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PERCEPTIONS AND POWER: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE ON DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION AND ATTITUDES IN AFRICA

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Perceptions and Power: Assessing the Impact of Russia's Influence on Development Cooperation and Attitudes in Africa

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Foreword by EBA

In today's geopolitical environment, development aid increasingly intersects with foreign and security policy. In some ways, they are even intertwined. Donor presence and behaviour have well-documented effects on recipient countries, not only economically, but also in shaping political preferences, institutional trust, and social attitudes.

Russia's expanding engagement in Africa is one example where strategic action in the form of trade agreements, media ownership and political intervention are likely to affect traditional "Western" donor interests. If donor strategies shift in response to Russian involvement, these changes may have long-term developmental and geopolitical consequences.

In this report, the author uses an innovative combination of geospatial data, public opinion surveys and conflict mapping, where Russian and Wagner-linked activities are used to proxy for broader forms of Russian influence. It compares regions with and without, and before and after the arrival of Russian actors to assess the influence on development assistance as well as on the views of citizens across the continent.

The author finds that responses are not uniform. Some Western donors withdraw from contested areas, while others adapt or intensify their engagement. Moreover, Russian involvement, rather than increasing citizens' support for Russian values and priorities, can foster positive views of U.S. leadership, even as it erodes trust in democratic norms.

The findings remind us that development cooperation does not take place in a vacuum: the presence of military contractors, disinformation efforts, and transactional partnerships can alter not only the operational space for aid actors, but also trust in democratic institutions, human rights, and inclusive governance. This understanding is important for a development cooperation that seeks meaningful impact.

We hope this working paper will find its audience among policymakers and practitioners in Sweden and abroad. EBA working papers are shorter studies that investigate a question of limited scope or that complements a regular EBA report. Authors are solely responsible for the content of the report.

Stockholm, December 2025

Jan Pettersson, Managing Director

Sammanfattning

I denna rapport undersöks hur Rysslands växande engagemang i Afrika påverkar givarbeteende hos västerländska givare och allmänhetens attityder i mottagarländer. Ryssland har ökat sin närvaro på den afrikanska kontinenten, särskilt efter att landet blivit alltmer isolerat från västvärlden till följd av Rysslands fullskaliga invasion av Ukraina.

Till skillnad från traditionellt västerländskt bistånd, som ofta är kopplat till demokratisk styrning och långsiktiga utvecklingsmål, fungerar ryskt bistånd mer transaktionsbaserat, i denna rapport benämnt ”a realist, transactional approach”. Genom samarbete med instabila regimer, där vapen eller tjänster från privata militära aktörer som Wagner-gruppen erbjuds i utbyte mot mineralkoncessioner och politiskt stöd, har Ryssland etablerat sig som en inflytelserik partner i länder som Centralafrikanska republiken, Mali, Sudan och Libyen. Denna strategi stärks av anti-västerländska och antikoloniala budskap som anknyter till historiska missförhållanden och väcker lokal sympati.

För att undersöka effekterna av ryskt inflytande används en kombination av olika datakällor: geokodade biståndsdata, data om konflikt och våldsamma händelser (med specifik spårning av incidenter kopplade till Wagner och andra ryska aktörer) och data från opinionsundersökningar. Analysen omfattar perioden 2014–2023 och använder statistiska metoder för att isolera förändringar i fördelning av bistånd och allmänhetens attityder till följd av rysk eller Wagner-gruppens närvaro. I huvudsak jämförs regioner före och efter rysk närvaro (och mot liknande regioner utan rysk närvaro) för att se hur givarbeteende och lokala uppfattningar förändras när ryska aktörer är verksamma.

Slutsatser – givarländers beteende: Resultaten tyder på att givare anpassar sina biståndsstrategier som svar på Rysslands närvaro, vilket innebär att närvaron av ryska militära aktörer kan påverka var och hur västerländskt bistånd distribueras. Studien visar att många västerländska givare minskar eller omfördelar biståndsprojekt från områden där Wagner-legosoldater eller andra ryska aktörer är verksamma. Dock intensifierade Världsbanken i stället sitt engagemang i regioner med rysk närvaro, särskilt efter 2022, och Frankrikes biståndsorganisation (AFD) valde att konsolidera sina projekt snarare än att dra sig tillbaka från områden med rysk närvaro. En mer fördjupad analys visar att Sverige efter 2022 upprätthöll och i vissa fall till och med ökade sitt bistånd till konfliktzoner, även om syftet inte var att motverka rysk närvaro.

Analysen avslöjar således att givare beter sig olika: vissa aktörer, exempelvis USA och Tyskland, drar sig tillbaka från konfliktområden, vilket potentiellt ger Ryssland ökat inflytande, medan andra, som Världsbanken, ökar sitt engagemang för att motverka rysk närväro. Dessa mönster blev särskilt tydliga efter att Rysslands invasion av Ukraina 2022 satte den geopolitiska konkurrensen om biståndet på sin spets.

I rapporten identifieras två möjliga scenarier: Om västvärldens tillbakadragande fortsätter kan Ryssland och andra auktoritära aktörer fylla tomrummet. Om fler givare däremot följer Världsbankens exempel kan det bidra till att västerländska värderingar och initiativ får lokalt genomslag.

Slutsatser – allmänhetens uppfattning: Rysslands aktiviteter, och givarnas reaktion på dem, påverkar också lokala attityder i mottagarländerna. Den ryska närväron har mätbara effekter på hur allmänheten ser på globala makter. Undersökningen visar att när ryskanknutna soldater etablerar sig i en region, ökar det lokala stödet för USA:s ledarskap med omkring sex procentenheter. Detta tyder på att samhällen som bevitnar kontrasten mellan västvärldens engagemang och Rysslands militära inblandning, vänder sig till väst för ledarskap. Samtidigt minskar tilliten till demokratiska värderingar och institutioner. I områden som påverkats av konflikter med koppling till Wagner-gruppen och Ryssland har man sett att tilliten till valens legitimitet och i viss mån stödet för jämställdhet och hållbarhet har minskat (principer som ofta förknippas med västerländskt bistånd). Även om resultaten inte alltid är signifikanta tyder det på att rysk närväro kan vara förknippad med ökat lokalt stöd för Ryssland, trots begränsat materiellt stöd, samt en mer pessimistisk syn på ekonomiska förhållanden och styrning. Sammantaget visar detta att när det västerländska biståndets synlighet eller genomslag avtar kan Rysslands anti-västliga budskap och löften om säkerhet få större genomslag hos lokalbefolkningen.

Konsekvenser för biståndsgivare: Resultaten av studien leder till flera viktiga rekommendationer för framtida utvecklingssamarbeten i Afrika.

För det första uppmanas givare och internationella institutioner att inte dra sig ur instabila stater och områden. Ett tillbakadragande av västerländskt bistånd riskerar att skapa ett vakuum som auktoritära makter som Ryssland snabbt kan exploatera, med potentiellt negativa effekter på demokrati och stabilitet. I stället bör givare hitta sätt att anpassa sin biståndsstrategi: detta kan innebära att man delar risker och samarbetar med lokala partners eller har flexibla program som även kan fungera i

instabila situationer. Att upprätthålla en närvaro på plats är avgörande för att kunna hjälpa behövande samhällen och för att begränsa Rysslands inflytande.

För det andra lyfts behovet av en starkare strategisk kommunikation. Västerländska biståndsgivare måste bli bättre på att kommunicera fördelarna med sitt bistånd och de värderingar som ligger bakom det. Samtidigt som man stödjer en oberoende journalistik för att främja en välgrundad offentlig debatt. I regioner där ryskt medieinflytande är påtagligt, är det därför viktigt att proaktivt engagera sig i lokala narrativ. I givarländerna behöver man stärka kommunikationen kring biståndets strategiska värde och utvecklingseffekter, och stärka det allmänna stödet för ett hållbart engagemang i dessa områden.

För det tredje, i takt med att den geopolitiska miljön blir mer komplex riskerar tillfälliga eller isolerade åtgärder att leda till fragmentering. Biståndsgivarnas olika strategier, som tillbakadragande eller omfördelning, undergräver utvecklingssamarbetets kollektiva styrka. För att säkerställa att olika åtgärder förstärker snarare än motverkar varandra krävs ökad samordning mellan givare som EU-länder, multilaterala institutioner och banker. Tillvägagångssätten kan behöva anpassas genom att långsiktiga utvecklingsmål kombineras med flexibilitet på marken.

Slutligen understryks värdet av detaljerad, geografiskt avgränsade data för att bättre förstå både utländskt inflytande och biståndets effektivitet. Därför bör utvecklingsaktörer använda geospatial analys, konfliktkartläggning och opinionsdata som en integrerad del av programcyklerna. Det är också viktigt att investera i öppna plattformar och gemensamma datainfrastrukturer som gör det möjligt att snabbt ställa om utifrån förändrade geopolitiska förhållanden.

Sammanfattningsvis är Rysslands inflytande i Afrika inte bara en säkerhets- eller diplomatisk fråga; det har också en direkt koppling till utvecklingsbiståndet. För att stödja Afrikas utveckling mitt i en ny stormaktsrivalitet måste västerländska beslutsfattare och utvecklingsaktörer förbli engagerade, stå enade och strategiskt kommunicera värdet av utvecklingssamarbete och västerländska värderingar.

Summary

This report examines how Russia's growing engagement in Africa is affecting development aid and public attitudes. Russia has ramped up its Africa strategy especially after its estrangement from the West due to the Ukraine conflict. Unlike traditional Western aid, which is often tied to democratic governance and long-term development goals, Russia employs a *realist*, transactional approach focused on security, military support, and resource deals. By partnering with unstable regimes and offering arms or the deployment of private military contractors like the Wagner Group in exchange for mineral concessions and loyalty, Russia positions itself as an influential ally in countries such as the Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan, Libya, and others. This strategy is bolstered by anti-Western, anti-colonial messaging that appeals to historical grievances.

To assess the impact of this Russian influence, the paper uses new data and empirical methods. It combines geocoded aid data, conflict event data (with specific tracking of incidents involving Wagner and other Russia-linked actors), and survey data on public opinion. The analysis spans 2014–2023 and employs rigorous statistical techniques to isolate changes in aid allocation and public attitudes attributable to Russian or Wagner Group involvement. In essence, the analysis compares regions before and after Russian actors' arrival (and against similar regions without such actors) to see how donor behaviour and local perceptions shift when Russian actors are active.

Key findings – donor behaviour: Western development actors appear to be adjusting their aid strategies in response to Russia's footprint. The study finds that many Western donors scale down or redirect aid projects away from areas where Wagner mercenaries or other Russian actors operate. This trend suggests that the very presence of Russian military contractors can alter where and how Western aid is delivered. However, the response is not uniform across all donors: notably, the World Bank intensified its engagement in regions with Russian involvement, especially after 2022, and France's development agency (AFD) chose to consolidate its projects rather than exit. A deeper analysis is devoted to Sweden, that after 2022 maintained or even increased aid to conflict zones, although without specifically tailoring it against Russia.

The analysis thus reveals divergent approaches: some actors retreat from contested areas, potentially ceding ground to Russian influence, whereas others step up involvement to counterbalance Russia's presence. These

patterns became especially pronounced after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which put a spotlight on geopolitical competition in aid.

The paper suggests two possible paths forward: if Western disengagement continues, Russian and other authoritarian actors could fill the void (a “vacuum” of influence), but if more donors follow the World Bank's lead, a more assertive development engagement could keep Western values and programs visible on the ground.

Key findings – public perceptions: Russia's activities and potentially how donors react to them also shape local opinions. The presence of Russian forces has measurable effects on how African citizens view global powers and governance. Interestingly, survey data reveals that when Russia-affiliated fighters enter a region, local approval of U.S. leadership rises significantly (by about 6 percentage points). This suggests a possible “rallying effect” where communities, witnessing the stark contrast between Western engagement and Russian military involvement, lean toward the Western camp for leadership. At the same time, however, there is evidence of erosion in civic trust and values: areas touched by Wagner- and Russia-linked conflict see a notable decline in confidence in the honesty of elections and similar drops in support for social ideals like gender equality and environmental protection (principles often championed by Western aid programs). In other words, conflict and chaos associated with Russian actors can undermine faith in democratic institutions and dampen enthusiasm for the progressive development agenda. Furthermore, the estimated effects suggest that Russian presence may be associated, although not in a statistically significant way, with increased local support for Russia, despite limited material aid, alongside a more pessimistic outlook on economic conditions and governance. Taken together, these shifts in public perception underscore the power of narrative and stability: if Western aid diminishes in visibility or impact, Russia's anti-West propaganda and security promises may gain a stronger foothold in the minds of local populations.

Policy implications: This study's insights carry important warnings and recommendations for the future of development cooperation in Africa. First, Western donors and international agencies are cautioned not to pull back entirely from fragile or contested states, even if the security situation is difficult. A retreat by Western aid risks creating ungoverned spaces and development voids that authoritarian powers like Russia can quickly fill, with potentially adverse effects on democracy and stability. Instead, donors should find ways to adapt their engagement: this could mean

sharing risks and working through local partners or flexible programs that can operate even amid instability. Keeping a presence on the ground is crucial to serve communities in need and to prevent Russia's influence from going unchecked.

Second, the report highlights the need for stronger strategic communication. Western organizations must do a better job at communicating the benefits of their aid and the values behind it. In regions saturated with Russian media messaging, proactively engaging local narratives, by highlighting successful projects, promoting transparency, and countering misinformation, is key to maintaining public goodwill.

Third, the evolving multipolar environment calls for greater donor coordination and a balance of ideals with pragmatism. Like-minded aid providers (e.g. EU countries, multilateral organisations and banks) should coordinate their responses to geopolitical challenges, ensuring that they don't work with cross-purposes or leave gaps. They may need to collectively refine their approach, blending their long-term development principles with on-the-ground realism.

Finally, the study highlights the value of granular, geolocated data in understanding both foreign influence and aid effectiveness. Development actors should therefore support the integration of geospatial analysis, conflict mapping, and public opinion data into programming cycles. Expand investment in open-source platforms and collaborative data infrastructures that allow for rapid and adaptive responses to geopolitical shifts.

In sum, *Perceptions and Power* shows that Russia's influence in Africa is not just a security or diplomatic issue: it directly intersects with development aid. Western policymakers and practitioners are urged to stay engaged, united, and communicative to support African development amid this new great-power rivalry.

1 Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, started in 2014 and escalated in 2022, has not only redrawn the geopolitical map of Europe but has also triggered a far-reaching reassessment of international alliances and foreign engagement strategies across the globe. In the wake of growing isolation from the West, Russia has actively sought to strengthen its influence in other regions, with the African continent emerging as a key arena for this recalibrated strategy.

Russia's growing presence in Africa differs in character from both the traditionally present Western powers and the emerging actors like China. It is marked by an opportunistic and distinctly “realist¹” approach to foreign policy, focused on security cooperation, military assistance, and access to strategic resources. Russia's model emphasizes elite-level alliances, arms sales, and the deployment of semi-state actors such as the Wagner Group in exchange for mineral concessions and political loyalty. This engagement is particularly prominent in countries with weak institutions and unstable governments, such as the Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan, Libya, and Burkina Faso, where Russia positions itself as a willing partner in return for geopolitical and economic leverage.

Despite a large body of literature on foreign powers' involvement in Africa, including the United States, China, and the former colonial powers, there is still limited empirical research on Russia's recent influence. Qualitative studies have described Russia's motivations and tactical methods, emphasizing an opportunistic and short-term strategy aimed at undermining Western influence while securing strategic gains. Observers highlight that Russia often targets fragile states rich in natural resources but governed by unstable or authoritarian regimes, such as Libya, Sudan, Mozambique, the Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Madagascar (Marten, 2019; Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021; Lindén, 2023). In these contexts, Russia forges ties with military juntas or undemocratic elites, trading political support, arms export, and military cooperation, often via the Wagner Group, in return for access to mineral wealth, concession rights, and geopolitical influence.

Beyond material interests, Russia pursues diplomatic legitimization, a military footprint, elite penetration, and influence over international

¹ The realist and idealist models of foreign policy are outlined in Section 2.1. In brief, realism views foreign policy as driven primarily by self-interest, whereas idealism places greater emphasis on the interests of partner countries.

voting patterns, frequently using anti-colonial and anti-Western propaganda to build ideological resonance. This media strategy, which promotes authoritarian alternatives and exploits historical grievances, has been criticized for eroding democratic norms and limiting African agency (Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021; Lindén, 2023). In contrast to the West's stated emphasis on democracy and progressive, inclusive solutions, Russia promotes autocracy and revisionist values, particularly in areas such as gender equality and the sustainability agenda (Lindén, 2023).

Nevertheless, quantitative analyses of the consequences of this engagement, especially in relation to development cooperation and public perceptions, remain sparse. This study seeks to fill that gap by systematically examining whether and how Russia's increasing footprint in Africa has altered the allocation and potential impact of Western development aid, as well as shaped public attitudes toward Western donors and institutions.

This research is guided by a central concern: Russia's expansion could significantly affect the long-term development trajectories of African countries and complicate international cooperation frameworks. Due to the specific character of Russia's engagement, broadly described above, potential consequences may include weakened democratic norms, shifts in geopolitical alignment, disruptions in aid flows, and heightened tensions around natural resource control. These effects carry not only regional but global implications, including for stakeholders such as the European Union and bilateral donors like Sweden.

To address these questions, the study builds on a geospatial analysis² of development aid using the Geocoded Official Development Assistance Dataset (GODAD), in combination with the mapping of Russian-linked conflict and military presence through the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED), and the analysis of public opinion via the Gallup surveys. To capture the effects of Russian activity in a reliable way, the study uses statistical methods that track how aid and public sentiment changed over time in places influenced by Russian activity compared with others.³

² A geospatial analysis uses data linked to specific locations, such as regions, municipalities or even exact geographic coordinates, to identify spatial patterns and relationships.

³ These methods, event studies, differences-in-differences, and triple-difference models, are described in more details in Section 4.

The aim of this report is twofold: first, to provide a clearer picture of how geopolitical competition, specifically Russia’s realist strategy, interacts with the structures and objectives of Western development aid; and second, to inform the policy responses of development agencies navigating an increasingly contested global aid landscape. By understanding how and where aid allocation and public trust are shifting in response to foreign influence, the study contributes to more adaptive, context-sensitive development cooperation.

1.1 Structure of the report

The report is organized as follows:

Following Section 1 *Introduction*, Section 2 presents *The conceptual framework and relevant literature*, laying out the theoretical underpinnings of the study. It contrasts realist and idealist approaches to foreign policy, reviews evidence on how foreign influence shapes public perception, and synthesizes recent literature on the documented effects of aid using geospatial data. The section concludes with the formulation of specific hypotheses to be tested empirically.

Section 3 maps *Russia’s engagement in Africa*, providing descriptive context on the scope, nature, and geographic distribution of Russian-affiliated activities, with a particular focus on the role of Wagner Group operations.

Sections 4 and 5 describe the data and methodology used and the limitations with the empirical strategy. Readers less concerned with technical details may proceed directly to Section 6 *Empirical findings summarized*.

Section 7 provides a broader *Discussion* of the findings, interpreting the results in light of the conceptual framework and situating them within current debates on aid, geopolitical competition, and governance.

Section 8 distills the study’s *Policy implications and recommendations*, aimed at informing donor strategy and development cooperation in contested environments.

Finally, Section 9 summarizes the study’s *Conclusion*, highlighting its key contributions and takeaways. The report ends with a full list of *References* and a short *Appendix* with supplementary material.

2 Conceptual framework and relevant literature

This section provides the conceptual and empirical foundation for the study by integrating three complementary strands of literature: classical theories of foreign policy, research on how foreign influence shapes public attitudes, and an emerging body of work leveraging geocoded aid data. The first two strands highlight broader mechanisms through which geopolitical dynamics may influence development trajectories and public sentiment. The third contributes both methodological tools and empirically grounded expectations about the likely consequences of shifting donor strategies. Taken together, these perspectives inform both the empirical strategy and the formulation of testable hypotheses, which conclude the section.

2.1 Realism vs. idealism in foreign policy

Classical international relations theory provides a useful lens through which to interpret the motivations and methods of foreign actors operating in Africa. Realism, as articulated by scholars like Morgenthau (1962) and later Mearsheimer (2001), views international politics as a struggle for power in an anarchic system where states are the primary actors, acting rationally to secure their survival and enhance their influence. Under this perspective, foreign engagement, taking various shapes that include military partnerships, resource deals, diplomatic alliances, and even foreign aid, is fundamentally transactional. States intervene abroad not to promote normative ideals, but to protect or expand their strategic interests, often by supporting regimes that can guarantee access to resources, geopolitical footholds, or alignment in multilateral forums.

In contrast, idealism (or liberal internationalism), emphasizes that foreign policy can and should be shaped by shared values and institutions (Keohane & Nye, 2012; Lancaster, 2006). It assumes that international cooperation, rule-based order, and support for democracy and human rights are not only morally justified but also conducive to global stability. In this view, development aid serves not merely as a foreign policy tool but as a means of providing global public goods such as education, health, and good governance, and promoting mutual prosperity. Most Western donors officially subscribe to this idealist paradigm, embedding their

assistance in institutional frameworks like the OECD-DAC and justifying aid in terms of poverty reduction, sustainability, and democratic accountability. Yet the literature also acknowledges that strategic and commercial interests may coexist with normative goals, sometimes leading to tensions or contradictions (e.g., Maizels & Nissanke, 1984; Alesina & Dollar, 2000; Dreher et al., 2024). Nevertheless, Western aid is generally accompanied by governance standards, transparency requirements, and alignment with international development principles.

For countries at the receiving end of major powers' foreign policy agendas, and particularly for developing countries, the implications from the contrasting approaches will be widely different. While even a realist foreign policy may ostensibly incorporate concerns about the welfare and development of allies, these are often not more than a thin disguise for the ultimate objective of buying political support and commercial advantages. A genuine interest in the welfare and development of receiving partners only finds a place under the idealist perspective, although idealism is at times claimed to "greenwash" state actors' own interests (Schraeder et al, 1998).⁴

In practice, most countries' foreign policies incorporate elements of both realism and idealism, although the balance between the two may vary. Some countries may have a predominantly realist approach, while others may prioritize idealist goals. Additionally, the same country may shift its approach over time, depending on changing circumstances and priorities. Idealism may be more prominent during periods of stability and prosperity, when countries have the resources and political will to pursue more ambitious foreign policy goals. Realism tends to become more prominent in times of crisis, when countries face serious threats to their national security or economic well-being. Historical examples of the latter are the aftermath of World War II, the Cold War, and even the 2008 global financial crisis (Boschini and Olofsgård, 2007; Fleck and Kilby, 2010; Frot et al., 2014).

Russia's engagement in Africa has historically been characterized as realist, although during the Cold War it also included a notable emphasis on human capital development and educational exchanges (Gould-Davies, 2003; Matusevich, 2008). After a prolonged period of relative absence, Russia reasserted its presence on the continent from 2015 onward with a markedly different agenda one that is more transactional, opportunistic, and focused on elite alignment and access to strategic resources. Presently,

⁴ While this claim sometimes has substance to it, the accusation can also stem from the anti-western agenda aimed at undermining the credibility of actors with good intentions.

amid mounting pressure from the Western democratic world following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia finds itself increasingly reliant on a realist approach.

When juxtaposed with the Western model, more norm-driven and conditional, Russia's realist strategy offers authoritarian regimes an alternative: support without reform. On the surface, this approach may resemble that of China, whose engagement in Africa has also drawn attention for its no-strings-attached philosophy. However, the two differ significantly in scope and intent. While China's presence is underpinned by long-term infrastructure investments, commercial partnerships, and strategic state-to-state financing, Russia's engagement appears more short-term, transactional, and opportunistic. Rather than committing to sustained development or economic integration, Russia tends to pursue immediate strategic gains *for itself*, such as resource concessions, arms deals, or diplomatic alignment. In this sense, Russia's involvement is even less development-oriented than China's, and more narrowly focused on extracting influence in unstable or contested environments.

2.2 Foreign influence and public perception

Foreign aid does not operate in a vacuum: recipient populations interpret and evaluate external engagement not only based on material outcomes but also through the lens of perceived intentions and historical context. During the Cold War, for example, aid was widely used as a tool to project ideological influence and promote alternative institutional models, values, and norms. But aid is just one of many instruments of soft power. Foreign presence more broadly, whether in the form of military, economic, or diplomatic engagement, can shape public attitudes in complex ways.

The impact of foreign actors on local perceptions has been explored across various settings. A substantial literature has examined the United States as one of the most prominent power actors in the international arena, spanning foreign aid, economic and diplomatic relations, and military involvement. The presence of U.S. troops, for instance, has been shown to influence public sentiment toward the U.S., sometimes positively through perceived security benefits, but also negatively when seen as intrusive or self-interested (Allen et al., 2020; Vine, 2015). Similarly, Chinese investment and lending have gained popularity in many countries

but have also been linked to increased corruption and weakened governance in some contexts (Isaksson & Kotsadam, 2018a, 2018b).

In fragile or politically unstable regions, especially those marked by weak state control, violent conflict, or active competition for power among domestic or international actors, public opinion is particularly vulnerable to external influence. In such contexts, and particularly where Russia is present, disinformation campaigns, anti-Western narratives, and appeals to historical grievances can play a significant role in shaping attitudes and perceptions. Russian propaganda efforts are often focused on delegitimizing Western actors by invoking anti-colonial rhetoric and promoting authoritarian, revisionist alternatives (Lindén, 2023; Akinola & Ogunnubi, 2021).

2.3 Aid effectiveness in the age of geospatial data

The availability of geospatially referenced datasets, such as the Geocoded Official Development Assistance Dataset (GODAD), or those provided by AidData, has ushered in a new wave of empirical research on the sub-national and local effects of foreign aid. Unlike older literature focused on the macro-level aid-growth relationship, often criticized for its inconclusive findings, this newer research explores the subnational effects of aid across small administrative units or uniform spatial grids. This approach, often referred to as geospatial impact evaluation (GIE), has emerged as a particularly robust method for assessing causal effects in development research, as it leverages fine-grained spatial variation in both aid delivery and outcomes, allowing researchers to implement quasi-experimental designs such as difference-in-differences or matching across subnational units, while minimizing aggregation bias and enabling the detection of localized effects and strategic allocation patterns. This shift allows to better isolate causal effects and to generate more policy-relevant insights into how aid is allocated and what it achieves on the ground.

A much broader body of work examines how foreign aid interacts with geopolitical competition, including how the presence of rival actors may influence donor behaviour and local perceptions. Our contribution is to add a geospatial lens to this debate, investigating the role of Russian engagement in shaping Western aid flows and their perceived legitimacy, while leveraging geospatial data to uncover patterns that might otherwise remain obscured at higher levels of aggregation.

To ground the analysis, the report connects to key findings from the recent GIE literature that are particularly relevant to the questions at hand. These include:

- * Aid at the local level can produce meaningful economic benefits. Bitzer and Gören (2024) find that World Bank projects significantly enhance local economic activity, as proxied by night-time light emissions. Demir et al. (2023) offer corroborating evidence: aid disbursed at the second-level administrative division (ADM2, often the municipality level) promotes economic growth both directly and indirectly through spillover effects to adjacent areas. Several studies focus on growth determinants rather than growth per se. For example, Brazys and Jung (2024) show that foreign aid can catalyze local foreign direct investment (FDI).
- * Economic growth is often not an objective in itself but a way to improve social outcomes. Greßer et al. (2021) document declines in child mortality and water-fetching time as well as improvements in drinking water quality following the completion of aid-funded infrastructure. Kotsadam et al. (2018) show that active aid projects reduce infant mortality in Nigeria, especially among disadvantaged populations. Berlin, Bonnier & Olofsgård (2023) document community level effects of aid presence on several measures of women's empowerment in Malawi, while Haer et al. (2023) find that geographical proximity to active aid projects at school-starting age increases the probability that an individual will enrol in school, at both primary and secondary levels in Nigeria. Fuchs et al. (2023) find that in the short run, aid reduces migration aspirations, except in fragile contexts, by improving individual expectations about the future and trust in national institutions. However, over the long run, aid can enhance individual capabilities and increase the likelihood of regular migration.
- * Aid influences trust in institutions, rule-following behavior, and governance outcomes. Isaksson and Durevall (2023) find that World Bank projects improve citizens' expressed willingness to comply with key state institutions. Similarly, Blair and Roessler (2021) focus more directly on the domestic state-building implications, finding that aid can reinforce citizens' sense of civic duty, particularly in tax compliance and morale, thereby contributing to a stronger social contract. Even in fragile contexts like Afghanistan and Syria, aid responsiveness to citizen needs strengthens the legitimacy of local and district governments (Parks et al., 2019; Carnegie et al., 2019). Masaki et al. (2021) emphasize, though, the importance of aid modalities: aid is more likely to shape reform priorities

when funding is channeled through partner governments' public financial systems.

* The risk that aid may erode rather than strengthen institutions is also widely acknowledged. Chinese development assistance, in particular, has been linked to increases in local corruption. Isaksson and Kotsadam (2018a) show this effect across a wide sample of African countries, while Brazys et al. (2021) find similar patterns in Tanzania, in contrast to World Bank aid. On the other hand, Carter (2022) finds that the daily rate of state repression declines during periods of debt relief negotiation, suggesting that international economic engagement can temporarily soften authoritarian behavior.

* The relationship between aid and conflict is complex and highly context dependent. Bluhm et al. (2021) find that the receipt of bilateral aid increases the likelihood that low-level unrest will escalate into full-scale armed conflict. However, they find little evidence that aid acts as a trigger in otherwise peaceful environments, suggesting that its destabilizing potential is conditional on pre-existing fragility. Findley et al. (2023) offer a more nuanced picture: aid delivered during active conflicts is associated with increased military fatalities possibly due to intensified contestation over resources but also with reduced civilian deaths, suggesting improved protection or service delivery. These dual effects highlight the dilemma of engaging in conflict zones, where aid can both stabilize and inflame.

* The question of how aid affects attitudes toward donors and development models has become increasingly salient. After the 2005 earthquake in northern Pakistan, trust in Europeans and Americans was markedly higher among those exposed to the inflow of international relief groups that followed (Andrabi and Das, 2005). Wellner et al. (2025) find that Chinese development projects temporarily boost public support for China particularly where financial commitments are generous, but this effect diminishes over time among those living near completed projects. Support also increases in “swing states” in the UN and in countries already predisposed to view China positively. Blair et al. (2022) provides a comparative perspective, showing that Chinese aid does not consistently boost support for China, and may even reduce it. Conversely, U.S. aid increases recipient support for the U.S. and appears to strengthen commitment to democratic values. Interestingly, they also find that Chinese aid can unintentionally bolster the image of other Western powers.

* Finally, geocoded aid research is increasingly situated within the broader context of great power competition. A growing body of work explores

how strategic rivalry between donors, both traditional (e.g., U.S. vs. France) and emerging (e.g., China vs. India), influences aid flows and project design. Davies and Klasen (2019), Fuchs et al. (2015), and Zeitz (2021) have documented patterns of strategic targeting and counterbalancing. More recent studies (e.g., Asmus-Bluhm, 2025) highlight how India's aid engagement may be influenced by competition with China, particularly in settings characterized by geopolitical rivalry, political instability, violent conflict, or weak state control.

2.4 Hypotheses

Beyond shaping the empirical strategy, the literature reviewed above also informs the core motivation for this study. If the growing presence of Russian actors leads to a crowding out or relocation of aid, the affected regions risk missing out on a wide range of documented benefits, as reviewed in the previous section, from improved service delivery and economic growth to strengthened local institutions and more favourable attitudes toward democratic norms. Understanding whether and how aid allocation shifts in response to geopolitical competition is thus a question with significant implications for the values, opportunities, and institutional trajectories of recipient communities. In light of this, the study proceeds by formulating a set of hypotheses that capture the expected impacts of Russian presence on both donor behaviour and local public opinion. These hypotheses are initially presented in broad conceptual terms and later refined into testable propositions following the presentation of data sources and empirical strategy.

*H1: Western donors' aid allocation shifts in areas with Russian engagement.

*H2: Areas exposed to Russian engagement see a deterioration in public perceptions of Western actors and popular support for values and attitudes typically promoted by Western development cooperation, such as democratic governance, gender equity, sustainable development, as well as aid-driven local economic opportunities.

In this report, 'Western donors' refers primarily to official development assistance (ODA) either as bilateral aid (through various channels such as governments, universities, private entities, civil society organisations) or multilateral aid through the World bank (a multilateral institution largely funded and governed by Western states). Civil society organisations' own contributions and philanthropy are not included.

3 Mapping Russia's engagement in Africa

There are multiple ways in which Russia's evolving presence in Africa can be mapped. Unlike traditionally present Western actors or newly emerging actors such as China and India, Russia provides very little official development assistance (ODA). Instead, to understand this engagement, we explored a broad range of data sources covering Russia's activities in natural resources, military operations, trade, propaganda, and diplomacy, including mining ownership and production data, arms transfers, trade statistics, and sectoral partnerships in energy and nuclear development. The emerging picture, confirming other qualitative reports on the subject, suggests that Russia's involvement is not primarily aimed at contributing to sustainable development in recipient countries, not even as a by-product of long-term economic ambition, such as sustained investment aimed at building mutually beneficial trade and development trajectories. The strategy is rather aimed at short-term, opportunistic, and geopolitical gains. These include securing access to strategic resources, expanding military influence, and establishing political alliances, relying heavily on bilateral deals, security cooperation, and symbolic diplomacy, often targeting fragile states or those geopolitically distanced from the West.

Trade data from recent years confirm that Russia has deepened its commercial ties with a select group of African countries since 2022, but the overall pattern remains uneven and economically modest. Only a handful of countries have significantly increased their exports to Russia compared to the 2019–2021 period. Somalia stands out with an extraordinary export surge exceeding 900%, albeit from a low level, followed by smaller increases in the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Sudan, and Burundi. On the import side, notable increases were observed in Tanzania, Zambia, Malawi, Madagascar, Uganda, Ethiopia, Mali, and Niger, while much of the continent saw little to no change. The magnitude of import growth overall remains moderate.

In terms of traded goods, Russia's exports to Africa have included oil and petroleum products, fertilizers, arms, wheat and cereals, as well as nuclear technology and equipment. In return, Russia has imported a mix of raw materials and agricultural products from across the continent: citrus fruits, onions, and potatoes from Egypt and Morocco; olives, dates, and seafood from Tunisia; gold, diamonds, and platinum from South Africa and

Zimbabwe; uranium from Namibia; and cocoa from Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana (Comtrade Database).

There is little indication that Russia is building meaningful economic partnerships with the continent's fastest-growing economies. Most of the countries intensifying trade with Russia are either economically stagnant or experiencing contraction, such as CAR, Sudan, and Mali. While some moderately growing economies like Ethiopia and Tanzania have increased imports from Russia, these are exceptions to a broader trend. Russia's economic engagement appears concentrated in fragile states or those geopolitically distanced from the West, where Western aid and investment may be limited or withdrawing. Notable examples include, again, Mali, CAR, and Sudan countries experiencing political instability, strained relations with Western donors, or active sanctions, where Russian partnerships have expanded in areas such as military cooperation, mining, and infrastructure.

This pattern is mirrored in Russia's diplomatic strategy. Data on bilateral state visits in 2022–2023 (ICEWS, Boschee et al., 2018) show that Moscow's outreach has focused heavily on slower-growing or politically isolated countries, including Mali, Sudan, CAR, Congo (Brazzaville), and Zimbabwe. The two clear exceptions are Ethiopia and Egypt both with stronger economic trajectories who have engaged more actively with Russia and received high-profile visits and strategic agreements. Still, the broader pattern suggests that Russia is prioritizing political access and strategic footholds over economically transformative partnerships.

Voting alignment data from the UN General Assembly (Bailey et al., 2017) further reinforce this picture. Historically, African agreement with Russia, measured by the frequency of a country voting in the same direction as Russia on UN General Assembly resolutions, peaked in the early 1980s, followed by a sharp decline after the Cold War. After stabilizing around 75–80% during the 2000s, alignment began to drop again around 2015. The decline accelerated after 2020, with average agreement levels falling to their lowest point since the 1970s. Moreover, the distribution of voting behavior has shifted: between 2014 and 2021, most African countries clustered at moderately high agreement levels (0.7–0.8). But from 2022 onward, the distribution shifted leftward, with increasing divergence and a notable dip in the modal agreement level. The 2023 data indicate greater polarization and a growing number of countries either distancing themselves from Russia or adopting neutral positions.

In summary, Russia appears to be investing in political and strategic relationships not necessarily for economic partnership, but where anti-Western feelings or political instability may leave a vacuum to be filled. Moreover, it shows limited success in forging new economic partnerships of sufficient scale to offset its growing isolation from Western markets. Nor is there clear evidence that this engagement translates into consistent political alignment, as reflected in UN General Assembly voting patterns.

While country-level patterns help illustrate broad trends, they are insufficient for drawing causal conclusions about the impacts of Russian presence. National averages can mask substantial variation within countries, and any changes in aid or public sentiment may reflect other contemporaneous national events, for example, a regime change or macroeconomic shifts, rather than local responses to Russian activity. In order to move beyond descriptive mapping and toward causal inference, our analysis must rely on data that is both geolocated and temporally frequent enough to capture variation across time and space. This leads us to focus on three core sources: the *Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED)*, which provides detailed event-level data on conflict and strategic developments and is used to proxy Russian and Wagner-linked activity; the *Geocoded Official Development Assistance Dataset (GODAD)*, which offers subnational information on aid allocation from Western donors; and *Gallup survey data*, which include geocoded responses on public opinion, civic attitudes, and perceptions of global actors. Together, these sources allow us to examine how Russian engagement reshapes donor behavior, influence local development outcomes, and alters public sentiment in affected areas. These data and the methods used to analyze them are described in more detail in the next section.

4 Data and methodology

Restricting the analysis to the available geolocalized data mentioned in the previous section necessarily narrows the conceptual and geographical scope of the study. Rather than examining the broader consequences of Russian influence on Africa's overall development trajectory, we focus on a more specific and measurable question: how Western donors react to conflict events involving Wagner-affiliated actors, with a discussion of what potential consequences this has for affected communities. Since Wagner presence is concentrated in a small number of countries and regions, this limits the breadth and generalizability of our findings. Yet this narrowing is a deliberate methodological choice, common in empirical social science, where external validity is partially sacrificed in favour of internal validity, causal identification, and analytical tractability. In this sense, the study offers insight into one critical mechanism of geopolitical competition, while acknowledging that it captures only a slice of the broader picture.

This narrower focus remains analytically and policy-relevant for two key reasons. First, as outlined in the reports referenced in the introduction, the presence of Wagner-linked actors is a strong proxy for broader forms of Russian influence, such as trade, asset control, media presence, and political intervention. Wagner Group operations rarely occur in isolation but are part of a wider strategic toolkit. Second, as discussed in the literature review, donor presence and behaviour have well-documented effects on recipient countries, not only economically, but also in shaping political preferences, institutional trust, and social attitudes. If donor strategies shift in response to Russian involvement, these changes are likely to have long-term developmental and geopolitical consequences for the regions concerned.

This section presents the data used in more detail and concludes with a reformulation of the research questions into more refined empirically testable hypotheses.

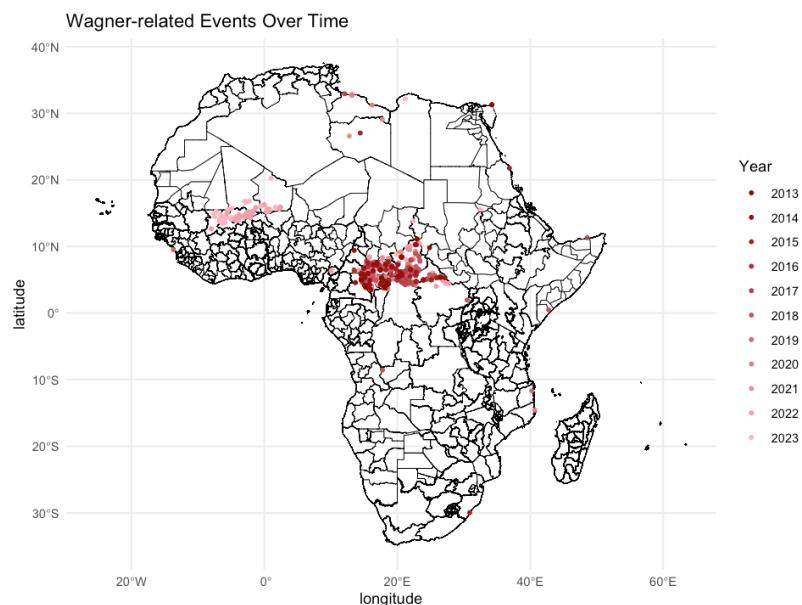
4.1 Data sources

The *ACLED* dataset is a widely used, open-source database that compiles systematically coded, geolocated data on conflict and violent events, broadly defined, across the globe. It includes detailed information on the date, location (down to precise geographic coordinates), event type,

involved actors, number of fatalities (if any), and contextual notes. ACLED classifies events into several types, including battles, violence against civilians, protests, riots, and strategic developments such as troop movements, base establishments, and non-violent territorial transfers, making it particularly suited for tracking patterns of armed activity and foreign involvement over time and space.

To isolate events involving Russian actors, and in particular the Wagner Group, we rely on ACLED's actor coding system, which identifies both state and non-state actors, including foreign proxies and private military contractors. The Wagner Group is explicitly labeled in ACLED as a distinct, non-state violent actor affiliated with Russian interests, and linked events can be retrieved by filtering for this designation. In addition to "Wagner Group," we include events that involve Russian military forces or actors labeled as "Russia (Government)" when their involvement in African conflicts is explicitly recorded. Our analysis focuses on the period from 2014 to 2023, when Russia's engagements in Africa intensified.

Figure 1. Map of ACLED events with Russian actors' involvement



Source: Data from ACLED.

The resulting dataset reveals a highly concentrated spatial footprint. As shown in Figure 1, the vast majority of Russian-linked conflict events are clustered in four countries: the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali, Burkina Faso, and Libya. These hotspots reflect the core of Wagner's known deployments and Russia's most prominent military alliances on the continent. However, smaller numbers of incidents are also recorded in a

few additional states, such as Benin, Chad, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Egypt.

To capture the presence of Western actors, this study draws on georeferenced foreign aid data from the *GODAD project* (Bomprezzi et al., 2025), using a pre-release version of the latter provided directly by the GODAD team. GODAD builds on the OECD's Creditor Reporting System (CRS) and offers geolocated information on aid projects from 18 European donors and the United States spanning the period from 1973 to 2020. To these it adds, from AidData.org, information on aid project data from China, India, and the World Bank.⁵ Again, we focus on the period following 2014, a turning point that marked the beginning of Russia's renewed and intensified engagement in Africa. The dataset includes rich auxiliary information for each project, such as donor and recipient identities, donor agencies, aid modalities (e.g., grants, loans, or other official flows), sector and sub-sector classifications, and financial data on commitments and disbursements.

Finally, we aim to assess how Russian engagement, particularly in conflicts and military presence, as well as any resulting shifts in aid activities, affect people's daily lives, economic prospects, and, crucially, their attitudes and values. To do so, we draw on geolocated survey data from the *Gallup World Poll*, capturing public sentiments on democracy, governance, the economy, and society. Specifically, we use responses to whether people approve of the leadership of the United States, Russia, China, and France, offering a way to track how global powers are perceived across African countries. We also include questions about the perceived integrity of elections, which help capture trust in domestic democratic processes. Similarly, we use responses about the perceived prevalence of government corruption to assess attitudes toward institutional quality. This connects to evidence that aid can either reinforce or undermine institutional trust. To assess local economic sentiment, we include measures of how people rate current economic conditions and whether they believe things are improving, outcomes that previous studies have linked to the presence of aid projects through both direct and spillover effects. Finally, we incorporate two composite indicators: one reflecting confidence in national institutions such as the military, courts, and government, and a second one capturing broader optimism or pessimism about the future.

⁵ ODA flows from China and India are not included in this analysis due to a lack of spatial and temporal overlap, as well as the focus on the Western development cooperation model.

4.2 Testable hypotheses

With the data sources now defined, we proceed to translate the study's broader hypotheses into more specific, testable formulations. These refined hypotheses reflect both the theoretical expectations outlined earlier and the practical structure of the available data. By linking geopolitical developments, such as Russian (and Wagner) presence, to observed changes in aid allocation and public sentiment, we aim to isolate measurable patterns that speak directly to the questions motivating this study.

- * TH1a. Western donors change their aid allocation in areas affected by Wagner- or Russian-linked conflict *differentially* compared to other conflict-affected areas.
- * TH1b. This differential change became more pronounced after the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, reflecting heightened geopolitical polarization.
- *TH2: Sub-national regions affected by Wagner- or Russian-linked conflicts experience *differential* changes in public perceptions of Western actors, popular support for democratic governance, gender equity, and sustainable development, as well as perceptions of local economic opportunities.

4.3 Addressing challenges

Reverse causality and strategic selection

Reverse causality is a valid concern for TH1a: Russian actors may deliberately target regions where Western donors are already withdrawing due to coups, instability, or limited operational capacity. In this case, what appears as a donor response to Russian presence may reflect pre-existing disengagement or targeting practices. This could lead to biased estimates of the "Russian effect" on aid allocation.

This concern is notably alleviated in the case of TH1b, as this relates to a potential change in donor response due to the geopolitical shock of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This invasion was driven by factors unrelated to aid allocation patterns in Africa and thus provides a plausibly exogenous shift in the geopolitical salience of Russian presence on the continent.

Reverse causality may also complicate causal inference in TH2. Similar to the case of TH1a, Russian actors may deliberately seek areas with growing anti-western sentiments and already changing public attitudes and values, for example, weaker democratic norms or civic values.

Omitted variable bias and confounding factors

There may be unobserved characteristics, such as the strength of local governance, security conditions, or geostrategic relevance, that simultaneously affect both Russian presence and donor decisions or public attitudes. Without adequate controls and an appropriate empirical strategy, such confounders can lead to biased estimates of causal relationships.

Conflict heterogeneity and the nature of Russian engagement

A further challenge relates to the comparability of conflicts involving Wagner- and Russian-linked actors with other violent events. The research design assumes that, once measurable regional characteristics and local differences are considered, conflict events are comparable across treated and control regions, allowing the study to isolate the effect of Russian presence. However, Russian involvement may not be randomly assigned across conflicts. These operations tend to take place in particularly fragile, resource-rich, or geopolitically strategic areas, where Western engagement is already limited, or where regimes are more willing to outsource repression or counterinsurgency to private actors. If these contexts systematically differ from other conflict areas, then any observed change in aid flows or public attitudes could be driven by the underlying conflict characteristics rather than Russian presence itself.

Table 1 below shows a comparison of the distribution of conflict event types and the lethality of events involving Russian-linked actors versus other actors. It highlights some key differences in both the nature and intensity of violence associated with Russian presence. Operations involving Russian actors are more frequently classified as battles and violence against civilians, and almost never involve protests or riots. This suggests a focus on military engagement and repression, rather than environments with active civil society. Additionally, mean fatalities per event are higher when Russian actors are involved, highlighting their greater human toll. These differences underscore that Wagner- and Russian-linked conflicts represent a more violent and distinct subset, which may have unique implications for aid allocation as well as public sentiment.

Table 1. ACLED events, composition and mean fatalities by actor

Event type	Non-Russian	Russian
Battles	23.0%	35.4%
Explosions / Remote Violence	7.5%	5.2%
Protests	26.5%	0.1%
Riots	11.8%	0.4%
Strategic Developments	7.9%	19.7%
Violence Against Civilians	23.4%	39.1%
Mean Fatalities per Event	1.22	1.75

Source: ACLED data, author's calculations. Strategic developments refer to non-battlefield events that signal shifts in territorial control, group capabilities, or political dynamics, such as the establishment of bases, changes in group activity, arrests, disarmament, looting, or transfers of territory.

Measurement error in key variables

Russian presence: Geolocation and actor identification in the ACLED data may be imprecise or incomplete, particularly for covert operations or proxy actors.

Aid allocation: Some donors may not report all projects or commitments/disbursements with full accuracy or granularity, especially in conflict zones. It must also be kept in mind that location-specific aid dollar amounts are estimated by dividing total amounts committed/disbursed for a project by the number of locations corresponding to this project. This introduces noise in the data. Although we have no reason a priori to believe that resources are unevenly allocated in any systematic way towards certain regions, the results about dollar commitments/disbursements need to be interpreted with care.

Attitudinal outcomes: Survey responses may suffer from social desirability bias, measurement inconsistencies across countries, or low spatial precision.

4.4 Quantitative methods

To identify the causal impact of Russian involvement on aid allocation (TH1a) and on attitudes (TH2), we adopt a Difference-in-Differences (DiD) framework developed by Callaway and Sant' Anna (2021). This method is specifically designed to estimate the impact of *staggered treatment*,

when different units receive a treatment at different points in time. In this case, the treatment is the first involvement of the Wagner group or other Russian actors in a given area, defined at the ADM2 level. The estimator compares outcomes for treated units (i.e. ADM2 regions where Wagner or Russian actors get involved in local conflicts) before and after the first exposure, relative to units that experience similar conflict dynamics (as captured by ACLED) but without Russian involvement.

Formally, this method estimates the following group-time average treatment effect:

$$ATT_{\{g, t\}} = \mathbb{E}[Y_{t(1)} - Y_{t(0)} | G = g, t \geq g] (1)$$

which is the average causal effect at time t for the group of units first treated in period g . It then aggregates these group-time specific effects into an average treatment effect.⁶

Using this aggregation method, we present results for: (i) Western donors, comprising the 18 European bilateral donors included in the GODAD data plus the United States; and (ii) the World Bank (WB). The dependent variable is either the number of projects implemented in a region, or the commitments/disbursements in million USD to that region. Applying the same dynamic framework to individual donors proves considerably more challenging, as the analysis is highly data intensive. In Section 4.2 we also report results for public opinion and attitudes.

While this framework provides causally identified estimates of how donor behavior and attitudes change following the involvement of Russian or Wagner actors in local conflicts, it is limited in scope: it relies on variation in treatment timing, requires relatively rich data density around the treatment event, and does not work very well for individual donors. To complement this approach and broaden the analysis, we turn to a panel fixed-effects model that allows us to study aid responsiveness to Russian presence across a wider sample of regions and time periods.

The empirical strategy involves estimating donor-specific regressions as well as aggregated ones summing aid receipts from groups of donors at the subnational level, with fixed effects at ADM2 (local), ADM1 (provincial), and country levels, capturing within-region variation over time. The models include lagged counts of conflict events, the share of

⁶ This approach ensures that estimates are robust to treatment effect heterogeneity and avoids the negative weighting problem that plagues standard DiD estimators in these settings.

those events involving Wagner actors, and interaction terms that capture whether responses differ in Wagner-affected areas. The estimated equations are as follows:

$$Y_{\{ijt\}} = \beta^1 \cdot Total_{\{ijt-1\}} + \beta^2 \cdot Ratio + \beta^3 \cdot Total_{\{ijt-1\}} \cdot Ratio \\ + X \cdot \theta + \gamma_{\{i\}} + \delta_{\{j\}} + \tau_{\{t\}} + \varepsilon_{\{ijt\}} \quad (2)$$

where the dependent variable ($Y_{\{ijt\}}$) is either the number of projects or the commitments/disbursements in million USD, by any specific donor (or aggregated across groups of donors), allocated to region j of country i in year t . The variable *Total* measures the number of ACLED events reported in the same region, lagged one year, and *Ratio* is the share of events involving Russia- or Wagner-related actors in the total. The vector of controls X includes the commitments for each project (in the equation for disbursements). Fixed effects are included for the country and subnational levels, along with year fixed effects.

This equation represents a *Difference-in-Differences framework*, comparing aid trajectories in treated regions (exposed to Russian/Wagner events) to those in similar but untreated regions (affected by other conflicts but without Russian/Wagner involvement), over time. This approach importantly relies on the assumption that, absent Russian involvement, the two groups would have followed parallel trends in terms of aid receipts.

As discussed above, reverse causality is a valid concern, i.e. the possibility that Russia engages in regions where Western donors are already disengaging. The empirical design helps mitigate this risk in several ways. First, the analysis focuses on year-on-year changes in aid flows, conditioned on pre-conflict aid levels, which helps isolate donor adjustments from long-term trends. Second, region fixed effects at the ADM1 and ADM2 level control for time-invariant unobserved characteristics of each region, such as persistent fragility or donor aversion. Third, the conflict variables, both total events and those involving Wagner or Russian actors, are lagged by one year in the specification, ensuring that only past conflict exposure can influence current aid outcomes. This temporal ordering reduces the risk that observed aid reductions are driving Russian involvement rather than responding to it. Nevertheless, while the empirical strategy strengthens the plausibility of a directional relationship, the findings should ultimately be interpreted as indicative of temporal associations rather than definitive causal effects.

The reverse causality concern is notably alleviated in the case of TH1b (see section 3.2 Testable hypotheses). The core identifying variation in TH1b comes from *a triple-difference design*, exploiting the exogenous geopolitical shock of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The estimated equation is the same as above, however adding a triple interaction term for the years post 2022:

$$\begin{aligned}
 Y_{\{ijt\}} = & \beta^1 \cdot Total_{\{ijt-1\}} + \beta^2 \cdot Ratio + \beta^3 \cdot Total_{\{ijt-1\}} \cdot Ratio \\
 & + \beta^4 \cdot Event_{\{ijt-1\}} \cdot Ratio \cdot (Year \geq 2022) \\
 & + \mathbf{X} \cdot \boldsymbol{\theta} + \boldsymbol{\gamma}_{\{i\}} + \boldsymbol{\delta}_{\{j\}} + \boldsymbol{\tau}_{\{t\}} + \boldsymbol{\varepsilon}_{\{ijt\}}
 \end{aligned} \quad (3)$$

By comparing changes in Western aid responses to Wagner- and Russian-linked conflicts *before and after* the 2022 invasion, relative to changes in response to other conflicts, we isolate the differential post-invasion donor behavior, which cannot easily be attributed to prior aid trends or local-level donor disengagement. This strengthens causal inference by leveraging a time discontinuity that is externally induced and unrelated to African aid dynamics.

Difference-in-differences specifications and fixed effects also limit the impact of persistent measurement issues. By comparing changes within the same region over time, we eliminate the influence of time-invariant unobservable characteristics, such as long-standing differences in reporting quality, local infrastructure, or survey implementation capacity, that may otherwise bias cross-sectional comparisons. The year-on-year variation is often more reliable even with imperfectly measured data.

Regarding imprecisions in the recording of Russian presence, although some covert or proxy activities may go undetected in the ACLED database, the results reflect documented episodes of Russian engagement and may be interpreted as conservative estimates, given the likely underreporting of less visible operations.

In sum, although the data are not without limitations, the combination of panel designs, fixed effects, cautious interpretation of dollar estimates, and focus on well-identified events provides reasonable assurance that the patterns we document reflect meaningful relationships rather than artifacts of imprecision.

5 Empirical findings

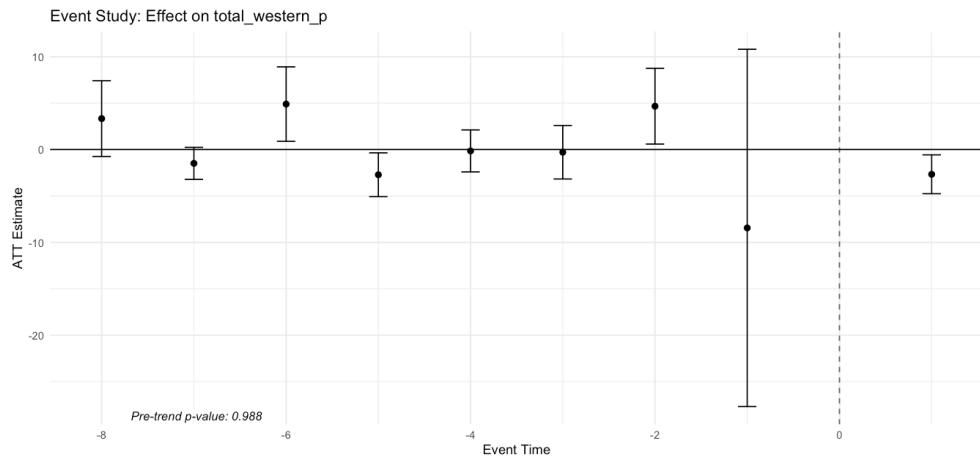
5.1 Aid allocation patterns

A first question is whether the presence of Russian actors alters the typical donor response to conflict, both in terms of the number of aid projects and the financial scale of commitments and disbursements. Starting with an event study perspective, we focus on what happens when Wagner or other Russian actors first are documented entering a conflict event in a region. Figures 2 and 3 below show how Western aid commitments changed before and after the onset of Russian activity in a given area. Each point represents the estimated difference in number of aid projects between regions affected by Russian presence and comparable regions that were not, for a given year relative to the event (shown on the horizontal axis). The vertical lines around each point indicate the statistical uncertainty of the estimate, with wider lines indicating less precision.

The vertical dashed line marks the moment when Russian involvement begins (the “event”). Dots to the left of the dashed line show whether there were systematic differences in aid *before* the event, which helps test whether the treated and comparison areas were following similar trends. Dots to the right show the estimated impact *after* the event.

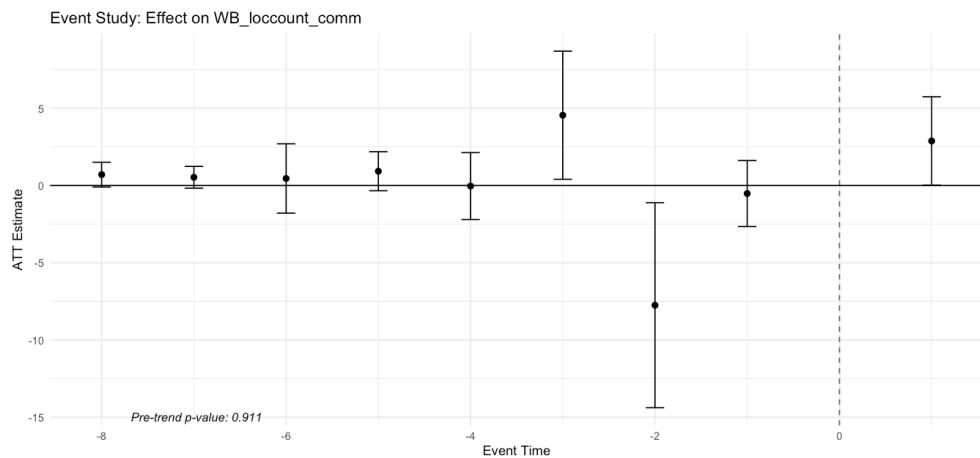
In both figures, the estimates before the event are close to zero, suggesting no pre-existing trend differences, while the post-event estimates indicate how Western aid responded following Russian activity. In Figure 2, the dot is below 0, indicating a negative difference. Western bilateral donors reduce the number of aid projects after Russian involvement, compared to control areas. In contrast, the World Bank, in Figure 3, appears to respond in the opposite direction, with a slight increase in project allocations.

Figure 2. Impact of Wagner involvement on project number, Western donors



Source: Data from GODAD and ACLED.

Figure 3. Impact of Wagner involvement on project number, World Bank



Source: Data from GODAD and ACLED.

No statistically significant effects are found when examining aid commitments or disbursements. As mentioned, applying the same dynamic framework to individual donors proves considerably more challenging, as the analysis is highly data intensive. For several donors, the effects cannot be reliably estimated due to limited data or insufficient variation, and for most, any estimated responses are difficult to distinguish from statistical noise. Still, a few consistent patterns emerge. Declines are observed for the United States (in the number of projects), Ireland (in projects, commitments, and disbursements), and Germany (in project numbers). In contrast, increases are found for Luxembourg (in both projects and disbursements), as well as for Finland and Belgium, both of

which show upward responses across all three dimensions: projects, commitments, and disbursements. For Sweden, as for most other donors, no statistically significant effect is detected across any of the aid measures. This partly confirms our TH1a: at least some of the Western donors change their aid allocation in areas affected by Wagner- or Russian-linked conflict relative to other conflict-affected areas. However, the overall impact on aggregate aid receipts remains limited, as divergent donor responses, some increasing and others decreasing both project numbers and funding, tend to largely offset each other. The World Bank exhibits a distinct pattern, which will be further discussed below.

Turning now to the more flexible panel fixed-effects model, we can establish a baseline on how development donors respond to violent conflict and investigate potential deviations in regions where Russian or Wagner Group involvement is documented. Again, we separate Western bilateral donors and the World Bank.

Table 2. Aid flows from Western bilateral donors

	Projects		Commitments		Disbursements	
	Between	Within	Between	Within	Between	Within
Total Events	0.027*** (0.004)	-0.056*** (0.005)	0.129*** (0.027)	-0.289*** (0.034)	0.118*** (0.027)	-0.292*** (0.034)
Wagner Share	0.168 (0.151)	0.125 (0.132)	-1.076 (1.045)	-0.541 (1.005)	-0.787 (1.047)	-0.415 (0.980)
Total*Wagner	-0.035 (0.065)	0.071 (0.063)	0.173 (0.451)	0.235 (0.479)	0.301 (0.452)	0.198 (0.468)
Num.Obs.	10738	10738	10738	10738	10738	10738
R2	0.457	0.716	0.378	0.604	0.446	0.666
FE: gid_0	40	40	40	40	40	40
FE: gid_1	445	445	445	445	445	445
FE: year	10	10	10	10	10	10
FE: gid_2		2350		2350		2350

Note: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

Starting with the group of Western bilateral donors, the findings indicate a broad tendency across donors towards a generally conflict-responsive approach, likely driven by humanitarian or stabilization motives. Table 2 present estimates of how the aggregate aid flows from Western bilateral donors respond to conflict across African regions, distinguishing between

overall conflict exposure and the specific involvement of Wagner- and Russian-linked actors. When comparing aid allocation across districts within the same province (the *Between* specification), donors consistently increase the number of projects, financial commitments, and disbursements in areas experiencing more conflict events. Adding ADM2-level fixed effects (the *Within* specification) reverses the sign for all outcomes. This indicates that, while donors appear to favour conflict-affected areas when comparing across districts, they tend to reduce aid within a given district as conflict intensity increases over time. This pattern is not different when it comes to conflicts with Russian involvement. Coefficients are larger but not in a statistically significant way.

Table 3. Aid flows from the World Bank

	Projects		Commitments		Disbursements	
	Between	Within	Between	Within	Between	Within
Total Events	0.020*** (0.003)	0.006* (0.003)	0.019 (0.027)	-0.134*** (0.039)	0.121*** (0.032)	0.056+ (0.030)
Wagner Share	0.385** (0.132)	0.394*** (0.079)	-0.221 (1.050)	-0.043 (1.130)	3.689** (1.217)	3.138*** (0.861)
Total*Wagner	0.186** (0.057)	0.139*** (0.037)	-0.144 (0.453)	-0.272 (0.539)	1.237* (0.525)	1.112** (0.411)
Num.Obs.	10738	10738	10738	10738	10591	10591
R2	0.552	0.891	0.236	0.391	0.473	0.819
FE: gid_0	40	40	40	40	40	40
FE: gid_1	445	445	445	445	445	445
FE: year	10	10	10	10	10	10
FE: gid_2		2350		2350		2344

Note: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

As already noticed in the event study, the World Bank exhibits a distinct pattern in its response to conflict. While financial commitments tend to decline as conflict intensifies, both the number of projects and actual disbursements increase, consistently so in both the *Between* and *Within* specifications. This pattern becomes even more pronounced in the presence of Russian actors. Although Russian involvement does not significantly influence commitment levels, it is associated with substantially higher project counts and disbursements: affected areas receive approximately 1.8% more projects and 12% more in disbursed funds per conflict event (relative to other conflict-affected districts in the

same province, and for a given level of commitments). When comparing within the same district over time, the corresponding increases are 1.4% and 11%, respectively. These findings suggest that, while the Bank may avoid visibly scaling up its commitments in Wagner-affected areas, it intensifies operational delivery on the ground, possibly reflecting efforts to promote stability, reinforce local governance, or counterbalance Russian influence through concrete results rather than expanded programming.

5.1.1 Donor heterogeneity

While these aggregate patterns provide a useful overview, they mask substantial variation across individual donors. Most donors tend to implement more projects in areas with conflicts than without, but relatively fewer in areas with Russian presence. However, when it comes to conflict escalation, some donors increase and some decrease their presence in response, although not in a significantly different way when it comes to Russian involvement.

But we also saw a distinct response by the World Bank. This divergence between bilateral and multilateral behavior likely reflects fundamental differences in mandate, governance structure, and operational flexibility. Multilateral institutions like the World Bank operate under a development-focused, technocratic mandate with long planning horizons and a strong emphasis on project continuity. Their governance involves multiple shareholder countries, which can dilute the influence of any single actor's foreign policy preferences, making responses to security threats more programmatic than political. In contrast, bilateral donors are more directly accountable to domestic constituencies and foreign policy objectives, giving them greater latitude to recalibrate aid portfolios in response to evolving conflict dynamics, including the presence of Russian forces. As a result, bilateral donors may use reductions in project numbers or shifts in sectoral focus as tools for signaling disapproval or managing risk, whereas the Bank is more likely to adapt operational modalities, scaling up disbursements or project activity within existing commitments rather than overtly changing its public aid pledges. This helps explain why multilateral engagement in areas with Russian presence appears more consistent and delivery-focused, while bilateral patterns are more heterogeneous and potentially more politically responsive.

A complementary explanation, rooted in the aid allocation literature, highlights how strategic motivations differ systematically across donor

types. Bilateral aid is often shaped by donors' geopolitical, commercial, or historical ties to recipients, with documented evidence that such aid serves foreign policy objectives more directly than multilateral assistance (e.g., Alesina & Dollar 2000; Maizels & Nissanke 1984). While multilateral institutions like the World Bank are not immune to political influence e.g., major shareholders can steer allocations toward strategically important recipients while retaining ostensibly "clean hands" (Dreher et al. 2019), their governance structures dilute individual donor preferences. As such, multilateral channels are often used as a commitment device to reduce political discretion and improve aid effectiveness (Milner & Tingley 2013; Dreher et al. 2018). Albeit not watertight (see a discussion with further examples and references in Berlin et al., 2023), this institutional insulation, along with stricter appraisal processes, likely contributes to the more consistent and delivery-focused engagement observed in Russia-affected regions.

5.1.2 Response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

A few donors provide data extending into 2023, enabling us to examine whether their behaviour shifted following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent escalation of geopolitical tensions. Importantly, the differential change in aid allocation between regions with and without Russian involvement before and after 2022, can be interpreted as causally identified, as the geopolitical shock of 2022 is plausibly exogenous to aid dynamics at the subnational level in African countries.

Table 4. Aid flows from the World Bank, before and after 2022

	Projects	Commitments	Disbursements
Total Events	-0.011+ (0.006)	-0.080 (0.049)	0.030 (0.037)
Wagner Share	0.200 (0.160)	1.297 (1.424)	0.705 (1.085)
Total*Wagner	-0.134 (0.083)	-1.175 (0.735)	1.255* (0.560)
Total*Post	-0.013* (0.006)	-0.080 (0.049)	0.045 (0.038)
Wagner*Post	-0.411* (0.196)	-2.781 (1.738)	4.758*** (1.323)
Triple Interaction	0.253** (0.092)	1.605* (0.816)	-0.676 (0.622)
Num.Obs.	10738	10738	10591
R2	0.466	0.391	0.819
FE: gid_0	40	40	40
FE: gid_1	445	445	445
FE: year	10	10	10
FE: gid_2	2350	2350	2344

Note: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

The results for **World Bank** aid presented in Table 4 reveal that while a positive disbursement response in areas with Russian involvement was already evident prior to 2022 (as indicated by the *Total*Wagner* interaction), the observed increases in project counts and financial commitments are entirely driven by the post-2022 period. This is reflected in the large and statistically significant coefficients on the triple interaction term, underscoring a shift in donor behaviour following the invasion.

The Bank's post-invasion response was also shaped by conflict type, with project presence increasing most in response to high-intensity violence and declining in connection with so called strategic developments, indicating a more cautious approach in volatile contexts.

Table 5. Aid flows from the AFD, before and after 2022

	Projects	Commitments
Total Events	-0.000 (0.001)	-0.002 (0.013)
Wagner Share	0.055+ (0.029)	0.671+ (0.373)
Total*Wagner	-0.037* (0.015)	-0.641*** (0.193)
Total*Post	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.013 (0.013)
Wagner*Post	-0.035 (0.036)	-0.936* (0.455)
Triple Interaction	0.009 (0.017)	0.803*** (0.214)
Num.Obs.	10738	10738
R2	0.536	0.513
FE: gid_0	40	40
FE: gid_1	445	445
FE: gid_2	2350	2350
FE: year	10	10

Note: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

The **Agence Française de Développement** (AFD, shown in Table 5) exhibited an even starker shift. Its response to Wagner presence, which used to be negative, turned into a relatively sizeable (8%) increase in financial commitments post-2022, although without any corresponding change in project number. This points to a strategy of reinforcing existing engagements, particularly in the social infrastructure sector, rather than expanding the project footprint. Strategic developments, however, prompted clear retrenchment, suggesting selective disengagement in response to perceived threats or instability.

All in all, the shift in geopolitical dynamics following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 appears to have prompted a more active aid response from some donors in conflict-affected African regions where Russian actors are present. Both the World Bank and France's AFD significantly increased their financial engagement in these areas after 2022, marking a shift not only from how they typically respond to conflict-affected areas more generally but also from their previous responses to

Russian presence suggesting a deliberate effort to counterbalance Russian influence.

Sweden's response, while more modest in scale, intensified after 2022. Both project numbers and disbursements increased in reaction to conflict in general, in contrast to both WB and AFD, but there is no evidence of a differentiated response to Russia-linked events.

Tables 6 to 8 decompose the Swedish response across countries and sectors. At the sector level (Table 6), project intensity rose most in Social Infrastructure and Services (SOC) with almost half a project more per region and year, followed by Economic Infrastructure and Services (ECON) (+0.30) and Production Sector (PROD) (+0.23). Financing moved away from ECON (−66% commitments; −39% disbursements) and toward PROD (+43% disbursements), while SOC saw higher project intensity with roughly flat disbursements (−0.5%). This points to a post-2022 pivot toward humanitarian/social and recovery-type operations, with smaller social projects and larger outlays concentrated in production.

Table 6. Sector changes per region-year

Sector category	Δ Pr	Δ Comm %	Δ Disb %
Production Sectors (PROD)	0.230	-0.195	0.431
Economic Infrastructure and Services (ECON)	0.302	-0.666	-0.386
Social Infrastructure and Services (SOC)	0.450	-0.439	-0.005

Source: Data from GODAD, author's calculations. The classification of projects into these three broad categories is reported in the Appendix. Δ Pr indicates the change in project number, while Δ Comm % and Δ Disb % indicate the change in commitments, resp. disbursements, in percentage terms.

Table 7. Post-2022 changes in Swedish aid, region-year averages

Country	Pr pre	Pr post	Δ Pr	Comm pre	Comm post	Δ Comm %	Disb pre	Disb post	Δ Disb %
Kenya	2,64	1,87	-0,77	0,73	0,37	-49,7	0,87	0,83	-4,3
Zimbabwe	2,2	1,76	-0,45	0,67	0	-99,9	0,49	0,32	-34,5
South Africa	1,83	1,4	-0,43	0,04	0,15	244,6	0,1	0,22	113
Tanzania	2,16	1,8	-0,35	0,72	0,18	-75,1	1,13	1,61	42,6
Sierra Leone	1,25	1	-0,25	0	0		0,12	0,15	21,1
Uganda	3,02	2,82	-0,2	2,33	1,2	-48,4	1,59	0,96	-39,6
Republic of Congo	2	2	0	0,33	0,28	-17,1	0,33	0,07	-80,5
Togo	1	1	0	0,12	0,05	-59	0,21	0,03	-84,8
Botswana	1	1	0	0	0,46		0,1	0,01	-93,9
Malawi	1	1	0	0,1	0	-100	0,03	0,06	91,6
Eritrea	1	1	0	0	0		0,16	0,03	-80,4
Zambia	2,5	2,67	0,18	2,4	0	-99,9	1,89	0,6	-68,1
Egypt	1,17	1,5	0,33	0,02	0	-100	0,05	0,05	-9,8
Ghana	1,25	1,67	0,42	0,01	0,37	2514,8	0,08	0,37	375
Sudan	2,13	2,58	0,45	0,82	1,08	31,3	0,88	1,04	18
Ethiopia	2,33	2,89	0,56	0,96	1,8	87,6	1,43	1,83	28,2
Rwanda	2,09	2,7	0,61	1,56	2,17	39	1,45	0,85	-41,2
South Sudan	1,29	1,99	0,7	1,62	0,24	-85,5	1,72	1,2	-30
Nigeria	1	1,83	0,83	0	0,31		0,07	0,65	764,5
Burkina Faso	1,66	2,97	1,31	1,39	0,87	-37	1,58	1,96	24,1
Mali	2,25	3,56	1,32	2,04	1,11	-45,5	1,31	2,05	55,7
Mozambique	2,81	4,28	1,47	0,85	1,12	31,8	1,78	1,16	-34,9
Gambia	1	3	2	0	0		0	0,18	
Somalia	2,73	4,75	2,01	3,15	0,42	-86,6	2,38	2,96	24
Liberia	2,09	4,34	2,25	1,69	0,07	-95,9	1,68	1,03	-38,5
Namibia	2,5	5	2,5	0	0		0,09	0,04	-55,1
DRC	2,24	5,71	3,47	1,33	2,04	54,1	1,21	3,19	164,2
Senegal		2			0,47			0,19	
Algeria	1,75			0			0,58		
Cameroon		2			0			0,09	
Guinea-Bissau	1			0,05			0,11		
Angola		1			0			0,06	
Morocco	1			0			0		
Tunisia		1			0			0,06	
Gabon	1				0,47			0,02	

Source: Data from GODAD, author's calculations. Pr indicates project numbers, Comm indicates commitments and Disb indicates disbursements. Changes are measured in units (project number) or percentage points (%).

At the country level (Table 7), the post-2022 pickup in project activity is concentrated in a handful of partners. The biggest increases in projects per region-year are in DRC (+3.47), Liberia (+2.25), Somalia (+2.01),

Namibia (+2.50), Mozambique (+1.47), Mali (+1.32) and Burkina Faso (+1.31), with meaningful but smaller gains in Rwanda (+0.61), Ethiopia (+0.56), Sudan (+0.45) and Ghana (+0.42). Although this table does not explicitly disaggregate by conflict type or exposure to Russia, it is noteworthy that several of the countries with the largest post-2022 surges (e.g., Mali, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, Sudan, DRC) are also places where Russian activity has been widely reported over 2022–24. On the financing side, disbursements surged in DRC (+164%), Nigeria (+765% from a very low base), Ghana (+375%), South Africa (+113%) and Tanzania (+43%), while falling in Zambia (−68%), Togo (−85%), Republic of Congo (−81%), Rwanda (−41%) and South Sudan (−30%). The combination of more projects with flat or lower disbursements in several countries (e.g., Rwanda, South Sudan, Mozambique) suggests a shift toward more, smaller interventions post-2022.

Disaggregating by country \times sector (Table 8) for the top countries clarifies which type of projects drove the aggregate patterns. In DRC, the expansion is broad-based but dominated by PROD (+3.96 projects per region–year; +7.41% disbursements) and SOC (+3.39; +2.04%), consistent with large humanitarian and recovery packages. Mali’s increase is led by SOC (+1.51; +1.62%) with a contraction in PROD, while Mozambique shows gains in SOC (+1.03) and ECON (+0.97) but falling disbursements in both, again pointing to smaller projects. Liberia’s rise is concentrated in SOC (+2.09 projects) with declining financing, and Somalia shows a SOC-led increase (+1.17), partly offset by a drop in ECON (−0.70). Burkina Faso’s growth skews to ECON (+1.00) with modest SOC gains.

Table 8. Changes in top partner countries

Country	Sector	Pr pre	Pr post	Δ Pr	Comm pre	Comm post	Δ Comm %	Disb pre	Disb post	Δ Disb %
Burkina Faso	ECON	1	2	1,00	1,33	0,56	-0,58	3,11	1,24	-0,60
	Other	1			0,60			0,08		
	PROD		1			0			2,42	
	SOC	1,62	1,90	0,28	1,37	0,58	-0,58	1,42	0,99	-0,30
DRC	ECON	1,00	1,89	0,89	0,43	0,69	0,61	1,58	0,75	-0,53
	Other	1,27			1,63			0,83		
	PROD	1,67	5,63	3,96	1,45	1,33	-0,08	1,01	8,52	7,41
	SOC	2,11	5,51	3,39	1,02	1,74	0,71	0,97	2,95	2,04
Gambia	SOC	1	3	2	0	0		0	0,18	
Liberia	ECON	3,60	1,53	-2,07	0,10	0,01	-0,89	5,63	0,55	-0,90
	Other	1,04			0,84			0,30		
	SOC	1,48	3,57	2,09	1,41	0,00	-1,00	1,01	0,73	-0,28
Mali	ECON	1,42	1,77	0,35	1,54	0,77	-0,50	0,93	0,83	-0,11
	Other	1,25			0,04			0,24		
	PROD	1,43	1,00	-0,43	1,62	0,00	-1,00	1,25	0,00	-1,00
	SOC	2,07	3,58	1,51	1,37	0,95	-0,31	0,94	2,47	1,62
Mozambique	ECON	1,87	2,84	0,97	1,17	0,40	-0,66	1,02	0,84	-0,18
	Other	5,04			0,16			1,34		
	PROD	2	1	-1	0,39	0,17	-0,57	0,19	0,04	-0,80
	SOC	2,34	3,37	1,03	0,37	1,79	3,83	3,22	0,70	-0,78
Namibia	SOC	2,50	5,00	2,50	0,00	0,00		0,09	0,04	-0,55
Somalia	ECON	2,00	1,30	-0,70	0,00	0,95		2,50	0,65	-0,74
	Other	1,21			5,38			2,30		
	PROD	1	1	0	0,73	0	-1	0,73	0,40	-0,45
	SOC	2,48	3,65	1,17	1,99	0,21	-0,89	2	2	0

Source: Data from GODAD, author's calculations. Pr indicates project numbers, Comm indicates commitments and Disb indicates disbursements. Changes are measured in units (project number) or percentage points (%).

5.2 Public attitudes and perceptions

Our second main research question concerns whether the presence of Russia-affiliated actors, beyond reshaping donor behaviour, also affects how individuals perceive major global powers, domestic governance, and their own economic outlook. Here, we shift from analysing aid flows to exploring shifts in public opinion, civic confidence, and values in regions affected by Russian involvement. Drawing on geocoded survey data by Gallup, we examine whether attitudes toward Western and non-Western

actors, perceptions of institutional integrity, and development-related aspirations respond differently in Wagner- and Russia-affected areas.

Table 9. Event study on attitudes

Variable	ATT	Std. Error	95% Conf. Int. Lower	95% Conf. Int. Upper
USapprove	0.0592*	0.0202	0.0197	0.0988
RUapprove	0.0225	0.0185	-0.0137	0.0586
CHIapprove	-0.0134	0.0188	-0.0503	0.0235
FRAapprove	0.0413	0.0243	-0.0064	0.0889
Elections	-0.0588*	0.0253	-0.1084	-0.0092
Corruption	-0.0275	0.0147	-0.0563	0.0012
LocalEcon	-0.0037	0.0152	-0.0334	0.0260
INDEX_NI	-1.0840	1.6511	-4.3202	2.1522
INDEX_OT	-0.8872	1.1393	-3.1203	1.3458
Environment	-0.0581*	0.0212	-0.0998	-0.0165
GenderEq	-0.0673*	0.0173	-0.1013	-0.0334

Note: + p < 0.1, * p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001.

Source: Data from Gallup World Surveys, author's calculations. *USapprove*, *RUapprove*, *CHIapprove*, and *FRAapprove* represent the share of respondents who answer "Yes" to the question: "Do you approve or disapprove of the job performance of the leadership of [United States / Russia / China / France]?". *Elections* measures the share of people responding "Yes" to the question: "In this country, do you have confidence in the honesty of elections?". *Corruption* refers to the share of respondents who answer "Yes" to the question: "Is corruption widespread throughout the government in this country or not?". *LocalEcon* captures the share of respondents answering "Getting better" to the question: "Right now, do you think that economic conditions in the city or area where you live as a whole are getting better or getting worse?". *INDEX_NI* captures confidence in key national institutions that play a central role in leading a country. It combines responses related to confidence in the military, the judicial system, the national government, and the honesty of elections. *INDEX_OT* measures a respondent's positive outlook on the future. Specifically, it reflects whether individuals perceive that certain aspects of their life are getting better or worse. *Environment* captures the share of respondents answering "Satisfied" to the question: "In this country are you satisfied or dissatisfied with efforts to preserve the environment?". *GenderEq* captures the share of respondents answering "Yes" to the question: "Do you believe that women in this country are treated with respect and dignity or not?"

This is particularly relevant in areas where aid trajectories also shift, although data limitations do not allow us to inspect potential variation in this dimension. It is important to note that the observed attitudinal patterns may therefore reflect not only the direct impact of Russia-linked conflict, but also the indirect effects of donor responses to such conflict, such as increased or withdrawn aid, which are likely to shape public perceptions as well.

The results in Table 9 indicate that the entry of Russian actors into a region is associated with a statistically significant increase in approval of U.S. leadership (+5.9 percentage points), while approval of Russian, French and Chinese leadership remains statistically unchanged. This suggests that the presence of Russian-affiliated conflict actors may trigger a rallying effect in favour of Western powers, particularly the U.S., potentially due to a perceived contrast in governance models or donor behaviour.

At the same time, there is a significant decline in confidence in the honesty of elections, in line with concerns that conflict environments, especially those involving external paramilitary actors like Wagner, may erode civic values and perceptions of institutional integrity. Although not in a significant way, the two aggregated indices, *INDEX_NI* and *INDEX_OT*, that capture confidence in institutions and optimism about the future, also show a decline. Attitudes toward environmental protection and gender equality, which are typically part of Western donor agendas, also show a similar drop by around 5–7 percentage points. Other indicators such as corruption perceptions and local economic sentiment, show no significant change, although some coefficients are in the expected direction.

Future research could broaden the empirical foundation by incorporating additional surveys, such as the Demographic and Health Surveys and Afrobarometer, to improve spatial and thematic coverage of public attitudes and institutional trust across the continent. This could also support disentangling the separate effects of Wagner-linked conflict and donor responses on local perceptions an important next step in clarifying the causal pathways suggested by this study.

6 Results summarized

To examine how donors respond to Russian involvement and given that we can only identify Russian in the context of armed conflicts, we begin by analyzing donor reactions to conflict in general. Most donors tend to implement more projects in conflict-affected areas than in peaceful ones. When focusing on conflict escalation, some donors increase their engagement while others scale it back.

For areas with Russian presence, two complementary methods are used. The first focuses only on the initial period of Russian involvement, allowing for cleaner comparisons across regions. The second examines the average response across all periods and regions experiencing both conflict and Russian activity. The first approach (an event study) indicates a negative aid response following Russian involvement. However, when considering all periods and contexts together, the overall response to conflicts involving Russian actors is not statistically different from the response to other conflicts.

We also saw a distinct response by the World Bank, which instead reacts with a larger increase in presence in areas with Russian involvement in conflicts compared to other similar areas. This divergence between bilateral and multilateral behaviour likely reflects fundamental differences in mandate, governance structure, and operational flexibility. Multilateral institutions like the World Bank operate under a development-focused, technocratic mandate with long planning horizons and a strong emphasis on project continuity. Their governance involves multiple shareholder countries, which can dilute the influence of any single actor's foreign policy preferences, making responses to security threats more programmatic than political. In contrast, bilateral donors are more directly accountable to domestic constituencies and foreign policy objectives, giving them greater latitude to recalibrate aid portfolios in response to evolving conflict dynamics, including the presence of Wagner forces. As a result, bilateral donors may use reductions in project numbers or shifts in sectoral focus as tools for signalling disapproval or managing risk, whereas the World Bank is more likely to adapt operational modalities, scaling up disbursements or project activity within existing commitments rather than overtly changing its public aid pledges. This helps explain why multilateral engagement in Wagner-affected areas appears more consistent and delivery-focused, while bilateral patterns are more heterogeneous and potentially more politically responsive.

A complementary explanation, rooted in the aid allocation literature, highlights how strategic motivations differ systematically across donor types. Bilateral aid is often shaped by donors' geopolitical, commercial, or historical ties to recipients, with documented evidence that such aid serves foreign policy objectives more directly than multilateral assistance (e.g., Alesina & Dollar 2000; Maizels & Nissanke 1984). While multilateral institutions like the World Bank are not immune to political influence e.g., major shareholders can steer allocations toward strategically important recipients while retaining ostensibly "clean hands" (Dreher et al. 2019), their governance structures dilute individual donor preferences. As such, multilateral channels are often used as a commitment device to reduce political discretion and improve aid effectiveness (Milner & Tingley 2013; Dreher et al. 2018). Albeit not watertight (see a discussion with further examples and references in Berlin et al., 2023), this institutional insulation, along with stricter appraisal processes, likely contributes to the more consistent and delivery-focused engagement observed in Wagner-affected regions.

We then examine whether donor behaviour in reaction to Russian involvement further shifted following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent escalation of geopolitical tensions. This is possible only for three donors for which data are available. Both the World Bank and France's AFD significantly increased their financial engagement in these areas after 2022, marking a shift not only from how they typically respond to conflict-affected areas more generally but also from their previous responses to Russian presence suggesting a deliberate effort to counterbalance Russian influence. Sweden's response, while more modest in scale, intensified after 2022. Both project numbers and disbursements increased in reaction to conflict in general, in contrast to both WB and AFD, but there is no evidence of a differentiated response to Russia-linked events. Since 2022, Sweden's aid portfolio has shifted toward more numerous but smaller projects, especially in social and humanitarian sectors, while financing has increasingly targeted production-oriented activities. The increase in project activity is concentrated in a handful of African partners, several of which such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Mozambique, and DRC also coincide with areas of reported Russian involvement. Overall, the pattern suggests a post-2022 pivot toward recovery and social infrastructure efforts, with funding spread across more projects of smaller financial size.

The results on public attitudes indicate that the entry of Russian actors into a region is associated with a statistically significant increase in

approval of U.S. leadership (+5.9 percentage points), while approval of Russian, French and Chinese leadership remains statistically unchanged. This suggests that the presence of Russian-affiliated conflict actors may trigger a rallying effect in favour of Western powers, particularly the U.S., potentially due to perceived contrasts in governance models or donor behaviour.

At the same time, there is a significant decline in confidence in the honesty of elections, in line with concerns that conflict environments, especially those involving external paramilitary actors like Wagner, may erode civic values and perceptions of institutional integrity.

7 Discussion

The findings of this study offer a nuanced picture of how geopolitical tensions, particularly Russia's expanding influence in Africa, are reshaping the landscape of development cooperation. Interpreting these results, it is useful to return to the conceptual distinction between realist and idealist approaches to foreign policy. Russia's engagement clearly fits a realist paradigm, emphasizing strategic presence, elite partnerships, and transactional exchanges over long-term developmental objectives or normative alignment. By contrast, most Western donors formally align with idealist principles prioritizing democratic governance, social inclusion, and sustainability even if strategic interests also guide allocation choices in practice.

The evidence presented in this report indicates that Western donors are adjusting to the changing geopolitical context. While aid flows remain generally responsive to conflict, the presence of Russian-linked actors, especially the Wagner Group, introduces a new layer of strategic calculation. Many donors appear to reduce or reallocate aid away from Wagner- or Russia-affected areas, particularly in terms of overall project presence. This response is not uniform. The World Bank stands out both for its previous openness to operating in areas with Russian involvement and for its intensified engagement post-2022. The French aid agency AFD opted to consolidate rather than expand its presence, and Sweden appears to have increased aid in conflict zones without adjusting its strategy specifically in response to Russian presence. These differences reflect varied institutional mandates and geopolitical priorities. While the data do not yet capture the full spectrum of donor behaviour after 2022, the observed divergence already suggests two possible paths forward: one in which Western disengagement continues in regions with Russian involvement, potentially leading to a crowding out of Western aid; and another in which more donors follow the lead of the World Bank and AFD by stepping up their presence to counterbalance Russian influence.

The implications of this adjustment are far-reaching. If geopolitical risks deter donors from operating in strategically contested or fragile areas, the result may be an aid vacuum in regions that are already underserved and institutionally weak. The evidence on public perceptions supports this concern: Russian presence is associated with a relative rise in support for Russia, a steeper decline in the confidence in electoral processes, as well as other aspects of the institutional environment, and more pessimistic views about economic prospects. The long-term consequences of

potentially diminished Western visibility, particularly on civic values and development outcomes, remain uncertain.

This evolving aid landscape raises broader questions about the effectiveness and coordination of development cooperation in an era of multipolar competition. If donors retreat from difficult contexts or allow their efforts to be shaped primarily by strategic rivalry, they risk undermining both their developmental goals and their credibility. Furthermore, the findings suggest that communication strategies and value promotion typically associated with idealist foreign policy may need to be rethought to remain effective in a setting increasingly shaped by strategic ambiguity and competing narratives.

In sum, the challenge ahead lies in navigating this tension: maintaining a principled approach to development while adapting to a more contested and unpredictable global order. This requires greater donor coordination, improved risk-sharing mechanisms, and stronger investments in understanding how geopolitical influence plays out not only in aid flows but also in hearts, minds, and institutions on the ground.

8 Policy implications and recommendations

The shifting behavior of donors in response to Russian activity raises important policy challenges for the design, delivery, and credibility of development assistance. Putting the results from this study in a broader context of strategic donor behavior leads to several key implications and corresponding recommendations for development partners, particularly in Europe and multilateral institutions.

1. Avoid strategic blind spots in fragile contexts

A retreat or retrenchment of aid in Wagner- or Russia-affected regions may inadvertently create vacuums that are quickly filled by authoritarian influence. While operational risks in conflict-affected areas are real, donors must resist the temptation to abandon strategically contested regions altogether, especially when these areas are already institutionally weak and underserved. Aid should not be viewed purely as a lever of soft power, but also as a stabilizing force and a critical source of legitimacy for local institutions.

Recommendation:

Develop adaptable aid delivery strategies, that allow for modular design, context-specific implementation, and real-time adjustment; complement with shared risk mechanisms to ensure continued engagement in fragile and contested settings. This could involve:

- expanding humanitarian-development-peacebuilding (HDP) nexus approaches;
- pre-approved contingency budgets that can be reallocated as local needs evolve;
- programming with short feedback loops that enable course correction without full project redesign;
- flexibility to shift between modalities (e.g., from technical assistance to cash transfers) as access and security conditions change;
- increasing reliance on local partners and NGOs with access to hard-to-reach areas;
- empowering local partners to lead delivery and adjust tactics on the ground.

2. Invest in strategic communication and narrative engagement

Although the survey evidence is not conclusive, support for Russia may increase in areas where Russian involvement is visible especially where Western aid is being scaled back. In parallel, perceptions of Western donors can deteriorate even in the absence of substantial Russian investment. This underscores the influence of visibility, narrative control, and symbolic engagement. Competing with actors like Russia, well-versed in propaganda and perception management, requires a clearer articulation of what Western engagement stands for and what it tangibly delivers.

Recommendation:

Strengthen communication strategies that raise public awareness of the tangible and long-term benefits of development cooperation. In recipient countries, this includes highlighting achievements in governance, education, health, and inclusive growth, while supporting media literacy and independent journalism to foster informed public discourse. In donor countries, it means demonstrating the strategic value and development impact of aid, reinforcing public support for sustained engagement in fragile contexts.

3. Improve donor coordination in the face of geopolitical competition

As the geopolitical environment becomes more complex, ad hoc or siloed responses risk fragmentation and inconsistency. The mixed strategies observed across donors, ranging from withdrawal to reallocation, undermine the collective strength of development cooperation and may allow competitors to exploit disunity.

Recommendation:

Establish clearer coordination mechanisms among donors operating in politically contested areas including countries affected by Russian operations. This includes aligning on risk assessments, response thresholds, and diplomatic messaging, while allowing for flexibility in operational tactics.

4. Strengthen data and monitoring in geopolitically sensitive areas

The study highlights the value of granular, geolocated data in understanding both foreign influence and aid effectiveness. As competition over influence increasingly plays out at the subnational level,

development actors must improve their capacity to monitor local dynamics and adapt programming accordingly.

Recommendation:

Support the integration of geospatial analysis, conflict mapping, and public opinion data into programming cycles. Expand investment in open-source platforms and collaborative data infrastructures that allow for rapid and adaptive responses to geopolitical shifts.

9 Conclusion

This study examines how the presence of Russian-affiliated actors, particularly the Wagner Group, has influenced development cooperation and public perceptions in Africa. While many Western donors scaled back their aid in areas with Russian involvement, others such as the World Bank and AFD appeared to step up their engagement after 2022. Sweden likewise expanded its aid during this period, focusing on a larger number of smaller projects in social, humanitarian, and production sectors, often in countries where Russian activity has been reported. However, no distinct response to Russian presence at the local level can be identified for Sweden.

At the same time, Russian presence is associated with shifts in public sentiment: declining trust in institutions, growing pessimism about economic prospects, and, in some contexts, increased support for Russia.

These findings highlight the complex interplay between geopolitical competition, aid allocation, and local attitudes. Given what we know from the existing literature on the local impacts of aid presence, we highlight the risk that donor responses to strategic threats can either reinforce or erode institutional confidence in contested environments, depending on how engagement is sustained and perceived.

In this context, research plays a crucial role in informing adaptive, evidence-based strategies. By identifying where aid is most at risk of retrenchment and how public sentiment evolves in response to both conflict and donor behavior, data-driven analysis can help donors remain effective and principled, even under geopolitical pressure.

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Appendix

Table A1 – Classification of project sectors

Sector category	Sector name
Economic Infrastructure and Services	II.1. Transport & Storage II.2. Communications II.3.a. Energy Policy II.3.b. Energy generation, renewable sources II.3.c. Energy generation, non-renewable sources II.3.f. Energy distribution II.4. Banking & Financial Services II.5. Business & Other Services III.1.a. Agriculture III.1.b. Forestry III.1.c. Fishing III.2.a. Industry III.2.b. Mineral Resources & Mining III.3.a. Trade Policies & Regulations
Production Sectors	VI.2. Development Food Assistance VIII.1. Emergency Response VIII.2. Reconstruction Relief & Rehabilitation VIII.3. Disaster Prevention & Preparedness
Social Infrastructure and Services	I.1.a. Education, Level Unspecified I.1.b. Basic Education I.1.c. Secondary Education I.1.d. Post-Secondary Education I.2.a. Health, General I.2.b. Basic Health I.2.c. Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) I.3. Population Policies/Programmes & Reproductive Health I.4. Water Supply & Sanitation I.5.a. Government & Civil Society-general I.5.b. Conflict, Peace & Security I.6. Other Social Infrastructure & Services

Source: GODAD.