-441.

Gaddafi in Libya is considered a critical factor influencing this trajectory. The gradual spread of instability across West Africa has turned the region into a base for a series of coups. Factors such as large “ungoverned spaces”, weak state institutions, low human development indicators, drug trafficking, smuggling, the effects of climate change, demographic expansion, and high dependence on natural resources have led to the intensification of the activities of violent groups and the emergence of a militarized structure in the region. In addition to these internal dynamics, the conflicts of interest of global and regional states have turned the region into a hotbed of instability.³ Insecurity has been exacerbated by a comprehensive intervention of security-oriented approaches by international actors. Over the last decade, numerous external powers have intervened to contain the threat of an extremist takeover of Mali and the wider Sahara. The region’s mineral wealth, as well as its importance for the irregular migration of people to Europe, have further stimulated international interest. Several agreements have been signed between the UN, the United States, the European Union and France, and a large number of external security forces have been deployed to the area. As a result, increasing insecurity and governance deficits have impacted the region’s political culture, creating another intermediate factor contributing to the risk of coup d’état.⁴

Increasing dissatisfaction with government policies is seen as another sub-heading of intermediate factors. According to the results of the Afrobarometer research organization's survey data for West African countries between 2019-2021, 60% of society thinks that corruption rates have increased significantly in the country. According to the same research organization's 2019-2021 survey data, 41% of society believes that the government has failed to prevent and suppress violent incidents.⁵ The citizens of these countries also accused France, a former colonial power in the region, of complicity in the government's abuse of power. This perception has seriously undermined regional and international efforts to

³ Mbaye, A. A., & Sign, L. (2022). Political turmoil in the Sahel: Does climate change play a role?.

⁴ Wilén, N., & Williams, P. D. (2022). What are the international military options for the Sahel?. *IPI Global Observatory*, 12.

⁵ <https://www.afrobarometer.org/surveys-and-methods/survey-resources/>

deter coup instigators. In the Sahel region, in particular, the Russian flag has become a popular symbol of opposition to the perceived influence of France in coups. Consequently, the erosion of civilian confidence in the capacity or will of governments to provide inclusive security, development and economic opportunities is a critical factor contributing to the rise of military coups. This, in turn, has created a base of grievances that military juntas can easily exploit.⁶

Another sub-heading of the intermediate factors that trigger coups is that the democratic system of governance is insufficiently mature and too fragile in the countries of the African continent. Classical arguments emphasise that functioning democracy is effective in reducing poverty and generating growth, with a particular emphasis on inclusive human development. However, in many settings, democracy in the African continent has failed to fulfil these promises. In such an environment, citizens can be expected to support groups that represent a break with “corrupt, incompetent and outdated” regimes. Ultimately, paradoxically, the reasons behind military coups create deep democratic pressure in favour of positive change.⁷

Another factor affecting the processes leading to coups in West Africa is considered to be structural and institutional factors. It is hypothesized that the most important reason behind structural and institutional factors, which have been put forward as contributing and proximate factors to the risk of coups, is the inadequacies in the democratic transition process. Coups often mark the beginning of prolonged political turmoil and associated insecurity. According to UNDP data, Burkina Faso was ruled by military coup regimes for 25 years and by politicians of military origin who came to power through elections after military coups for 26 years during its 62 years of independence. This ratio was 21/24 years after independence in Chad, 14/15 in Guinea, and 31/23 in Sudan. Mali, another country in the Sahel region, has been ruled by military coup regimes for 25 years. The frequency of military coups in the above-mentioned states after independence has become a structural problem, and the

⁶ Aina, F., & Al-bakri Nyei, I. (2022). Why have civilians welcomed the recent coups in West Africa.

⁷Knutsen, C.H. (2021). A business case for democracy: regime type, growth, and growth volatility. *Democratization*, 28(8), 1505-1524.

role of the military in political life has risen to a strategic position.⁸ The attention to the structural drivers of coup risk highlights the importance of understanding the impact of civil-military dynamics more broadly. In this sense, the concept of “coup-proofing”, referring to the tactics used in African countries to prevent future coup attempts, has gained traction in academic literature. The term refers to the ways in which the leaders of the country concerned can use the resources at their disposal (international aid, natural resource revenues or others) to attract potential military opposition actors to their side and build alliances aimed at maintaining their own power.⁹

It is argued that factors such as fragile state structures, legitimacy problems of political governments, and failures in economic development increase the risk of coup d'état in the African continent. In African states with low per capita gross domestic product (GDP), uneven economic development, and widespread human and drug trafficking, unconstitutional attempts to change the government are common. In African countries, such as Tanzania, Ghana, and Gambia, which are in the process of democratic transition, military coup attempts are not observed because the negative factors mentioned above are partially absent.¹⁰

One of the countries where the triggering, intermediate and structural factors of military coups in African history are most intensely experienced is Niger, located in the centre of the Sahel Region. Colonel Maj Amadou Abdramane, speaking on behalf of the junta during the last military coup, cited the "deterioration of the security situation" and the poor socio-economic situation as the reasons for taking over the government. Niger, a former French colony, has faced military coups 5 times since its independence in 1960. In Niger, which faced the first military coup in 1974, Hamani Diori, who had ruled the country since 1960, was ousted from power by the military. In 1993, Mahamane Ousmane, the first elected president of the country, was removed from power by a military coup in 1996, and as a result, the country faced a

⁸ UNDP, “Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa”, 2023, <https://www.soldiersandcitizens.org/en/about>

⁹ Girod, D. M. (2015). Reducing postconflict coup risk: The low windfall coup-proofing hypothesis. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 32(2), 153-174.

¹⁰ <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>, 2023

military coup for the second time. The third coup in the history of the country took place in 1999. As a result of the coup, President Ibrahim Bare Mainassara, one of the leading officers of the 1996 coup, was ambushed and killed by a group of soldiers in 1999. Between 1999 and 2010, Niger was relatively stable under the rule of President Mamadou Tandja. However, the period of stability did not last long and Tandja was removed from power in 2010 by a military coup led by Salou Djibo, an officer of the Nigerian army. The last military coup in Niger took place on 27 July 2023 and President Mohammed Bazum was removed from power by the guard regiments led by General Abdourahmane Tchiani. With the coup in Niger, the Sahel region is now ruled by the military from Mali in the west to Sudan in the east. The unconstitutional seizure of power by the military in Niger, where some elements of a partially democratic political system are in place, has raised concerns that the Sahel will be turned into a regional and global center of military conflict.¹¹

Why is Niger important?

Geographically, Niger is the largest country in West Africa, and politically, it was seen as an example of relative democratic stability in the region, whilst neighbouring states such as Mali and Burkina Faso succumbed to military coups. Strategically, Niger, home to French and US military bases, was also considered a key partner in the fight against terrorist groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda. In its April 2022 report on Niger, the US State Department described the country as "a cornerstone for the stability of the Sahel" and presented Niger as a "reliable counterterrorism partner", particularly in the fight against radical terrorist groups.¹² This part of the study will analyse why this Sahel country, which is also economically rich in uranium, is strategically important for both the Western Bloc and Russia, especially France and the USA.

Hem uranyum kaynakları hem de uranyum üretim merkezi anlamında Nijer, dünyanın en önemli ülkelerinden biri konumundadır. Tanımlanmış uranyum kaynakları bağlamında Nijer, Güney Afrika'dan sonra kıta Afrika'sının

¹¹ Tufan Aktaş, "Nijer'de bağımsızlıktan bu yana 5 kez askeri darbe yapıldı", 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/>

¹² USA Department of State, Integrated Country Strategy: Niger, April, 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ICS_AF_Niger_Public.pdf

en zengin uranyuma ihtiyatlarına sahip ülkesidir. Dünya uranyum kaynaklarının yaklaşık %5'i Nijer'in payına düşmektedir. Uranyum üretim merkezi anlamında da Nijer Namibya'dan sonra Afrika'da ikinci ülke, dünya genelinde ise yedinci en büyük üretim üssü konumundadır. Nijer, sahip olduğu bu doğal kaynağı ile Fransa başta olmakla birçok nükleer santral sahibi ülke için önemli bir ticari ve stratejik partner olarak değerlendirilmektedir.¹³

Until the coup, Niger was an important centre of the Pentagon's regional strategy. It is estimated that there are approximately 1,100 US troops stationed in the US drone bases in Niamey, the capital of Niger, and in the northern regions of the country. It is also known that the US has permanent bases in the Niamey and Agadez regions as well as temporary military bases in Arlit, Dirkou, Diffa and Ouallam. With the coup, there are serious question marks about the future of these bases. The US is concerned that Russia will strengthen its sphere of influence in this region in the event of a potential withdrawal from the country. The waving of Russian flags on the streets by the supporters of the junta after the coup amplifies this worry. The US and its allies are of the opinion that the military coup will permit al-Qaeda and ISIL-linked groups to turn the Sahel into a terrorist hub. The US is also concerned that China's, and more recently Russia's, political economy and military interest in Africa will grow and their influence will be strengthened after the military coups in West Africa. The fact that Russia has in recent years positioned itself as the torchbearer of anti-US and especially anti-French sentiments in parts of Africa makes the countries of the Western Bloc nervous.¹⁴

France is one of the main countries that see Niger as strategically important in terms of military bases. France's colonial past has turned into a source of motivation in terms of anti-colonialism in the post-coup process in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and most recently Niger. Especially after the coups in Burkina Faso and Mali, France shifted its military bases and personnel from these regions to Niger. France's colonial past on the African continent has led to the rise of a serious anti-

¹³ Nuclear Energy Agency and the International Atomic Energy Agency, "Uranium Resources, Production and Demand", 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/>

¹⁴ Declan Walsh, "Coast to Coast, a Corridor of Coups Brings Turmoil in Africa", The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/29/world/africa/africa-coups-niger.html>, 17.08.2023

French sentiment in recent years, especially in countries in the Sahel region. As a source and producer of uranium, France has pursued a strategy of maintaining close relations with Niger. It is known that France has the highest number of military personnel in Niger after the USA. It is estimated that there are approximately 1000 French military personnel in Niger, supported by fighter jets and unmanned aerial vehicles. France claims to have these troops in the country to support the Niger army when local forces identify terrorist operations in the border areas linking Mali and Burkina Faso. Therefore, by focusing on supporting local forces rather than having Western troops do most of the legwork on the ground, Paris seeks to avoid potential criticism of its role in the Sahel and minimise anti-French sentiments. However, the anti-French stance of the new military administration during the post-coup period and its attitude towards military bases/personnel leaving the country indicate that France's influence in the region is under serious threat. The other two NATO countries with military personnel in Niger are Italy and Germany. According to data from the Italian Ministry of Defence, 300 soldiers are training local elements for terrorist operations in Niger. Germany, on the other hand, is estimated to have between 50-100 personnel in the country for military training purposes.¹⁵ In total, it is still not known what kind of future awaits all of these Western Bloc military bases and personnel in the post-coup period. The new military administration is gradually increasing its anti-Western discourse and is close to a pro-Russian political line. However, it is not yet foreseeable what kind of danger awaits the region in the event of the withdrawal of Western Bloc military personnel, especially the USA and France, who are critical in supporting the Sahel Region countries in the fight against radical terrorist groups, and how adequate Russia is in terms of filling this gap.

Relations with the West: In Terms of Political Economy

The military and political significance of Niger for the Western Bloc, particularly the United States and France, has been analysed in the sections above. Niger's strategically important natural resources, especially

¹⁵ Emelia Sithole Matarise, "Factbox: Which Western countries have foreign forces in Niger?", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/which-western-countries-have-foreign-forces-niger-2023-07-28/>, 17.08.2023

uranium, and the fact that it is seen as an important base in the fight against radical terrorist groups in the Sahel Region cause the Western Bloc to position this country as an important partner. The military bases/personnel of the USA and France in the region, especially in Niger, and the long historical relations network, show the Western Bloc in a more advantageous position compared to China and Russia, which have recently tried to penetrate the region. However, the fact that military juntas have taken over in almost all countries in the Sahel region in the last two years threatens the interests of countries such as the USA and France, which are in a militarily and politically advantageous position in the region. This chapter will analyse the political economy of the Western Bloc countries' interest in Niger. Thus, it will be investigated to what extent the West has an interest behind its military and political investments in Niger and whether this interest has translated into significant political economy gains and influence.

The Sahel Region countries, which have a negative outlook in terms of political stability, cannot be said to be a centre of attraction for Western Bloc countries in terms of political economy. It is seen that the most important export partner of Niger, whose total exports are around 3.78 billion dollars, is the United Arab Emirates. Niger carries out 70.8 per cent of its total exports to the United Arab Emirates and has annual trade cooperation of 2.68 billion dollars with this country. The second largest share in the country's exports belongs to China with a trade cooperation of 344 million dollars. China is an important partner with a 9.1% share in Niger's exports. Among the Western Bloc countries, only France ranks 3rd in Niger exports with an annual trade volume of 197 million dollars. This corresponds to approximately 5.21% of the country's exports.



Source: <https://oec.world/>, 27.08.2021

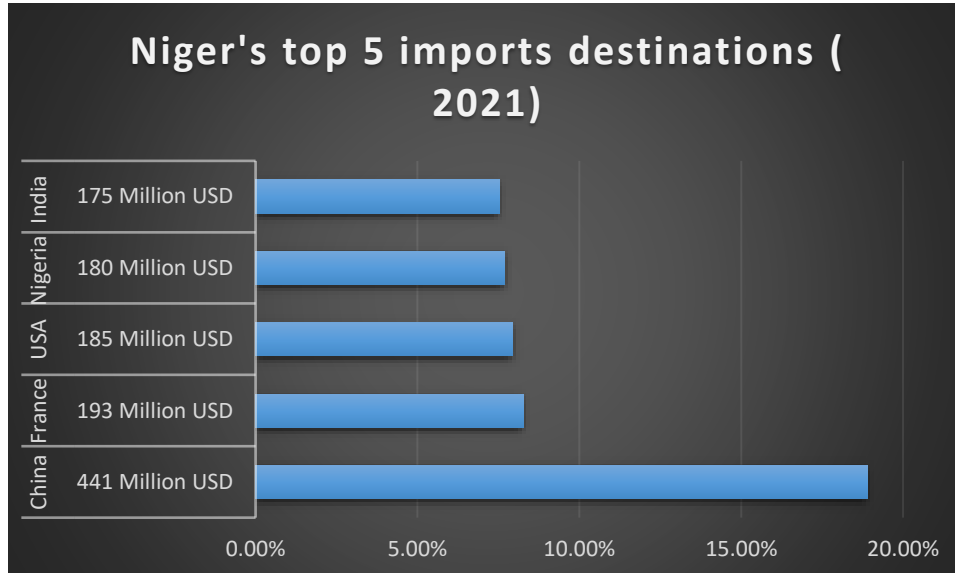
Niger's main export is semi-manufactured gold, worth \$2.7 billion a year. Niger's second largest export is radioactive chemicals, and its third largest export is petroleum products. Refined petroleum products and uranium/thorium ores are also important components of Niger's exports.



Source: <https://oec.world/>, 27.08.2021

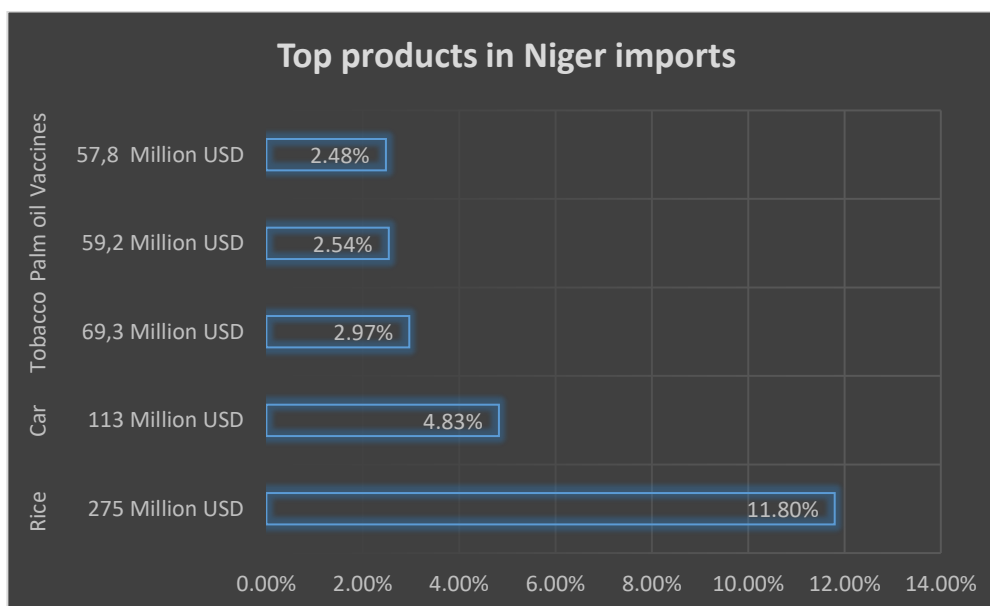
It is seen that the most important trade partners of Niger, whose annual imports are around 2.33 billion USD, are the USA and France after China. Whilst China meets 18.9% of Niger's total imports, the USA and France account for 16.22% of the country's total imports. As for export items,

it is observed that China is a vital trade partner for Niger concerning imports. Other countries in the Western bloc, such as Turkey, Belgium, and Germany, also play an important role in meeting Niger's needs in the field of foreign trade.



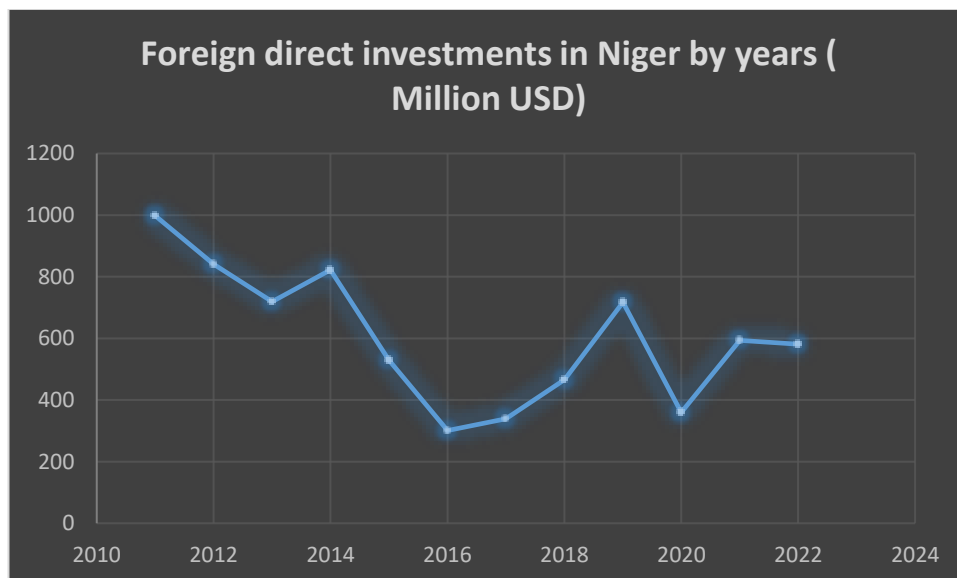
Source : <https://intracen.org/>, 29.08.2023

It can be seen that Niger's main import, which is accepted in the category of countries with a low level of economic prosperity, is rice. Rice, which accounts for 11.8% of Niger's imports, is supplied by China and India. Due to the economic conditions, foreign dependence is very high on staple foods, but medical products, automobiles and construction materials are also among the main imports.



Source : <https://intracen.org/>, 29.08.2023

When we look at the foreign direct investment data of Niger, it is seen that there has been a steady flow of foreign capital to the country since 2011. Compared to other African countries, having a stable administration and the mining sector, especially uranium, have attracted foreign investors to the country. With a foreign capital inflow of 1.07 billion pounds in 2011, Niger was able to receive direct foreign investment steadily until 2022. In the country where French companies dominate the uranium sector, Moroccan companies are interested in roads, telecommunications, banking and real estate development, whilst Turkish companies are interested in construction and hotel management. In recent years, it has been known that there is a serious interest from Chinese state companies in uranium and oil fields.¹⁶ According to the US Embassy in Niger, China's total foreign direct investment in Niger will reach \$2.68 billion by the end of 2020.¹⁷ The country's stock of foreign investment is estimated at \$8.2 billion in 2022. It is estimated that the largest share of this FDI stock belongs to France, followed by China.¹⁸



Source : <https://www.worldbank.org/en/home>, 31.08.2023

When we look at the network of Niger's political economy relations with the Western Bloc countries in terms of

¹⁶ Sherillyn Raga, "Niger: macroeconomic and trade profile", Open Data Institute, 2023, <https://www.theodi.org/service/public-policy/>

¹⁷ Andrew Hayley, "China's oil and uranium business in Niger", 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>

¹⁸ World Investment Report, 2023, <https://unctad.org/>

export, import and foreign direct investment indices, it is seen that France is an important partner, especially in terms of foreign investment. In addition to the network of relations established with Niger in the political and military context, the investments made by French companies in the field of mining, especially uranium, show that Niger is a significant area for France in the African field both politically and economically. It is seen that the problems experienced by African states with France in the processes leading to independence from colonialism have a serious impact on today's politics. It is seen that France is trying to maintain political and military activity in its former colonies, especially in Niger, through economic support and humanitarian aid programs. In this sense, France endeavours to strengthen its sphere of influence in other former colonies such as Niger by activating political economy. In addition to political economy, the Paris administration is also endeavouring to preserve its presence in the geopolitical competition arena with its military components in the region. However, the negative attitudes of the military governments that took power after the military coup in the Sahel Region countries, the last link of which is in Niger, towards France show that both the political economy and military interests of the Paris government in the entire continental area are under serious threat. Therefore, it is estimated that the political economy and geopolitical interests of the Paris government will be seriously damaged in the regional competition both due to the attitude of the post-coup military administration towards France and due to the activities of countries such as China and Russia, which are opening up to Africa by taking advantage of the negative image of the Western Bloc in the continent in general.

Relations with Russia: In Terms of Geopolitics and Political Economy

Russia has recently made remarkable progress on the African continent, re-establishing diplomatic relations with key African regional states and strengthening its sphere of influence in regions where Western powers are absent or in trouble. While the Western coalition led by the United States, which seeks to isolate Russia internationally, has convinced the transatlantic alliance to do so, it has yet to convince a significant part of the world, including countries on the African continent, to cut ties with Moscow. Despite

wars and sanctions that have strained Russia's economy and defence sector, the Kremlin maintains enough ties to the continent to challenge Western narratives. This chapter examines Russia's slowly growing influence in Africa, with a particular focus on Niger, and assesses Moscow's current political, economic, and military-security relationships in the region. In the course of this assessment, it will examine Russia's political, economic, and military relations with Niger and the extent to which Moscow has been able to exert influence over Niger before and after the military coup, and whether this influence is geopolitical or political economy. Finally, it examines the potential for a new conflict between the Western bloc and Russia in Niger, the last link in the Sahel coup belt.

Although Russia's interest in the African continent has gained momentum since the mid-2000s, historically the roots of the relationship go back to the Cold War period. During the Cold War years, almost all major countries in Africa, including but not limited to Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Mozambique, and others, began to enter the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, and the Kremlin provided them with arms, equipment, military training, and advisory services. This laid the foundation for the long-term legacy of the Russian sphere of influence across Africa.¹⁹ Bilateral trade relations are one of the main reasons why most African countries did not take a stance against Russia, especially during the war in Ukraine, but these deep historical ties also play an important role.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, however, this military and economic aid to Africa declined significantly to a marginal level. Moscow's first visible attempts to re-engage with the continent began in the mid-2000s, with President Vladimir Putin visiting South Africa in 2006 and his successor Dmitry Medvedev visiting Egypt, Angola, Nigeria, and Namibia in 2009. After Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, the first round of Western sanctions against Russia began, forcing Moscow to actively seek new geopolitical partners and business opportunities. Since 2014, several high-ranking Russian government officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov,

¹⁹ Sukhankin, S. (2020). The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs, and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa. *Jamestown Foundation*, January, 10.

Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev, and Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, have frequently visited the African continent and signed numerous bilateral military, economic, and security cooperation agreements with various African states.²⁰ One of Russia's most important gestures to the countries of the region was the cancellation of billions of dollars of African debt.²¹

Since 2018, Russia's efforts to strengthen its sphere of influence in Africa have taken on a strategic dimension. In 2019, Moscow took an important step by hosting the first Russia-Africa summit in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, aimed at strengthening Russia's position as a reliable strategic partner on the continent and ensuring Russia's security. At this summit, Russia signed military contracts with several African countries for the export of Russian attack helicopters. In 2023, despite the war, sanctions and Western pressure, Russia hosted the second Russia-Africa summit, which was attended by 17 African heads of state (54 in total). At this summit, Moscow signed several agreements with several African countries on preventing the arms race in space, cooperation in information security and counter-terrorism, and promised to cancel additional debts.²²

In addition to strengthening diplomatic ties with African countries, the Kremlin is also pursuing a strategy of expanding its economic influence on the continent. For example, trade revenue between Russia and African countries almost doubled from \$9.9 billion in 2013 to \$17.7 billion in 2021. Grain exports are of particular importance, as about 30 per cent of Africa's grain supplies come from Russia. Moscow's leading trading partners in the region are Egypt, Algeria and Morocco. These countries account for 67 per cent of Russia's trade with the continent. In this sense, Niger does not have a significant volume of Russian exports. Russia's exports to Niger are around 1.2 million dollars, while the volume of imports is limited to only 160,000 dollars.²³ As can be

²⁰ ТАСС, Российские экономические проекты в Африке. Досье, 2016, <https://tass.ru/info/3237697>

²¹ Burc Eruygur, "Moscow wrote off more than \$20B in debts from African states, Russian president says", 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en>

²² "SECOND SUMMIT RUSSIA–AFRICA ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN FORUM", 2023, <https://summitafrica.ru/en/>

²³ globalEDGE, "Russia: Trade Statistics", 2023, [tps://globaledege.msu.edu](https://globaledege.msu.edu)

seen, Niger does not currently have any strategic importance for Russia in the political economy. However, the military junta that took power after the military coup in 2023 aims to establish important cooperation with Russia, especially in the field of defence. The military government's aloof attitude toward the Western bloc increases Russia's chances in this regard.

Despite having a limited sphere of influence in Africa in terms of economic and trade relations, the Kremlin maintains strong defence and security ties, arms sales and joint military training programs with the continent. Currently, Russia is the main arms supplier to Africa. Between 2018 and 2022, 40 per cent of Africa's major weapons systems needs were procured from Russia. This is more than the total arms exports to the region of the United States (16 per cent), China (9.8 per cent) and France (7.6 per cent). Russian arms sales to Africa are estimated to have reached \$2 billion in recent years. The main importers of Russian weapons systems are North African countries, particularly Algeria and Egypt. Russia accounts for 73 per cent of Algeria's arms imports, compared to 34 per cent for Egypt. In addition to Algeria and Egypt, Mali, Sudan and Angola are also important trading partners of Russia in arms and equipment.²⁴ One of the main reasons for African countries' dependence on and preference for Russian-made weapons/equipment is that modern Russian weapons are generally cheaper than their Western alternatives and compatible with the stockpiles of old Soviet-era defence systems held by many states on the continent. On the other hand, Russia, under the leadership of the Wagner Group, has often been flexible in selling significant amounts of arms to any country, regardless of country or principle, that opposes the Western bloc and to military juntas that have taken power to strengthen their sphere of influence on the African continent.²⁵

Another step in strengthening Russia's geopolitical sphere of influence in Africa is Russia's military exercises with many African countries. The Kremlin, which attaches great importance to military diplomacy, regularly organizes various exercises with the armies of

²⁴ SIPRI Fact Sheet, "TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL ARMS TRANSFERS", 2023, <https://sipri.org/taxonomy/term/297>

²⁵ Paul Stronski, "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa", 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>

countries such as Angola, Egypt, Algeria, Congo, Mali and Zimbabwe. In addition, Russian military elements provide a limited number of military personnel to the United Nations and participate in anti-terrorist operations in Congo, Western Sahara, Sudan, and South Sudan.²⁶ Another area of Kremlin activity in Africa is private military companies. It is estimated that there are 7 Russian private military companies in 16 African countries. It is observed that Russian private military companies have significantly entered the African arena after 2015. It is known that Russian private military companies are active in such African countries as Sudan, South Sudan, Congo, Gabon, Libya, Mali and Madagascar. The Kremlin directs private military companies to fragile African states, especially those rich in natural resources, in exchange for economic concessions. The most prominent of these private military companies is the Wagner Group, owned by Russian businessman Prigozhin. It has been observed that the Wagner Group, led by Prigozhin, whose relations with the Kremlin deteriorated after the military revolt against the Russian government in June 2023, has obtained important security concessions in African countries rich in natural resources. After the military coup in Niger, the Wagner Group had agreed to support the new military government by providing the necessary security services. However, after the deterioration of relations between the Kremlin and the Wagner Group following the attempted armed rebellion in June and the death of Prigozhin in a plane crash in August 2023, there was uncertainty about the direction of the Wagner Group's activities in Africa. It has been claimed that the Wagner Group will be pacified and replaced by other Russian private military companies.

Possible Consequences of the Coup: Findings and Opinions

With the junta attempt in Niger, the last link in the chain of military coups in the West African region, the region appears to have been plunged into serious instability. The post-coup process in Niger is being closely watched by both France and the United States, which have strategic

²⁶ Grissom, A., Charap, S., Cheravitch, J., Hanson, R., Massicot, D., Mouton, C. A., ... & RAND PROJECT AIR FORCE SANTA MONICA CA. (2022). *Russia's Growing Presence in Africa: A Geostrategic Assessment*. RAND.

partnerships with the region, as well as Russia, which has emphasized the region through private military companies and economic aid. Although Niger's economic and social indicators place it at the bottom of global development indices, the country's geographical location at the crossroads of North, West and Central Africa, its mineral and oil resources, its potential for renewable energy development and its strong demographic growth help explain the seemingly excessive interest of middle and major powers in the current crisis. This section analyzes the possible implications and outcomes of the post-military coup process in Niger.

Niger is the second largest recipient of U.S. military aid in sub-Saharan Africa, and one of the countries where Washington trains and equips the country's military and security forces to fight terrorism and international crime. After the July 26 coup, however, the U.S. suspended a significant portion of many of its military and humanitarian aid programs to Niger. The US clearly wants to maintain its military bases in Niger and continue its intelligence gathering and offensive operations against various terrorist groups in the region. However, this appears to depend on the decision of the current military authorities.²⁷ It is noted that the majority of Niger society is not satisfied with the presence of foreign forces on its territory to ensure the security of the country. In this context, a survey conducted by the Afrobarometer Institute in 2022 shows that 64 per cent of the population is against the use of foreign forces to ensure the security of the country. According to the survey data, only 6.1 per cent of the population wanted the support of French forces or European Union allies, while 4.1 per cent wanted the support of American forces. The post-coup rallies in favour of the junta were also characterized by slogans and reactions against the presence of the Western bloc in the country. Ultimately, the current status of U.S. military personnel and bases in Niger remains unclear.²⁸

From France's point of view, the military coup in Niger and the subsequent developments pose a serious risk of loss of influence. The junta government that took power after the coup made statements against France and openly declared

²⁷ Yabi, G. (2023). The Niger Coup's Outsized Global Impact.

²⁸ Mahamne Tahirou Ali Bako, "Terrorisme : Les Nigériens sont satisfaits de l'implication de leur armée et ne veulent pas de l'aide d'une armée étrangère", 2023, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>

that it did not want a French military presence on its territory. The military government's statements on the termination of all major defence agreements signed under President Mohamed Bazoum put France at risk of evacuating all its military installations. Having moved its largest military presence in West Africa to Niger after the military coups in Burkina Faso and Mali, France is determined to maintain its geopolitical influence in the region. Although not as large as France's, some EU members, such as Germany and Italy, also have a small military presence in Niger. The new military government favours the withdrawal of not only France, but all foreign forces from the country, and is attempting to establish a rapprochement with Russia as a counterweight to the Western bloc.²⁹

From Russia's perspective, the military coup in Niger signals a shift in alliances toward the Kremlin. Although the Russian flags waved by some coup supporters suggest a repeat of the Mali and Burkina Faso scenarios, it is not yet realistic for the new military government to publicly break with the Western bloc and enter into a full alliance with Russia. Compared to other African countries close to the Kremlin, Niger does not have such deep politico-economic ties with Russia as the US and France. It is even known that in March 2022, Niger voted against the Kremlin in the United Nations General Assembly, calling for an end to Russia's use of force against Ukraine. Despite all this, relations between the new junta in Niamey and the transitional regime in Mali, the Wagner Group's West African base, are reportedly quite good. Wagner's opportunistic offer of security to Niger's military rulers could lead to alliances that cannot be ignored. While the death of Wagner leader Yevgeny Prigozhin on August 23 adds a new layer of uncertainty to Russia's ability to exploit the crisis in Niger, the Kremlin's potential geopolitical ascendancy in Niger is a serious concern for the Western bloc, particularly the United States and France.

Conclusion

Russia's security pivot to Africa poses a serious strategic dilemma for the West. Allowing Russia to expand has serious implications for the Western bloc and threatens the geopolitical and political-economic investments and

²⁹ GIORGIO LEALI, "Niger junta revokes military pacts with France", 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/>

interests of the United States and France on the continent in the long term. Overall, Russia has so far been unable to provide significant assistance or capacity building beyond the military-security sphere in the context of the African continent as a whole, and the Western bloc's influence on Niger and other regionally important African countries is stronger than the Kremlin's. Niger's relations with the U.S. and the West demonstrate the influence of the Western bloc in the region, both in geopolitical and political-economic terms. However, after the junta took over the government in Niger, the last link in the chain of military coups in West Africa, the Western bloc's historic network of relations in the region is in jeopardy. The junta's "close contact" with Wagner, a private Russian military mercenary company, its willingness to declare close ties with the Kremlin, and the general public's dissatisfaction with the presence of foreign (especially French) military elements in the country pose a long-term threat to the geopolitical and political economy of the Western bloc countries. Despite the military junta's negative statements against the Western bloc, a complete break with this bloc does not seem realistic, at least for the time being. This is because Niger has a long historical network of relations with the Western bloc, both in terms of political economy and military security. Therefore, it is not out of the question that this network will come to an end in the short term. However, Russia's appetizing opening to Africa and its contacts with Niger's military junta in the immediate aftermath of the coup will not mean that the Western bloc will stand idly by and risk only resorting to "strategic patience". As a result, the likelihood of a hot military confrontation between the Western bloc and Russia in the case of Niger seems low in the short term, but it is expected that the military junta, after consolidating and strengthening its power, will feel more comfortable with different strategic partners such as Russia and even China. In such a situation, the Western bloc, which has made long-term geopolitical and political-economic investments in regionally important African countries, especially Niger, may enter a new phase of confrontation with the Kremlin in order not to lose these gains. Thus, Niger, which is not only an important military base in the fight against radical terrorist groups but is also rich in natural resources, especially uranium, is likely to bear the brunt of this

power-sharing conflict between the Western bloc and Russia.

References

1. Miller, M. K., Joseph, M., & Ohl, D. (2018). Are coups really contagious? An extreme bounds analysis of political diffusion. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 62(2), 410-441.
2. Mbaye, A. A., & Sign, L. (2022). Political turmoil in the Sahel: Does climate change play a role?.
3. Wilén, N., & Williams, P. D. (2022). What are the international military options for the Sahel? IPI Global Observatory, 12.
4. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/surveys-and-methods/survey-resources/>
5. Aina, F., & Al-bakri Nyei, I. (2022). Why have civilians welcomed the recent coups in West Africa?
6. Knutsen, C. H. (2021). A business case for democracy: regime type, growth, and growth volatility. *Democratization*, 28(8), 1505-1524.
7. UNDP, "Soldiers and Citizens: Military Coups and the Need for Democratic Renewal in Africa", 2023, <https://www.soldiersandcitizens.org/en/about>
8. Girod, D. M. (2015). Reducing postconflict coup risk: The low windfall coup-proofing hypothesis. *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, 32(2), 153-174.
9. <https://fragilestatesindex.org/>, 2023
10. Elischer, S., & Mueller, L. (2019). Niger falls back off track. *African Affairs*, 118(471), 392-406.
11. Yusuf Akinpelu, "Niger coup makes the troubled Sahel region yet more fragile", BBC News, 27 July 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66322914>
12. USA Department of State, Integrated Country Strategy: Niger, April 2022, https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/ICS_AF_Niger_Public.pdf
13. Nuclear Energy Agency and the International Atomic Energy Agency, "Uranium Resources, Production and Demand", 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/>
14. Declan Walsh, "Coast to Coast, a Corridor of Coups Brings Turmoil in Africa", The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/29/world/africa/africa-coups-niger.html>, 17.08.2023
15. Emelia Sithole Matarise, "Factbox: Which Western countries have foreign forces in Niger?", Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/which-western-countries-have-foreign-forces-niger-2023-07-28/>, 17.08.2023
16. Sherillyn Raga, "Niger: macroeconomic and trade profile", Open Data Institute, 2023,

- <https://www.theodi.org/service/public-policy/>
17. World Investment Report, 2023, <https://unctad.org/>
18. Andrew Hayley, "China's oil and uranium business in Niger", 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/>
19. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/home>
20. Sukhankin, S. (2020). The 'Hybrid' Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs, and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa. Jamestown Foundation, January, 10.
21. ТАСС, Российские экономические проекты в Африке. Досье, 2016, <https://tass.ru/info/3237697>
22. Burc Eruygur, "Moscow wrote off more than \$20B in debts from African states, Russian president says", 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en>
23. "SECOND SUMMIT RUSSIA–AFRICA ECONOMIC AND HUMANITARIAN FORUM", 2023, <https://summitafrica.ru/en/>
24. globalEDGE, "Russia: Trade Statistics", 2023, <https://globaledege.msu.edu>
25. SIPRI Fact Sheet, "TRENDS IN INTERNATIONAL ARMS TRANSFERS", 2023, <https://sipri.org/taxonomy/term/297>
26. Paul Stronski, "Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa", 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/>
27. Grissom, A., Charap, S., Cheravitch, J., Hanson, R., Massicot, D., Mouton, C. A., ... & RAND PROJECT AIR FORCE SANTA MONICA CA. (2022). Russia's Growing Presence in Africa: A Geostrategic Assessment. RAND.
28. CSIS, "Russia's Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia's Private Military Companies", 2021, <https://www.csis.org/>
29. Alice Speri, "INFORMATION WARFARE WAS KEY TO PRIGOZHIN'S MUTINY AGAINST PUTIN", 2023, <https://theintercept.com/>
30. Yabi, G. (2023). The Niger Coup's Outsized Global Impact.
31. Mahamne Tahirou Ali Bako, "Terrorisme : Les Nigériens sont satisfaits de l'implication de leur armée et ne veulent pas de l'aide d'une armée étrangère", 2023, <https://www.afrobarometer.org/>
32. GIORGIO LEALI, "Niger junta revokes military pacts with France", 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/>
33. Nadzharov, A. M., & Entina, E. G. (2023). Franco-Russian Great Power Rivalry in the Sahara-Sahel Region. *Russia in Global Affairs*, 21(3 (83)), 181-204.
34. Catrinel Popescu, A. I. (2017). Russia's strategy in sub-Saharan security in the wake of the Ukraine crisis.
35. Bartosiewicz, A. (2022). French-Russian Rivalry in Africa. *Security Dimensions. International and National Studies*, (40), 40-62.
36. Kohnert, D. (2022). The impact of Russian presence in Africa. Available at SSRN 4067193.

37. Giles, K. (2013). *Russian Interests in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Army War College Press.
38. Besenyő, J. (2020). The Africa Policy of Russia. In *The 21st Century Cold War* (pp. 132-153). Routledge.
39. Kanet, R. E., & Moulioukova, D. (2022). Russia's return to Africa: a renewed challenge to the West?. *Post-Soviet Affairs*, 38(5), 427-439.
40. Duursma, A., & Masuhr, N. (2022). Russia's return to Africa in a historical and global context: Anti-imperialism, patronage, and opportunism. *South African Journal of International Affairs*, 29(4), 407-423.
41. Paczyńska, A. (2020). Russia in Africa: Is great power competition returning to the continent? (No. 15/2020). Briefing Paper.
42. Tufan Aktaş, "Nijer'de bağımsızlıktan bu yana 5 kez askeri darbe yapıldı", 2023, <https://www.aa.com.tr/>