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Russia's Involvement on the African Continent and its Consequences for Development: The Aid Channel

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Russia's Involvement on the African Continent and its Consequences for Development:

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Abstract

In the wake of international sanctions, Russia has intensified its engagement in Africa, with potential ramifications for democracy, international relations, and conflict dynamics. This paper examines whether the expanding presence of Russian actors has influenced the allocation and composition of development aid from Western partners, particularly after the invasion of Ukraine. Given established evidence on the local socioeconomic and political effects of foreign aid, such shifts could shape public perceptions of Western development efforts and carry wider geopolitical and developmental implications.

Keywords: foreign aid; Russia; World Bank
JEL Codes: P45, F35, O12, O19, O55

VERY PRELIMINARY. DO NOT CITE.

1 Introduction

Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia has become increasingly isolated. In an attempt to counter Western powers' efforts to suppress the Russian economy and soft power impacts, Russia has tried to increase its influence in other parts of the world. In particular, Russia is increasingly active on the African continent, having become a key partner to several African regimes, typically operating in areas with weak institutions and governments. While significant attention has been directed towards analyzing the impact of Russia's actions in a European and Caucasian context, the consequences of Russia's involvement on the African continent remain understudied. We maintain that

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this is an important question for at least two reasons: i) Russia's growing presence and activity may have significant consequences for the future trajectory of several African countries and ii) this may also entail repercussions for the rest of the world. Of particular interest are relations to other global actors, effects on attitudes and norms (for instance towards democracy), and the frequency and extent of conflict and tensions, especially when linked to the presence of natural resources, as these are all factors with potential long-term impacts on a local, regional and global scale.

Russia's engagement on the continent is still small in comparison to other global players, albeit growing. Additionally, Russia's approach is markedly different, focused on security and military cooperation in exchange for access to natural resources, military equipment sales, and political support. Reflecting this, there are multiple ways in which Russia's evolving presence in Africa could be mapped. However, to move beyond a descriptive approach and towards causal inference, we need data that is both geolocated and frequently updated to capture variations over time and space. For this reason, we focus on two key sources: the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED), which provides detailed data on conflict and strategic developments, used to proxy Russian activities; and the Geocoded Official Development Assistance Dataset (GODAD), which offers subnational data on aid allocation from Western donors. This necessarily narrows our research question. 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 do Western donors react to conflict events involving Russian-affiliated actors.[1]

We argue that this narrower research question is still important, for two reasons. First, based on what we know about Russia's strategies in Africa, the presence of actors linked to the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization, serves as a strong proxy for other activities, such as trade, asset ownership, propaganda, and political influence (see a discussion in the next section). Second, a broad body of literature, which we selectively review in the next section, examines how foreign influence shapes outcomes in recipient countries. Specifically, the presence of foreign aid has been shown to have significant impacts, ranging from economic effects to changes in attitudes. The emerging body of research using geocoded aid data has highlighted these impacts. Engaging with this literature offers both methodological tools and empirically grounded expectations about the likely consequences of shifting donor strategies.

In the remainder of the paper, Section 3 outlines the empirical strategy and describes the data used in the analysis. Section 4 reports results on the general patterns and section 5 focuses on the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. Section 6 concludes.

[1] In a companion study, we further analyze what consequences this has for affected communities, by looking at social norms and attitudes.

2 Theoretical framework and literature

Classical international relations theory provides a useful lens through which to interpret the motivations and methods of foreign actors operating in Africa. The realist perspective on international relations emphasizes the role of power, national interest, and security in shaping foreign policy (Morgenthau, 1962; Mearsheimer, 2003). In this model, countries act in their self-interest, and often in competition or even conflict with one another. Strategic alliances and a willingness to use force to advance one's interests are contemplated under this perspective. An alternative approach is the idealist perspective, in which foreign policy - with foreign aid as an important tool - is used to promote democratic values, human rights, and international cooperation, prioritizing tools such as diplomacy, international law, and multilateral institutions (Keohane and Nye, 2012; Lancaster, 2008).

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).

For countries at the receiving end of major powers' foreign policy agendas, and particularly for developing countries, the implications from the contrasting approaches are 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, which most Western donors officially subscribe to, embedding their assistance in institutional frameworks like the OECD-DAC and justifying aid in terms of providing global public goods. However, idealism is sometimes criticized for "greenwashing" self-interest,[2] or at the very least for allowing altruistic and strategic motives to coexist(e.g. Maizels and Nissanke, 1984; Alesina and Dollar, 2000; Dreher et al., 2024).

The United States stands as a prominent power actor in the international arena, with its engagement on the African continent often characterized as both realist and idealist (Aning et al., 2008; Kaba and M'Cormack-Hale, 2015; Hackbarth, 2008). An extensive literature has examined the various facets of this presence, spanning foreign aid, diplomatic relations, and military involvement,

[2]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.

revealing significant impacts on local economic development through multiple channels.

Russia has historically adhered to a realist approach in its foreign policy endeavors. Throughout its trajectory, Russia has consistently prioritized national security and economic interests, frequently leveraging military and economic means to safeguard these interests (Götz, 2016; Aleprete, 2017; Lo, 2016; Rezvani, 2020; Wifciawski, 2011; Nazarov, 2024; Feinstein and Pirro, 2021; Sussex, 2012). During the Cold War, Russia's engagement in Africa also included a notable emphasis on human capital development and educational exchanges (Gould–Davies, 2003; Matusevich, Matusevich), but the economic collapse of the 90s put a halt to these ambitions. 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, amid mounting pressures from the Western democratic world following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Russia finds itself increasingly reliant on a realist approach.

It's important to emphasize at this point that the Russian approach diverges from that of China, another realist foreign actor whose presence in Africa has attracted scholarly attention. China shows no interest in democracy and human rights (its famous *no-strings-attached* stance), but is focused on a long-term presence, infrastructure building and investments; it is not always loved (Isaksson and Kotsadam, 2018b), but efficient and cheap. Russia's interest is more short term and opportunistic, seeking out countries rich in natural resources with unstable governments and weak institutions, such as Libya, Sudan, Mozambique, the Central African Republic, Mali, Burkina Faso and Madagascar. Russia typically targets undemocratic elites or military juntas, offering political support, military equipment sales, and security cooperation (in particular through the Wagner Group) in exchange for access to natural resources, concession rights and influence. Russia is pursuing a range of strategic goals that include diplomatic legitimization, media influence, military presence, elite influence, arms export, and shaping voting patterns in international organizations (Lindén, 2023). Like China, Russia is uninterested in democracy or human rights. Rather, what Russia stands for is in stark contrast to the Western model. Russia stands for autocracy and backward revisionist values (for instance in areas such as attitudes to gender equality and the sustainability agenda) while the West generally promotes, at least officially, democracy and progressive inclusive solutions (Lindén, 2023). What also especially characterizes Russia is the particular attraction towards the presence of anti-west sentiment, which it fuels through populistic anti-colonial disinformation and propaganda. This approach has been criticized for potentially weakening democratic norms and sidelining African agency (Akinola and Ogunnubi, 2021).

In light of these diverse approaches and their far-reaching implications, understanding the intricacies of foreign engagements in Africa, and of Russia's distinct approach, becomes imperative. While a substantial body of literature examines the Soviet Union's historical engagement with African regimes (e.g. Morris, 1973; Bienen, 1982; Ramani, 2023), research on Russia's post-Soviet in-

volvement in Africa is limited due to its strategic withdrawal from the region between 1990 and 2015. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, its renewed interest in Africa has gained attention. Existing studies have qualitatively explored Russia's motivations (Marten, 2019a; Akinola and Ogunnubi, 2021) and highlighted troubling trends, such as the Wagner Group's human rights abuses and lethal activities (Marten, 2019b; Gang et al., 2023). However, quantitative evidence on the consequences of this engagement, especially in relation to development cooperation and public perceptions, remains 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.

The literature on the global development architecture explores the influence of donor motivations on recipients' governance and development models, from the Cold War to the emergence of China as a key player (Boschini and Olofsgård, 2007; Frot et al., 2014; Blair and Roessler, 2021). A much broader body of work also explores how foreign aid interacts with geopolitical competition, particularly how the presence of rival actors can influence donor behavior and local perceptions. Our contribution is to investigate the role of Russian engagement in shaping Western aid flows adding a geospatial lens to this debate. By leveraging geospatial data, we aim to uncover patterns that might otherwise remain obscured at higher levels of aggregation.

This study then builds on key findings from the recent geospatial impact evaluation (GIE) literature, particularly in the context of foreign aid allocation, with the idea that if Russian engagement influences aid distribution, it could indirectly affect the outcomes typically associated with foreign aid. For instance, Bitzer et al. (2024) and Demir et al. (2024) find that aid boosts economic activity and growth, including spillovers to nearby areas. Beyond growth, aid can attract foreign direct investment (Brazys and Jung, 2024) and improve social outcomes such as child mortality, water access, and women's empowerment (Greßer et al., 2021; Berlin et al., 2024; Kotsadam et al., 2018). Proximity to aid also increases school enrollment (Haer et al., 2023) and, in the short run, lowers migration aspirations by boosting optimism and institutional trust—though in the long term it may increase outmigration (Fuchs et al., 2023). Aid can strengthen civic attitudes and state legitimacy. World Bank projects have been linked to increased rule-following (Isaksson and Durevall, 2023) and tax morale (Blair and Roessler, 2021), while responsiveness to citizen needs improves local legitimacy even in fragile settings like Afghanistan and Syria (Parks et al., 2019; Carnegie et al., 2022). Moreover, channeling aid through national systems increases influence on reforms (Masaki et al., 2021).

But aid may also enable corruption. Chinese aid, in particular, has been linked to increases in local corruption (Isaksson and Kotsadam, 2018a; Brazys and Vadlamannati, 2021), whereas World Bank aid is less prone to this. In some cases, international economic engagement softens authoritarian behavior (Carter, 2023). The aid–conflict relationship is context-dependent. Bilateral aid can escalate unrest in fragile settings (Bluhm et al., 2021), while during active conflict, it may increase military fatalities but reduce civilian deaths (Findley

et al., 2023).

Aid also shapes public attitudes toward donors. Chinese aid can temporarily boost support for China, especially where generosity is high (Wellner et al., 2025), though effects fade over time. U.S. aid tends to increase support for the U.S. and democratic values, while Chinese aid may inadvertently improve Western donors' image (Blair et al., 2022).

Finally, to show that it is plausible to expect Western aid to respond strategically to the presence of Russian actors, studies in this literature have also found that aid allocation is influenced by geopolitical considerations. Strategic targeting and counterbalancing have been documented among both traditional donors (e.g., U.S. vs. France) and emerging donors (e.g., China vs. India) (Fuchs et al., 2015; Asmus-Bluhm et al., 2025; Davies and Klasen, 2019; Zeitz, 2021).

3 Data and methods

To proxy Russian presence, we use data from the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED). The dataset covers geolocalised violent incidents such as battles, political violence, riots, protests, but also strategic developments and troops deployments, including location coordinates, involved actors, dates, and fatalities. We focus on actors affiliated with the Russian government and with the Wagner Group. Table 7.1 in the Appendix shows the prevalence of different types of events, and how typical events involving Wagner are. The map in Figure 1 shows that these events are highly concentraded in space. Four countries – Central African Republic (CAR), Burkina Faso, Mali and Libya – stand for the vast majority, but occasional events happen in a handful of other countries, including Benin, Chad, the DRC, Cameroon and Egypt.

Using this variation, we investigate how Western donors respond to conflict events in general and to the presence of Wagner-affiliated actors in particular. To capture the presence of Western actors, this study draws on georeferenced foreign aid data from AidData.org and the Geocoded Official Development Assistance Dataset (GODAD) project (Bomprezzi et al., 2024), 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. In addition to Western bilateral donors, the dataset also incorporates geocoded aid project data from China (2000–2021) and the World Bank (1995–2023), enabling cross-donor comparisons across a wide temporal and geographic scope. 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. This allows us to characterize baseline patterns in aid allocation and identify whether Wag-

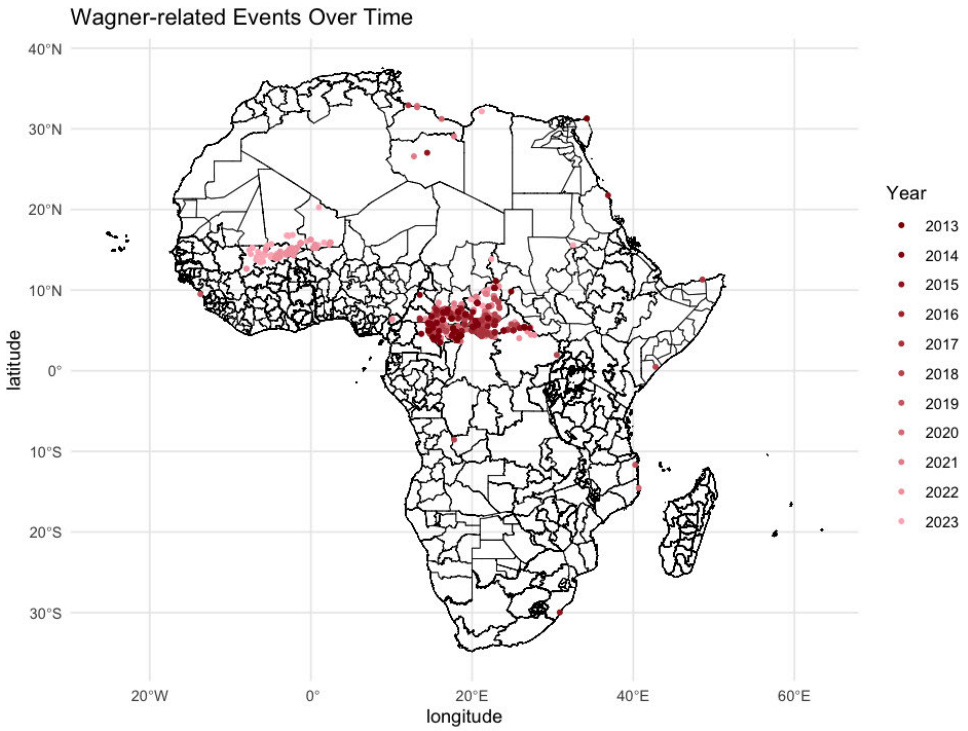

Figure 1: ACLED events involving Wagner actors over time

ner involvement systematically alters donor behavior, by reducing or increasing engagement, or by shifting the type of aid within recipient regions.

Building on this, we then narrow our focus to explore whether donor behavior changed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the subsequent intensification of geopolitical tensions. In the original GODAD dataset, only two donors are present with data after 2022, the World Bank and the Agence Française de Développement (AFD). For the purposes of this study, we have extended the post-2022 period to also include data for Sweden.

This empirical approach requires narrowing both the thematic and geographic scope of the study. Rather than addressing Russia's overall impact on African development, we examine a more targeted question: how Western donors respond to Wagner-linked conflict incidents, and what this implies for affected communities. Since Wagner's presence is limited to specific areas, the analysis trades broad generalizability for stronger causal identification.

A key concern is reverse causality: Russian actors like Wagner may intentionally enter regions where Western donors are already reducing their engagement due to factors such as coups, political instability, or logistical constraints. In such cases, what might appear to be a donor response to Russian presence could instead reflect pre-existing patterns of disengagement. This dynamic risks biasing estimates of the "Russian effect" on aid allocation.

To identify the causal impact of Wagner or Russian involvement, we estimate an event study using the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) estimator for staggered treatment timing. This method is specifically designed for settings when different units receive treatment at different points in time. It compares outcomes for treated units (in this case, ADM2-level areas) before and after their first exposure to Wagner or Russian actors in local conflicts, relative to units that are never exposed. Importantly, the method restricts comparisons to units that experience similar conflict dynamics (as captured by ACLED) but without Russian involvement, and it allows the estimated treatment effects to vary across groups and over time.

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

$$ATT_{g,t} = E\left[Y_t(1) - Y_t(0) \mid G = g, t \geq g\right] \tag{1}$$

which is the average causal effect at time t for the group of units first treated in period g. The estimator compares the change in outcomes over time for units treated in period g to the change in outcomes for an appropriate control group, in this case never-treated units. It then aggregates these group-time specific effects using convex, interpretable weights. 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.

While the event study framework provides causally identified estimates of how donor behavior changes 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.

This model incorporates both conflict intensity and a measure of Russian involvement, as well as their interaction, to examine how the presence of Russian actors shapes donor reactions to conflict. Although the fixed-effects approach does not yield causal estimates in the same way as the event study design, it offers valuable correlational insights and allows us to test mechanisms and heterogeneities that cannot be captured in the dynamic framework. In this sense, it serves as a complementary tool to explore the broader patterns of donor behavior in response to Russian presence.

We estimate the following set of equations:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ijt} = \beta_1 Total_{ijt-1} + \beta_2 Ratio + \beta_3 Total_{ijt-1} \times Ratio \\ + \mathbf{X}\theta + \gamma_i + \delta_j + \tau_t + \epsilon_{ijt} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where the dependent variable is either the number of projects or the commitments/disbursements in million USD, by any specific donor or group 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 $\mathbf{X}$ includes the commitments for each project (in the equation for disbursements). For the fixed effects structure, we begin by including fixed effects at the country and subnational (ADM1) levels, along with year fixed effects. This specification compares small geographic units (ADM2 level) affected by ACLED events vs not, controlling for broader spatial and temporal heterogeneity. We then add also ADM2 fixed effects, which captures temporal variation within small geographic units, allowing us to isolate within-region changes over time. We estimate log-linear models to capture percentage changes in aid levels, normalize for skewed distributions, and enable meaningful comparisons across donors with different presence and budget scales. This approach also improves model fit by stabilizing variance and accounting for the proportional nature of financial responses.[3]

[3]For the number of projects, a count model is more appropriate in principle. As a robustness check, we estimate Fixed Effects Poisson models using Pseudo Maximum Likelihood (PPML), which is well-suited for count data and allows for high-dimensional fixed effects. However, Poisson models with fixed effects drop units with no variation in the dependent variable, which can lead to substantial sample reduction—especially in the presence of many zeros, as is common in project-level outcomes. This issue is particularly pronounced when including a full set of fixed effects at the country, subnational (ADM1), and local (ADM2) levels. In contrast, when estimating the model with only ADM1 fixed effects, the number of dropped units is considerably smaller, and the Poisson estimates are more closely aligned with those from the log-linear specification.

4 Results

4.1 Event study - How do Western donors react to the first involvement of Russian actors in local conflicts?

Starting with the Callaway and Sant'Anna (2021) event-time estimates, we present results for: (i) Western donors in aggregate, comprising the 18 European bilateral donors plus the United States; and (ii) the World Bank (WB). The dependent variable is the number of projects implemented in a ADM2-level region.

Table 1: Summary Statistics of Outcome and Treatment Groups

Statistic	Value
Number of Regions	2398
Treated Regions	45
Never-Treated Regions	2353
First Treatment Year	2013
Last Treatment Year	2023
Mean of Western Projects	1.93
SD of Western Projects	7.05
Mean of WB Projects	0.68
SD of WB Projects	2.61

Table 2: Number of Treated Regions by Treatment Year

Treatment Year	Number of Regions
2013	5
2014	11
2015	6
2017	5
2019	3
2020	1
2021	2
2022	9
2023	3

Table 3: Number of Treated and Control Units by Event Time

Event Time	Treated Units	Control Units
-10	0	0
-9	2	748
-8	6	748
-7	6	911
-6	8	907
-5	8	996
-4	9	1129
-3	9	1182
-2	9	1435
-1	9	1456
0	9	1427
1	9	1303
2	5	911
3	5	907
4	4	996
5	4	1129
6	9	1435
7	5	1435
8	5	1456
9	5	1427
10	4	1303

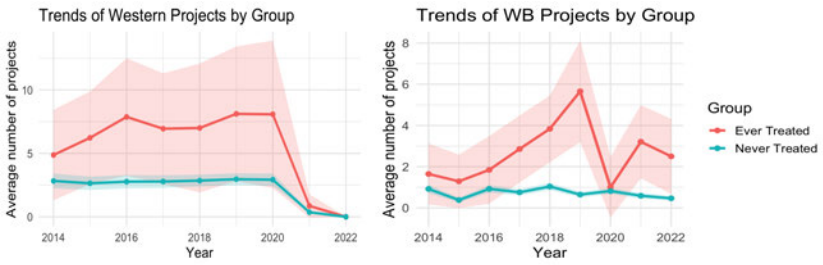

Figure 2: Impact of Wagner involvement on project number

Table 4: Average Short-run Treatment Effect

	ATT	Std. Error	CI Lower	CI Upper	p-value
Western Pr	-2.648	1.519	-5.626	0.33	0.081
WB Pr	1.856	1.536	-1.155	4.867	0.227

The results, shown in Table 4 and Figures 3 and 4, indicate that the number of aid projects allocated by Western donors tends to decline in regions where Wagner or other Russian actors become involved in local conflicts. In contrast, the World Bank appears to respond in the opposite direction, with a slight increase in project allocations.

The plots also display dynamic treatment effects over time, allowing for a visual assessment of pre-treatment trends. To formally evaluate the parallel trends assumption, we report the p-value from a precision-weighted test of whether average pre-treatment effects differ from zero. In both cases, the test fails to reject the null hypothesis of parallel pre-trends, providing support for the validity of the identification strategy.

The aggregate number of projects is however the only outcome for which we identify a significant reaction to Wagner involvement. No statistically significant effects are found when examining aid commitments or disbursements. Furthermore, 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.

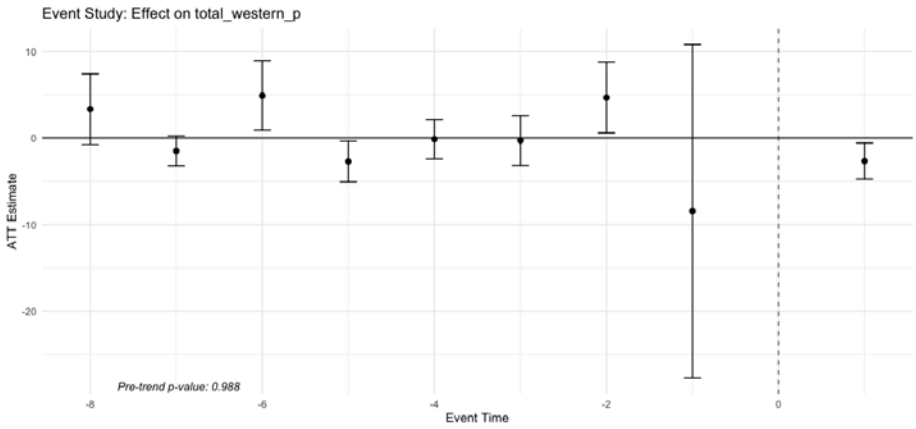

Figure 3: Impact of Wagner involvement on project number, Western donors

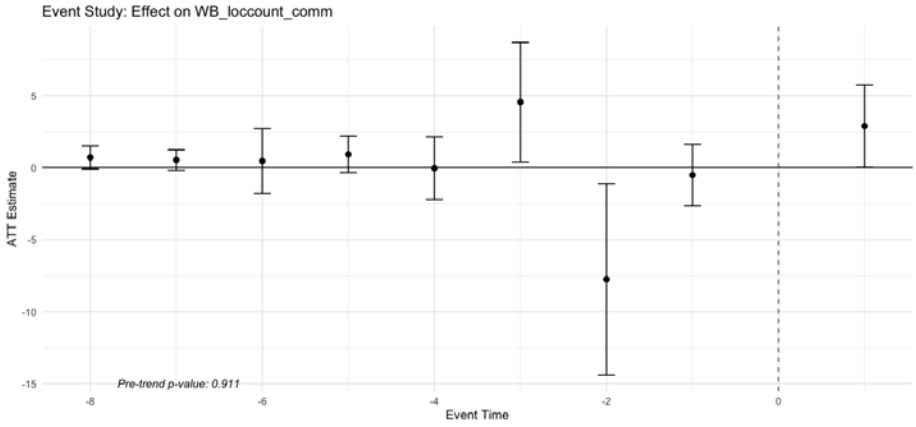

Figure 4: Impact of Wagner involvement on project number, WB

4.2 Panel framework - Aid allocation patterns

Moving to the panel framework, we estimate equation 2 where the dependent variable is either the number of projects or the commitments/disbursements in million USD,[4] by any specific donor or group of donors, allocated to each region. We begin by examining the aggregate effects. Table 5 reports estimates from equation 2 for the total number of projects (Columns 1–2), commit-

[4]It must be kept in mind that location-specific amounts are estimated by dividing total amounts 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 disbursements need to be interpreted with care.

Table 5: Aid flows from Western bilateral donors (log)

	Projects		Commitments		Disbursements	
	Between	Within	Between	Within	Between	Within
Total Events	0.027***	−0.056***	0.129***	−0.289***	0.118***	−0.292***
	(0.004)	(0.005)	(0.027)	(0.034)	(0.027)	(0.034)
Wagner Share	0.168	0.125	−1.076	−0.541	−0.787	−0.415
	(0.151)	(0.132)	(1.045)	(1.005)	(1.047)	(0.980)
Total x Wagner	−0.035	0.071	0.173	0.235	0.301	0.198
	(0.065)	(0.063)	(0.451)	(0.479)	(0.452)	(0.468)
Num.Obs.	10 738	10 738	10 738	10 738	10 738	10 738
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

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001
Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

ments (Columns 3–4), and disbursements (Columns 5–6) by all bilateral Western donors. When comparing between ADM2 areas within the same ADM1 region (Columns 1, 3, and 5), the results show that donors tend to allocate more projects, commit more, and disburse even more funds in areas experiencing a higher number of ACLED events, as indicated by the positive and significant coefficients on *Total Events*. This pattern likely reflects a conflict-responsive allocation strategy, possibly aimed at humanitarian relief, stabilization, or visibility. Columns 2, 4, and 6 shift the focus to within-area comparisons over time by including ADM2 fixed effects. The coefficients on *Total Events* turn negative, indicating that as conflict level intensifies within a given ADM2 area over time, donors tend to scale down their presence: we observe fewer projects, smaller commitments, and reduced disbursements given commitments. This may reflect operational challenges, risk aversion, or temporary withdrawal in response to insecurity.

There is no significant difference in how donors respond to Wagner-linked versus other conflicts, as suggested by the non-significant *Total x Wagner* interaction. This suggests that while donors initially retreat following Wagner's first involvement in a region, as captured by the event study, their behavior over the longer term, when considering all periods of Wagner presence, does not differ significantly from their response to other conflict-affected areas.

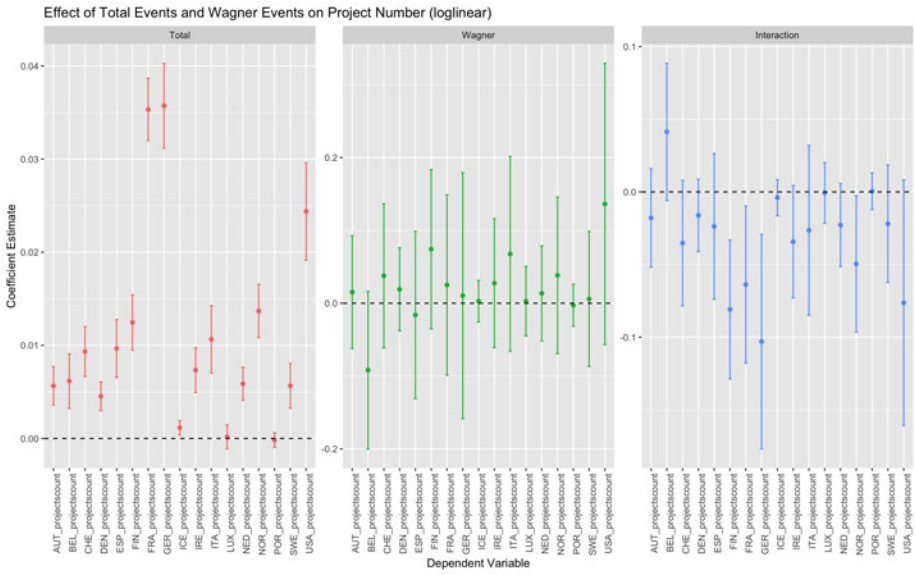

Figure 5: Impact of ACLED Events on Number of Projects, between

4.3 Donor heterogeneity

While the aggregate patterns shown in Table 5 provide a useful overview, they mask substantial variation across individual donors.

Figures 5 and 6 disaggregate the project allocation response by donor, revealing some heterogeneity. Most donors tend to allocate more projects to areas experiencing a higher number of ACLED events, consistent with the aggregate results, although the intensity of the response varies. However, this pattern weakens or even reverses when focusing on Wagner-related violence. The *Interaction* coefficients in Figure 5 indicate that most donors implement a lower number of projects in Wagner-affected areas relative to other parts of the same ADM1 region. The difference is large for most, however statistically significant only in a few cases.

Figure 6 examines changes over time within the same area, i.e., how donors respond to an increase in the number of events, by adding ADM2 fixed effects. Here the pattern becomes more mixed. Some donors increase their project presence in response to more events, while others reduce it. The differential response to Wagner events is, in this case, statistically significant only for Belgium, while most donors do not react in a significantly different way to Wagner escalation.

Commitments and disbursements, reported in the Appendix Figures 11 to 14, react generally less than project number, indicating a strategy of maintaining resource levels (or even increasing them in few cases) while scaling back activities or locations, possibly consolidating efforts in fewer, relatively safer locations or more relevant type of activities. Keeping in mind the caveat about how

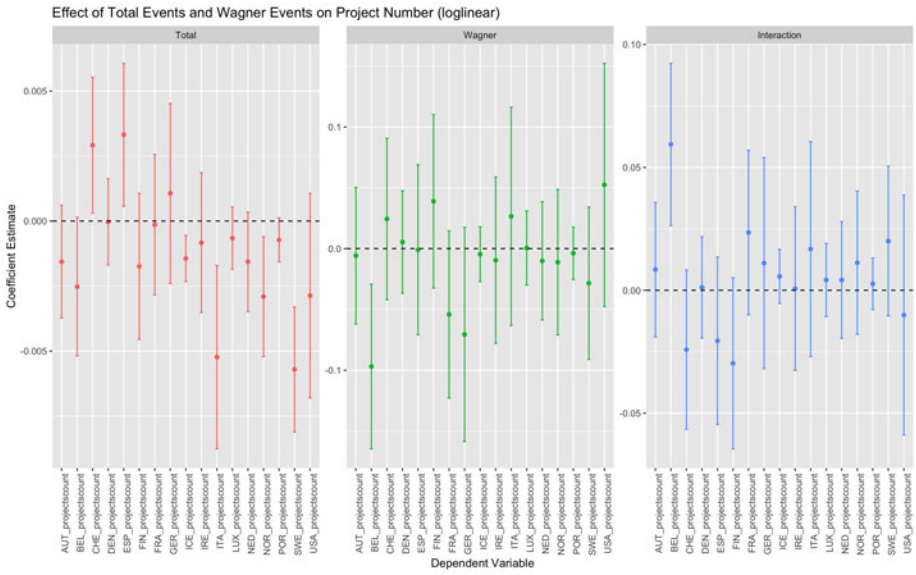

Figure 6: Impact of ACLED Events on Number of Projects, within

amounts per location are calculated, we see both overlaps and divergences in how donors adjust commitments, disbursements and project counts in response to conflict and Wagner-linked violence. Some donors show positive coefficients in both amounts and counts, suggesting parallel increases in the number and size of interventions. Conversely, others react asymmetrically across the two. This may reflect a shift in strategy: rather than exiting, these donors could be reducing financial intensity while increasing the number of projects, potentially opting for smaller-scale or more diffuse engagements in conflict-affected regions. Looking at differences across regions or at changes over time within the same area, i.e., how donors respond to an increase in the number of events, doesn't change the picture substantially.

The World Bank exhibits a distinct pattern in its response to conflict.

Table 6 shows that, 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 Wagner-linked conflicts. Although Wagner activity 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

Table 6: Aid flows from the World Bank (log)

	Projects		Commitments		Disbursements	
	Between	Within	Between	Within	Between	Within
Total Events	0.020***	0.006*	0.019	−0.134***	0.121***	0.056+
	(0.003)	(0.003)	(0.027)	(0.039)	(0.032)	(0.030)
Wagner Share	0.385**	0.394***	−0.221	−0.043	3.689**	3.138***
	(0.132)	(0.079)	(1.050)	(1.130)	(1.217)	(0.861)
Total × Wagner	0.186**	0.139***	−0.144	−0.272	1.237*	1.112**
	(0.057)	(0.037)	(0.453)	(0.539)	(0.525)	(0.411)
Num. Obs.	10 738	10 738	10 738	10 738	10 591	10 591
R^2	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

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001
Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

the ground, possibly reflecting efforts to promote stability, reinforce local governance, or counterbalance Russian influence through concrete results rather than expanded programming.

As we saw in the previous section, bilateral donors all have different strategies. Most donors tend to implement more projects in areas with conflicts than without, but relatively fewer in areas with Wagner 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 Wagner. Why do bilateral and multilateral donors behave differently? 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 Wagner 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 Wagner-affected areas appears more consistent and delivery-focused, while bilateral patterns are more heterogeneous and potentially more politically responsive.

5 Response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine

For a few donors, GODAD provides data extending to 2023, enabling us to examine whether their behavior 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 Wagner 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.

We add a triple-difference (DDD) to equation 2, estimating regressions of the form:

$$\begin{aligned} Y_{ijt} = \beta_1 Total_{ijt-1} \times Ratio + \beta_2 Total_{ijt-1} \times Ratio \times (Year >= 2022) \\ + \mathbf{X}\theta + \gamma_i + \delta_j + \tau_t + \epsilon_{ijt} \end{aligned} \tag{3}$$

where the dependent variable is either the number of projects or the commitments (and when possible disbursements) in million USD, allocated to region j of country i in year t. As before, the variable $Total$ measures the number of total ACLED events reported in the same region, lagged one year, and $Ratio$ is the ratio of events involving Russia- or Wagner-related actors in the total. The vector of controls $\mathbf{X}$ includes all the lower order interactions and main effects, as well as the commitments for each project (in the equation for disbursements).

5.1 The World Bank

Table 7 examines World Bank flows, comparing within ADM2 over time. The triple-difference estimate indicates that the large increase in project count in regions experiencing ACLED events involving Wagner-affiliated actors is concentrated in the post-2022 period, suggesting a relative increase in project activity in Wagner-affected areas after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Commitments display a similar pattern, with a large relative increase to Wagner-affected regions after 2022. Disbursements, on the other hand, while also more responsive to Wagner-linked conflicts than to other conflicts (with a 13% higher increase), show a negative, albeit statistically insignificant, triple-difference term, suggesting no change after 2022.

We can further disaggregate this effect by type of event and aid flow sector,

Table 7: Aid flows from the World Bank, before and after 2022

	Projects	Commitments	Disbursements
	Within	Within	Within
Total Events	−0.011+	−0.080	0.030
	(0.006)	(0.049)	(0.037)
Wagner Share	0.200	1.297	0.705
	(0.160)	(1.424)	(1.085)
Total x Wagner	−0.134	−1.175	1.255*
	(0.083)	(0.735)	(0.560)
Total x Post	−0.013*	−0.080	0.045
	(0.006)	(0.049)	(0.038)
Wagner x Post	−0.411*	−2.781	4.758***
	(0.196)	(1.738)	(1.323)
Triple Interaction	0.253**	1.605*	−0.676
	(0.092)	(0.816)	(0.622)
Num.Obs.	10 738	10 738	10 591
R2	0.466	0.391	0.819
FE: gid_0	40	40	40
FE: gid_1	445	445	445
FE: gid_2	2350	2350	2344
FE: year	10	10	10

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001
Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

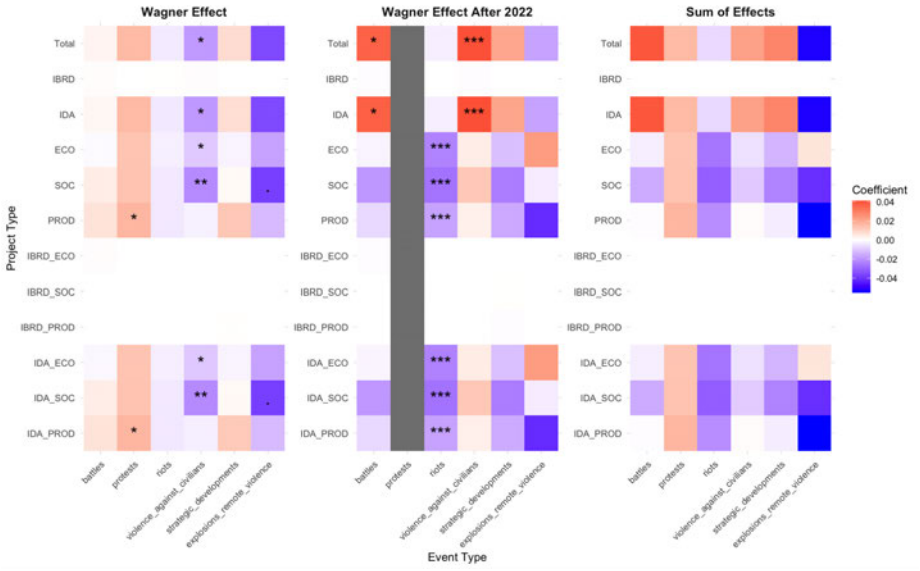

Figure 7: Impact of ACLED Events on WB projects (Triple-Difference Model)

to gain more insight into how this reshuffling of funds and projects looked like.[5] Figures 7 and 8 summarize this analysis.

The left-most panel of Figure 7 displays the β_1 coefficients from regressions corresponding to each pair of event and disbursement type, showing that the weak decrease in presence following Wagner-related events before 2022 mostly came from projects financed through the International Development Association (IDA). The coefficients on the IBRD variables are one or two orders of magnitude smaller, and therefore they are not visible on the plot.[6] Moreover, the decrease mostly followed events involving violence against civilians, as well as explosions and remote violence, while protest events led to some mild increase.

The central panel of Figure 7 reports the coefficients for the triple interaction term β_2, capturing how this relationship changed after 2022. The results indicate a reversal for most event types, in particular for IDA financing - although only few of these coefficients are statistically significant - and an intensification of response to riots events, although sample sizes are very small in this case.

The resulting total effect is shown in the right-most panel. Explosions and remote violence emerge as the most damaging event type for production-sector

[5]Summary statistics on the occurrence of different event category and aid flows disaggregated by type are reported in the Appendix.

[6]The International Development Association (IDA) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) are both part of the World Bank Group, but they serve different countries and operate under different financing models. ECO stands for "Economic Infrastructure and Services", SOC for "Social Infrastructure and Services", and PROD for "Production Sectors". Any reaction of financing going through the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) cannot be estimated.

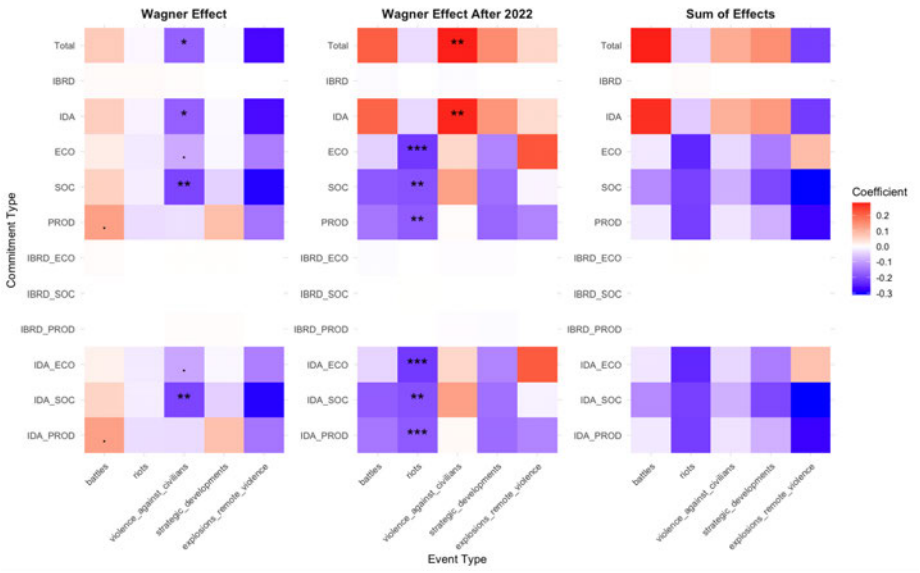

Figure 8: Impact of ACLED Events on WB commitments (Triple-Difference Model)

aid, which sees the largest reductions. In contrast, project presence in reaction to violence against civilians continues to rise in response to Wagner conflict, indicating more sustained engagement despite increased insecurity.

Figure 8 presents the estimated effects on commitments. While the reaction to protests cannot be estimated in this case - the triple interaction was already missing in the project case - the broad pattern is the same.

5.2 AFD projects

Tables 16 and 17 in the Appendix report average ODA flows from the AFD, the Agence Française de Développement. Both number of projects and commitments are increasing since 2014 and then decreasing after a peak around 2019-2020.

By and large, connecting the patterns in project allocation with ACLED events points to a different strategy than for the WB aid.[7] Table 8 reveals a significantly negative reaction to Wagner events before 2022, while, after 2022, the triple-difference estimate indicates a differential increase of 8% in commitments to areas affected by Wagner events. The patterns in project counts are more muted. In aggregate, the Wagner interaction is negative but very small, and the

[7]Formally, the AFD operates through structured frameworks for project and fund allocation, in a similar way to the WB. However, AFD places a stronger emphasis on decentralized decision-making, particularly through its support for local authorities and partnerships. See for example the creation of the FICOL in 2014.

Table 8: AFD Projects and Commitments (log)

	Projects	Commitments
Total Events	0.000	−0.002
	(0.001)	(0.013)
Wagner Share	0.055+	0.671+
	(0.029)	(0.373)
Total x Wagner	−0.037*	−0.641***
	(0.015)	(0.193)
Total x Post	−0.001	−0.013
	(0.001)	(0.013)
Wagner x Post	−0.035	−0.936*
	(0.036)	(0.455)
Triple Interaction	0.009	0.803***
	(0.017)	(0.214)
Num.Obs.	10 738	10 738
R2	0.536	0.513
FE: gid_0	40	40
FE: gid_1	445	445
FE: gid_2	2350	2350
FE: year	10	10

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001
Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

triple-difference is not statistically significant. This indicates that donors may have responded to Wagner involvement, particularly after 2022, primarily by scaling up the financial volume of aid, rather than by increasing the number of projects,suggesting a strategy of reinforcing existing interventions rather than expanding project presence.

Disaggregating by flow and event type, though, we see in Figure 9 that some categories of projects, categorized as social infrastructure, see nevertheless significant increases after 2022 particularly in connection with explosions and remote violence, and to some extent battles and events involving civilians. Strategic developments are conversely met by a stark reduction of presence.

These patterns are very similar for commitments, albeit with larger positive magnitudes.

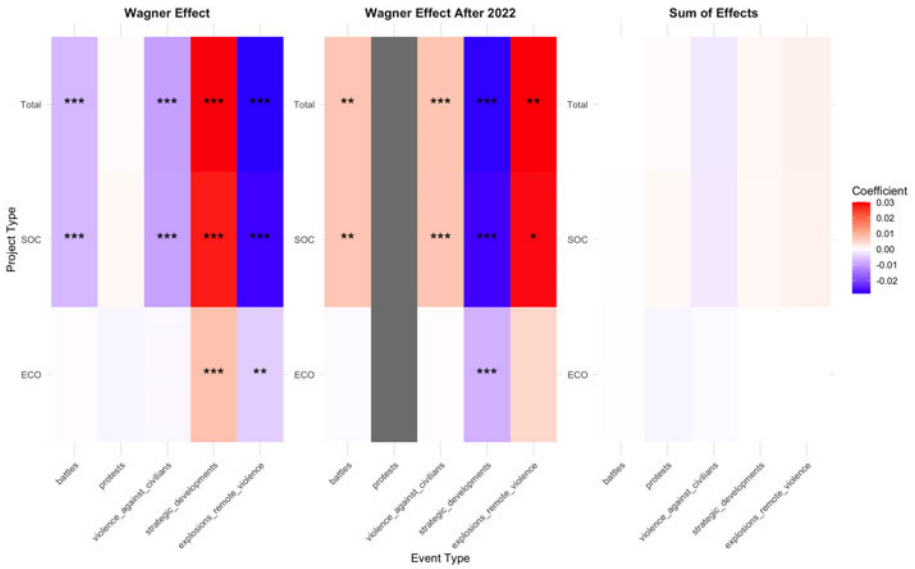

Figure 9: Impact of ACLED Events on AFD projects (Triple-Difference Model, Admin 1 level)

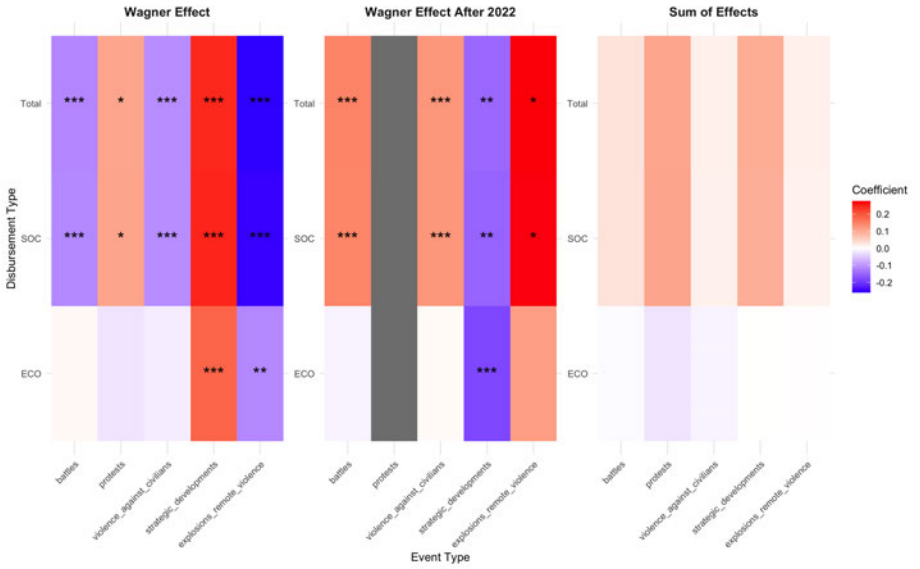

Figure 10: Impact of ACLED Events on AFD disbursements (Triple-Difference Model, Admin 1 level)

5.3 Swedish aid

Sweden's aid response to conflict in general, while modest in magnitude, strengthened after 2022, both in terms of project number and disbursements. No differential reaction to Wagner involvement is however visible.

Table 9: Swedish Projects and Disbursements (log)

	Projects	Commitments	Disbursements
	Within	Within	Within
Total Events	−0.008***	0.015	−0.009
	(0.002)	(0.020)	(0.022)
Wagner Share	−0.045	−0.106	−0.301
	(0.056)	(0.571)	(0.646)
Total x Wagner	0.033	−0.088	0.094
	(0.029)	(0.295)	(0.334)
Total x Post	0.017***	0.027	0.120***
	(0.002)	(0.020)	(0.022)
Wagner x Post	0.009	0.161	−0.118
	(0.069)	(0.697)	(0.789)
Triple Interaction	−0.051	−0.039	−0.190
	(0.032)	(0.328)	(0.370)
Num.Obs.	10 738	10 738	10 738
R2	0.731	0.429	0.659
FE: gid_0	40	40	40
FE: gid_1	445	445	445
FE: gid_2	2350	2350	2350
FE: year	10	10	10

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001
Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

6 Conclusion

This study provides an initial exploration of how the growing presence of Russian actors, particularly the Wagner Group, is reshaping the landscape of Western development aid in Africa. Using geocoded aid data and conflict event data from ACLED, we examined whether Western donors adjust their aid allocations and project strategies in response to Russian influence.

Our findings reveal several important patterns. First, the result from an event study focusing on the first involvement of Wagner actors in a region led to a significant decline in Western donors' agregate project numbers, suggesting that heightened Russian military presence and geopolitical competition may deter or complicate Western development efforts.

Second, the results from the difference-in-differences (DiD) and triple difference (DDD) analyses suggest that differently from bilateral Western donors, the World Bank responded to Wagner-related events by increasing the number of projects and disbursements in Wagner-affected regions before 2022. This pattern likely reflects a reactive strategy aimed at maintaining influence and stabilizing conflict-prone areas. This dynamic intensified after 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, however in terms of number of projects and total commitments.

In contrast, aid flows from the Agence Française de Développement (AFD) show a more ambiguous pattern. While AFD commitments and project numbers peaked around 2019–2020, a sharp decline followed thereafter. Unlike the World Bank, the AFD's response to Russian involvement was negative before 2022, possibly due to France's direct political disengagement from Burkina Faso and broader shifts in its foreign policy in West Africa, but reversed after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Overall, these findings suggest that Russia's expanding presence in Africa — through both military and economic channels — has tangible effects on Western development efforts, influencing both the scale and geographic distribution of aid. This provides further evidence for the well-established notion that development aid, though ideally aimed at poverty reduction and stabilization, is frequently influenced by global geopolitical competition. Future research should deepen the analysis by incorporating public perception surveys and further disaggregating the effects by sector, type of conflict, and donor response strategies. Additionally, deeper case studies in countries with significant Russian influence—such as Burkina Faso, Mali, Libya, and the Central African Republic—could help clarify whether the patterns observed represent broader trends across the continent.

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7 Appendix

7.1 Summary statistics of ACLED events and aid projects

Table 10: Mean ± SD of Event Counts (All Years, All Regions)

event_label	Non-Wagner	Wagner
Battles	2.19 ± 11.892	0.027 ± 0.431
Explosions / Remote Violence	0.713 ± 6.29	0.004 ± 0.105
Protests	2.526 ± 9.211	0 ± 0.009
Riots	1.121 ± 3.877	0 ± 0.019
Strategic Developments	0.753 ± 3.678	0.015 ± 0.257
Violence Against Civilians	2.231 ± 8.019	0.03 ± 0.453

Table 11: Event Composition (Shares) and Mean Fatalities per Event by Actor

Event Type	Non-Wagner	Wagner
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

Table 12: Mean ± SD of WB Flows (All ADM2 Regions, All Years)

Sector	Projects	Disbursements (mil.)	Commitments (mil.)
IDA	0.64 ± 2.57	1.97 ± 18.83	2.29 ± 26.17
IDA Economy	0.12 ± 0.84	0.83 ± 14.56	0.84 ± 16.74
IDA Social	0.29 ± 1.37	1.37 ± 17.37	1.42 ± 23.53
IDA Productive	0.10 ± 0.73	0.62 ± 13.70	0.61 ± 15.91
IBRD	0.05 ± 0.60	0.32 ± 7.88	0.31 ± 7.94
IBRD Economy	0.02 ± 0.24	0.16 ± 3.24	0.07 ± 1.99
IBRD Social	0.01 ± 0.24	0.09 ± 3.28	0.11 ± 3.45
IBRD Productive	0.01 ± 0.18	0.03 ± 1.85	0.05 ± 1.91
Economy	0.14 ± 0.87	0.99 ± 14.91	1.06 ± 19.23
Social	0.30 ± 1.38	1.46 ± 17.69	2.00 ± 39.30
Productive	0.11 ± 0.75	0.65 ± 13.83	0.86 ± 28.23

Table 13: WB Projets by Year and ADM2 region

year	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Proportion_Zero
2014	0.5135048	0	1.9571858	0	36	0.8824195
2015	0.2582889	0	1.3778598	0	37	0.9398350
2016	0.5065502	0	1.9796557	0	27	0.9050623
2017	0.4565745	0	1.8224351	0	33	0.8977842
2018	0.7161572	0	2.4300254	0	47	0.8628497
2019	0.4947437	0	2.2735727	0	59	0.9154132
2020	0.5570112	0	2.4333116	0	72	0.9021511
2021	0.4711305	0	2.2885010	0	54	0.9264111
2022	0.3213650	0	1.9498919	0	31	0.9526120
2023	0.0045285	0	0.3202113	0	25	0.9996765

Table 14: WB Commitments by Year and ADM2 region

year	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Proportion_Zero
2014	3106766.07	0	45296923	0	2120000000	0.8824195
2015	1976725.57	0	41264350	0	2823742303	0.9398350
2016	1010717.47	0	11143555	0	490752987	0.9050623
2017	2295888.09	0	24922605	0	1165257546	0.8977842
2018	2292708.00	0	36743511	0	2330817904	0.8628497
2019	2188562.78	0	32711751	0	2088676121	0.9154132
2020	3416559.77	0	54194927	0	3553191885	0.9021511
2021	3191538.13	0	42073887	0	2274652177	0.9264111
2022	1987286.05	0	19114444	0	694705016	0.9526120
2023	73889.08	0	4445905	0	322950069	0.9996765

Table 15: WB Disbursements by Year and ADM2 region

year	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Proportion_Zero
2014	1053596	0	7920049	-725156.11	304178231	0.6713569
2015	1085087	0	9169398	-19847737.44	448161827	0.6632703
2016	1202950	0	16704917	-1653180.26	1179478803	0.6634320
2017	1293014	0	11229548	-1332009.31	562905293	0.6584182
2018	1341804	0	20953256	-1031240.02	1480036794	0.6482290
2019	1966157	0	27598250	-1566165.64	1186953535	0.6430535
2020	1866224	0	20174233	-1165019.22	977988300	0.6606825
2021	1837339	0	22770303	-513733.18	1145363124	0.6621381
2022	2073985	0	23859342	-2158178.83	1074184119	0.6606825
2023	818106	0	7720490	-76565.78	415639142	0.6941614

Table 16: Average AFD Projects by Year and ADM2

year	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Proportion_Zero
2014	0.0001617	0	0.0127175	0	1	0.9998383
2015	0.0006469	0	0.0254287	0	1	0.9993531
2016	0.0008087	0	0.0284279	0	1	0.9991913
2017	0.0035581	0	0.0880444	0	4	0.9978975
2018	0.0150412	0	0.2599060	0	10	0.9935306
2019	0.0218341	0	0.3561296	0	11	0.9933689
2020	0.0224810	0	0.3806793	0	14	0.9927220
2021	0.0174672	0	0.3042122	0	12	0.9933689
2022	0.0134239	0	0.2231672	0	7	0.9943393
2023	0.0071163	0	0.1319827	0	4	0.9961184

Table 17: Average AFD Commitments by Year and ADM2

year	Mean	Median	SD	Min	Max	Proportion_Zero
2014	2437.975	0	191703.0	0	15074000	0.9998383
2015	10061.768	0	683358.2	0	53309262	0.9993531
2016	44252.684	0	2011533.0	0	128056634	0.9991913
2017	130773.826	0	3785013.1	0	154266595	0.9978975
2018	311388.897	0	7592801.0	0	370993344	0.9936914
2019	451359.758	0	9524004.4	0	432294197	0.9933689
2020	287895.470	0	6700963.6	0	356933025	0.9928826
2021	242248.415	0	5167416.7	0	268762446	0.9933689
2022	229257.395	0	5845173.1	0	282694051	0.9943393
2023	46099.401	0	1320291.8	0	78733841	0.9961184

7.2 Impact of ACLED events on commitments and disbursements by donor

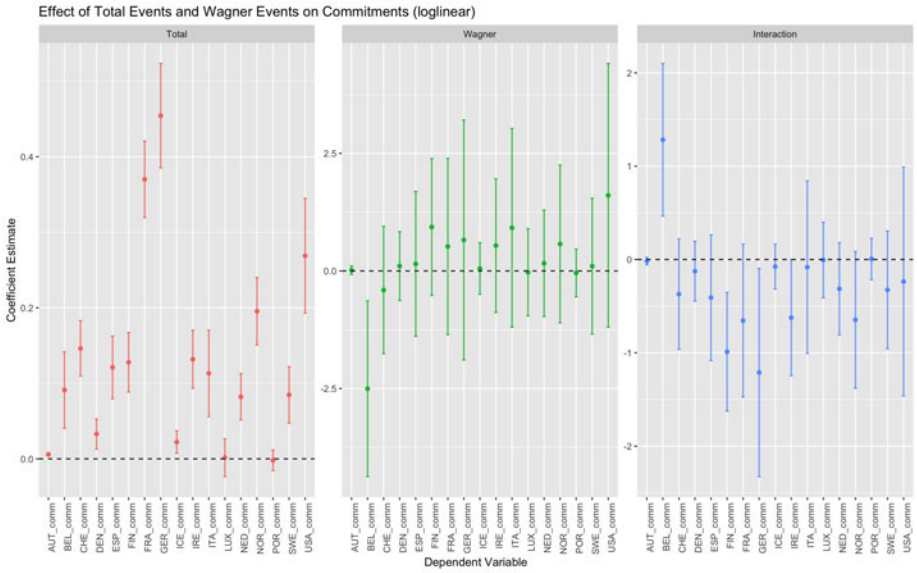

Figure 11: Impact of ACLED Events on Commitments, between

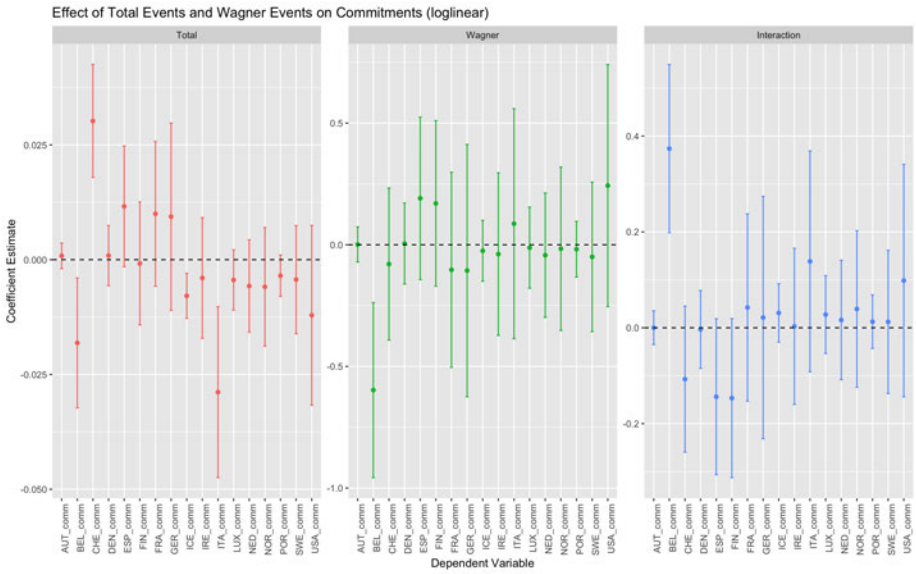

Figure 12: Impact of ACLED Events on Commitments, within

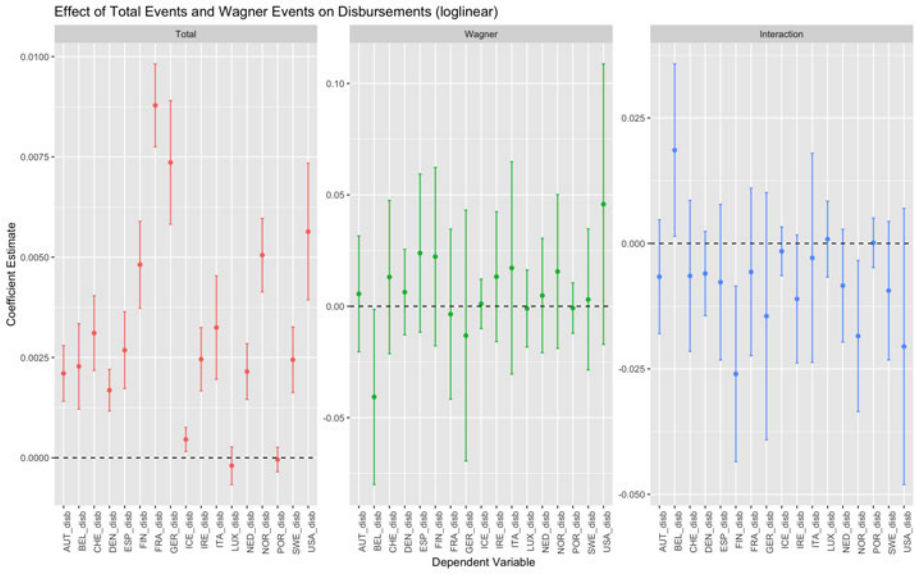

Figure 13: Impact of ACLED Events on Disbursements, between

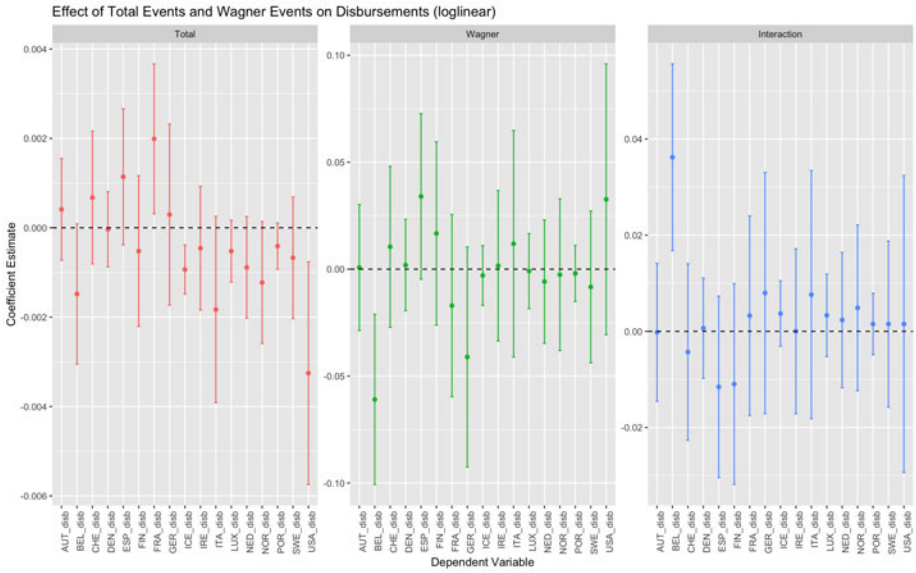

Figure 14: Impact of ACLED Events on Disbursements, within

7.3 Robustness - Poisson models for Projects

Aggregate Impacts on Project Number (Poisson)

	Western Donors		World Bank	
	Between	Within	Between	Within
Total Events	0.098***	−0.012*	0.067*	0.006
	(0.024)	(0.005)	(0.031)	(0.038)
Wagner Share	0.766***	0.256	0.429*	0.204
	(0.128)	(0.168)	(0.218)	(0.393)
Total x Wagner	−0.558***	0.057*	−0.394**	−0.234
	(0.147)	(0.028)	(0.145)	(0.161)
Num.Obs.	7236	4384	5691	2662
FE: gid_0	39	39	32	31
FE: gid_1	345	340	243	243
FE: year	8	8	8	8
FE: gid_2		572		265

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001
Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.

Triple-interaction models for Project Number (Poisson)

	AFD		World Bank	
	Between	Within	Between	Within
Total Events	0.200	−0.092	0.071*	0.000
	(0.163)	(0.060)	(0.029)	(0.036)
Wagner Share	5.233	−2.881	0.333	0.210
	(5.612)	(3.716)	(0.326)	(0.505)
Total x Wagner	−0.461	0.666+	−0.397**	−0.213
	(0.740)	(0.372)	(0.128)	(0.151)
Total x Post	−0.076	−0.011	−0.015	0.005
	(0.110)	(0.088)	(0.042)	(0.057)
Wagner x Post	−95.763***	−102.299***	−0.128	0.005
	(2.554)	(2.853)	(0.440)	(0.499)
Triple Interaction	8.399***	8.740***	0.619***	0.457**
	(0.573)	(0.375)	(0.130)	(0.166)
Num.Obs.	663	206	7937	3666
FE: gid_0	20	20	33	33
FE: gid_1	6	6	260	260
FE: year	9	9	10	10
FE: gid_2		3		282

+ p <0.1, * p <0.05, ** p <0.01, *** p <0.001
Conflict events are scaled by a factor of 10.