



Summary

This brief presents findings on online public sentiment towards the Wagner Group private military company (PMC) among social media users in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Based on social data extracted from the Twitter and Facebook social media platforms, the study finds that most DRC-based social media users who have engaged in online discussions on the Wagner Group between 1 December 2022 and 29 January 2023 hold positive sentiments towards the PMC. The prevailing sentiment among the population of social media users examined here, who represent the politically engaged educated class in the DRC, is that the Wagner Group may be a necessary recourse in the country's struggle against the March 23 Movement (M23) rebels.

Context

The Wagner Group is already present in several African countries, and its activities have been associated with reported violence against civilians in particular in [Mali](#) and the Central African Republic (CAR). In December 2022, soon after a Wagner Afrique Twitter account was set up in October 2022 especially focussed on the DRC (see an example of a post on the account in the image), rumours intensified that the DRC government had recently added the Wagner Group to its payroll to help fight M23 rebels in the country's eastern provinces.

On 22 December 2022 around 100 armed white men landed at Goma airport and were photographed moving through the town in pickup trucks, provoking speculation on their identity. Subsequently, on 30 December 2022 M23 rebels claimed – possibly to [damage](#) the DRC's international reputation – to have killed a white mercenary in the Karenga area located in the Masisi territory in North Kivu province. Subsequent [investigations](#) indicated that the armed group may in fact have been [Romanian mercenaries](#) hired to guard Goma airport by a [private company](#) with close ties to politicians with links to the highest levels of the government in Kinshasa.

Online discussions regarding the Wagner Group's rumoured presence in the DRC provide a window to assess local public sentiment towards the PMC even if it may not be present in the country. The discussions on social media took place against a background of M23 advances in eastern DRC despite the deployment of the East African Community (EAC) regional force supposedly to contain the Rwanda-backed M23 rebellion. To [Kinshasa's disappointment](#) the EAC troops failed to militarily engage with the well-equipped rebel group.

Analysing public sentiment in the DRC towards the Wagner Group allows a better understanding of the extent to which politically engaged social media users would be receptive to the PMC's presence in the country should this be the case.



Methodology

This brief is based on public social media data collected with the use of AI-powered software. The software is fed Boolean search queries in a process that allows us to collect all the social data that could possibly be pertinent to the chosen subject. The data is downloaded and manually cleaned.

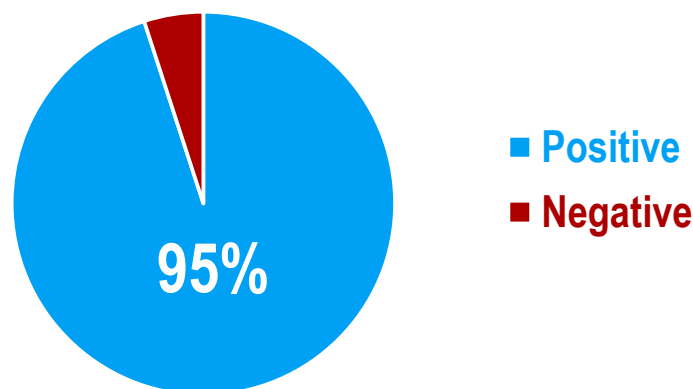
Relevant data was collected from Twitter and Facebook for a 53-day period between 1 December 2022 and 29 January 2023. The data was cleaned to ensure that any unrelated data was removed and a new category – “sentiment towards M23” – was created in the database to examine whether sentiment towards the Wagner Group correlated with sentiment towards M23. After the data was cleaned the final database consisted of 102 main observations of public sentiment towards the Wagner Group.

Findings on public sentiment towards the Wagner Group

Figure 1 presents a basic breakdown of findings on online public sentiment towards the Wagner Group among social media users in the DRC between 1 December 2022 and 29 January 2023.

It suggests that a large majority (95%) of social media users in the DRC who expressed Wagner Group-related opinions in this period held positive sentiments towards the PMC.

Figure 1: Sentiment (%) on social media towards Wagner in the DRC



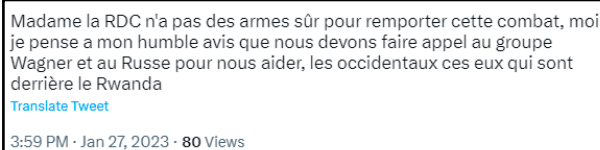
Note: The figure does not include pro-M23 accounts on Twitter. Pro-M23 accounts are defined as accounts with explicitly pro-M23 content only.
Source: Insecurity Insight

Understanding positive sentiment towards the Wagner Group

When discussing the Wagner Group, social media users in the DRC tend to refer to various reasons behind their positive sentiments towards it. Presented below are the main arguments underlying positive perceptions of the Wagner Group in the country.

- **The perception that the Wagner Group may be a necessary recourse in the fight against M23:**

With the Congolese national army struggling to contain and repulse the Rwanda-backed M23 rebel group in eastern DRC, which continues to gain territory despite the deployment of EAC forces in 2022, some DRC social media users think that the PMC could be a more efficient solution to the problem of restoring security to the region.



JOIN MAILING LIST

Having intervened in a growing number of African countries against rebel and Islamist groups, the Wagner Group appears to have built a reputation for adopting a no-nonsense and efficient approach to dealing with adversaries in the field. One Congolese social media user stated that “if Wagner were [really] there [fighting M23], M23 would already be in [Rwandan capital] Kigali in the process of fleeing”.¹

The sentiment that contracting the Wagner Group could be an efficient solution to the DRC’s M23 problem seems to be also shared by those social media users who recognise that the PMC is known for its notorious practices in Africa and elsewhere. In the words of one Twitter user from the DRC when discussing the Wagner Group, “to struggle against the security threat which seeks to destroy our Nation ... we will, if necessary, call upon the army of the devil himself!”²

- **Pro-Russian sentiment:**

An important factor contributing to a positive outlook on the Wagner Group is the seemingly growing pro-Russian sentiment, a phenomenon that is not exclusive to the DRC on the African continent.

The Wagner Group entered countries such as the neighbouring CAR, Mali and Burkina Faso on the back of increasing pro-Russian sentiment and growing local hostility towards Western – in particular, French – interests.

Congolese civilians have not been immune to the [anti-French propaganda](#) in Africa successfully spread by the Wagner Group to influence public opinion in its favour. Indeed, social media users in the DRC appear to respond well to Wagner propaganda, and at least some clearly support the Russian war effort in Ukraine.



Understanding negative sentiment towards the Wagner Group

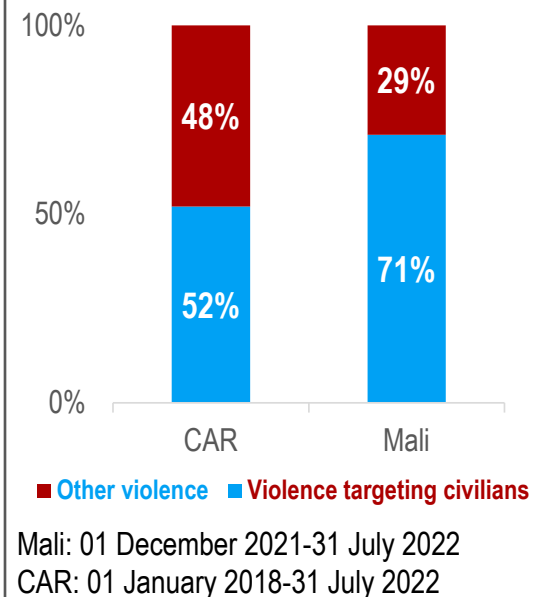
Although the vast majority of DRC social media users who discussed the Wagner Group in December 2022 and January 2023 expressed positive sentiments towards the PMC, nevertheless a small minority appeared to hold negative sentiments. The main reason behind this appears to be Wagner’s notorious practices in warfare, but this appears more related to reports of the group’s use of African students in the war in Ukraine than atrocities committed against African civilians in neighbouring countries.

One DRC resident, probably referring to the imprisoned Zambian student who was recruited by Wagner in prison and died in Ukraine, wrote the following: “it is too easy to accuse France of all evil while Wagner kills Ukrainians, not to forget prisoners and African students and undocumented people”.³

Absence of discussions of atrocities in African countries

Social media users who discussed Wagner mercenaries in the DRC during the examined period did not mention atrocities such as the [Moura civilian massacre](#) in Mali in March 2022 reportedly at the hands of Malian and Wagner troops. Nor was there any other reference to other incidents associated with the Wagner Group in Mali or the CAR. According to an [ACLED analysis](#), Wagner personnel were involved in 52% of reported attacks on civilians in Mali and in 71% of reported attacks in the CAR, but social media users in the DRC did not discuss such concerns. This suggests that DRC social media users are largely unaware of these incidents. The Wagner Group's notorious disregard for international humanitarian law when operating in Africa appears to have helped to create a reputation for effectiveness for the PMC rather than being a matter of concern. This raises important questions as to why such information does not seem to have come to the attention of social media users in the DRC.

Percentage of organized political events targeting civilians, by actor and country during Wagner deployment



Examples of violence perpetrated by Wagner personnel in Mali and the CAR targeting health care and aid operations

In 2021 and 2022 several incidents involving Wagner mercenaries attacking health care facilities and personnel were reported in [Mali](#) and the CAR. While these were not large-casualty events, they were publicly reported. In Mali they contributed to large-scale displacements of civilians. Source: Insecurity Insight

- 16 October 2021:** In Kpondigmon village, Bossangoa town and district, Ouham prefecture, CAR, a health centre was looted, shops destroyed, livestock stolen, and three civilians killed during an attack on the village by Wagner personnel supported by members of the Central African Armed Forces (FACA).
- 09 April 2022:** In the infirmary, Henri Izamo military camp, Bangui, CAR, Wagner mercenaries forced entry to a health centre and raped women in the maternity ward.
- 11 April 2022:** In Gordile locality, Vakaga prefecture, CAR, Wagner mercenaries supported by FACA troops stole 37 motorcycles, four of which belonged to the Red Cross.
- 23 June 2022:** In Lawane quarter, Bornou city, Ouham prefecture, CAR, Wagner mercenaries detained a 30-year-old pharmacist on suspicion that he was providing healthcare to a rebel leader and executed him after torturing him.
- 04 September 2022:** In Nia-Ouro village, Fakala rural commune, Mopti region, Mali, a male nurse was reportedly missing following an attack on the village by Malian Armed Forces troops, Wagner mercenaries and Donso militiamen. Several women were assaulted, and valuables and livestock was looted during the incident.
- 30 August 2022:** In Ansongo town, Gao region, Mali, the offices of two INGOs were reportedly searched by Malian Armed Forces troops and Wagner mercenaries.

- **06 December 2022:** In Kita village, Tenenkou commune, Mopti region, Mali, a health worker and two other civilians were injured and five civilians from the Tuareg and Fulani communities were killed in air-ground operations by Malian Armed Forces troops and Wagner helicopters.

Profile review

A review of the social media accounts behind the data presented in this brief indicates that the people operating these accounts in the DRC tend to represent the middle-upper educated middle classes, with self-described job titles that included engineers, political analysts and a computer information technologist. Moreover, most of the accounts tend to be particularly active in political discussions around ongoing issues in the DRC and in Africa in general, a factor that also arguably suggests that social media discussions of the Wagner Group are mostly concentrated within a narrow strata of politically engaged users hailing from the educated classes. There is no indication that the social media accounts used for this research are fake. The absence of discussions on atrocities attributed to Wagner personnel in these accounts that otherwise discuss current affairs in Africa raises questions as to whether underlying algorithms may expose these users primarily to pro-Wagner propaganda and somehow exclude information on violence against civilians attributed to Wagner personnel in other posts.

Conclusions and recommendations for NGOs operating in the field

Social media analysis provides an insight into dominant opinions among groups of social media users, and these opinions should be considered in any wider acceptance-based strategy⁴ designed to assess and manage the security risks facing aid operations in the field. Based on past reported information from Mali and the CAR, Wagner forces can pose serious risks to key humanitarian services through killings, sexual violence and looting.

The absence of concern for the safety of key civilian services from the interference of a mercenary group among social media users raises particular concerns for the safety of local partners should mercenaries be deployed in the future. The fact that a vast majority of social media users would be in favour of the hiring of mercenary groups that may pose serious risks for aid agencies – and in particular their local partners – raises complex questions as to the most appropriate forward-looking acceptance strategy among organisations providing aid.

Options may include the following:

- **Seek a discussion with local partners about the Wagner Group and other security forces.**

Find out whether opinions shared by social media users are also held among staff of local partner organisations. It is possible that international and local organisations may have different perceptions of risk. Discuss potential mitigation strategies early and seek common ground on how to protect key operations.

- **Consider initiating discussions on the protection of civilians in light of atrocities committed in neighbouring countries.**

The aim would be to stimulate a discussion on the standards that DRC citizens may wish to demand from any security forces intervening in the conflict in their country and the guarantees of accountability they may require from their own government when contracting foreign forces of whatever kind. The engagement of journalists and other opinion makers may be particularly important to raise awareness of risks.

Footnotes

¹ “Si Wagner serait là, le M23 serait déjà à Kigali entrain de fuir” (Twitter, 27 January 2023).

² “[Pour] lutter contre la menace sécuritaire qui cherche à anéantir notre Nation, sachez que [nous] ferons, s’il le faut, appel à l’armée du Diable lui-même!” (Twitter, 19 January 2023).

³ “C’est trop facile d’accuser la France de tous les maux alors que Wagner tue les Ukrainiens sans oublier des prisonniers et des étudiants africains et des sans papiers” (Twitter, 17 December 2022).

⁴ An acceptance-based security risk strategy refers to a security risk management approach that builds safe operating environment through consent, approval and cooperation from individuals, communities and local authorities. It one of the three cornerstones of aid agency security risk management [EISF Security-to-go guide Module-4 Security-strategies Acceptance-protection-and-deterrence.pdf](#) (gisf.ngo)

Related content

Social Media Monitoring in the DRC:

- [The Deployment of East African Community Forces in Eastern DR Congo](#) (February 2023)
- [Disinformation WFP Helicopter Crash](#) (November 2022)
- [CENI and the Red Cross](#) (July 2022)
- [Downing of a UN Helicopter](#) (May 2022).

Violence Against or Obstruction of Health Care in the DRC:

- SHCC 2021 Factsheet available in [English](#) and [French](#)
- Attacks on Health Care Bi-Monthly [News Briefs](#): Available since October 2017
- Attacks on Health Care [News Briefs Dataset](#): Available on HDX.

Should you wish to provide us with any feedback or to get in touch, kindly write to: info@insecurityinsight.org.

This document is published by Insecurity Insight. The contents are the responsibility of Insecurity Insight. The analysis and opinions expressed in this report belong solely to the publisher, Insecurity Insight. Insecurity Insight is a Humanitarian to Humanitarian ([H2H](#)) organisation committed to the [Humanitarian Principles](#).

Insecurity Insight. 2023. Social Media Monitoring, Wagner Mercenaries in Eastern DR Congo? February 2023. Switzerland: Insecurity Insight. bit.ly/WagnerInDRCSMMFeb2023