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COUNTERING FOREIGN INFORMATION MANIPULATION AND INTERFERENCE IN AFRICA

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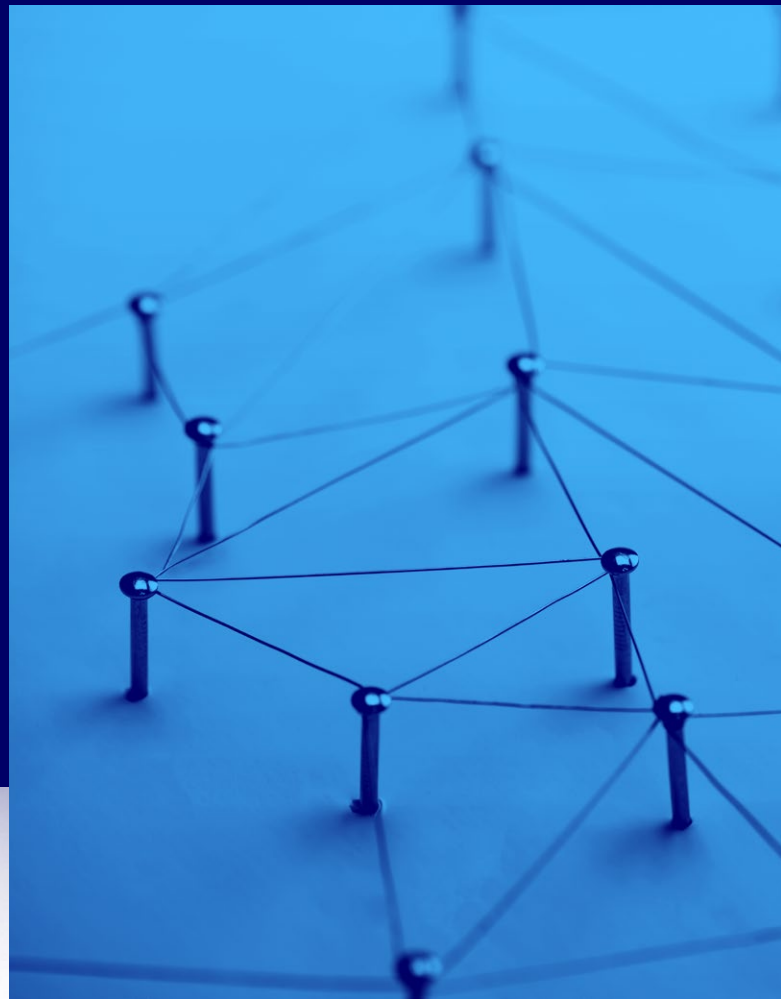
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INTRODUCTION

Disinformation campaigns, key components of so-called **hybrid threats**, play a vital role in aggression towards and the destabilization of countries. This has been highlighted by institutions across the world and by civilian and military organizations. It is therefore essential to gain an understanding of these campaigns, their tactics, methods and procedures, and the geopolitical strategies on which they are based, as this is the only way to recognize and combat them.

This paper examines these threats, which are being perpetrated by Russia and China on the African continent, identifying their motivations and means of dissemination, and distinguishing between what has been labelled *soft power* (activities related to seemingly innocuous matters such as culture, language or education) and so-called *hard power* (activities with a greater focus on the kinetic world and military operations).



THIS ANALYSIS WILL HELP US TO UNDERSTAND THE METHODS AND TOOLS THAT ARE CURRENTLY BEING USED TO PERPETRATE THE AFOREMENTIONED ATTACKS AND, THEREFORE, ENABLE A BETTER AND MORE EFFECTIVE RESPONSE.





01 RUSSIA

1.1 CURRENT SITUATION

Russia's policies and interests on the African continent have undergone several major shifts over time. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the historical ties it had once maintained with Africa began to weaken, largely owing to internal upheaval, leading to Russia's strategic withdrawal from the continent. However, following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent deterioration in relations with the West, Africa re-emerged as an area of peripheral interest for Russia.

With the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and open confrontation with the West on all fronts, Africa once again occupies an important place in global geopolitics. For the first time, the new Foreign Policy concept adopted by the Russian government in March 2023 contains a specific section on the African continent, marking a significant shift in its foreign strategy¹.

THE KREMLIN'S INTERESTS IN AFRICA ARE AIMED AT ACHIEVING FIVE KEY OBJECTIVES:



1 To undermine democracy and the rule of law, which includes weakening Western efforts to strengthen these values and the African institutions that uphold them.



2 To break Russia's diplomatic isolation by strengthening and broadening trade, political and security ties with Africa's business and political elites.



3 To create new markets and trade opportunities to mitigate Western sanctions, especially in areas where Russia already has an edge, namely: energy, mining, arms and agriculture.



4 To reassert its own relevance on the international stage, supporting the creation of a *multipolar world*, demonstrating its ability to influence political events and shape global outcomes, strengthening Moscow's position as a force to be reckoned with in international debates.



5 To advance its own geo-strategic ambitions, in particular by building up its military presence through the creation of security partnerships in various countries along the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea and even the Atlantic².



TO ACHIEVE THESE GOALS, IN AN EFFORT TO CONSOLIDATE ITS GEOPOLITICAL AND ECONOMIC INFLUENCE, THE KREMLIN HAS STEPPED UP ITS CAMPAIGNS IN AFRICA, USING DISINFORMATION TACTICS AIMED AT EXPLOITING HISTORICAL TENSIONS AND PORTRAYING THE WEST AS THE COLONIAL ENEMY, AS WELL AS PORTRAYING ITSELF AS AN ANTI-IMPERIALIST ALLY.

Thus, various media outlets, social networks and platforms such as *Afrique Média TV* are regularly used to spread narratives that promote Russia's presence while undermining the West's influence. This propaganda also seeks to justify the intervention of paramilitary groups such as *Wagner* and its successors, which, in addition to exploiting natural resources, have been propping up authoritarian regimes on the continent.

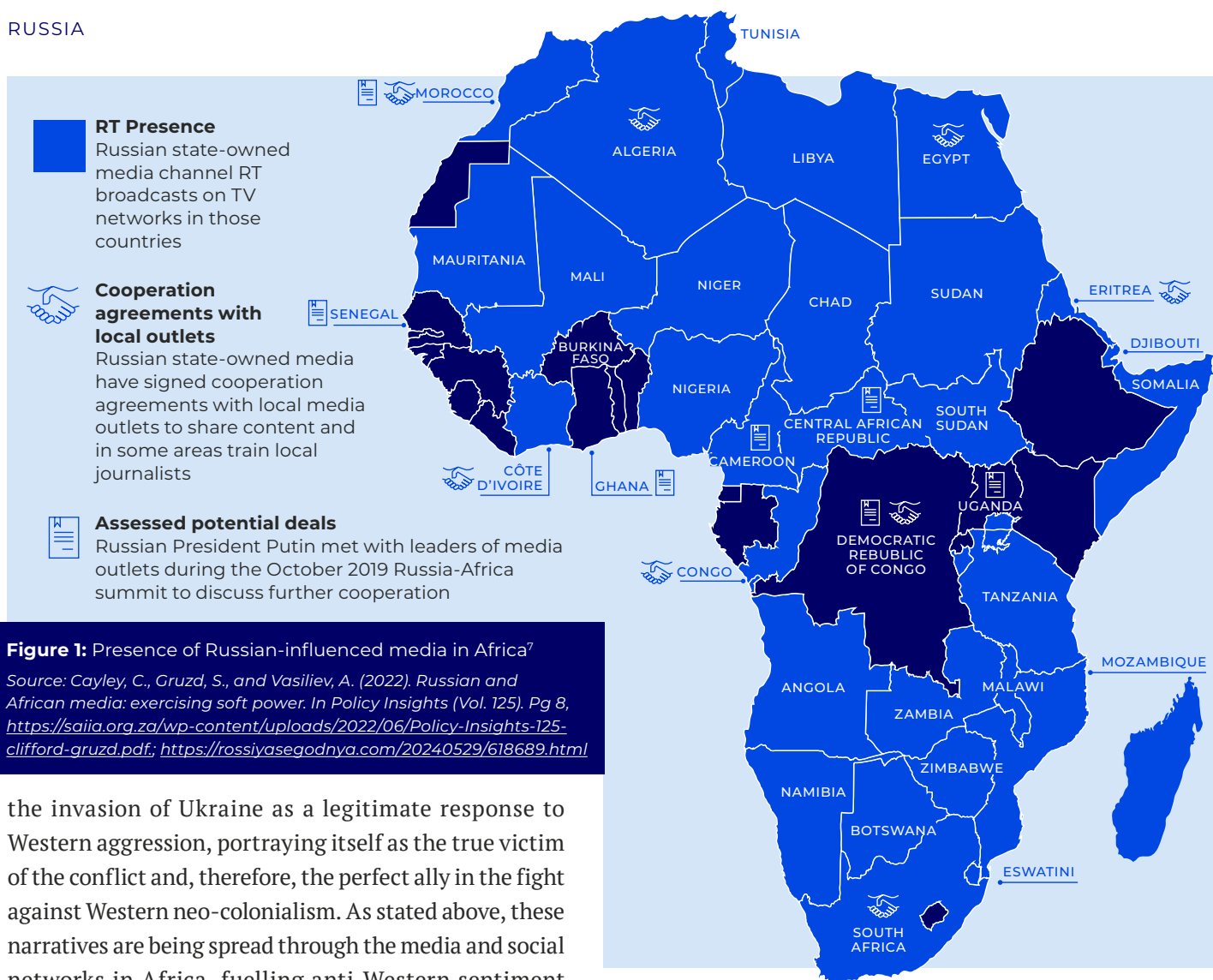
Indeed, the Kremlin has been deploying these disinformation tactics to legitimize its presence in Africa, in an attempt to portray Russia as a defender of African sovereignty vis-à-vis Western powers, while in fact it is seeking to control key resources and expand its political and military power in the region. These disinformation campaigns revolve around creating and disseminating narratives that highlight alleged historical links between Russia and Africa and portray Moscow as a reliable partner that respects African independence, in contrast to the exploitative image attributed to the West.

THESE RUSSIAN STRATEGIES NOT ONLY SEEK TO GAIN THE SYMPATHY OF AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS, BUT ALSO TO INFLUENCE PUBLIC OPINION, STOKING RESENTMENT AGAINST THE WEST AND PROMOTING THE IDEA THAT RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IS ESSENTIAL FOR STABILITY AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA.

This adept use of disinformation allows Russia to operate under the guise of providing legitimate support while pursuing its own strategic interests in key sectors such as mining, security and the domestic policies of the countries in which it engages in such campaigns³.

In July, Javier Colomina was appointed NATO Special Representative for the *Southern Neighbourhood*, a geographic area that includes regions such as the Middle East, North Africa and the Sahel⁴. Colomina underlined the importance of the *Southern Neighbourhood* for Europe's security, noting that problems in this region have a direct impact on NATO's stability, stressing the need for a coherent and sustained strategy to address threats in the Sahel. His appointment reflected NATO's commitment to increasing its presence and visibility in this critical region, working closely with local partners to address clear security challenges and promote peace and stability⁵.

Meanwhile, Russia has also been using disinformation in Africa to shape perceptions of the war in Ukraine—and other key issues—in an effort to cement its influence on the continent. Russia's strategy involves presenting



the invasion of Ukraine as a legitimate response to Western aggression, portraying itself as the true victim of the conflict and, therefore, the perfect ally in the fight against Western neo-colonialism. As stated above, these narratives are being spread through the media and social networks in Africa, fuelling anti-Western sentiment and seeking to bolster Russia's political and economic ties in the region. As already discussed, Russian disinformation in Africa is not only aimed at justifying the war in Ukraine, but also at delegitimizing Western narratives on the concepts of democracy and human rights, while presenting Russia as a reliable partner that respects African sovereignty, seeking to influence both political leaders and public opinion, using sensitive issues such as colonialism and exploitation to create a positive perception of Russia and its position on the global stage.

Moreover, the Kremlin has also been trying to dispel the negative perception that Western sanctions against Russia may have an impact on Africa, attributing any economic woes not to its own policies, but to Western interference. By manipulating these messages, Russia is not only trying to justify its actions in Ukraine, but also to extend its power and influence in Africa, where it senses that there are opportunities to increase its geopolitical and economic presence⁶.

Thus, with regard to the dissemination of disinformation campaigns, Russia has been using its own state-owned media outlets, e.g. RT and Sputnik, to sway public opinion in Africa by presenting content as an alternative to Western narratives, highlighting its long-standing policy of non-colonization and supporting like-minded African leaders. This was clearly evident at the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit, where the need to counter the negative perception of Russia in the Western media was addressed.

Despite its rhetoric, aimed at asserting its reputation as a humanitarian economic contributor, Russia provides limited aid to Africa. Additionally, Russia's support for certain African dictators has become less and less covert, using disinformation campaigns to delegitimize protests.

In any event, it seems clear that the popularity of the Russian media in Africa is mainly fuelled by the demand for alternative content and growing access to the internet, as shown in the figure above.

In terms of the methods it uses, Russia has also enlisted *influencers* from the continent to amplify its message, with local voices being used to spread pro-Russian and anti-Western propaganda. Through these *influencers* and media outlets that are funded or backed by the Kremlin, narratives are being pushed that portray Russia as a reliable ally that supports African sovereignty and stands against Western neo-colonialism. This strategy, which is clearly aimed at manipulating public opinion and strengthening Russia's influence on the continent, is also fuelling the destabilization of traditional ties with the West while promoting Moscow's geopolitical interests⁸.

To achieve this, Russia has been relentlessly recruiting African *influencers* to disseminate pro-Russian narratives. For example, *Mutapa Bere*⁹—who has over 65,000 followers on TikTok—has been using the platform to advocate coups in Africa. This well-known personality has produced content that glorifies violence and the overthrow of governments, which obviously raises serious concerns about the impact of such messages on younger audiences. The fact that such videos have gone viral highlights the challenges faced by social media platforms in moderating content and preventing the spread of destabilizing messages that could fuel political instability in the region. This phenomenon provides stark evidence of the capacity of social networks to amplify dangerous narratives, especially in settings where democratic institutions are fragile. The glorification of coups in such content not only serves to trivialize political violence, but also inspires individuals or organized groups to act in a similar way, in the belief that such actions are not only legitimate, but desirable.

Correlatively, the ease with which such content is disseminated among younger audiences is especially concerning, as this demographic is particularly susceptible to the influence of social media and may not be fully equipped to appreciate the gravity and consequences of coups and violent actions.

This situation raises important questions about the role of social networks in regulating content and their responsibility to prevent the spread of disinformation and messages that may incite violence or destabilize

entire regions. Although platforms like TikTok have policies to remove content that promotes violence, the rapid spread of such content and the use of algorithms that facilitate the dissemination of shocking and controversial content make it difficult to moderate. This underlines the need to explore whether a more proactive approach should be adopted in monitoring and regulating content that may have a negative impact on societies, especially in vulnerable regions such as certain parts of Africa¹⁰.

Examples of personal media influence include:

- **Duduzile Zuma**, an *influencer* who is a member of South Africa's National Assembly and the daughter of former South African President Jacob Zuma, has been identified as a key player in a pro-Russian and pro-Putin campaign on Twitter¹¹.
- **Ahoua Don Mello**, Vice-President of the BRICS alliance, is an influential promoter of pro-Russian narratives within BRICS, a bloc of countries that includes Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. Mello has been using digital platforms to spread messages that portray Russia as a bastion in the fight for a multipolar world, countering Western hegemony. His content, which blends political analysis with aspects of popular culture, has captured the attention of young audiences in Africa, where there is a growing demand for alternatives to Western narratives. Don Mello has a remarkable ability to connect with African audiences through an approach that mixes geopolitical analysis with entertainment, allowing him to reach a wider audience. He champions Russia and BRICS in a rhetoric that strongly criticizes the West's influence in Africa, while praising Russia's role as an upholder of the rights of sovereign nations and an ally against neo-colonialism. These messages resonate particularly in regions where there is growing mistrust of Western powers.

The rise of figures like Don Mello clearly demonstrates Russia's strategy to gain influence in Africa by using local voices to amplify its geopolitical narratives. As remarked above, these *influencers* not only promote Russia's foreign policies, but also help to build a sense of solidarity among the BRICS countries, establishing

Russia as a leader in the shaping of a new multipolar world order. This tactic is especially effective in Africa, where young people, who make up a significant part of the population, are highly active on social media and very receptive to new ideas that challenge the *status quo*.

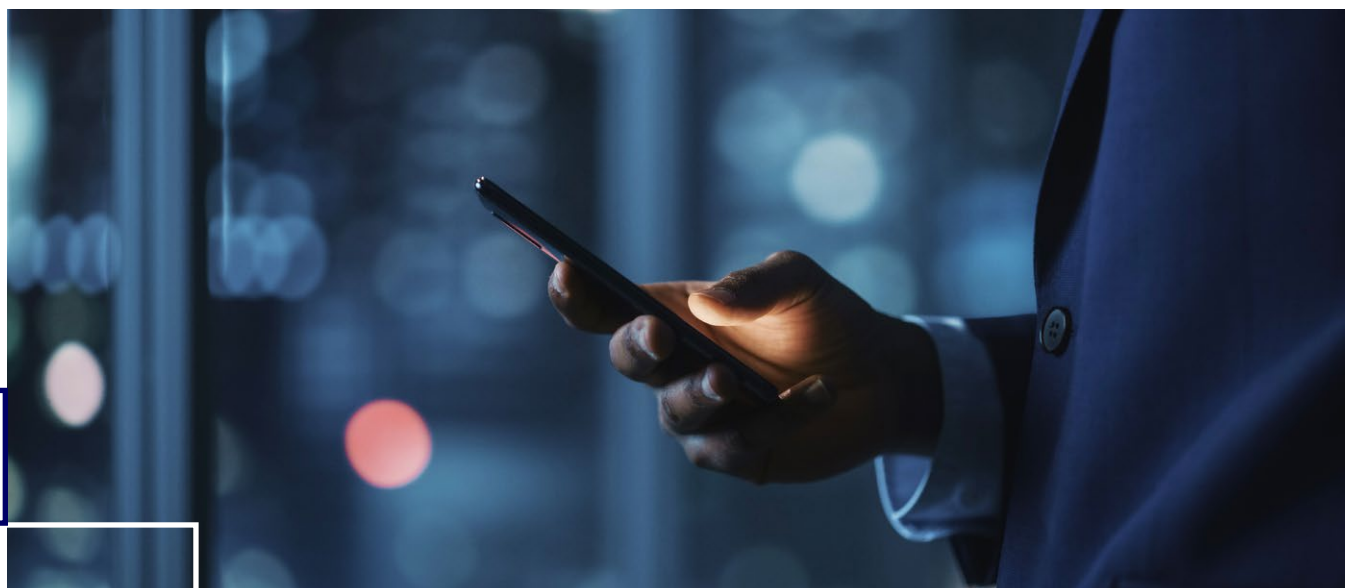
The strategy pursued by Mello and other pro-Russian *influencers* illustrates how Russia is using soft power to cement its presence in Africa, not only through political and economic agreements, but also by building cultural and media alliances that strengthen its influence on the continent. This phenomenon is an example of how global narratives are being re-shaped in an increasingly multipolar world, with actors seeking to expand their influence in key regions through digital media and influential local voices¹².

- Pan-African influencers **Kemi Seba** and **Nathalie Yamb** are using digital platforms to spread pro-Russian narratives in Africa, promoting Moscow's influence and undermining democratic values on the continent. These influencers exploit historical tensions with the West and portray themselves as defenders of African sovereignty, while promoting agendas that align Africa with Russia's geopolitical interests. This poses a clear threat to stability and democracy in the region¹³, and it is especially striking that these figures have been supporting Wagner's activities in Africa on their social media channels and at public events.

In addition to the above, there are other such high-profile figures on the continent.

- **Harouna Douamba**, a businessman and head of a pro-Russian and anti-Western disinformation network in the Central African Republic and Burkina Faso. Described by Reporters Without Borders (RSF) as a "lobbyist close to Wagner's world", Douamba became a key player for Russia in Africa in 2018, following a business failure.

Indeed, in the Central African Republic, where Wagner had just been deployed, Douamba spearheaded Russian propaganda from the "*Office of Information and Communication in the Central African Republic*", a centre of influence created by the group within the Central African presidency. At the same time, Douamba used his NGO "*Aimons notre Afrique (ANA)*" and its communications department to launch a campaign against France in 2018, allegedly funded by Lobaye Invest, the Wagner group's predecessor in the region. After supporting the re-election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in 2021, his disinformation network was dismantled by Meta, which deleted 80 accounts linked to ANA for promoting pro-Russian and anti-French content. In 2022, Douamba moved his network to Burkina Faso, operating under the agency "*Groupe Panafricain pour le Commerce et l'Investissement (GPCI)*", which was also dismantled by Meta in May 2023, describing its activities as "covert influence operations"^{14, 15}.



In the pursuit of its aims, Russia has organized several congresses specifically aimed at young people in Africa¹⁶: *“Russia’s foreign policy is geared towards furthering cooperation with African countries, and the Forum is a unique discussion platform that is designed to promote dialogue between young people in Russia and Africa and the exchange of views between representatives of student communities on the most pressing issues affecting relations between Russia and African countries”*.

Table 1: Key African narratives among Russian-owned disinformation proxies.

Source: compiled by author

NARRATIVES	MEDIA
Anti-colonial narratives that contain criticism of the West	Globalresearch
	Newsfront
	ZeroHedge
	Strategic Culture
	Tsargrad TV
	The Unz Review
	The Duran
	Observateur Continental
	RT
	Sputnik News
Support for the alliance of Sahel States	Globalresearch
	Newsfront
	Southfront
	ZeroHedge
	Diario Octubre
	Strategic Culture
	Tsargrad TV
	The Unz Review
	The Duran
	Observateur Continental
	RT
	Sputnik News
Criticism of western support in the health field (vaccines, medicines, etc.)	Globalresearch
	Newsfront
	Southfront
	ZeroHedge
	Diario Octubre
	Tsargrad TV
	The Unz Review
	The Duran
	Observateur Continental
	RT
	Sputnik News

The use of *influencers* is the logical evolution of Russia’s use of proxies via non-official channels, playing a crucial role in the dissemination of disinformation. These proxies allow multiple variations of false narratives to be introduced, tailoring them to different audiences and circumstances, while providing the Kremlin with plausible deniability, allowing it to distance itself from the most dangerous or controversial content. Moreover, these channels create a knock-on effect, feeding off each other’s content, increasing the reach and resonance of the propaganda. Collectively, the proxies are central to the Kremlin’s information manipulation strategy¹⁷.

NARRATIVES	MEDIA
Support for narratives that point to Russia’s support for Africa	Globalresearch
	Newsfront
	Southfront
	ZeroHedge
	Diario Octubre
	Tsargrad TV
	The Unz Review
	The Duran
	Observateur Continental
	RT
Support for Wagner’s role in Africa	Sputnik News
	ZeroHedge
	Diario Octubre
	Tsargrad TV
	The Duran
	RT
Narratives that indicate the interest of African citizens in learning Russian	Sputnik News
	Globalresearch
	ZeroHedge
	Tsargrad TV
	RT
	Sputnik News



From this we can conclude that Russia exerts two types of influence in Africa, which we will call *soft power* and *hard power*.

Through ***soft power***, Russia strengthens its cultural and educational ties with Africa by signing agreements, holding international congresses and creating Russian cultural centers, offering Russian language courses and promoting Russian literature and art, as well as encouraging academic exchanges and scholarship programs for African students, seeking to build a positive image and establish lasting relations with the continent's future elites.

In turn, through ***hard power***, Russia provides military support to several authoritarian governments and leaders in Africa.

Indeed, using private military companies such as the *Wagner Group* and its successors—e.g. the *Africa Corps*—Russia provides military training, weapons and direct support in local conflicts. This has been instrumental in keeping certain leaders in power and helping to destabilize some regions, exacerbating conflicts and humanitarian crises¹⁸.

1.2 THE INFLUENCE OF RUSSIA'S SOFT POWER IN AFRICA

As noted above, Russia has intensified its efforts to strengthen its presence in Africa through education, using this tool as a form of *soft power* to increase its influence on the continent. This strategy is part of a broader approach to countering Western influence and furthering its own geopolitical and economic interests. To achieve this, Russia has set up numerous scholarship programs for African students, allowing them to study at Russian universities. These programs not only improve the students' skills and knowledge, but also create a network of individuals with positive links to Russia. African students who study in Russia often return home with a positive opinion of Russia, which can influence future policies and relations between their home countries and Russia. Furthermore, these initiatives help Russia to present itself as an alternative partner to Western powers, by offering a different option for education and development.

Russia has also set up Russian language and cultural centers in several African countries. These centers not only teach the language, but also Russian culture and values. Furthermore, Russia has signed cooperation agreements with several African universities to facilitate academic exchanges and joint research. These centers and agreements are key to strengthening cultural and educational ties between Russia and African countries, and to promoting the desired positive image.

DESPITE THE BENEFITS, RUSSIA'S STRATEGY ALSO FACES CHALLENGES. SOME CRITICS ARGUE THAT THESE INITIATIVES ARE A FORM OF PROPAGANDA THAT DOES NOT ALWAYS BRING TANGIBLE BENEFITS FOR AFRICAN COUNTRIES.

Additionally, the quality of education and living conditions for African students in Russia have at times been called into question, painting a negative picture that should not be underestimated, as it may affect the perception and effectiveness of Russia's *soft power* strategy in Africa.

Be that as it may, education is clearly a bridge that connects Russia with Africa, promoting cooperation and mutual understanding that may have far-reaching implications for future international relations in the region¹⁹. One example: Russia is providing scholarships for African students, increasing the number of African students at Russian universities to over 10,000 in 2024. Naturally, this is all part of a strategy to counter Russia's international isolation by focusing Russian-African cooperation on education. Nearly 35,000 African students are currently studying in Russia, and this number is growing each year. Russia is also planning to open Russian campuses and schools in Africa to promote educational and cultural exchanges, as well as launch an international Russian language organization²⁰.

As regards the latter point, the Russian language is booming in several African countries, highlighting both the opportunities and challenges that this trend presents. In recent years, countries such as the Central African Republic, Burkina Faso and Mali have adopted Russian as a compulsory second language in their education systems. The Kremlin sees the Russian language as a natural extension of its foreign policy that aims to strengthen Russia's presence and promote a positive image of Russia among the younger generations in Africa. Meanwhile, some African governments remain committed to promoting the Russian language, hopeful that this will strengthen diplomatic and economic ties with Russia²¹. Vladimir Putin stressed the importance of these programs during the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg, highlighting the role of educational institutions and announcing an increase in scholarships

for Africans to study in Russia. Over the last three years, the number of Africans receiving these scholarships has grown by 150%²².

It is noteworthy that since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, many Russian universities have opened Russian language programs on the African continent, as illustrated by the figure below.

One illustration of Russia's interest in promoting partnerships between universities in Russia and Africa is the Peoples' Friendship University (RUDN), which in March 2023 changed its name to the *Patrice Lumumba Peoples' Friendship University*, in honor of Patrice Lumumba, Prime Minister of the Republic of Congo and a pan-Africanist and anti-colonialist figure in Africa²³.

This university is pushing for the creation of the first pan-African university to shift away from Western education²⁴, a clear demonstration of how Russia is making every effort to improve its image among the African population.

Another example of academic cooperation between Russia and various African countries is the "*Russian-African Network University*" consortium, which aims to promote voluntary and equal partnerships between Russian and African universities and research organizations in the fields of higher education, lifelong learning and research. It is composed of 75 higher education institutions in Russia and 31 African universities.²⁵

Figure 2: Russian presence in African universities.

Source: compiled by author

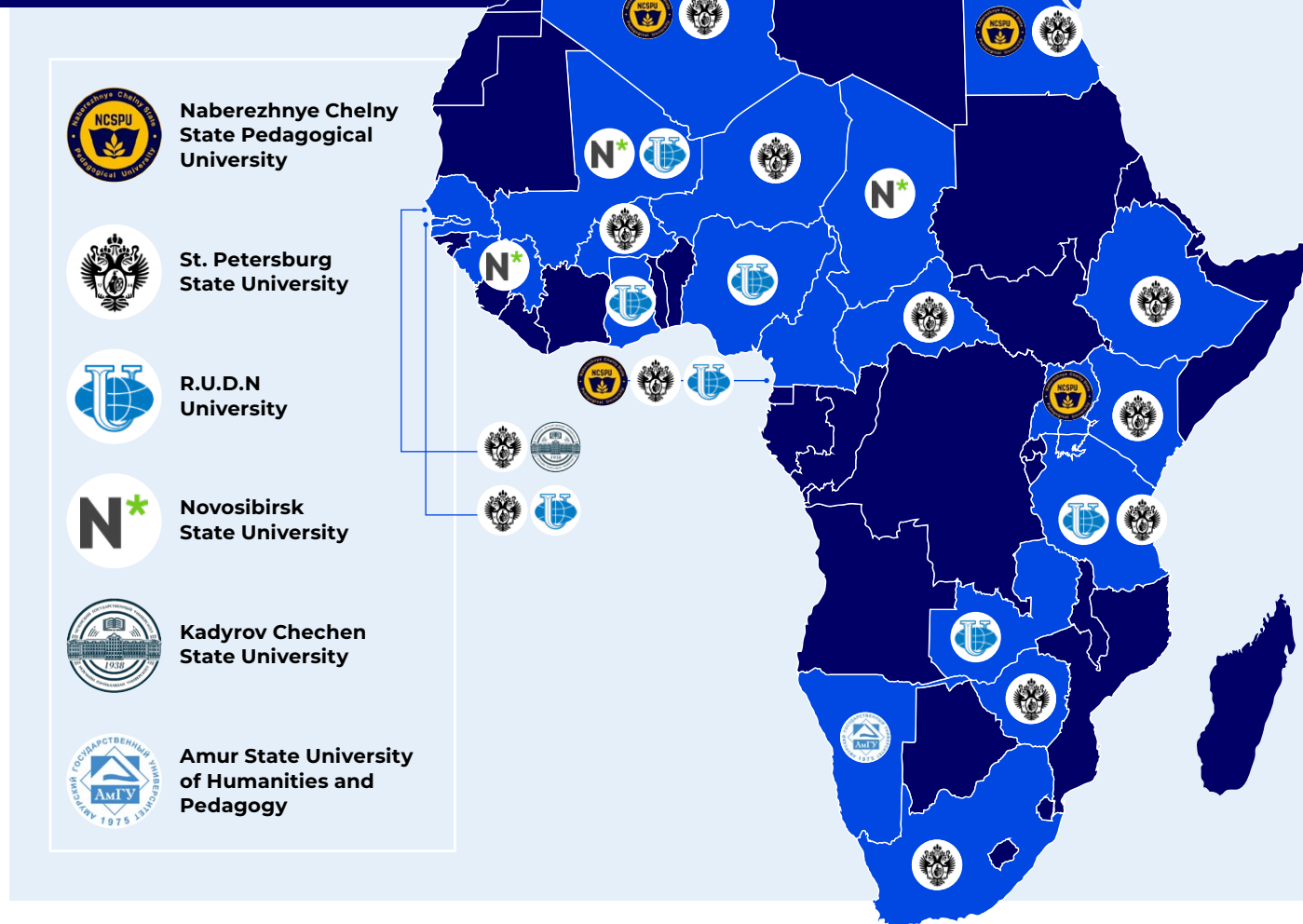
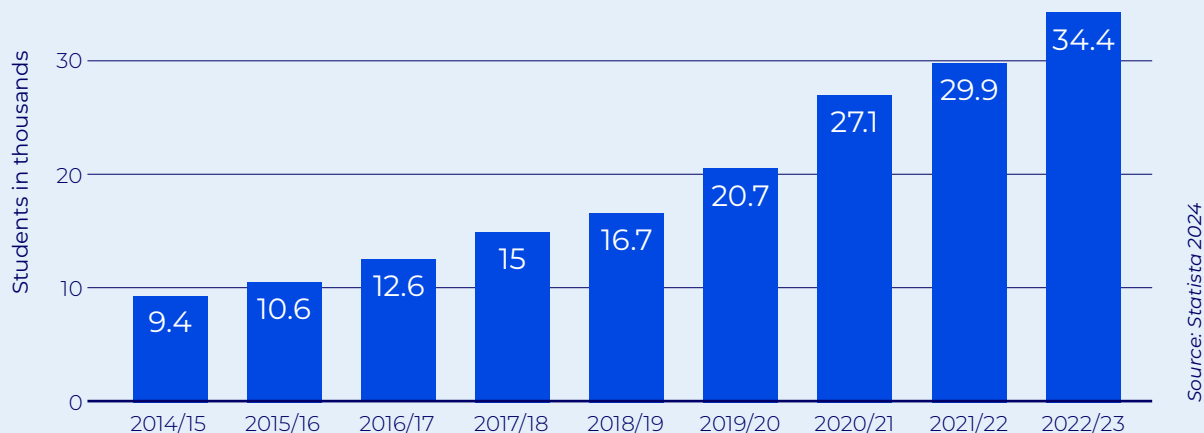


Figure 3: Evolution of the number of African students in Russia²⁶

Source: Statista. (2024, October 23). Higher education students from African countries in Russia 2015–2023. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1131825/number-of-african-students-in-russia>



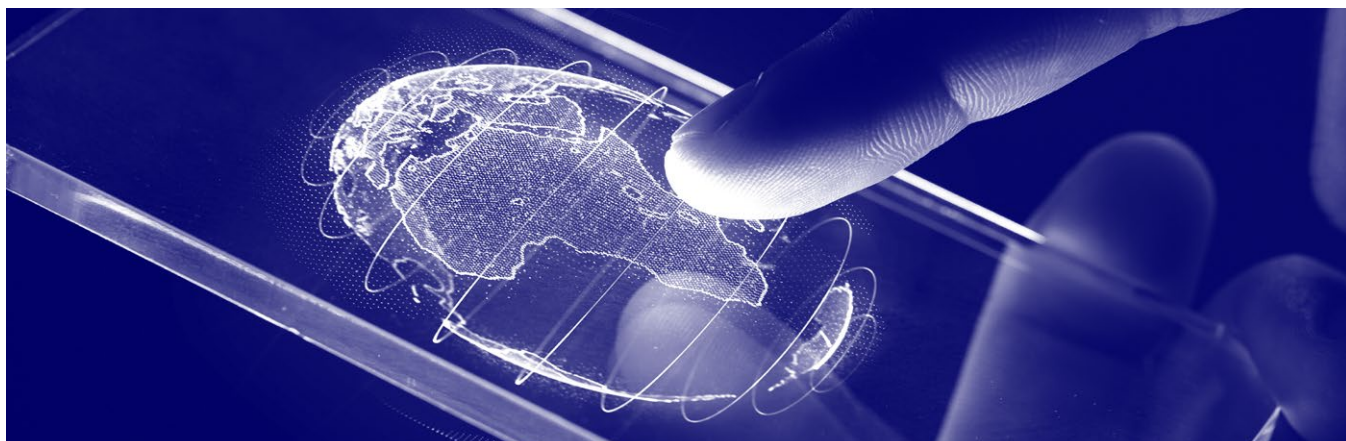
However, despite these efforts, at present the results remain limited due to the scant importance of the Russian language compared to other languages such as English, French and Chinese. The perception of Russia as a remote partner that is culturally different also curbs interest in its language and culture²⁷. It seems evident that Russia needs to prioritize motivational factors such as tourism, cultural exchanges and educational partnerships in order to improve its position in Africa.

Russia has therefore stepped up its propaganda to attract more African students, highlighting several factors that make the country an attractive destination for higher education. This effort has led to a significant rise in the number of African students in Russia, which grew from 6,700 in 2010/11 to 34,400 in 2022/23, as shown in the figure above.

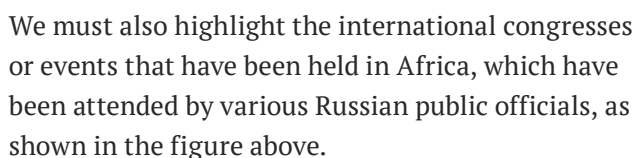
In the pursuit of its aims, Russia has been using social media to disseminate messages that praise its education system—while criticizing those of Western powers—including testimonials from African students who have had positive experiences on Russian soil^{28, 29}.

A MATTER OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE: LEAVING ASIDE THEIR ACADEMIC EDUCATION, IT IS WORTH NOTING THAT MANY OF THESE STUDENTS WILL BE USED TO ACTIVELY ENGAGE IN ARMED CONFLICTS.

It has been shown that Russia has been recruiting African students to fight in Ukraine by using coercive tactics or misleading promises³⁰.



Source: Official summit website; Tass, accessed 4 December 2023



THE RUSSIA-AFRICA SUMMITS ARE A VITAL PLATFORM FOR RUSSIA TO STRENGTHEN ITS TIES WITH THE CONTINENT, TO SEEK NEW OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION AND TO PURSUE ITS GEOPOLITICAL INTERESTS.

Many of the narratives coming from Russian disinformation proxies in the region suggest that multipolarity is emerging in Africa due to the collapse of the old Western-dominated world order.

They note how African nations are seeking to diversify their international alliances by shifting away from dependence on Western powers and embracing partnerships with new global actors such as China, Russia and other countries of the global South. It has been argued that this trend reflects a rejection of the white world order and an assertion of African sovereignty and self-determination³².

As outlined above, Russia has adopted a diplomatic strategy in Africa which is underpinned by anti-colonial rhetoric, seeking to gain support in its conflict with Ukraine and to counter the influence of the West. It presents its confrontation with the West as if it were an extension of past anti-colonial struggles, appealing to historical sentiments of resistance against European colonialism, narratives that tend to find fertile ground in African countries that have had colonial experiences and are often distrustful of Western powers³³.

It is therefore evident that Russia's *Africa doctrine* has been revived based on the concept of “*messianic multipolarity*”. This doctrine is based on the vision of Russia as a proponent of a multipolar world where several powers coexist without Western domination, capitalizing on its historical legacy and the ties established during the Soviet era to reassert its presence in Africa.

It is clear that this doctrine is part of Russia's wider strategy to broaden its global influence, using the key tools of diplomacy, military cooperation and economic investment. The so-called *Africa doctrine* is Moscow's attempt to revive and adapt its foreign policies to align with present-day realities, capitalizing on dissatisfaction with the current world order and offering Africa a narrative that promises a future of independent development and equitable relations in a multipolar world³⁴.

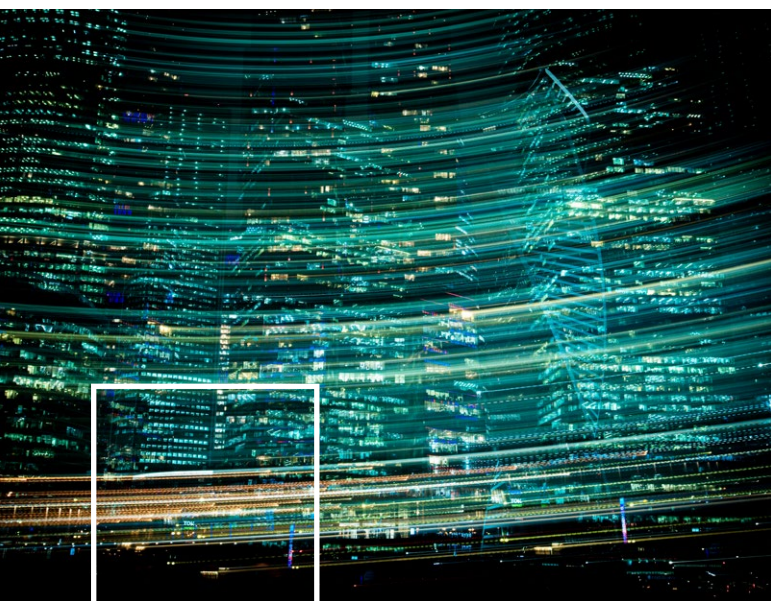
The idea of *multipolarity*, which originally referred to a world in which several powers coexist on an equal footing, is being invoked by various authoritarian regimes to cement their power. They use this concept as a means of challenging Western dominance and justifying their autonomy in domestic politics, often at the expense of human rights and democratic freedoms. So, instead of promoting a more just world order, multipolarity is becoming a tool to increase internal repression.

Indeed, authoritarian regimes use the rhetoric of multipolarity to legitimize their actions on the world stage, casting themselves as advocates of a new global balance in the face of what they describe as Western imperialism. This narrative is especially compelling in countries seeking to escape the influence of the United States and Europe, attracting nations that share a critical view of the current world order. While multipolarity may offer an alternative to Western unipolarity, in the hands of authoritarian regimes it can serve to stifle dissent and perpetuate autocratic control.

WE CAN CONCLUDE THAT THE USE OF THE CONCEPT OF *MULTIPOLARITY* BY THESE GOVERNMENTS POSES A DILEMMA FOR THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY: WHILE THE DIVERSIFICATION OF GLOBAL POWER MAY BRING IMPORTANT BENEFITS, IT COULD ALSO LEAD TO GREATER INSTABILITY AND THE EROSION OF HUMAN RIGHTS.

Therefore, it seems clear that multipolarity must be carefully managed to prevent it from becoming a pretext for authoritarianism and repression³⁵.

To promote this concept of *multipolarity*, the Kremlin has organized several international congresses and events, both in Africa³⁶ and Russia. One of the most important events was held in Moscow in February 2024³⁷. The main speaker at this event was Alexandr Dugin, one of Russia's most renowned intellectuals and the foremost proponent of a Russian-led anti-Western Eurasian



imperialist movement. This movement, hereafter referred to as the *Syncretic Disinformation Network (SDN)*, aggressively promotes Dugin's so-called *Fourth Political Theory (4PT)*, which seeks to unite extreme right and extreme left movements with the aim of destroying the post-World War II order³⁸.

Dugin argued that the age of Western hegemony had come to an end, ushering in a new global order in which several power centers will coexist. According to Dugin, this shift is an opportunity for different civilizations (almost all of them now dictatorships) to assert their own values and sovereignty, challenging the predominant liberal model promoted by the West.

Dugin claims that multipolarity is not only a response to the decline of Western dominance, but also a manifestation of each civilization's right to determine its own destiny without outside interference. In his view, the West's sole hegemony, based on liberalism and globalization, has been successfully challenged by countries seeking to assert their independence and reject Western values. According to Dugin, this new order is being led by powers such as Russia, China and Iran, which are building a world based on diverse political and cultural models, rather than on the imposition of a single value system³⁹.

The event that was held in Moscow, in which Vladimir Putin himself participated via videoconference⁴⁰, was attended by representatives of 130 states, many of them from African countries⁴¹, who played a key role at certain points⁴².

Another of Russia's objectives at the event was to promote the Russophile movement, seeking to spread the Russian language and its culture across the African continent, by promoting education programs which, as we have noted, include offering scholarships to African students to pursue higher education at Russian universities, with the aim not only of strengthening cultural ties, but also of cementing Russia's influence in Africa⁴³.



1.3 THE INFLUENCE OF RUSSIA'S HARD POWER IN AFRICA

Since 2015, Russia has signed military agreements with over 20 African countries. These agreements cover various forms of cooperation, including arms sales, access to African seaports and air bases, training African officers at Russian military academies, counter-terrorism and peacekeeping, and the presence of Russian military advisors.

However, the key military actor in Africa has been the Wagner Group, a Russian paramilitary organization that has built up a strong presence on the continent, winning lucrative contracts in countries such as the Central African Republic, Sudan and Libya.

In exchange for providing military support to autocratic governments, Wagner has secured trade concessions to exploit valuable natural resources such as gold and diamonds. However, its presence has been dogged by gross human rights violations, including killings and torture, and its counter-insurgency operations have largely failed, exacerbating regional instability rather than settling conflicts.

NEVERTHELESS, WAGNER'S INFLUENCE IN AFRICA IS NOT JUST LIMITED TO MILITARY AND ECONOMIC MATTERS, IT HAS ALSO HAD AN IMPACT ON LOCAL POLITICS, PROPPING UP AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES AND HELPING TO REPRESS THE OPPOSITION.

As noted above, on many occasions, despite their attempts to portray themselves as a stabilizing force, their actions have led to discontent and resentment among local populations. The Wagner Group has used its military might to secure significant economic advantages in Africa, but at a high cost to peace and human rights in the region. Its legacy on the continent is a mix of exploitation and violence, which continues to undermine the stability of the countries in which it operates⁴⁴.

Lengo Songo, a popular radio station in Bangui in the Central African Republic, is controlled by the Wagner Group and funded by Russian capital. The media outlet has played a crucial role in spreading pro-Russian propaganda, portraying Russia as the country's biggest ally and omitting critical information about Russia's actions and its failings, such as the small number of African leaders at the Russia-Africa Summit in 2023. *Lengo Songo* also seeks to discredit critical reports, like the one produced by The Sentry documenting Wagner's crimes in the country⁴⁵.

Additionally, this media outlet promotes the activities of the *Russian House* in Bangui, which offers educational and cultural programs to strengthen Russia's influence. In its programming, especially in its interviews and reports, the West is portrayed as an exploitative enemy, a narrative that contrasts with Russia's supposed benevolence. For example, Russian journalist Edvard Chesnokov's account has been widely disseminated, comparing the situation in Africa to the war in Ukraine and arguing that Russia and Africa are natural allies against the West's "re-colonization". Such propaganda not only strengthens Russia's influence in the region, but also fuels anti-Western sentiment, justifying the presence and actions of the Wagner Group in Africa,⁴⁶ an organization that has even produced films for propaganda purposes.



Thus, for example, the film *Granit* tells the story of a supposedly noble “instructor” who goes to Mozambique to train ill-armed and undisciplined soldiers; easily accessible and effective films to soften the image of Russia and Wagner in Africa, which portray Russia as a savior⁴⁷.

The US State Department reports that the Wagner Group’s presence in Africa has had a devastating impact on the civilian population, noting that in countries like the Central African Republic, Mali, Sudan and Libya, the organization has been responsible for the massacre of civilians and has greatly exacerbated instability and violence in these regions, estimating that, as of August 2023, at least 1,800 Africans had been killed due to the Wagner Group’s actions⁴⁸.

For example, in the Central African Republic, the Wagner Group has been accused of massacring civilians and destroying entire villages to pursue its economic interests in the mining sector. In Mali, terrorist violence against civilians has increased by 278% since the Wagner Group’s arrival in 2021. In Sudan, artisanal gold mines have been looted and people have been unlawfully executed. These atrocities have not only resulted in loss of life, they have also displaced thousands of people, creating a refugee crisis and increasing instability in the region⁴⁹.

Anticipating this, various Western embassies in Africa had already been warning of the dangers posed by the Wagner Group. For example, in May 2022, the US embassy in Mali explained how the group, led by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, used disinformation to promote Russian interests, employing propaganda and manipulative narratives to justify its presence on the continent, and portraying itself as a stabilizing force while exploiting natural resources and propping up authoritarian regimes. As can be seen, disinformation is a key component of its strategy to sway African public opinion and legitimize its activities in the region⁵⁰.

The Wagner Group has continued to operate in Africa a year after the death of its leader, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and while it has maintained its influence in the region, it has faced internal organizational challenges. Prigozhin’s death has forced the group to adapt, with the Kremlin’s influence on its operations increasing, so Wagner remains a key part of Russia’s strategy to expand its power in Africa, using, as we have noted, tactics such as resource exploitation, backing authoritarian regimes and disinformation campaigns.

As remarked above, although Wagner has lost some of its original cohesion, it remains a powerful operational force. The group’s ability to adapt to Prigozhin’s absence

demonstrates its resilience and importance to Russian interests on the continent. However, this transformation process has not been entirely straightforward, as the organization has had to redefine its structure and relationships, both internally and externally. In recent years, Wagner has had to cope with the pressure of remaining relevant in the face of growing direct Russian intervention. The Kremlin has been taking a more active role in overseeing Wagner's activities, ensuring that the group remains aligned with Moscow's strategic objectives in the region, including the ongoing use of military force to protect its interests and manipulating public opinion through disinformation, especially in countries where its military presence is challenged or controversial.

On a practical level, Wagner is still involved in natural resource exploitation in Africa, particularly in countries such as the Central African Republic, where the group has secured mining concessions in exchange for military support, enabling it to bankroll its operations and maintain its influence, despite changes in its leadership⁵¹.

AS NOTED ABOVE, THE WAGNER GROUP NOT ONLY OPERATES AS A MILITARY FORCE IN AFRICA, IT IS ALSO A VITAL PROPAGANDA TOOL FOR RUSSIA IN THE REGION.

Through Wagner, Russia promotes a narrative in which it portrays itself as a defender of African sovereignty to counter Western influence. This narrative is reinforced by Wagner's actions, which, under the guise of stabilization missions, spread pro-Russian propaganda and discredit Western actors. This propaganda strategy not only seeks to secure the loyalty of local governments, but also to sway African public opinion, pushing the idea that Russia is a necessary counterweight to Western influence, which is often perceived as neo-colonialist.

However, while all these actions are effective propaganda exercises, they have also increased instability in several regions, underscoring the complex and often negative impact of Russia's strategy on the continent⁵².

Although Prigozhin's death may have heralded an uncertain future for Wagner, the group's structure and operations in Africa remained operational and ready to continue and expand⁵³. Wagner, led by veterans loyal to the Kremlin, continued to play a critical role in Russia's foreign policy, especially in regions where Moscow is seeking to increase its geopolitical influence. As noted above, the organization not only provided security and military assistance to African governments, but also benefited financially by controlling mines and other valuable natural resources⁵⁴. In his first video after the brief mutiny in June 2023, Wagner's mercenary leader claimed to be making "Africa even freer", attracting potential recruits⁵⁵.

Since Prigozhin's death, Viktor Lukovenko, a Russian ultra-nationalist, has stepped into the role of chief spokesman for Russian propaganda in Africa, following the dissolution of the Wagner Group. Lukovenko is at the forefront of disinformation and propaganda efforts on the continent, continuing the Wagner Group's work to promote Russian interests, extending its influence to several African countries, where it uses local media and social networks to spread pro-Russian messages and destabilize governments that are not Moscow's allies. Lukovenko, known for his criminal past and his close relationship with Yevgeny Prigozhin, has been instrumental in setting up the *African Initiative*⁵⁶ office.

The *African Initiative* serves as a mouthpiece for Russian interests on the African continent. The speed with which it was set up in Burkina Faso suggests an organized effort to spread Russian influence, and its use of culturally resonant methods, such as screening Russian films in local languages, is evidence of a strategic approach aimed at winning hearts and minds.

This organization, based in Moscow's West Federation Tower, established an extensive digital presence that led to a remarkable increase in its followers on the Telegram platform, commonly fuelled by posts about Russian military operations in Africa, which often went viral⁵⁷.

With regard to Telegram, it should be noted that the number of users in Africa has grown significantly in recent years⁵⁸, with an estimated 8% of users coming from the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, equating to approximately 72 million users in Africa, since Telegram has around 900 million monthly active users globally as of 2024.⁵⁹

TELEGRAM HAS ALSO BEEN ONE OF THE WAGNER GROUP'S PREFERRED CHANNELS FOR PUBLICIZING ITS ACTIVITIES⁶⁰.

Figure 5: Growth in the number of African Initiative subscribers on Telegram

Source: CfA using TGStat

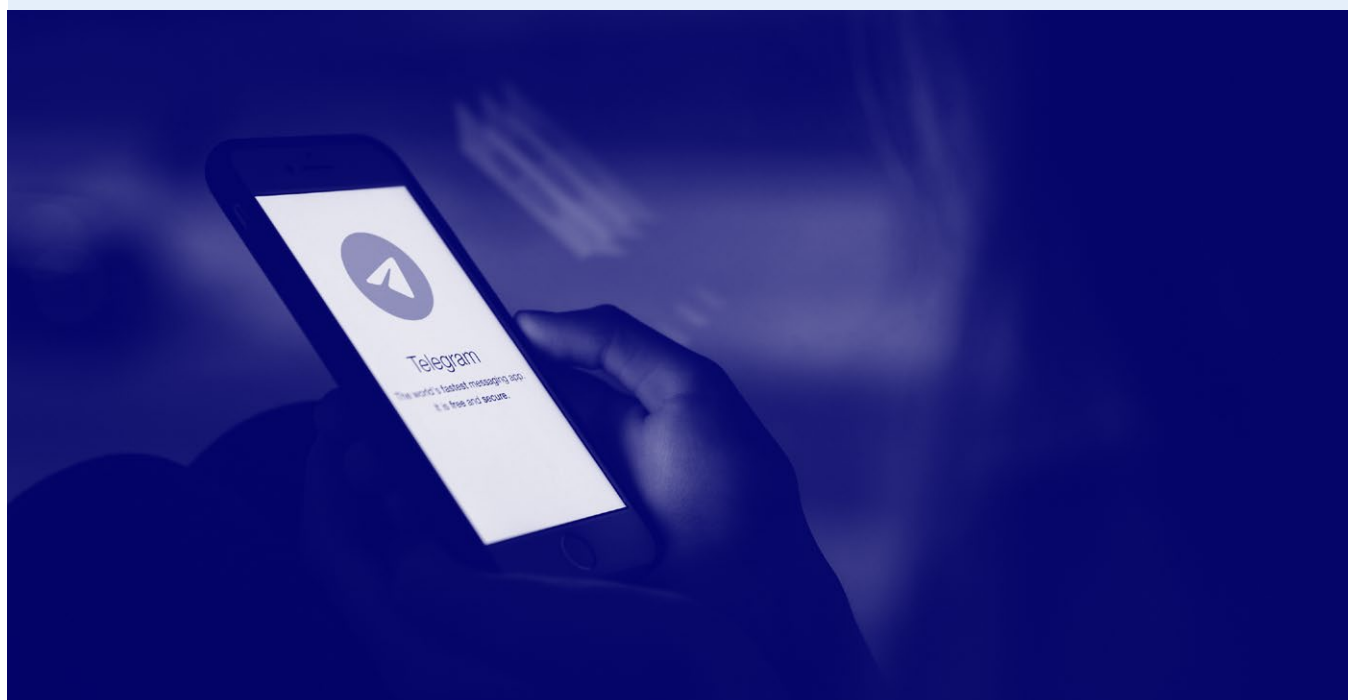
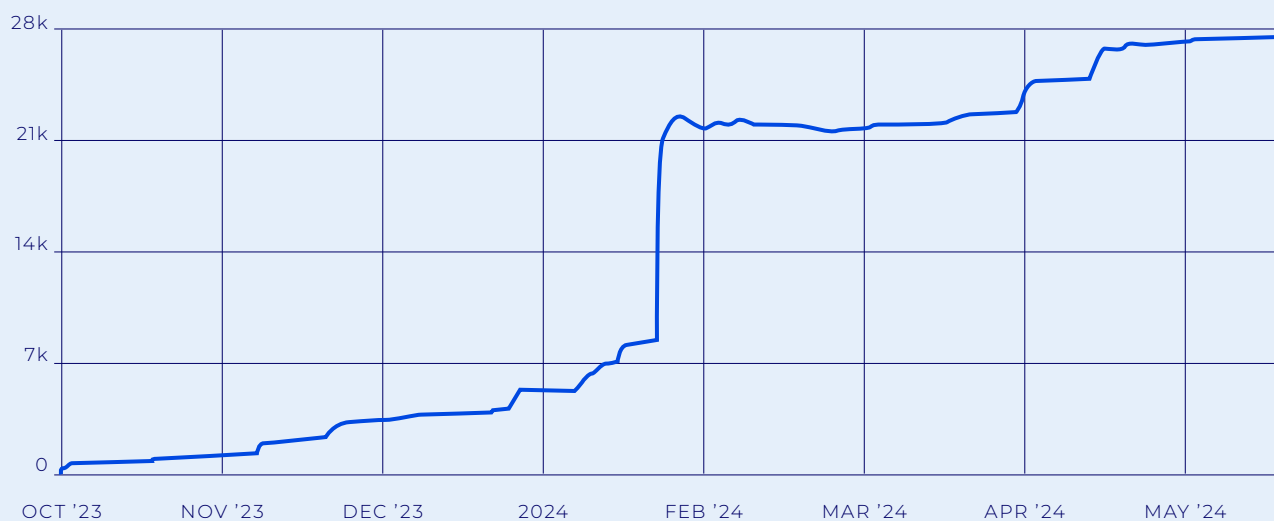
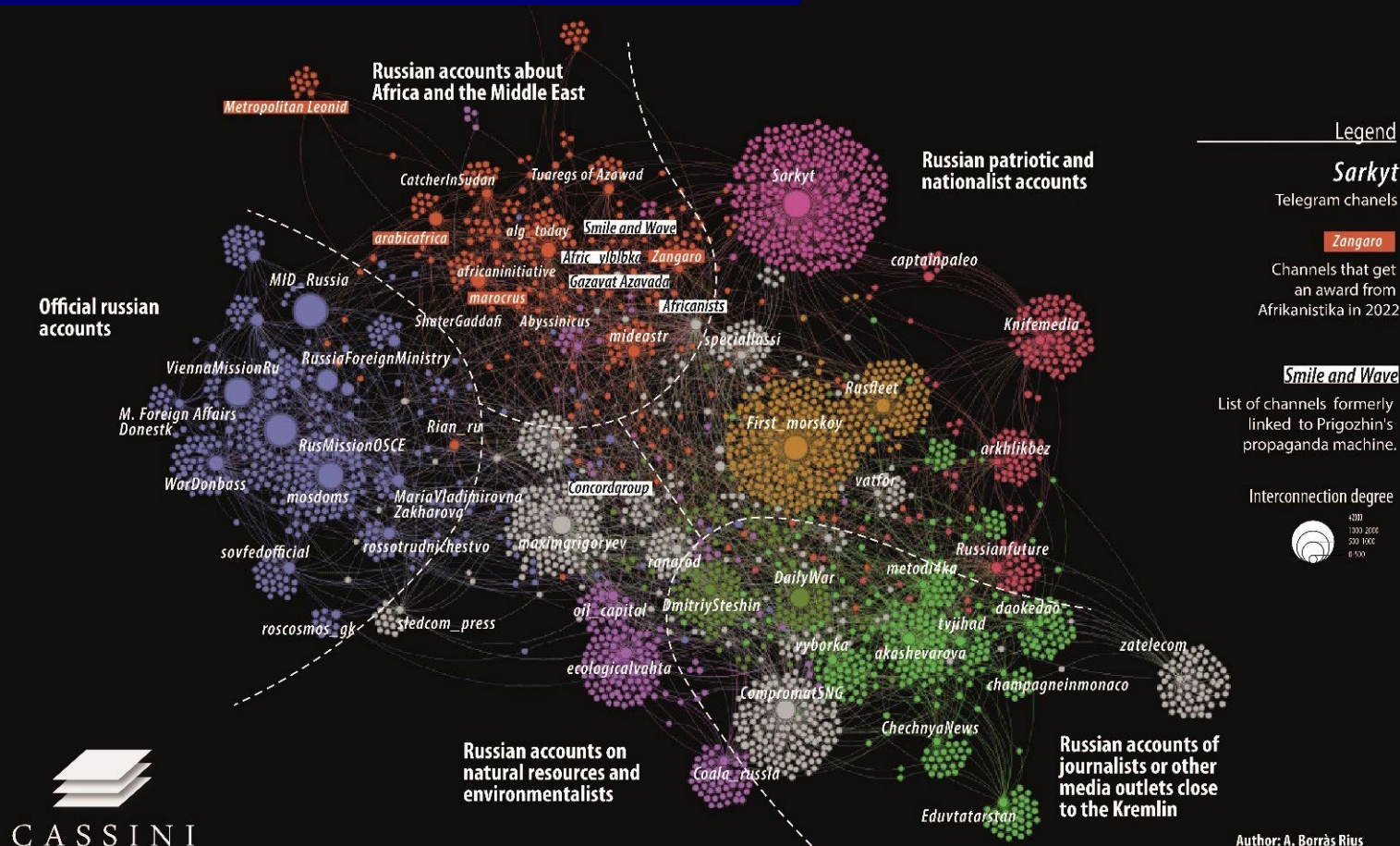


Figure 6:
Russian Networks and Strategies in Africa. *Source: Cassini Group*



The above figure shows Russia’s network of Africa-related news channels on Telegram. The compiled data was based on a list of accounts published in 2022 by the Telegram channel *Afrikanistika* (t.me/africanists), which was linked to Prigozhin at the time and, after his death, became part of a larger group of Russian-language channels related to Africa and linked to the African Initiative website. Every year, *Afrikanistika* publishes the “Best Africa-related channels of the year” and lists all Russian-language channels related to Africa. This list suggests that all of these channels also serve the interests of the Russian state. In 2022, the entire list consisted of 67 channels.

20 channels were selected: *Afrikanistika* itself, all channels focused on a specific region and the channels that were awarded the titles of “favourite of the year”, “best analytical channel of the year”, “best news channel of the year”, “best regional channel of the year” and “discovery of the year”, identifying all of the messages that these channels forwarded from other channels to

obtain their links (resulting in the 67 channels in the figure). This process allowed us to create the above diagram, which represents the global ecosystem in which *Afrikanistika* and other pro-Kremlin Russian-language channels centered on Africa are embedded.

As shown in the figure, the algorithm identifies, arranges and sorts the different groups according to their position and importance within the information network. All award-winning accounts are in the red community and marked red, near to the official Russian accounts (blue community). It also shows the group of accounts that disseminate content on Africa, and also on the Near and Middle East (*marocrus*, *arabicafrica*, *CatcherInSudan*, *Tuaregs of Azawad*, *Zangaro*, etc.). These accounts interact primarily with official Russian accounts, although their connection to Wagner and Prigozhin-linked business networks, such as *Smile an Wave*, *Africa_ylblbka*, *Gazavat Azavada*, etc. is also evident.



The rest of the communities that interact with the red community are part of a wider network of heterogeneous interest and lobby groups, e.g. those focused on naval issues (*First_morskoy*, *Rusfleet*), war blogs (*DailyWar*), journalists like Dmitriy Steshun from *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, or blogs on natural resources and environmental issues (*oil_capital*, *ecologicalvahta*), etc. The level of interconnectedness of official Russian accounts is notable, although some accounts linked to Russian nationalist media outlets, blogs or journalists, such as *Sarkyt*, *First_morskoy* and *DailyWar*⁶¹ also stand out.

RUSSIA HAS STEPPED UP ITS INFLUENCE-BUILDING OPERATIONS IN AFRICA, USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO SPREAD PRO-RUSSIAN AND ANTI-WESTERN MESSAGES, ESPECIALLY IN COUNTRIES LIKE SUDAN AND MALI.

Facebook's parent company Meta has identified networks operated by local citizens in Sudan which have been promoting the Russian narrative; networks linked to the Russian Internet Research Agency, funded by Yevgeny Prigozhin. These networks have been praising Russia, while also criticizing certain leaders who have been exposed as pawns of the US. However, they have no reservations about promoting a new Russian military base in Port Sudan.

Meanwhile, in Mali, this propaganda has led to a distorted perception of France's presence there, portraying Russia as a savior. Although Russia's intervention in Mali only began fairly recently, it has proven to be effective, fuelling a narrative that blames France for the country's problems and presenting Russia as a viable and desirable alternative. Kamissa Camara, a former Malian minister, has stressed that without French intervention, Mali would have faced a greater jihadist threat⁶².

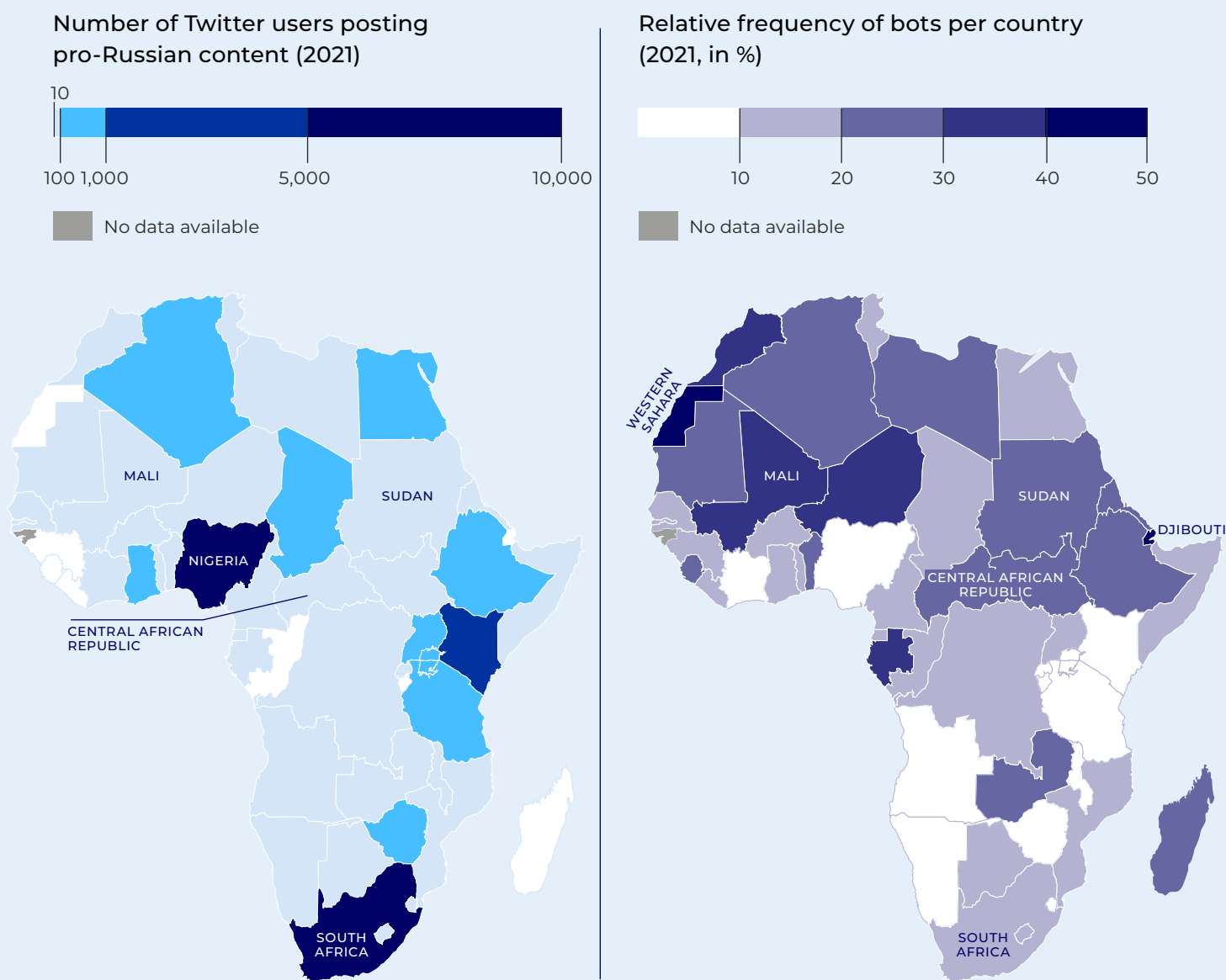
Russian influence has also been apparent in the Central African Republic, silencing critics of the pro-Russian regime, and it is clear that Moscow is also helping to fund certain local media outlets, such as the *Lengo Songo* radio station.

Generally speaking, Wagner's reputation in Africa is positive, with the Group being seen as providing security to help combat terrorism and instability. Moreover, the history of cooperation between some African countries and the former Soviet Union has helped to cement this perception, with Wagner being seen as an ally in the fight for sovereignty.

Furthermore, Africans who have been exploited by Western powers provide an ideal breeding ground for Wagner's anti-imperialist rhetoric. Its association with economic and development projects has also significantly enhanced its reputation among communities in search of growth opportunities. In certain settings, where there are limited opportunities to receive support, Wagner's presence has been seen as a viable solution, which helps to enhance its good reputation on the continent. We will analyze this further below.

Figure 7: Russian propaganda on Social Media in Africa⁶³

Source: Dominique Geissler, Dominik Bär, Nicolas Pröllochs and Stefan Feuerriegel



WAGNER'S ECOSYSTEM IN AFRICA

The Wagner Group has three main organizations operating in Africa:

1. *African Initiative*,
2. *Africa Corps* and
3. *Afrique Média TV*.

African Initiative is part of a broader disinformation strategy to gain influence in Africa. Through this initiative, Russia promotes a narrative that portrays itself as an ally in the fight against neo-colonialism, while concealing its real interests, i.e. exploiting natural resources and propping up authoritarian regimes. *African Initiative* uses disinformation to undermine Western influence and strengthen Russia's geopolitical standing on the continent, using these campaigns to spread false information on sensitive issues such as the war in Ukraine. As remarked above, by manipulating the narrative, the Kremlin is seeking to gain the sympathy and support of African public opinion, pushing the idea that its actions are designed to help African countries free themselves from the grip of colonialism⁶⁴.

While using *Africa Initiative* as its main outlet for disinformation campaigns, *Africa Corps*, the Wagner Group's successor, also has its own social media channels⁶⁵.

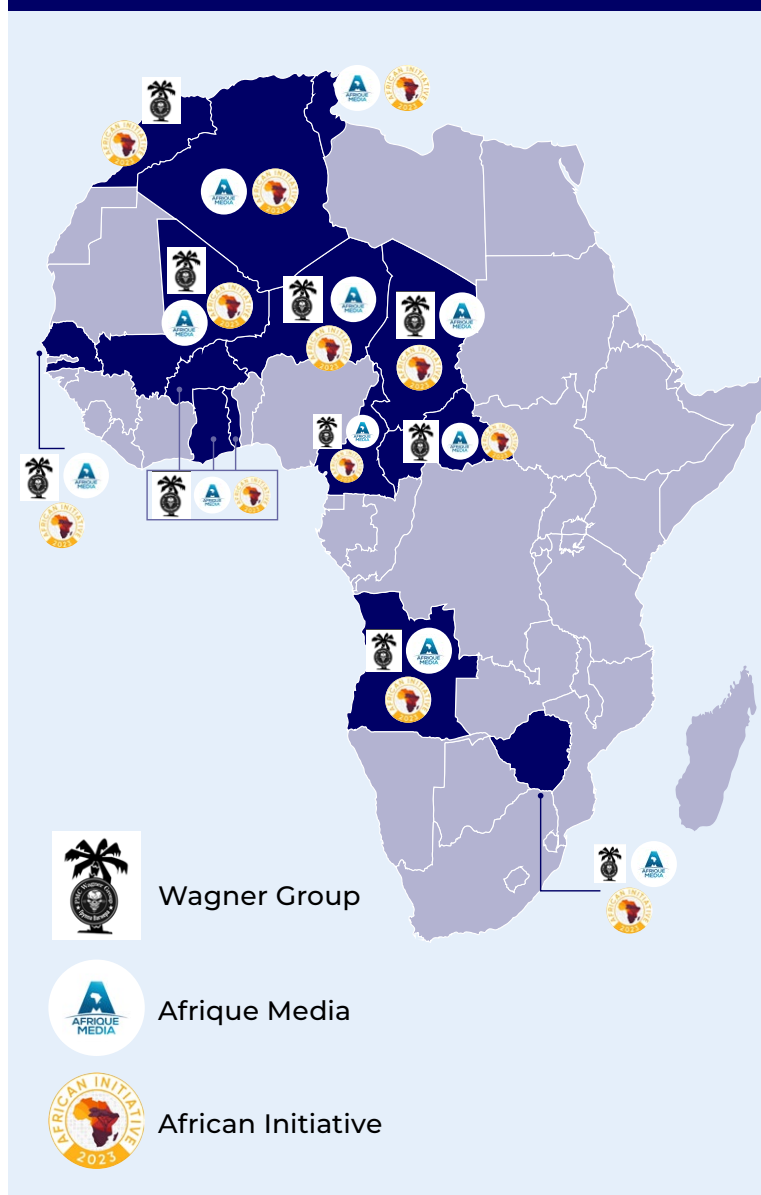
Finally, we have *Afrique Média TV*, a television channel based in Cameroon, which has become a key mouthpiece for the organizations that we will call the *Wagner orbit* in Africa⁶⁶. This media outlet has been instrumental in spreading pro-Russian propaganda, portraying Wagner as a protective force defending African countries against Western influence. The channel has played a vital role in shaping public opinion, promoting narratives that justify Russia's military presence and activities on the continent, especially in nations like the Central African Republic and Mali.

Afrique Média TV, which has a past record of supporting authoritarian regimes in Africa, has expanded its reach and discourse to align itself with the interests of the

Wagner orbit. The channel's programming includes content that glorifies Russian forces and demonizes Western countries, painting a picture in which Russian intervention is seen as a liberation and protection mission. Once a regional media outlet, *Afrique Média TV* has become a key propaganda tool for the Wagner orbit in Africa, helping to cement its power and influence in the region, underlining the importance of the media in modern information warfare and the role it plays in enabling international actors to consolidate their power⁶⁷. These media outlets have had an impact in numerous countries, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 8: Social media outlets in the Wagner orbit in Africa

Source: compiled by author



The main narratives that have been disseminated by these media outlets can be divided into the following thematic areas:

Health-related narratives:

These include narratives accusing US intelligence services of using the African population as test subjects for vaccines⁶⁸ and creating secret military biological laboratories in the region⁶⁹. Narratives on health issues also often promote vaccines and research purportedly produced by Russian laboratories⁷⁰.

Anti-Western narratives:

These include narratives that stress the need to break away from the Western discourse that has traditionally shaped the continent's media landscape and instead focus on self-determination and reflect African values and perspectives⁷¹. This is the Kremlin's attempt to portray itself as a reliable partner in the region, unlike Western countries⁷², which are portrayed as states that seek to exploit natural resources and foster a climate of instability in the region⁷³, as was explicitly argued by Alexandr Dugin in *African Initiative*⁷⁴.

Equally noteworthy are the narratives that seek to accuse NATO⁷⁵ of various terrorist acts: African nationals being recruited to fight for Ukraine is a recurring theme in these channels⁷⁶. Other notable narratives are similar to those presented by Russian media outlets disseminating disinformation in the West. They resort to rhetoric about *Nazification* when referring to Ukraine and allege that Ukraine is recruiting individuals to kill African nationals⁷⁷.

The anti-Western sentiment generated by Russia is designed to extend Russia's influence as part of its strategy to promote a multipolar world, challenging Western hegemony. As noted above, Moscow is seeking to establish itself as a key player in a world order in which several powers are competing for influence, as opposed to unipolar dominance led by the US and its allies (especially France)⁷⁸. Through military, economic and diplomatic agreements, Russia is forging strategic relationships with African governments, offering military support and access to resources in exchange for political loyalty and alliances.

Russia's multipolar strategy in Africa is part of a wider effort to realign global alliances, with the aim of challenging US and European influence in key regions of the world. With its wealth of natural resources and growing geopolitical importance, Africa has become a central battleground in the drive to create a more multipolar world order⁷⁹.

Promoting Russia's activities in Africa:

These include Russia's volunteering activities in the region. Most of these measures are aimed at young people, whether through organizing educational,⁸⁰ cultural or sporting activities⁸¹.

As previously mentioned, Russia has a strong interest in agreements being signed between African and Russian universities⁸². Collaboration agreements with universities appear to be mainly focused on areas aimed at providing a deeper understanding of Russian language and culture⁸³. From these agreements, it can be inferred that one of the main objectives is to promote the use of the Russian language in the region^{84, 85}.

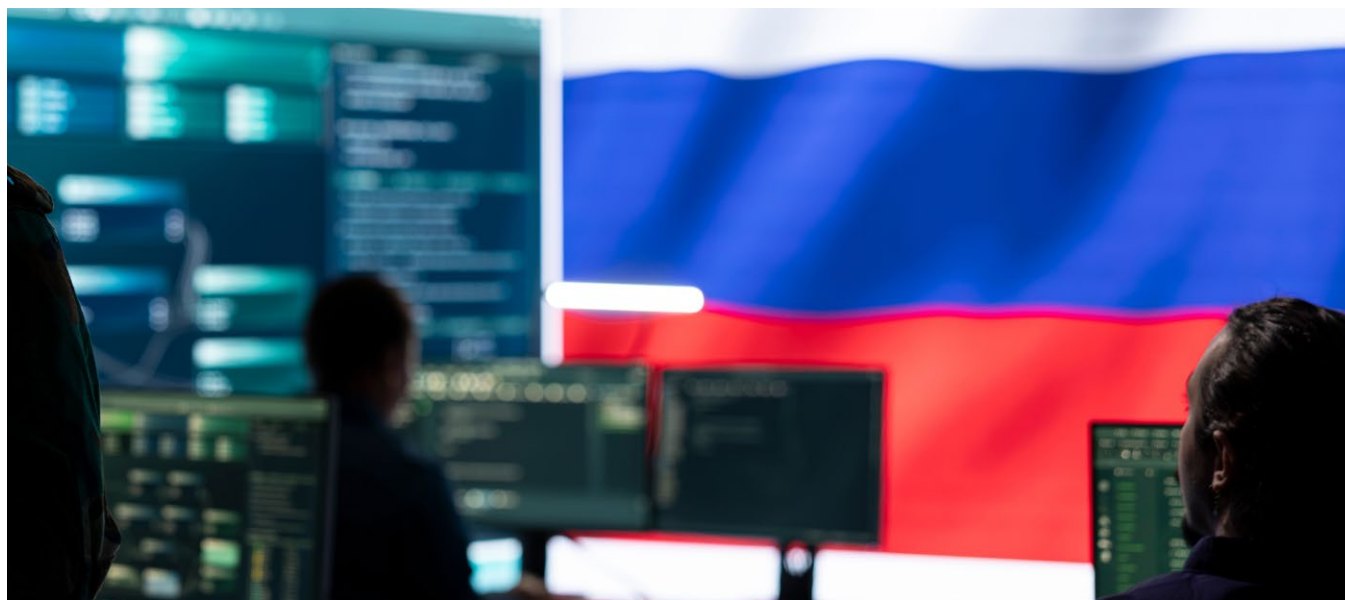
Similarly, Russia is trying to enhance the reputation of Russian citizens in the region by showing that they are needed to improve the conditions of African citizens⁸⁶.

Albeit to a lesser extent, we can also see how these media outlets are trying to promote Russia's image as a vital ally in the fight against terrorism⁸⁷, as a humanitarian partner⁸⁸. They also seek to portray it as an attractive country for African nationals to migrate to in search of work⁸⁹.

Promoting the activities of organizations in the Wagner orbit in Africa:

These media outlets highlight the important role played by organizations such as the Wagner Group and its successors in protecting the main industries of countries in the region^{90, 91}, portraying them as key allies in the fight against ISIS and other terrorist forces⁹².

These narratives are developed differently in each country on the African continent, as illustrated by the content provided by *African Initiative*⁹³.



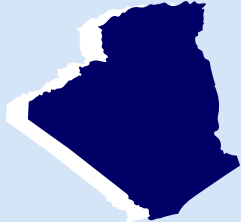
COUNTRY	EXAMPLE OF NARRATIVE
ANGOLA	It highlighted the aid that the country is receiving from Russia ⁹⁴ .
BURKINA FASO	It referred to declarations made by Burkina Faso's transitional President, Ibrahim Traoré, accusing the Ivory Coast of harboring opponents who were seeking to destabilize his country ⁹⁵ . The Côte d'Ivoire is a country that has sided with Ukraine in its fight against Russia ⁹⁶ .
MALI	The media outlet reported that Mali's army, backed by Russian allies, had allegedly clashed with terrorists in the north of the country ⁹⁷ .
MOROCCO	The article in Afrinz.ru reported on the cooperation agreement between the attorney generals of Russia and Morocco ⁹⁸ .
NIGER	The article reported on the economic rapprochement between Russia and Niger and called for a shift away from the West ⁹⁹ .
CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC	The article by African Initiative included a declaration by the Ministry of Defense of the Central African Republic (CAR), accusing the Western media of waging an information war on the CAR and its allies, especially Russia. The Ministry of Defense claimed that the recent disinformation campaigns were an attempt to discredit the Central African Armed Forces and their Russian allies in the wake of successful military operations against the rebels. The Ministry also denied accusations of wanton cruelty and suggested that the images being circulated had been manipulated by enemies of the CAR ¹⁰⁰ .
SENEGAL	The media outlet criticized the leaders' dealings with France ¹⁰¹ .
TOGO	The media outlet quoted Togo's Foreign Minister Robert Dussey when he remarked on Russia's active role in the fight against terrorism in Africa ¹⁰² .
ZIMBABWE	Zimbabwe's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Frederick Shava, announced his country's intention to hold a Russia-Africa summit ¹⁰³ . The media outlet has also published announcements about Wagner's recruitment of Africans ^{104, 105} and has disseminated narratives supporting China's actions in the region ¹⁰⁶ .

Thus, we can see how Russian propaganda on the continent varies considerably between North Africa and the Sahel. While in the North, Russia focuses on promoting economic, cultural and educational cooperation, in the Sahel, Russian propaganda is focused

on destabilizing governments that are not aligned with Moscow, using organizations in the Wagner orbit to achieve these goals. This can be seen very clearly by examining two countries in North Africa and two in the Sahel.

NORTH AFRICAN COUNTRIES

ALGERIA



Algeria joined the *Mediterranean Dialogue* in March 2000, a framework for consultation and cooperation that brings NATO member countries together with their southern Mediterranean partners. Since then, relations between Algeria and NATO have made significant progress¹⁰⁷. An example of this was Admiral Rob Bauer's visit to the country in April 2024, where he noted that *"Algeria is an increasingly active partner and we warmly welcome that. We cooperate, for instance, on counter-terrorism, military dialogue and consultation, defense reform, crisis management and emerging security challenges"*¹⁰⁸.

However, we should not forget that the country's current President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, attended the St Petersburg International Economic Forum on 16 June 2023¹⁰⁹. Moreover, it should be stressed that Algeria and Russia maintain close cooperation, with the volume of bilateral trade increasing by almost 70% in 2022¹¹⁰. We must also highlight Tebboune's remarks, noting the role played by Russia in Algeria's independence thanks to its military support¹¹¹.

However, the Wagner orbit's mercenary activities in Algeria's southern and eastern neighbors are a bone of contention. Algeria, which buys most of its arms from Russia, remains firmly committed to non-alignment, expressing concern about Wagner's presence in the Sahel region and Libya, which has led to diplomatic tensions between the countries¹¹².

Despite the fact that there is no support for the Wagner orbit from the Algerian authorities, Algeria is one of the countries on the continent where the demand to learn Russian has grown most. For example, the Russian Language Centre in Algeria, which opened on 18 September 2023, received 4,000 applications to enroll in a single day¹¹³.

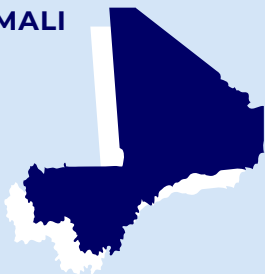
TUNISIA



In the wake of tensions between Tunisian President Kais Saied and several Western countries over the lack of opposition in the latest general elections¹¹⁴, there has been increased cooperation between Tunisia and Russia. Russian aircraft have been detected landing at Djerba airport near the Libyan border, raising concerns about the nature of these activities¹¹⁵ and prompting speculation about the presence of Russian military personnel and equipment in the region. These activities have been a source of concern, due to fears that Russia (Wagner orbit) is using Tunisia as a base for operations in Africa¹¹⁶. However, the Tunisian embassy in Rome has denied that members of the former Russian paramilitary group Wagner are present in its territory, stressing that Tunisia is an independent sovereign country that fully controls its territory and rejects any foreign interference in its domestic affairs¹¹⁷.

COUNTRIES IN THE SAHEL

MALI



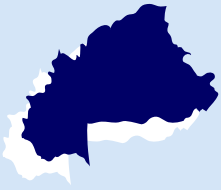
Mali's current President is Assimi Goita, a former colonel in Mali's special forces. Since his rise to power, Goita has sought to strengthen ties with Russia, moving away from France's traditional sphere of influence in the region. This relationship has manifested itself in a number of ways, including military and economic cooperation.

For example, in 2022, Russia supplied fighter jets and helicopters to Mali, underlining Moscow's continued military support¹¹⁸. Furthermore, Goita has held frequent talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, discussing security issues and essential supplies such as food and fuel¹¹⁹.

The Malian government has shown strong support for the Wagner Group since it arrived in December 2021. This support has manifested itself in a number of ways. Wagner is paid by the Malian government and military establishment for its activities in Mali, including training, close protection and counter-terrorism operations. The withdrawal of other foreign military forces and resulting international isolation has made Bamako even more dependent on Wagner to maintain security and stability in the country. Despite the Russian government's attempts to take control of the Wagner contract, the Malian government has insisted on keeping the mercenaries in the country, underlining its continued dependence and support. Officials from the transitional government and the Malian military have facilitated the Wagner Group's expansion and operations in Mali, which has even led to them being hit by international sanctions. This support illustrates the importance that the Malian government attaches to Wagner's presence in its national security strategy, despite the associated controversies and challenges¹²⁰.

Wagner suffered a military defeat at Tinzaouaten, which has not only had significant repercussions for the organization, but has also cast doubt on the effectiveness of the Moscow-backed mercenaries¹²¹. During this defeat of the Wagner military group, the propagandist from *The Grey Zone* channel, Nikita Fedyanin, was killed. He had played a crucial role in disseminating propaganda for the Wagner Group and Moscow, helping to shape public perception and justify the group's actions in Africa. The loss of this propagandist was significant because propaganda has always been one of the Wagner Group's key tools, used to gain support and legitimize its operations. The death of a prominent figure in this field weakened their communication efforts and persuasive powers. Furthermore, this propagandist was not only important for external propaganda, but also for morale within the group¹²².

Mali is also one of the countries where numerous Russian-language universities and study centers have appeared in recent years. The country even goes so far as to hold award ceremonies for Malian students who are studying Russian¹²³.

BURKINA FASO

The Wagner Group has had a strong influence in Burkina Faso, an area that has witnessed a marked rise in violence and jihadist activity in recent years. Burkina Faso struck a partnership with the Wagner Group to fight jihadist forces, which was viewed as a desperate measure to combat the insurgency and stabilize the country. However, the presence of Russian mercenaries also posed significant risks, including human rights violations and increased instability. The partnership with the Wagner Group and the arrival of these fighters was seen as a move to strengthen local security forces and improve the country's ability to tackle the jihadist threat¹²⁴. Support for the troops from the Wagner orbit has been strong among the local population¹²⁵. In February 2024, Burkina Faso allowed a 100-strong Russian contingent to enter the country to support its leader, Ibrahim Traoré, and to train local forces¹²⁶.

Burkina Faso is another country that has introduced Russian language courses in its schools, a move following a meeting between Burkina Faso and Russian officials, signaling a deepening partnership between the two countries. The Ministry of Education described the initiative as “ambitious”, aimed at increasing students’ exposure to culture and language and strengthening bilateral relations^{127, 128}.



The background of the entire page is a complex, abstract network of glowing blue lines and nodes. The lines are thin and interconnected, creating a web-like structure that fills the frame. The nodes are small, bright blue dots, some of which are more prominent than others. The overall color scheme is a deep blue, with the glowing elements providing a contrast.

02 CHINA

2. CHINA

Despite mutual mistrust and against the backdrop of conflicting interests, Russia and China seem to have put aside their differences over their relations in Africa.

Both powers had historically competed to influence communist movements and civil wars in Africa during the Cold War. However, in recent decades, they have arguably taken on complementary roles on the continent.

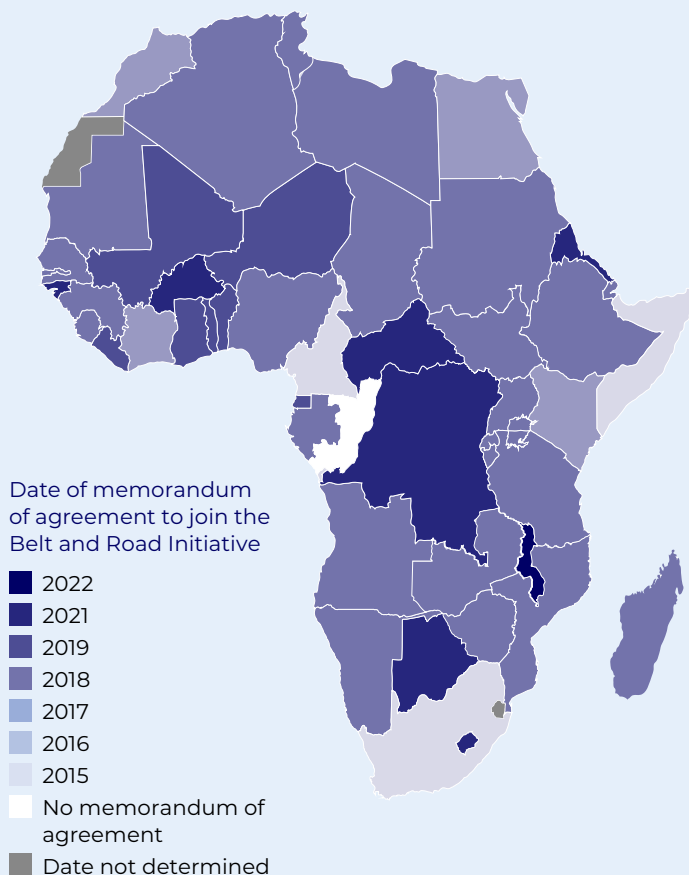
Indeed, as outlined in the previous section, while Russia has used *hard power* tools, basing its actions on military cooperation and, more broadly, the use of force, China has chosen to direct its activity towards economic or cultural matters (*soft power*), investing in infrastructure and becoming Africa's largest bilateral trade partner since 2009. Its *Belt and Road initiative* has been endorsed by most African countries, which has strengthened its economic presence, as shown in the figure below.

Figure 9: Penetration of the Belt and Road Initiative in Africa¹²⁹

Source: Lynch, E. A. (2024). *La Iniciativa de la Franja y la Ruta de China en África del Este: ¿Encontrando el éxito en el fracaso?* In *MILITARY REVIEW*. <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/Spanish/Q1-2024/Lynch-SPA-Q1-2024/Lynch-SPA-Q1-2024-UA.pdf>

Despite the partial overlap between their histories and interests, relations between Russia and China in Africa are simultaneously marked by cooperation and competition, as they seek to strengthen or at least maintain their respective positions. One example: while trade between Russia and Africa has increased significantly in recent years, it is still far smaller than trade between Africa and China.

WHAT IS CERTAIN IS THAT CHINA HAS GREATLY INTENSIFIED ITS PROPAGANDA PUSH IN AFRICA AS PART OF ITS *SOFT POWER* STRATEGY. THESE EFFORTS ARE DESIGNED TO IMPROVE CHINA'S IMAGE AND PROMOTE ITS STRATEGIC INTERESTS ON THE CONTINENT.



Through this and a number of other initiatives, China is seeking to shape public opinion and strengthen its ties with African countries. One of the main methods used by China to strengthen its influence is to set up educational and cultural institutions in Africa. A prime example is the *Mwalimu Nyerere Memorial Academy* in Tanzania, which not only promotes Chinese culture and values, but is also used as a platform for disseminating propaganda. These initiatives portray China as a benevolent and reliable partner, which helps to improve its image in the region¹³⁰.



This “cultural” rapprochement may be one of the most impactful actions in the short term, as can be seen from the Chinese Ministry of Education’s statement in September 2023 announcing the launch of a number of programs to enhance Chinese-African cooperation in the education sector, focusing on a cooperation plan between Chinese and African universities, and announcing the creation of five centers for Chinese-African cooperation in various cultural fields, including the dissemination of the Chinese language¹³¹.

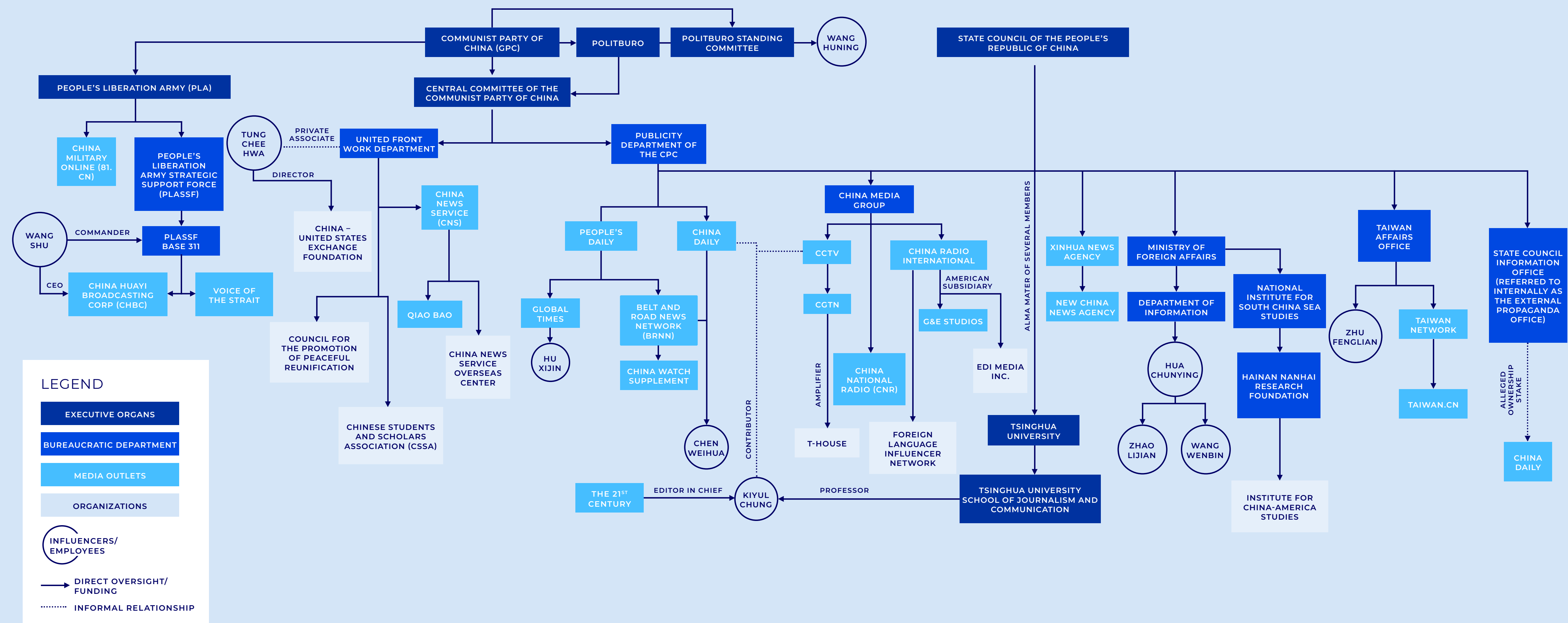
Furthermore, China has been investing heavily in the media in Africa, e.g. by setting up Chinese state-owned media outlets such as *Xinhua News Agency* and *China Central Television* (CCTV), broadcasting pro-Chinese content and highlighting China’s contributions to African development, while providing training and support to African journalists, and generally promoting media coverage favorable to Chinese interests.

AS NOTED ABOVE, CHINA HAS BEEN USING ITS STATE MEDIA AND SOCIAL NETWORKS TO DISSEMINATE NARRATIVES THAT ARE FAVORABLE TO ITS GOVERNMENT AND POLICIES, WHICH INCLUDES USING DIGITAL PLATFORMS AND FAKE OR AUTOMATED ACCOUNTS AIMED AT AMPLIFYING ITS MESSAGE.

Thus, the core narratives being pushed by China are aimed at reinforcing China’s reputation as a benevolent leading global state and a reliable development partner, while discrediting rival countries, especially the United States, using conspiracy theories and extensive disinformation campaigns¹³².

Unlike Russia, almost all Chinese media outlets are official (funded by the Chinese Communist Party itself), with no major differences in subject matter or style between them.

Figure 10: China’s propaganda and disinformation landscape¹⁶⁷
Source: Eide, C., Lt, and Watts, C. (2021, November 19). China’s Propaganda and Disinformation Landscape—2021 Snapshot. Microsoft Threat Analysis Center (formerly Miburo). <https://miburo.substack.com/p/chinapropagandadisinformationlandscape>



Through exchange and cooperation programs, China has been inviting African leaders, academics and students to visit China. During these visits, they are presented with a positive picture of the country, which helps to create a network of influencers who can promote the Chinese narrative in their home countries.

China also organizes and sponsors numerous events and conferences in Africa, where they discuss topics of mutual interest and promote cooperation. This serves as a platform for propaganda and allows China to present its policies and projects in a favorable light, bolstering its image as a strategic ally and development partner.

As we have already observed, China's propaganda efforts in Africa are an integral part of its *soft power* strategy. Through educational projects, media outlets, exchanges and events, China is seeking to heavily influence public opinion and strengthen its ties with African countries. As reported by various sources, these efforts are designed to enhance its image and promote its strategic interests on the continent¹³³.

EDUCATION IS ANOTHER KEY ELEMENT OF CHINA'S DRIVE TO GAIN INFLUENCE.

Indeed, by providing scholarships, training and education programs, China has been attracting African students to its universities and educational institutions. These programs not only provide academic education, they also immerse students in Chinese culture and values, promoting its cultural and political ethos. Through institutions such as the various *Confucius Institutes*, China spreads its language and culture, strengthening cultural ties between China and Africa. This *soft power* strategy not only enhances China's image in the region, it also creates a generation of African leaders who, having taken a positive view of China, will be willing to engage with the country in the future¹³⁴.

Efforts to promote these educational programs in Africa have been central to the activities of all of China's official media outlets¹³⁵.

According to China's Ministry of Education, of the 81,562 Africans studying in China in 2018, 6,385 were pursuing a PhD, accounting for around 20% of all foreign students studying for a PhD in China; this was a result of the commitment made by the Chinese government that year to provide 50,000 scholarships for African students to pursue higher education in China over the following three years. This effort has yielded results, with the number of African students in China continuing to grow steadily in 2024, cementing China's position as an increasingly popular study destination among young Africans¹³⁶.

China's interest in African education mainly stems from the *Forum on China-Africa Cooperation* (FOCAC), which, since its inception in 2000, has helped to build partnerships between Chinese and African universities, promoting knowledge transfer and capacity building on the African continent¹³⁷.

Chinese institutions acquire full ownership of intellectual property developed by international students. This reflects China's ambitions to develop key industries through heavy investment in research and innovation¹³⁸.

On the other hand, China is funding African media outlets by sharing content and training local journalists, all with the aim of entrenching its narratives and policies on the continent. This effort is part of an overall strategy by the Chinese Communist Party to gain influence in developing countries by shaping their news environments.

China's largest media conglomerate, *Xinhua*, has 37 offices in Africa, more than any other news agency, African or otherwise. Moreover, StarTimes, Africa's largest digital television operator, is installing satellite dishes in 10,000 rural households across 20 African countries, connecting them to Chinese digital television.

Additionally, many young African journalists are being trained in China and employed by Chinese media organizations. In Kenya, for example, 500 journalists and local staff work for Chinese media agencies, covering 1,800 stories a month. This training and employment enables China to clearly influence media coverage in Africa, promoting a positive view of China and its investments.

The Chinese Communist Party sees the media as a battleground to “tell China’s story well”, a phrase coined by Party General Secretary Xi Jinping in 2013. It seems clear that China’s strategy in the African media aims to win battles without fighting, distorting African news coverage, disrupting access to independent information and shaping public debates on governance, society and the economy¹³⁹.

Some of the main Tactics, Techniques and Procedures used by China on the African continent include¹⁴⁰:

- Using local media and influential African voices to spread Chinese propaganda, forging and building close and mutually beneficial partnerships with prominent foreign figures, e.g. those designated by the Chinese Communist Party as “*Friends of China*”.
- It is very common to see African citizens appearing regularly in China’s official mainstream media, providing quotations or writing articles or opinion pieces, receiving material support, financial support and even all-expense-paid trips to China in return.

As is to be expected, these figures enhance the appeal of and affinity for overseas propaganda, according to Liu Yunshan (former Director of the Propaganda Department of the Chinese Communist Party)¹⁴¹.

- Establishing content-sharing agreements. These agreements have formed the backbone of a wide variety of partnerships between African and Chinese organizations. Although Beijing claims that these initiatives benefit the African media, the latter’s efforts to report critically on China’s economic and political interests in Africa are ultimately thwarted by these agreements. For example, the *Standard* newspaper in Kenya lost funding for its bi-monthly economic supplement when it published a critical investigative report on the transport project being funded by the People’s Republic of China in Kenya¹⁴².
- Hiring local staff for its official channels. China has hired numerous journalists and media workers in Africa to push its agenda. For example, the official media outlet *CGTN* in Nairobi employs around 200 African journalists¹⁴³.
- Training African journalists in China. African journalists attend training courses for reporters in the People’s Republic of China, where they are encouraged to disseminate Chinese beliefs and values¹⁴⁴.

Finally, it should be noted that, unlike Russia, China does not appear to apply different influence-building methods between countries in North Africa and the Sahel.





03

THE IMPACT
OF RUSSIAN
AND CHINESE
PROPAGANDA
IN AFRICA

3.1 POINTS TO CONSIDER IN THE CASE OF RUSSIA

Although Russia and China have been trying to increase their influence in Africa for years through propaganda, there is evidence that their efforts have not been as successful as they would have liked, and there may be signs that their current influence is not as great as it was in the past, as we shall see below.

When *Afrobarometer*¹⁴⁵ asked Africans which foreign actor had the most positive influence on their respective countries in 2021, the results were conclusive: China ranked highest (63% said it had a positive influence), followed by the United States (60%), while their “former colonial power”, usually a European country, came second to last (46%). Only Russia ranked lower (35%), a situation that may have been exacerbated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Although many African countries have refrained from condemning the invasion in the UN, an analysis of sentiment in the African media shows a negative trend towards Russia.

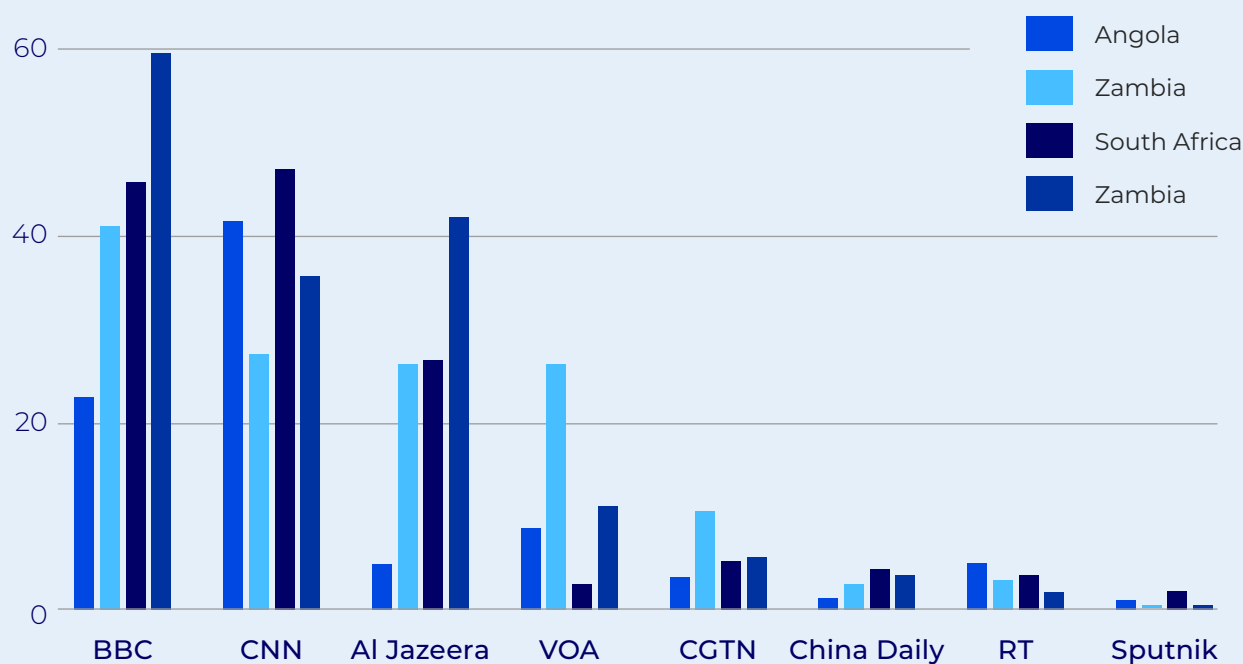
Moreover, Western sanctions against Russia have also had a negative impact on African economies, which could erode support for Moscow.

Finally, it should be noted that most information on the war in Ukraine comes from Western news agencies, which limits the spread of the Russian narrative.

The following figure shows the different media outlets used in certain countries on the African continent.

Figure 11: The influence of different media outlets in various African countries¹⁴⁶

Source: Dani Madrid-Morales, Herman Wasserman. *The “Rise of the Rest” in Global Media and Competition Over News Narratives in Africa*. In: *IS AFRICA TURNING AGAINST THE WEST?* (ISPI, November, 2023)





Although Russia is widely known to have invested in state media organizations such as Sputnik and RT, their audience is still relatively small compared to Western media outlets.

With regard to Wagner, the arrival of Russian private military companies (PMCs) in Africa was initially met with skepticism and mistrust. In countries such as the Central African Republic, Mozambique and Sudan, the local media portrayed their presence with a predominantly negative tone. They were accused of supporting corrupt and authoritarian governments, committing abuses against civilians and exploiting natural resources under the pretext of maintaining security. In Mozambique, there was also criticism of their ineffectiveness in the war against Islamist insurgents. However, over time, the perception of Russian PMCs has improved markedly, especially in Mali. This shift is partly due to Russia's ability to provide stability and security, as witnessed in its interventions in Syria and the CAR. Africans have begun to associate the Russian presence with stability, which is highly prized in African societies. Additionally, the crisis in French-African relations has fostered a more positive view of Russian intervention, as many Africans see Russia as an alternative to the influence of France, which they regard as neo-colonialist. In Mali, the local media highlight the role played by Russian PMCs in helping to fight terrorism and stabilize the country, using more neutral and positive terms to describe their presence¹⁴⁷.

As regards younger populations, young Africans are highly susceptible to anti-Western propaganda, especially that being pushed by Russia. Young people are deeply unhappy with their social and economic plight, blaming both their leaders and the former colonial powers. This discontent legitimizes almost any action, including joining Islamist movements. France's forced withdrawal from several African countries may have sparked hope among young people, which has been exploited by the Kremlin's propaganda.

ADDITIONALLY, YOUNG AFRICANS PRIMARILY GET THEIR INFORMATION FROM SOCIAL NETWORKS SUCH AS FACEBOOK, TIKTOK AND TELEGRAM, WHERE ANTI-WESTERN PROPAGANDA IS RIFE.

This propaganda is framed as a continuation of the anti-colonial resistance of historical figures such as Ahmed Sékou-Touré and Kwame Nkrumah, and although they recognize that Russia also spreads propaganda, many young people believe it is beneficial and it gives them hope. It targets different audiences, creating a climate of trust and the illusion of a common cause. For this reason, although they do not necessarily support Russian or Chinese ideologies, young Africans see Russia as an alternative to Western powers, based on the notion that *"the enemy of my enemy is my friend"*¹⁴⁸.

3.2 POINTS TO CONSIDER IN THE CASE OF CHINA

In recent years, there has been growing resentment towards China in Africa, fuelled by concerns about China's trade practices, natural resource exploitation and the environmental impact of its investments¹⁴⁹, leading to protests and calls for agreements with China to be cancelled¹⁵⁰. Furthermore, the perception that China is creating a “debt trap” for African countries has also heightened mistrust.

The following table presents evidence of resentment towards China and the main factors behind, manifestations and cases of this¹⁵¹.

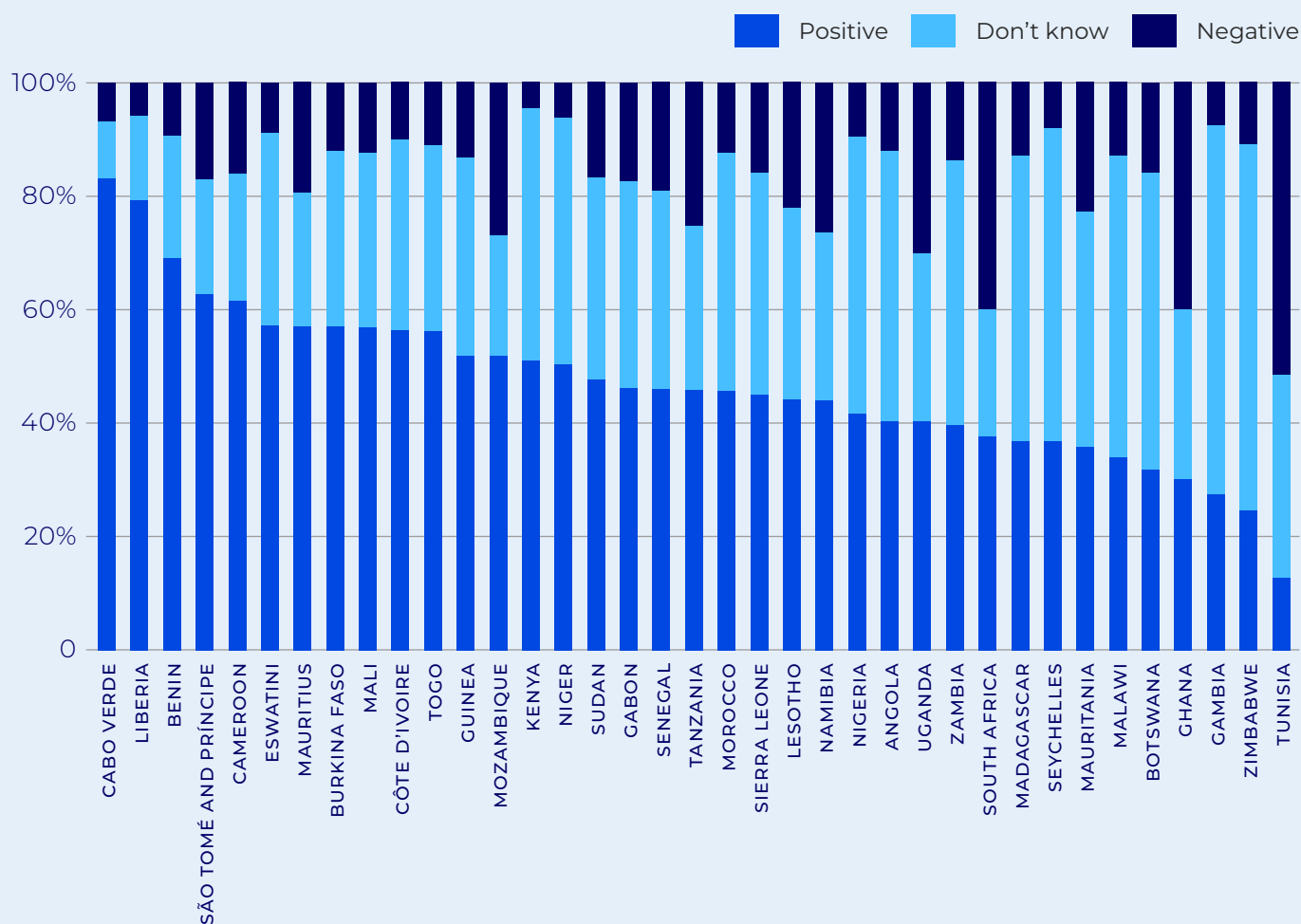
Table 2: Elements for the analysis of resentment towards China in Africa.

Source: Hagan Sibiri. *Anti-Chinese Resentment in Africa*. In: *IS AFRICA TURNING AGAINST THE WEST?* (ISPI. November, 2023)

FACTORS	MAIN COUNTRIES	TYPE OF MANIFESTATION
Concern of Unfair and Imbalanced Partnerships	ANGOLA, DRC, GHANA, GUINEA, KENYA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organized public protests against Chinese firms Intense political debate, public outrage, resistance, and opposition towards Chinese businesses and agreements involving China Public criticism and anxiety over mounting debt to China Hostilities, violent clashes, and attacks against Chinese businesses and nationals Legal process to stop the operation of Chinese firms
Chinese Immersion in the Local Economy, Job Market, and Land Acquisition	DRC, KENYA, LESOTHO, MADAGASCAR, SUDAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-Chinese slogans Organized public protests against Chinese firms Intense political debate, public outrage, resistance, and opposition towards Chinese businesses and agreements involving China Hostilities, violent clashes, and attacks against Chinese businesses and nationals Parliamentary boycott by opposition parties
Chinese Extractive Activities and their Environmental Impact	DRC, GHANA, CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC, ZAMBIA, KENYA, GAMBIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organized public protests against Chinese firms Intense political debate, public outrage, resistance, and opposition towards Chinese businesses and agreements involving China Hostilities, violent clashes, and attacks against Chinese businesses and nationals Legal process to stop the operation of Chinese firms
Eccentric Investments and Labor Practices of Chinese firms	KENYA, SOUTH AFRICA, ZAMBIA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organized public protests against Chinese firms Intense political debate, public outrage, resistance, and opposition towards Chinese businesses and agreements involving China Public criticism and anxiety over mounting debt to China Hostilities, violent clashes, and attacks against Chinese businesses and nationals
Concerns of Chinese Finances Propping up Corrupt Regimes	ANGOLA, DRC, KENYA, SUDAN, UGANDA, ZAMBIA, ZIMBABWE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organized public protests against Chinese firms Intense political debate, public outrage, resistance, and opposition towards Chinese businesses and agreements involving China Public criticism and anxiety over mounting debt to China Hostilities, violent clashes, and attacks against Chinese businesses and nationals Legal process to stop the operation of Chinese firms

Figure 12: Survey on China's influence in Africa

Source: Robert Mattes, Peter Lewis. *Africans' Views of the US and China*. In: *IS AFRICA TURNING AGAINST THE WEST?* (ISPI. November, 2023)



Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic severely damaged China's reputation in Africa, due to accusations of racism and the view that China did not provide enough aid.

Indeed, the Chinese development model, based on authoritarianism and a lack of transparency, seems to have become less attractive to some African countries that are seeking more democratic and sustainable

models. The figure above shows Africans' views on China's influence in different countries between 2022 and 2023, based on the following question: "Do you think that the economic and political influence of each of the following countries on your country is mostly positive, mostly negative, or haven't you heard enough to say?"¹⁵².

3.3 FACTORS LIMITING RUSSIA'S AND CHINA'S INFLUENCE THROUGH PROPAGANDA

Firstly, it should be acknowledged that there is a growing trend among African countries to diversify their alliances and seek greater autonomy in international relations. The (re)emergence of “non-alignment” as a guiding principle of foreign policy in several African countries clearly limits the influence of any foreign power, including Russia and China.

Furthermore, the growing importance of regional institutions such as the African Union (AU)¹⁵³ and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS)¹⁵⁴ is enabling African countries to coordinate their positions and withstand external pressure.

Moreover, it has become apparent that African civil society is playing a more active role in scrutinizing relations with foreign powers, including Russia and China. This is largely due to the proliferation of independent media outlets and access to information via the internet, which has raised awareness of the risks of dependence on a single power.

IN SHORT, WHILE RUSSIA AND CHINA HAVE RAMPED UP THEIR PROPAGANDA EFFORTS IN AFRICA, THERE ARE SIGNS THAT THEIR INFLUENCE MAY HAVE WANED IN RECENT YEARS.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine, growing resentment towards Chinese practices and African countries' drive for autonomy are all factors limiting the success of Russian and Chinese propaganda on the continent.





04 CONCLUSIONS & PROPOSALS

4.1 CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be drawn from this paper:

REGARDING RUSSIA

Following the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent deterioration in relations with the West, Africa re-emerged as an area of peripheral interest for Russia.

The Kremlin's interests in Africa are aimed at achieving five key objectives:



To undermine democracy and the rule of law, including Western efforts to strengthen these values and the institutions that uphold them.



To break Russia's diplomatic isolation by strengthening and broadening Russia's trade, political and security ties with Africa's business and political elites.



To create new markets and trade opportunities to mitigate Western sanctions, especially in those areas where Russia has already established a market advantage, namely: in energy, mining, arms and agriculture.



To reassert its own relevance on the international stage, supporting the creation of a multipolar world, and demonstrating its ability to influence political events and shape global outcomes.



To advance its own geo-strategic ambitions, in particular by building up its military presence and creating security partnerships in countries along the Red Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea and even the Atlantic.

To achieve these goals, the Kremlin has stepped up its campaigns in Africa, using disinformation tactics to exploit historical tensions and portray the West as the colonial enemy, as well as portraying itself as an anti-imperialist ally.

Russia has been relentlessly recruiting African *influencers* who disseminate pro-Russian narratives.

Russia exerts two types of influence in Africa, which we will call *soft power* and *hard power*.

Through *soft power*, Russia strengthens its cultural and educational ties with Africa by signing agreements, holding international congresses and creating Russian cultural centers.

Through *hard power*, Russia provides military support to several authoritarian governments and leaders in Africa, primarily using organizations within what we have termed as the *Wagner orbit*.

REGARDING CHINA

Despite mutual mistrust and against the backdrop of conflicting interests, Russia and China seem to have put aside their differences over their relations in Africa.

While Russia has used *hard power* tools, basing its actions on military cooperation and, more broadly, the use of force, China has chosen to direct its activity towards economic or cultural matters (*soft power*).

One of the main methods used by China to strengthen its influence is to set up educational and cultural institutions in Africa.

China has been using its state media and social networks to disseminate narratives that are favorable to its government and policies, which includes using digital platforms and fake or automated accounts.

By providing scholarships, training and education programs, China has been attracting African students to its universities and educational institutions. These programs not only provide academic education, they also immerse students in Chinese culture and values, promoting its cultural and political ethos.

The main Tactics, Techniques and Procedures used by China on the African continent:



Using local media and influential African voices to spread Chinese propaganda, forging and building close and mutually beneficial partnerships with prominent foreign figures.



African citizens appearing regularly in China's official mainstream media, being interviewed or providing quotations, or writing articles or opinion pieces and receiving material support, financial support and even all-expense-paid trips to China in return.



Establishing content-sharing agreements in the media; these form the backbone of a wide variety of partnerships between African and Chinese media organizations.



China has hired numerous journalists and media workers in Africa to push its agenda.



Training African journalists in China.

4.2 PROPOSALS

It would appear that more investment in Western education programs is needed in Africa to counter the image that Russia and China are trying to portray on the African continent, with narratives that are clearly at odds with Western values, liberal democracies and the reality and unquestionable benefits of peacekeeping alliances such as NATO.

Below, we have developed some additional proposals to address the aforementioned problems.

SOLUTIONS TO IDENTIFY DISINFORMATION

These involve monitoring and verifying information to identify disinformation, including:

- **Fact-checking and data verification:** confirming the accuracy of claims with rigorous verification methods.
- **In-depth research:** detailed content analysis to determine the source of disinformation and the motivations behind it.

Although fact-checkers have been set up in a few countries on the African continent, the speed and scale of disinformation is beyond the capacity of these fact-checkers to detect and correct it in real time, especially in areas with poor internet access. Moreover, even when information is verified, the outcomes of these verifications are often not as widely disseminated as the initial misleading messages.

Furthermore, it should be remembered that the information warfare efforts of Russia and China on the continent mainly focus on propaganda, not disinformation.

Fact-checkers do not tend to conduct in-depth analyses of propaganda campaigns in countries. They usually debunk specific campaigns, losing sight of the overall strategy being pursued by one country to influence another.

SOLUTIONS TARGETING SOURCES AND DISSEMINATORS OF DISINFORMATION:

These measures seek to change the legal and social climate that shapes the behavior of people who produce and disseminate information:

- **Information campaigns:** disseminating reliable information to counter false narratives.
- **Legal measures:** promoting regulations to regulate information and punish disinformation, especially during election periods.
- **Electoral engagement:** monitoring election pledges and tactics to counter lies in political campaigns.

It is important to remember that many of Russia's and China's activities in Africa are designed to support dictatorial regimes.

However, it should be stressed that any new regulations that are proposed must respect fundamental rights, such as freedom of expression and freedom of information.

The private sector is at the forefront of developing innovative solutions to support civil society organizations (CSOs) that are pressuring African governments to improve disinformation legislation. For example, LEXOTA (Laws on Expression Online: Tracker and Analysis), which was launched in 2022, is the first comprehensive tool to analyze online disinformation laws, policies and government actions across sub-Saharan Africa¹⁵⁵.

SOLUTIONS FOCUSED ON PRODUCTION AND DISSEMINATION MECHANISMS AND AUDIENCES TARGETED BY DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGNS:

These apply to disinformation production and dissemination processes, such as:

- **Technical/algorithmic approaches:** using AI and dedicated algorithms to automatically detect disinformation.
- **Improving content:** improving editorial policies and strengthening community standards on platforms.

Developing robust moderation mechanisms to prevent the spread of harmful content. Platforms must reduce the visibility of incorrect information and prevent their algorithms from amplifying disinformation and propaganda¹⁵⁶.

EDUCATION ON IDENTIFYING CREDIBLE SOURCES:

Aim: equipping the public with the tools to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources, primarily by helping to identify funders of media outlets that publish certain content.

Actions: creating guidelines and workshops in local languages with clear examples to help local people identify relevant issues.

One effective way for NGOs to combat disinformation is by partnering with local media outlets to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills. For example, NGOs in Nigeria, such as Paradigm Initiative, ‘Enough is Enough’ Nigeria (EiE) and the Nigerian Press Organization (NPO), have partnered with local media outlets such as Premium Times, Channels TV and the British Council to promote media literacy and critical thinking skills to combat disinformation¹⁵⁷.

ENGAGING WITH THE PUBLIC AND HOLDING WORKSHOPS AND EVENTS:

This solution has already been proposed by NATO¹⁵⁸: NATO’s most powerful means of countering disinformation is by proactively sharing accurate information. Through open, transparent and clear public communications, NATO is able to “pre-bunk” potential disinformation, anticipating hostile narratives and pre-empting their spread.

The Alliance engages with the public through a wide variety of channels, including social media, relations with journalists and the NATO website. NATO is fully committed to transparency and regularly publishes information about its activities and plans, for example by sharing a schedule of NATO and Allied exercises well in advance. All of NATO’s communications activities¹⁵⁹ are in line with the Alliance’s core democratic values, including freedom of speech and freedom of the press¹⁶⁰.

CONTINUING TO SUPPORT THE REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS PRODUCED BY THE GLOBAL ENGAGEMENT CENTER:

To recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation efforts aimed at undermining or influencing the policies, security, or stability of the United States, its allies, and partner nations¹⁶¹.

The GEC’s operation in Africa was its largest yet, exposing a complex Kremlin-backed plan called “African Initiative”, which had been set in motion to undermine US and Western influence across Africa by amplifying disinformation online about US-funded health programs. The Russian campaign recruited independent journalists, bloggers and public leaders to help spread conspiracy theories critical of the health programs on websites, social media and Telegram channels¹⁶².

In this respect, it may be beneficial to work with independent professionals or local social media personalities to get the right messages across to target audiences.

We have found a number of success stories, including Owiny Hakim in Uganda, who has been a successful civic educator, teaching young people about the dangers of disinformation and the importance of inclusive dialogue, helping to build more informed and cohesive communities. Vanessa Manessong from Code for Africa has worked on educating young people on how to identify and combat disinformation on social media, focusing on 14-24 year olds in order to reduce their vulnerability.

Kunle Adebajo from HumAngle Media has documented and exposed the methods used by extremist groups to radicalize and recruit young people through social media, raising awareness of these tactics to protect young people. Harriet Ofori from Penplusbytes in Ghana has spearheaded public awareness campaigns and media literacy training, improving the ability of young people to distinguish the truth from false information and strengthening community resistance to disinformation. These examples show how education and media literacy can empower young people and protect them from disinformation¹⁶³.

WESTERN INSTITUTIONS MUST START RESPECTING LOCAL VALUES WHEN ENGAGING WITH AFRICAN GOVERNMENTS:

There have been many flaws in the way Western policies have been pursued in Africa. Western leaders have limited knowledge of Africa, leading to condescending and ill-informed policies. It is essential that the West respects local values when engaging with African governments in order to avoid an anti-Western backlash. Africa has become a playground for powers such as China, Russia, Europe and the United States, each with different approaches and objectives. China funds infrastructure projects without voicing concerns over governance issues, while Russia focuses on military support, especially in the Sahel zone. Both the US and Europe try to influence African governance by imposing conditions based on specific values. This is often perceived as neo-colonialism. Promoting LGBTQ rights has sparked a fierce backlash in Africa, where many leaders and citizens see these initiatives as a Western imposition that does not respect their values and

traditions. Ill-conceived Western policies not only fail to improve the human rights situation in Africa, but also fuel local resistance. Rather than imposing conditions, it would be more effective for the West to facilitate trade and investment by adopting more pragmatic and less paternalistic policies. This paper concludes that in order to improve relations and cooperation with Africa, the West needs to adopt a more respectful and pragmatic approach, aligned with local values and needs, rather than imposing its own values and expectations¹⁶⁴.

WARNING AFRICAN STUDENTS OF THE DANGERS OF PURSUING THEIR EDUCATION IN RUSSIA:

Russia has been using threats and false promises to recruit Africans, including students and migrants, with the ultimate goal of enlisting them to fight in the war in Ukraine. Many of these recruits were lured with promises of good jobs and salaries, but they ended up on the front lines without any knowledge of the language or the conditions they would face. In addition, Russia has stepped up its recruitment efforts in Africa, offering financial incentives and the promise of Russian citizenship. Some African migrants have been threatened with having their visas revoked or even with deportation if they do not agree to join the Russian armed forces^{165, 166}.



ENDNOTES

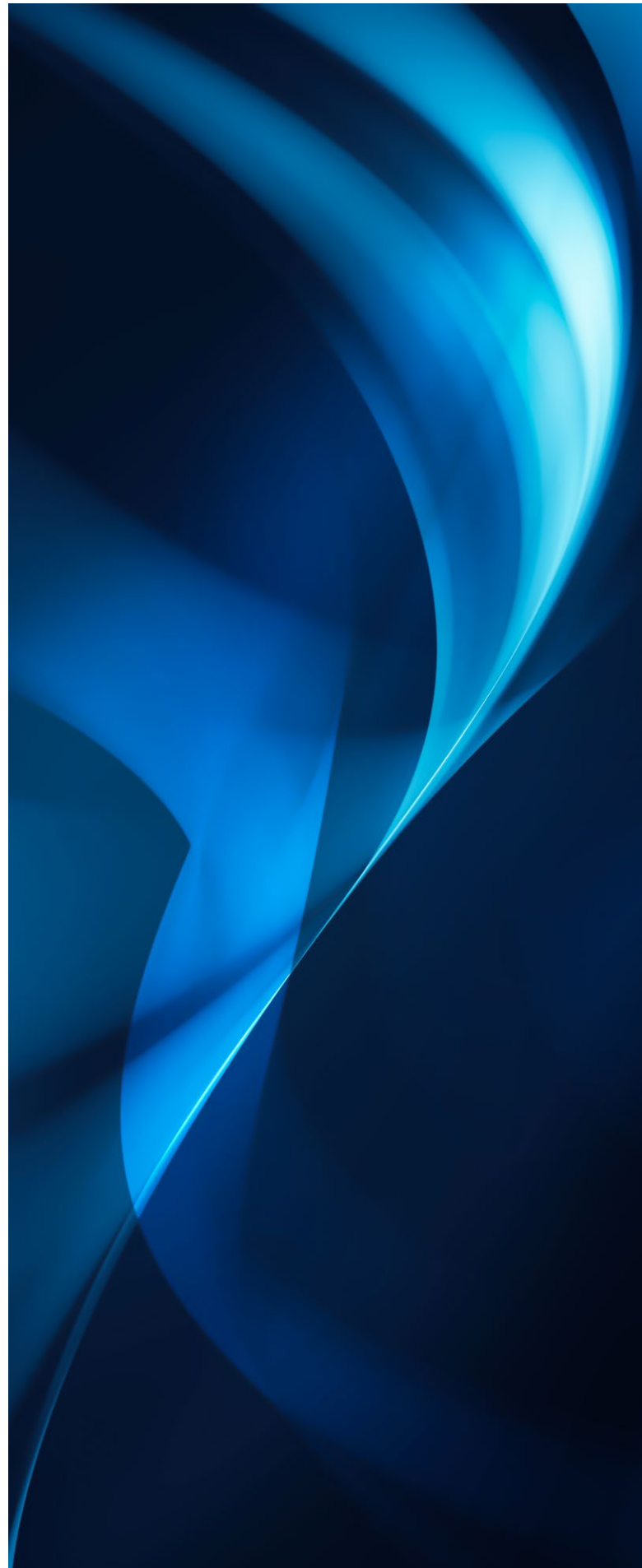
- 1 [Russia in Africa: An atlas www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/757654/EPRS_BRI\(2024\)757654_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2024/757654/EPRS_BRI(2024)757654_EN.pdf)
- 2 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/great-power-competition-implications-africa-russian-federation-and-its-proxies>
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- 6 <https://edmo.eu/publications/what-russian-disinformation-wants-africa-to-think-about-the-war-in-ukraine-and-more>
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- 10 <https://disinfo.africa/tiktok-influencer-promotes-coups-in-africa-6b760bbd6a0c>
- 11 <https://www.theafricareport.com/309392/sa-russia-duduzile-zuma-super-influencer-for-the-kremlin>
- 12 <https://disinfo.africa/meet-the-newest-pro-russian-influencer-brics-don-mello-6229ca9ed878>
- 13 <https://rusieurope.eu/hidden-in-plain-sight-pro-kremlin-pan-african-influencers-and-the-threat-to-africa-s-stability-and-democracy>
- 14 https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/08/06/the-faces-of-russia-s-influence-across-the-african-continent_6082513_124.html
- 15 <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/car-takedown-may-2021>
- 16 <https://tass.com/society/1779669>
- 17 <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/el-ecosistema-de-propaganda-rusa>
- 18 Some studies, such as “Africa Corps—A new iteration of Russia’s old military presence in Africa” (Filip Bryjka | Jędrzej Czerep, Pism Report, May, 2024) argue that the danger posed by these groups must be effectively countered by concrete measures, such as: “Western countries considering extending sanctions lists, as well as strategic communication units in the EU, should take steps to target structures linked to the African Initiative, the main transmission belt of Russia’s (dis)information activities in Africa” or “The EU should use the negative perception of AC activity in some countries, such as Algeria and Mauritania, to communicate in the African direction, highlighting the lack of respect for the sovereignty of these countries (as a counterpoint to the Russian ‘sovereignist’ narrative).”
- 19 <https://www.conflictfieldnotes.com/p/education-russias-soft-power-in-africa>
- 20 https://pielegacy.spinmeaweb.co.uk/news/russian-scholarships-for-africans-in-150-growth-in-three-years/?__hstc=243760922.f47072cfce455f29b22d7459265f6214.1724932759653.1724932759653.1724932759653.18__hssc=243760922.2.1724932759653&__hsfp=2380184817
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