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Putin Gives Blessing to New Madagascar Leader

By AFP

February 19, 2026



Russian President Vladimir Putin and Madagascar's President Michael Randrianirina shake hands during their meeting at the Kremlin in Moscow. **Alexander Zemlianichenko / Pool / AFP**

Russian President Vladimir Putin gave his blessing to Madagascar's new leader in a Kremlin meeting Thursday, as Russia seeks to expand its influence in Africa.

Colonel Michael Randrianirina — Madagascar's interim leader since the former president fled in October following demonstrations — said he was counting on Russian support as his country goes through a "difficult period."

He traveled to Moscow on a Russian-chartered plane weeks after the Kremlin sent military equipment to the island nation.

Putin told Randrianirina that Madagascar was an "important partner" in Africa.

Moscow has sought to extend its outreach in Africa, where its Wagner mercenary forces have

been active for years and where it rivals European powers, especially France.

"I would like to note that we have many interesting areas of cooperation. These include agriculture, geological exploration, energy, medicine, healthcare and education," Putin said.

"We are ready to develop these ties in the humanitarian sphere and others," he added.

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Russia has sought to pivot to Asia and the Global South since 2022, when its full-scale invasion of Ukraine triggered punishing Western sanctions.

Randrianirina called Russia a "country whose support we hope will accompany Madagascar, which is currently going through a difficult period, both politically and economically."

"We are happy to be here," he said, adding that the visit shows the island's "will to reinforce cooperation with the Russian Federation."

He said that Madagascar is "ready to fully cooperate" in the military sphere in addition to the "social, health and education sectors."

Russian independent media has for several years reported that the Wagner Group sought to expand its presence in Madagascar.

Last month, Russian military instructors visited Madagascar to train their counterparts in military equipment supplied by Moscow, including drones.

Putin also expressed condolences to the army colonel over a recent cyclone on the island that killed at least 40 people this month.

Russia is the third country that Randrianirina has visited since coming to power, having traveled to the United Arab Emirates and South Africa before.

All of those visits came before going to Madagascar's ex-colonial ruler France, where Randrianirina is due later this month.

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