

# Policy Insights

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## Russian and African Media: Exercising Soft Power

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African perspectives  
Global insights

# Executive summary

Under President Vladimir Putin, there has been a resurgence of Russian interest and involvement in Africa. The October 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi was reported as being a key milestone in Russia's return to the African continent.

Like other countries which use strategic narratives to advance state interests, attempting to influence through the media is not a new phenomenon for Russia. However, in recent years – particularly since the 2014 Ukraine conflict – Russia's use of media to leverage broader influence campaigns has gained notoriety, both domestically and internationally.

Russia's state-owned media outlets are central to the Kremlin's strategy and are drivers of its soft power in Africa. Services like Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today) find resonance among African editors. Building on anti-imperialist credentials and positioning itself as an alternative news source, state-owned media is able to provide a more balanced image of Russia in Africa, while combatting Western narratives.

The Kremlin has successfully adapted to the digital age, broadening its operations to include online news sites in several languages. African news websites are, in turn, re-publishing content from Kremlin-sponsored media on a large scale. The narratives are amplified far beyond their original source, the main message being that Moscow is ready to engage with Africa on mutually beneficial terms.

Influence-building using social media is another key aspect of Russia's media strategy in Africa. It is used to sow doubt and build trust in alternative news sources. And, Russian networks are increasingly working with local actors in African countries to better disguise their activities. Interestingly, much of the content being shared on social media by Russian networks is not 'fake news', but in most cases is hyper-partisan and polarising.

The success of online influence campaigns depends on how connected societies are to the digital world. Russia is therefore increasingly using a combination of social media and other public diplomacy instruments to build influence in Africa. In the Central African Republic, for example, the production of audiovisual content, the financing of the local press and the sponsoring of local activities is helping to present Russia as a new and helpful development partner. Nevertheless, as in other parts of the continent where Russia attempts to extend its influence, it must do so on a limited budget.

*Africa is largely unaware of Russia, since African media mainly consumes Western sources and then replicates them. And all the fake news, the Russophobia and anti-Russian propaganda, spread by the Western media, are repeated in the African media.*

Alexey Vasiliev<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The Soviet Union maintained a strong presence in post-World War II Africa. It provided material, logistical and ideological support to socialist-leaning liberation movements fighting for independence from colonial and settler regimes. The collapse of the USSR in 1991 saw the bankrupted Russian successor state pulling back from its engagements in Africa and across the world. Bolstered by a more aggressive foreign policy under President Vladimir Putin, Russian involvement on the continent has been revived. This was especially the case following Russia's controversial annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 after which Moscow was placed under Western sanctions. A high point of Russia's increasing engagement with Africa was the October 2019 Russia–Africa Summit in Sochi.

This insights paper examines how Russia seeks to influence the media landscape in contemporary Africa, and how it deliberately strives to craft a media narrative supportive of its interests and against those of the West, particularly the US and France. Through instruments such as the Sputnik<sup>2</sup> news service and the RT television channel, Russia deliberately spreads content that portrays itself and its allies in the best possible light, and its competitors in the worst.

Russia's media influence plays on its rhetorical support for national sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other states, even as it seeks to influence those very affairs in its favour. Russia deliberately works to cast doubt on Western claims of the universality of human rights, aggravate societal fault lines and undermine the notion of truth itself. It also rails against what it perceives as anti-Russian bias in Western media. This approach is evident when exploring how Russia engages in the African media space.

Russia does not leave how it will be portrayed in the media to chance. Instead, it builds on many decades of experience in propagating disinformation to transmit the image it desires.

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1 Vasiliev is the Director of the Institute for African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and chief editor of the *Asia and Africa Today* journal. Quoted in Peter Fabricius, 'Russia starts a new chapter in Africa', *Daily Maverick*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-10-29-russia-starts-a-new-chapter-in-africa/>.

2 Named after the 1957 satellite, Sputnik, a subsidiary of the Russia Today Media Group, was founded in 2014. It provides online and radio news in 33 languages, delivering content in English, Arabic, Spanish, Chinese and Farsi to international partners.

# Russia's media landscape

The Russian media system consists of different models, with the main dichotomy between tightly controlled media loyal to the Kremlin and (fewer and fewer) independent outlets and online communication platforms. Although the government promotes the use of the Internet, it also attempts to use it as a political tool for control. Russia's media landscape could therefore be described as semi-authoritarian.<sup>3</sup>

Certain oligarchs have a significant stake in Russia's media apparatus. Billionaires Alisher Usmanov and Yuri Kovalchuk have stakes in publishing houses, mobile operators, Internet companies and TV channels.<sup>4</sup> Both reportedly have close ties to Putin.<sup>5</sup> Russian businessman, Yevgeny Prigozhin is alleged to have financed the Internet Research Agency and stands accused of attempting to influence the 2016 US election.

Like other countries who use strategic narratives to advance state interests, attempting to influence through the media is not a new phenomenon for Russia. In 1922, it created La Voix de la Russie (Voice of Russia), broadcasting in French, and in 1941 RIA Novosti, a domestic news agency, was established. These two news agencies were prominently used by the USSR throughout the Cold War and in the 1990s and early 2000s by Russia. They were merged to form Sputnik in 2014, which has continued to peddle conspiracy theories and tout anti-Americanisms and support for state sovereignty.

Like other countries who use strategic narratives to advance state interests, attempting to influence through the media is not a new phenomenon for Russia

Throughout the Soviet era and into the present day, the media has played an important role in Russian foreign policy. This form of soft power did not always aim to discredit the West or present itself in ideological opposition to the West; on the contrary, it sought first to present

3 Katja Lehtisaari, 'Market and Political Factors and the Russian Media' (Working Paper, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Oxford, 2015), 2, <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/market-and-political-factors-and-russian-media>.

4 Lehtisaari, 'Market and Political Factors', 3.

5 See Ilya Khrennikov, 'Netflix Partners with Broadcaster Linked to Putin Ally Yury Kovalchuk', *Business Day*, September 02, 2020, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/companies/telecoms-and-technology/2020-09-02-netflix-partners-with-broadcaster-linked-to-putin-ally-yury-kovalchuk/>; Jack Stubbs et al., 'The Man Who Married Putin's Daughter and Then Made a Fortune', *Reuters*, December 17, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/russia-capitalism-shamalov/>; Henry Meyer and Irina Reznik, 'Putin Foe Navalny Urges Europe to Target Billionaires Abramovich, Usmanov', *Bloomberg*, November 27, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-27/navalny-urges-europe-to-target-billionaires-abramovich-usmanov/>; Spencer Woodman, 'Senators Urge Adding Usmanov to Official Oligarch List, Citing Paradise Papers Revelations', *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*, January 19, 2018, <https://www.icij.org/investigations/paradise-papers/senators-urge-adding-usmanov-official-oligarch-list-citing-paradise-papers-revelations>.

itself as a young democracy. In recent years, and particularly since the Ukraine conflict in 2014, Russia's approach changed. When military officers were first spotted in the Crimean Peninsula and linked by Western media to Russia, the Kremlin called the reports 'complete nonsense'.<sup>6</sup> And, as concerns were increasing around a possible incursion, Russia presented a different scenario. Using electronic media, digital forums and social media, Russia attempted to create a single, unchallenged narrative: that a humanitarian crisis was unfolding in Ukraine and Russian-speaking Ukrainians needed protection from extremists and radicals

Russia's use of media as a key lever of broader influence campaigns has gained notoriety domestically and internationally. Putin and his main advisors continue to use media to disseminate key messages about Russia's foreign policy agenda, discredit Western institutions and democracy, reduce social cohesion and promote Russia's role in the international system.<sup>7</sup> This is made possible through the direct control that the Russian Government has over private media.

## Russia's use of traditional media in Africa

Speaking to reporters at a 2013 news conference, Putin remarked, 'There should be patriotically minded people at the head of state information resources ... people who uphold the interests of the Russian Federation'.<sup>8</sup> Russia's state-owned media outlets are clearly a key driver of its soft power in Africa.

State-owned media service RT's clear mission to cover issues marginalised by the so-called 'mainstream media', finds resonance among African editors and influencers, who re-transmit their content.' Apart from positioning itself as an alternative to the West, RT aspires to be a viable international broadcaster in its own right. A line-up of international reporters, anchors and guests gives the outlet a global face and its conspiratorial culture appeals to some audiences.<sup>9</sup>

Russia's anti-imperialist credentials also find support among African elites (and to an extent the general population). The country makes a lot of never having colonised Africa, and many African leaders were educated or trained in the USSR or the former Eastern Bloc.

Combatting Western narratives in media and public opinion was a topic at the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit. During a panel discussion on mass-media cooperation between Russia and

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6 Jill Dougherty, 'Everyone Lies: The Ukraine Conflict and Russia's Media Transformation' (Discussion Paper Series #D-88, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Cambridge, 2014), 4, <https://shorensteincenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/d88-dougherty.pdf>.

7 Vera Zakem et al., 'Mapping Russian Media Network: Media's Role in Russian Foreign Policy and Decision-making', CNA Analysis & Solutions, 2018, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/DRM-2017-U-015367-3Rev.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/DRM-2017-U-015367-3Rev.pdf).

8 Jill Dougherty, 'How the Media Became One of Putin's Most Powerful Weapons', *The Atlantic*, April 21, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/04/how-the-media-became-putins-most-powerful-weapon/391062/>.

9 For instance, RT has collaborated with Julian Assange, head of WikiLeaks, an international NPO that publishes news leaks and classified media provided by anonymous sources.

African countries, speakers said Russia was portrayed very negatively by Western media and decried the dearth of credible information on Russia. 'We should stop seeing the things through the eyes of others – through the eyes of Reuters or Associated Press,' said Khalil Hashimi Idrissi, the director of Moroccan news agency Maghreb Arabe Presse.<sup>10</sup> The head of Ghana's state news agency, Albert Kofi Owusu, noted that Russian outlets such as Sputnik and RT shared 'positive stories' about Africa, in contrast with the Western media narrative of 'Ebola and civil war'.<sup>11</sup>

At the summit, state-run Russian news agency TASS announced it would enhance partnerships with African media outlets to provide an alternative view on world affairs and news, and African media outlets were criticised for simply reproducing Western 'anti-Russian' content. Media training for African journalists by Russians was offered.<sup>12</sup>

To influence the media landscape and provide a more balanced image of Russia, RT provides content in English, French and Arabic to African countries, such as Algeria, the DRC, Egypt, Morocco and South Africa, where they also swap content with local media. RT has also supported state broadcasters in Côte d'Ivoire and Eritrea with equipment and finances.

When it comes to humanitarian assistance, Russia is eager to be seen as a major international contributor in Africa, and it leverages state media outlets and official statements to highlight the limited assistance it provides. For example, in 2010, Russia portrayed itself, through official news outlets, as a critical player in the fight against Ebola in West Africa. Using 'vaccine diplomacy' it has done the same to get its Sputnik V vaccine used in Africa, and, by distributing personal protective equipment to allies such as Zimbabwe. However, data from the [Financial Tracking Service](#), (a database tracking humanitarian funding flows) shows that of the \$ 62.1 million Russia donated in 2020, only \$ 4 million went to Africa.<sup>13</sup>

Russia has also used the media to amplify support for African dictators. For instance, Russian communication specialists were active in Sudan during the January 2019 protests. Official channels spread [fake news](#) linking protesters to foreign powers such as Israel. Official Russian media also [presented](#) the protests as being a result of foreign influence, warning against 'external intervention' and the destabilisation of the country.<sup>14</sup>

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10 Dani Madrid Morales et al. 'How China, Turkey and Russia Influence the Media in Africa' (Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung, Johannesburg, 2021), 115, <https://www.kas.de/documents/285576/0/How+China%2C+Turkey+and+Russia+influence+media+in+Africa.pdf/6594fc3e-f240-6aea-342d-92c8f90dbf43?version=1.2&t=1611811364948>.

11 Evan Gershkovich, 'At Russia's Inaugural Africa Summit, Moscow Sells Sovereignty', *Coda*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.codastory.com/disinformation/russia-africa-summit-sochi/>.

12 Anton Troianovski, 'A New Message': Russia Trains Its Propaganda Machine on Africa', *The New York Times*, October 29, 2019.

13 Financial Tracking Services, 'Russian Federation, Government of 2020', <https://fts.unocha.org/donors/3006/summary/2020>.

14 Karel Svoboda, Paula-Charlotte Matlach and Zack Baddorf, *Russia's Activities in Africa's Information Environment: Case Studies: Mali and Central African Republic* (NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, Riga, 2021), [https://stratcomcoe.org/uploads/pfiles/russias\\_activities\\_in\\_africa\\_nato\\_stratcom\\_coe\\_05-03-2021-1.pdf](https://stratcomcoe.org/uploads/pfiles/russias_activities_in_africa_nato_stratcom_coe_05-03-2021-1.pdf).

The Kremlin's apparent control of the media, widely attributed to the democratic erosion witnessed under the rule of Putin, has played a significant role in efforts to exert influence. The emergence of digital communication channels has increased the reach and impact of practices such as the flow of information. The ability of states to convey messages directly to foreign publics<sup>15</sup> has become easier and cheaper. The Kremlin has successfully adapted to the digital age, broadening its operations to include online news websites such as Sputnik and RT, broadcasting in several languages.<sup>16</sup>

The Kremlin has successfully adapted to the digital age, broadening its operations to include online news websites such as Sputnik and RT, broadcasting in several languages

Kremlin-sponsored media, in particular RT and Sputnik, are rising in popularity across the African continent. Between November 2017 and January 2018, there was a significant increase in subscribers to the RT France Facebook page (from 50 000 to 850 000), the vast majority of whom are from countries of the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa, showing an appetite for Russian-based French language media.<sup>17</sup> It is not clear why RT France is a preferred source of media, but RT did run an expansive advertising campaign to grow its African audience.<sup>18</sup> A 2010 study on Russia's image in Africa revealed that French-speaking Africans admire Putin as a leader who is considered to have pulled his country out of the rut into which Western countries pushed it.<sup>19</sup> This narrative is particularly popular among those who have grown increasingly critical of the West and former colonial powers.<sup>20</sup> Russia also seeks to undermine the various Western-led multilateral peacekeeping efforts in the Sahel. Recent studies show negative bias regarding the missions and the role of France, affirmed by the use of mostly negative quotes and by the abundance of hostile narratives by Russian content providers.<sup>21</sup> A general anti-Western narrative was also found.

As many as 4 000 online news websites in Africa re-publish content from Kremlin-sponsored media. This is because of the demand for domestic news, which RT and Sputnik are only too happy to meet. This is also the result of growth in the use of social media

15 *Foreign publics* refers to constituents around the world with whom a country builds relationships through public diplomacy efforts.

16 Svoboda et al., *Russia's Activities*, 11.

17 Svoboda et al., *Russia's Activities*, 10.

18 Kevin Limonier and Marlene Laruelle, 'Russia's African Toolkit: Digital Influence and Entrepreneurs of Influence', *Orbis* 65, no. 3 (2021): 403-419.

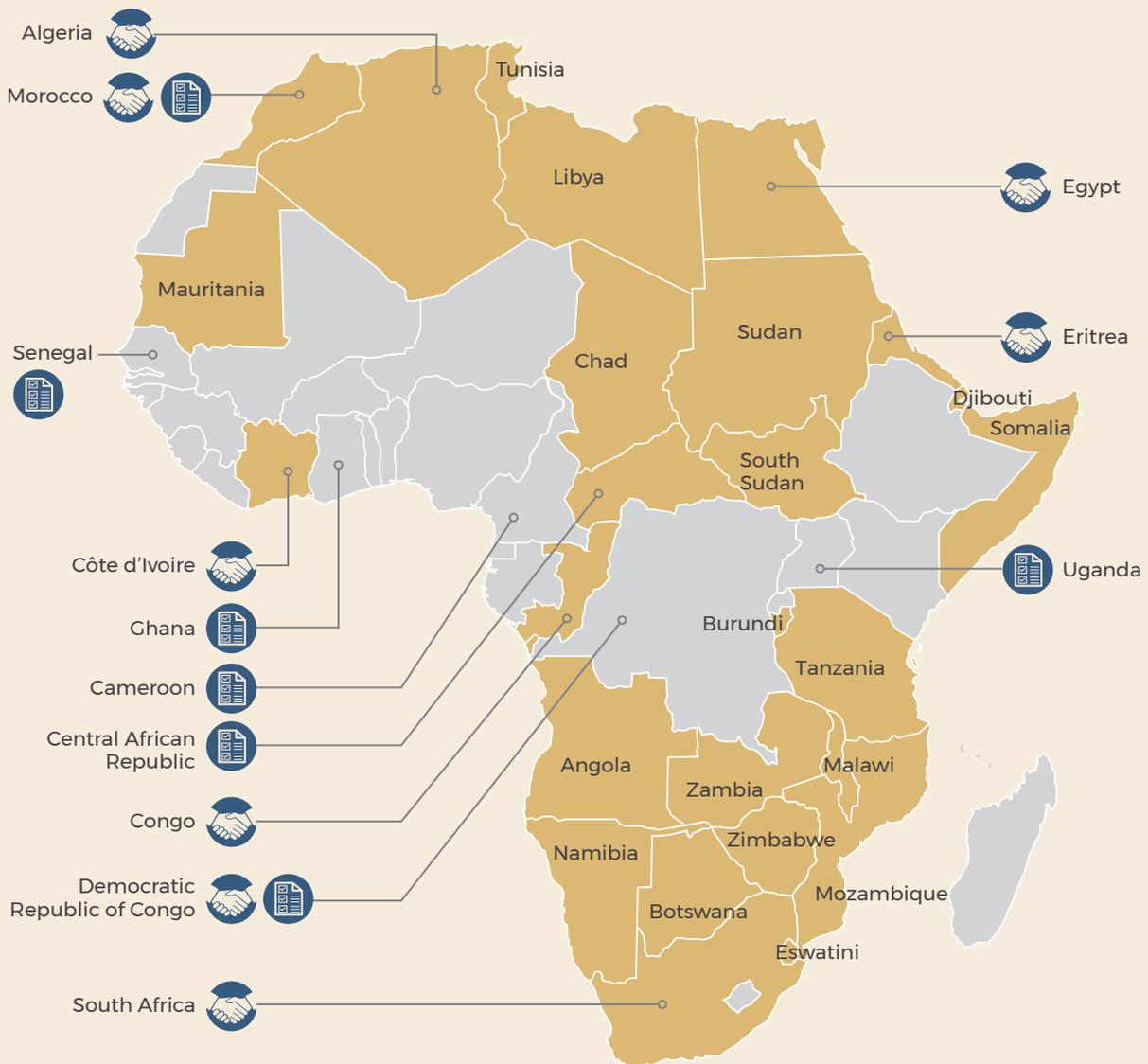
19 Dmitri Bondarenko, 'In the Red Banner's Shade: The Image of Post-Soviet Russia in Africa', *Africa Review* 2, no. 1 (2010): 1-14.

20 Limonier and Laruelle, 'Russia's African Toolkit', 405.

21 Svoboda et al., *Russia's Activities*, 9.

and domestic political context. The number of Internet users in sub-Saharan Africa has increased dramatically in recent years, from just 4 million in 2009 to 522 million in 2019.<sup>22</sup>

**Figure 1 The Kremlin’s media influence in Africa**



**RT presence**  
 Russian state-owned media channel RT broadcasts on TV networks in those countries

**Cooperation agreements with local media outlets**  
 Russian state-owned media have signed cooperation agreements with local media outlets to share content and in some areas train local journalists

**Assessed potential deals**  
 Russian President Putin met with leaders of media outlets during the October 2019 Russia-Africa summit to discuss further cooperation

Source: Nataliya Bugayova et al., 'The Kremlin's Inroads after the Africa Summit', Institute for the Study of War (Washington, D.C.), November 08, 2019, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgroundunder/kremlins-inroads-after-africa-summit>

22 Limonier and Laruelle, 'Russia's African Toolkit', 407.

Many Africans access the Internet through a smartphone, which has been beneficial for Facebook, and which Sputnik and RT have in turn used to their advantage. African news outlets, which are likely autonomous actors and not part of the Kremlin's coordinated media strategy, re-publish Russian content for its ability to attract clicks and therefore advertising revenue.<sup>23</sup>

Although newspaper headlines tend to overestimate Russian influence in Africa, Moscow's efforts to influence public opinion on the continent should nevertheless be seen as a part of a broader strategy. This is in an attempt to push back US attempts to spread liberal democracy and democratic values on the one hand, and to promote the business interests of Russian companies (with links to the government) on the other. These efforts are meant to help revive Russia as a superpower with global reach, which it does by promoting anti-Western views.

As analyst Joseph Siegle puts it, 'Africa, with its weak governments, abundant natural resources, colonial legacies, proximity to Europe, and fifty-four votes at the United Nations General Assembly, provides Russia an easy and attractive theatre where it can advance its interests with limited financial or political costs.'<sup>24</sup> One should, however, not underestimate the agency of African audiences and citizens – they choose whom they wish to support to further their interests.

## Influence-building using social media

Influence-building using social media is one of the key aspects of Russia's media strategy in Africa. It is used to sow doubt and to build trust in alternative news sources. And, unlike previous campaigns, Russian networks are increasingly working with local actors in African countries to better disguise their activities. Interestingly, much of the content being shared on social media by Russian networks is not 'fake news'; in most cases it is hyper-partisan and polarising.

Influence-building using social media is one of the key aspects of Russia's media strategy in Africa

For example, in August 2020, supporters of a coup d'état in Mali spilled into the streets to celebrate. Some were carrying Russian flags and photos of Putin. This was amid reports that

<sup>23</sup> Limonier and Laruelle, 'Russia's African Toolkit', 408.

<sup>24</sup> Joseph Siegle, 'Russia's Strategic Goals in Africa', African Center for Strategic Studies (Washington, D.C.), <https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/russia-strategic-goals-africa>.

**Figure 2** A supporter of the August 2020 coup d'état in Mali holds up a sign that reads 'Thank you Russia and China for support in Mali'



Source: Fred Muvunyi, 'Was Russia behind the Coup in Mali?', Deutsche Welle, October 26, 2020

some of the junta leaders who forced President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita to step down were trained in Russia and had ties to the Kremlin.<sup>25</sup> Although Russia has supplied some military equipment to Mali, at the time Russia did not have strong bilateral, cultural or historical ties with the country. However, the groundwork for pro-Russian sentiment was laid a year earlier when social media sites started blaming France for Mali's militant Islamist insurgency in the north.<sup>26</sup> Prigozhin's Internet Research Agency reportedly paid local actors to post this content on its behalf, providing a veneer of authenticity.<sup>27</sup>

Since the August 2020 coup d'état, several more protests have sprung up in parts of Mali, all denouncing France's presence in the country and, in some cases, calling for further cooperation with Russia.<sup>28</sup>

25 Fred Muvunyi, 'Was Russia behind the Coup in Mali?', Deutsche Welle, October 26, 2020.

26 Siegle, 'Russia's Strategic Goals'.

27 Jacob Silverman, 'France Is Flooding Africa with Fake News', *The New Republic*, December 28, 2020, <https://newrepublic.com/article/160756/france-operation-barkhane-mali-africa-fake-news-propaganda>.

28 See *Reuters*, 'Malian Police Disperse Protest against French Military Presence', January 21, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-mali-security-france-idUSKBN29Q0SC>; Africa News, 'Mali: Protesters Call for French Troops to Leave, Some Call for Greater Russia Cooperation', June 26, 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/06/26/mali-protesters-call-for-french-troops-to-leave-some-call-for-greater-russia-cooperation>; VOA News, 'Maliens March against "Foreign Meddling" on Independence Day', September 22, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/maliens-march-against-foreign-meddling-on-independence-day/6241736.html>.

This experience mirrors other Russian-sponsored influence campaigns in Africa. For example, in Libya, criticisms of the West, the UN and the UN-backed Government of National Accord became common on Libyan social media networks, with Russia being praised as a stabilising influence. The messaging seemed to be aimed at obscuring the truth and sowing confusion for both domestic and international audiences. Although mainstream news outlets drew attention to the allegations of systematic human rights violations by forces loyal to Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Tobruk-based Libyan National Army (LNA), pro-Russian social media platforms contended that all sides were responsible for the human rights abuses.

Figure 3 A post from the 'Libya Gaddafi' Facebook page



Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman', February 18, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman>

Stanford's Internet Observatory, working with Facebook and Twitter, was able to identify dozens of social media accounts with hundreds of thousands of followers presenting themselves as authentic domestic voices, but which were based outside of Libya. The accounts were shut down.<sup>29</sup> Most of the accounts were in support of Haftar, with posts saying that he was the only actor who could bring peace and security to Libya. Others praised Saif Gaddafi, son of the former leader Muammar Gaddafi, referring to his father's rule as 'the best time for the Motherland'. Both types of account would, however, share criticism of the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord.<sup>30</sup> The content shared was in line with Russia's foreign policy aims in the country. Since the deployment of mercenaries to Tripoli in September 2019, Russia has played all sides of the conflict, exploiting the chaos to ensure a seat at the negotiating table. The Middle East and North Africa are strategically important for Russia as it wants to show support for leaders favourable to Russian interests (both economic and military), erode US influence in the region and reinforce its own stature on the global stage.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps more interesting than the narratives Russia tries to push through social media are the tactics it uses to do so. With tech companies now wise to online influence campaigns, Russia has sought to outsource the creation of content to local actors in Africa. For example, in 2020, a Russian troll farm posting polarising and racist content before the US election was unmasked in Ghana. This was done with the intention of inflaming divisions among Americans and provoking social unrest.<sup>32</sup>

More than 200 accounts were created (most of them in the second half of 2019), including Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, potentially reaching millions of people around the world. These accounts presented themselves as being based in the US, but could reliably be associated with Russia, Twitter said.

A CNN investigation was able to pinpoint the location of the Ghanaian troll farm – a walled compound in a quiet residential area near Accra, the country's capital.<sup>33</sup> It was being rented by an NGO called Eliminating Barriers for the Liberation of Africa (EBLA).

It is unclear whether the EBLA employees knew the details of the influence campaign – one woman claimed to have 'no idea' she was working as a Russian troll.

The Ghanaian troll farm is not the only influence operation linked to the Internet Research Agency or Progozhin.<sup>34</sup> According to Russian media, political consultants with links to Prigozhin are operating in over 20 African countries, pushing anti-Western rhetoric (against

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29 Siegle, 'Russia's Strategic Goals'.

30 Shelby Grossman, Daniel Bush and Renée DiResta, 'Evidence of Russia-linked Influence Operations in Africa' (Stanford Internet Observatory, Stanford, 2019), 5, [https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/29oct2019\\_sio\\_-\\_russia\\_linked\\_influence\\_operations\\_in\\_africa.final\\_.pdf](https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/29oct2019_sio_-_russia_linked_influence_operations_in_africa.final_.pdf).

31 Center for Strategic and International Studies, 'Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya'.

32 Clarissa Ward et al., 'Russian Election Meddling Is Back – via Ghana and Nigeria – and in Your Feeds', CNN, April 11, 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html>.

33 Ward et al., 'Russian Election Meddling'.

34 Prigozhin was indicted by the US and accused of interfering in the 2016 presidential elections.

Figure 4 The compound rented by EBLA in Accra, Ghana



Source: Clarissa Ward et al., 'Russian Election Meddling Is Back – via Ghana and Nigeria – and in Your Feeds', *CNN*, April 11, 2020.

both the US and France) and inflaming local conflicts during election campaigns.<sup>35</sup> Russia denies this, and in turn blames the West for unfair competition and propagating disinformation.

Siegle notes, 'Russia's disinformation efforts have begun "franchising" their model by creating or sponsoring African hosts for the pro-Russian and anti-West messaging. This approach gives the disinformation campaign more cultural context while making it more difficult for ordinary readers to identify inauthentic accounts.'<sup>36</sup> It also provides the Russian Government with plausible deniability should the campaign be uncovered.

According to the Stanford Internet Observatory, it is unclear whether any of the above-described influence campaigns had a real impact. Although users who declared themselves to be from Africa engaged with many of the posts and were active commenters, it is important to keep in mind one major aim of Russian information operations in Africa: to convey the message that the country's presence on the continent is larger than it really is. After all, Russia is in many ways struggling to increase its economic and political foothold in Africa<sup>37</sup> (particularly when compared with Chinese, British or

35 Svoboda et al., *Russia's Activities*, 121.

36 Siegle, 'Russia's Strategic Goals'.

37 Paul Stronski, 'Late to the Party: Russia's Return to Africa', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 16, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056>.

French presence). The success of online influence campaigns also depends on how connected societies are to the digital world.

It is perhaps because of this that Russia increasingly uses a combination of social media and other public diplomacy instruments to build influence in Africa. Education initiatives and cultural institutions, for example, work together with Russia's media strategy and complement one another. The Central African Republic (CAR) is a good case in point.

## Hybrid warfare in the CAR

The CAR is of major geopolitical relevance in Africa, due to its location, mineral wealth and local context. Not only does it provide a transition point between a largely Muslim north and Christian south, but the ongoing civil war also makes it an easy target for foreign interference.<sup>38</sup>

In 2018, the CAR signed a security cooperation agreement with Russia, paving the way for Moscow to provide weapons and security training to the CAR's armed forces. Although this move came with approval from the UN Security Council, the CAR's traditional supporters (France and the US) have been reluctant to supply weapons, concerned that they could end up in the hands of the rebels and fuel further conflict.<sup>39</sup> The Russian Government, meanwhile, has been open in its support of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who is struggling to regain control over parts of the country from local warlords.

Around the same time of the cooperation agreement, anti-French and -UN messaging began to appear on social media in the CAR. In 2019, Facebook discovered 13 suspicious pages, all posting similar content: They praised Touadéra while criticising France for trying to re-colonise the CAR and defending Russia's own presence in the country.<sup>40</sup> In some cases, online trolls would get into disagreements (knowingly or unknowingly), with online influence operations run from France. Media reports tend to focus on the threat of Russian digital aggression, but this demonstrates that other governments such as France may also be complicit in online influence campaigns, particularly where their interests are being challenged.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, a growing commercial media landscape (and a largely digital advertising model) has opened a space for citizen journalism, fake news, spyware and other harmful software. State-owned media often operate within this mixed environment where the players are fluid, making it harder to decipher what is from the state and what is commercial.

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38 Pablo Arbuniés, 'Russia's Sharp Power in Africa: The Case of Madagascar, Central Africa Republic, Sudan and South Africa', *Global Affairs and Strategic Studies*, <https://www.unav.edu/web/global-affairs/detalle-/blogs/russia-s-sharp-power-in-africa-the-case-of-madagascar-central-africa-republic-sudan-and-south-africa>.

39 Svoboda et al., *Russia's Activities*, 19.

40 Grossman et al., 'Evidence of Russia-linked Influence Operations in Africa', 23-27; Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 'Exploiting Chaos: Russia in Libya'.

41 Silverman, 'France Is Flooding Africa'.

According to the Stanford Internet Observatory, the above-mentioned social media accounts were intended to build support for Russia in the CAR. But with only 4.3% of Central Africans having access to the Internet, Russia needs to fortify its influence-building efforts with on-the-ground PR. This includes producing audiovisual content, financing the local press and sponsoring sympathetic local influencers or NGOs.

A Russian-Central African feature film called *Touriste* (The Tourist), for example, was shot in the CAR and previewed to thousands of people in Bangui in May 2021. It shows war scenes in which Russian ‘instructors’, who support Touadéra, defeat rebels allied to former president François Bozizé. In the end, ‘a wounded hero emerges from combat feeling that he has accomplished his mission’.<sup>42</sup> Whereas the film glorifies Russian mercenaries, it is quiet on the allegations of abuse levelled against them.

Following the preview in Bangui, the French version of the film was amplified to reach audiences in the wider Central and West African region between May and June 2021. A social media analysis revealed coordinated and rapid sharing of the film across 310 Facebook pages and groups. The geographical coverage included the CAR, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, the DRC and Congo-Brazzaville.<sup>43</sup> The film provided an opportunity for Russia to present itself as an ally in the CAR and to showcase its inroads on the continent, and is another soft power instrument to watch out for.

As with most sub-Saharan countries, radio is the most popular and widely accessible medium in the CAR. The country has dozens of privately owned stations and is host to several international broadcasters. Russia has thrown its hat into the ring with Radio Lengo Songo, financed by Lobaye Invest, a mining company linked to the Russian Wagner group of mercenaries and headed by Yevgeny Khodorov, a Prigozhin loyalist.<sup>44</sup> The station, which has a large listenership in Bangui, covers local news but has also published content supportive of Russia’s presence in the CAR on its website.<sup>45</sup> The CAR’s cash-strapped media sector has made it easy for Russia to obtain sympathetic coverage for its activities in the country. Media outlets *Le Confident*, *Le Potentiel*, *Njoni Sango* and *Les Collines de l’Oubangui* reportedly receive financial support from Russia.<sup>46</sup>

Lobaye Invest sponsored a ‘Miss Bangui’ beauty contest in 2018. Valery Zakharov, security advisor to Touadéra, appeared on stage to congratulate the winner and award the prize. When asked about his involvement in the contest, Zakharov replied: ‘Russia is not just about arms ... security can come only when we change people’s lives. We must create

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42 Benjamin Roger and Georges Dougeli, ‘Russia – Africa: Behind the Scenes of Moscow’s Soft Power’, *The Africa Report*, July 29, 2021, <https://www.theafricareport.com/112950/russia-africa-behind-the-scenes-of-moscows-soft-power>.

43 Code for Africa, ‘How a Movie Drew More Eyes – and More Influence for Russia in Africa’, August 13, 2021

44 Roger and Dougeli, ‘Russia – Africa: Behind the Scenes’.

45 James Disalvatore, ‘Central African Republic Media Platforms Push Prigozhin’s Pro-Putin Agenda’, Kharon, October 6, 2020, <https://brief.kharon.com/updates/central-african-republic-media-platforms-push-prigozhin-s-pro-putin-agenda>.

46 Nathalia Dhukan, ‘Central African Republic: Ground Zero for Russian Influence in Central Africa’ (Issue Brief, Eurasia Center, Atlantic Council, Washington, 2021), 7, [https://issuu.com/atlanticcouncil/docs/central\\_african\\_republic-ground\\_zero\\_for\\_russian\\_i](https://issuu.com/atlanticcouncil/docs/central_african_republic-ground_zero_for_russian_i).

positive ground'.<sup>47</sup> The beauty contest is one in a series of humanitarian, social and cultural activities that have been sponsored in the CAR, sometimes by private companies such as Lobaye Invest, and other times by the Russian embassy. Others include a youth soccer event, donations of sports equipment to a school, donations of equipment to media, food distribution and the building of mobile hospitals in rebel-controlled areas.<sup>48</sup>

It is clear that Russia is using a combination of soft power techniques and instruments to build influence in the CAR. And it would appear that its efforts are paying off. In the local press and on social media, Russia receives much praise for the support it gives to social and cultural activities in the country.<sup>49</sup> In the streets of Bangui, the general opinion is that Russia is a new, and helpful, development partner. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the value of Russian investments in the country is low. As in other parts of the continent where Russia attempts to extend its influence, it must do so on a limited budget.

Moreover, while Russia has tried to build influence in Africa through the use of social media for some time, it is getting more difficult to avoid being caught.<sup>50</sup> Facebook and Twitter, in cooperation with research organisations, have grown adept at identifying and stopping online influence campaigns. This could see Russia rely more on the use of websites where content is more protected.

## Conclusion

Following Russia's resurgence in Africa, it is clear that it has been attempting to influence the media landscape and perceptions on the continent. Building on decades of experience in propaganda campaigns, Russia has striven to create media narratives that portray itself as an ally, at the same time discrediting Africa's traditional partners such as France and the US. It can do this through the high levels of control the Kremlin exerts over much of Russia's media ecosystem.

These attempts have proven somewhat effective in Africa, where Russia's anti-imperialist credentials find resonance and where the West's perceived negative media coverage of the continent (and Russia) is a sore point. Russian state-owned media outlets such as RT, Sputnik and TASS are key players. They actively seek partnerships with African media outlets, even offering media training to newsrooms. The Kremlin has also adapted well to the digital age – online content, produced by RT and Sputnik but published in French, have become popular in francophone Africa, and supports Russia's aim to cast doubt on France as a legitimate actor in the region. This also forms part of Russia's broader strategy of resisting liberal democracy (more recently) while advancing its own interests on the continent.

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47 Patricia Huon and Simon Ostrovsky, 'Russia, the New Power in Central Africa', *Coda*, December 19, 2018.

48 Dhukan, 'Central African Republic', 7.

49 Huon and Ostrovsky, 'Russia, the New Power'.

50 Collier, 'Facebook Says'.

Social media is another driver of Russian narratives in Africa. Campaigns in several African countries bear two important similarities: content is created to sow confusion (and is therefore hyper-partisan) and will often support Russia's role on the continent while denouncing the presence of other foreign actors. Social media campaigns increasingly include local players giving them an air of credibility and cultural context. However, social media networks and research organisations have become adept at identifying inauthentic behaviour. This, in addition to low levels of connectivity on the continent, could prove to be a challenge.

It is important to remember that African countries have agency and exercise choice about who their partners and supporters will be, including in the media arena. Discrediting others is not the only value offered by RT and Sputnik – they also seek to report on neglected stories from Africa by offering a different viewpoint, which appeals to African states.

Overall, the success and impact of many of the above-mentioned information campaigns is up for debate. The Mali case shows that support for Russia, whether influenced by online content or not, can translate into real life. But while Russia has managed to restore its image as a genuine power in some parts of the continent, the popularity of Russian-sponsored content may rely more on its appropriation by African actors. And although Russia continues to push certain narratives to convince African audiences of its foreign policy, it does so on a limited budget and, so far, with limited benefit.

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# About SAIIA

SAIIA is an independent, non-government think tank whose key strategic objectives are to make effective input into public policy, and to encourage wider and more informed debate on international affairs, with particular emphasis on African issues and concerns.

SAIIA's policy insights are situation analysis papers intended for policymakers, whether in government or business. They are designed to bridge the space between policy briefings and occasional papers.

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