THE DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN WEST AFRICA AND BEYOND

By Jean le Roux and Tessa Knight

With contributions from Code for Africa
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Cover: Kathy Butterfield

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The Disinformation Landscape in West Africa and Beyond

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The mission of the Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) is to identify, expose, and explain disinformation where and when it occurs using open-source research; to promote objective truth as a foundation of government for and by people; to protect democratic institutions and norms from those who would seek to undermine them in the digital engagement space; to create a new model of expertise adapted for impact and real-world results; and to forge digital resilience at a time when humans are more interconnected than at any point in history, by building the world’s leading hub of digital forensic analysts tracking events in governance, technology, and security.
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Introduction

The prominence of West Africa, and Africa as a whole, within the global disinformation ecosystem cannot be ignored. A report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies released in April 2022 identified twenty-three disinformation campaigns targeting African countries dating back to 2014.¹ Of these campaigns, sixteen are linked to Russia.

The listed disinformation campaigns—nine of which were identified by the DFRLab—reveal two key points. First, there has been a marked increase in the number of publicly identified disinformation campaigns in recent years. Whether this is due to an increase in the scrutiny, analytical capacity, or efforts on the part of bad actors is unclear. Second, the characteristics of each of these influence operations are distinct—these operations target a wide variety of issues, such as elections, the war in Ukraine, commercial interests, and domestic and international politics.

Further, relations between France and francophone West Africa have, following years of amicable relations built on the back of military cooperation, seen a marked erosion that was underscored by the exit of the last of the French troops from Mali in August 2022. Anti-France and pro-Russia sentiments have surged contemporaneously, with overlapping narratives positioning Russia as a viable alternative to Western aid. When French forces began their departure from Mali in June 2022, Russian private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group stood ready to fill the void.

This report examines several influence operation case studies from the West African region, with a particular emphasis on Mali, Burkina Faso, Côte d’Ivoire, and Niger. The narratives, actors, and contexts supporting these influence operations are summarized alongside their impact on regional stability. Russian influence plays a significant role in these case studies, an unsurprising fact considering the geopolitical history of this region.

This report also includes case studies from outside the Sahel region, consisting of thematically distinct but strategically noteworthy influence campaigns from elsewhere on the continent. For example, the Nigerian government used social media influencers to suppress citizen participation in the #EndSARS movement. Elsewhere, the Ethiopian diaspora used innovative click-to-tweet campaigns to spread international awareness of the conflict in Ethiopia’s Tigray region. In South Africa, the rise in violent xenophobic demonstrations was precipitated by a popular social media campaign that normalized prejudice against foreign nationals.

The plethora of actors, targets, strategies, and tactics make a blanket approach to studying African disinformation networks difficult. The depth and breadth of these campaigns shows that Africa is facing the same challenges as the rest of the world insofar as disinformation is concerned. Moreover, the interest shown by foreign governments attests to the region’s geopolitical significance. This combination of geopolitical importance and a vulnerability to influence campaigns makes Africa a notable case study.

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Background

Africa’s information environment is not monolithic. Analog channels such as radio and film are used in conjunction with digital efforts to reach audiences, but Internet penetration rates and the accompanying reliance on analog media differ significantly from country to country. For example, as of January 2022, Morocco, the Seychelles, and Egypt maintained Internet penetration rates of higher than 70 percent, nearly ten times the rate of the country with the lowest penetration rate, the Central African Republic (7 percent).²

In the countries mentioned in the table above, Facebook and Instagram maintain a leading position insofar as social media penetration is concerned. This can be partly ascribed to Facebook’s Free Basics service that “zero-rates” data (including Facebook and Instagram data) on participating mobile networks.³ These mobile networks can then bundle Facebook and Instagram data into a consumer’s service plan without the consumer having to pay extra for that data use. Considering that mobile connections outstrip desktop connections, and that mobile data is more expensive than fixed broadband, it is clear why this has been effective to expand Facebook and Instagram’s footprint. Meta shuttered the Free Basics program in some regions at the end of 2022 as the program’s spiritual successor - Meta Discover - was being rolled out. The impact this will have on the information environment remains to be seen.⁴

### Breakdown of Social Media and Internet Penetration Rates in Some of the African Countries Referenced in This Report

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Total Internet Users</th>
<th>Penetration Rate</th>
<th>Social Media Users</th>
<th>Facebook</th>
<th>Instagram</th>
<th>Twitter</th>
<th>Mobile Connections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Niger²</td>
<td>3.72 million</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>0.5%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>47.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mali²</td>
<td>6.33 million</td>
<td>29.9%</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>111.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Côte d’Ivoire³</td>
<td>9.94 million</td>
<td>36.3%</td>
<td>23.4%</td>
<td>20.6%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>137.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burkina Faso⁴</td>
<td>5.95 million</td>
<td>27.3%</td>
<td>10.1%</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>118.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria⁵</td>
<td>109.2 million</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>15.4%</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central African Republic⁶</td>
<td>355, 100</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

In March 2003, Central African Republic President Ange-Felix Patassé was overthrown when rebel forces led by François Bozizé captured the capital Bangui. The coup prompted a civil war, with clusters of rebel groups clashing with government forces between 2004 and 2007. Amid this conflict, Bozizé was elected president in 2005 and subsequently reelected in 2011, despite allegations of fraud from the opposition.

In 2012, an unknown coalition of predominantly Muslim rebel groups calling themselves Séléka claimed Bozizé’s government had violated peace accords struck in 2007, prompting them to attack three towns in September of that year.

Séléka forces eventually seized Bangui in 2013, prompting Bozizé to flee the country. Séléka’s Muslim rule, in turn, prompted predominantly Christian anti-Balaka militias to take up arms against Séléka. The anti-Balaka militias are believed to originate from rural villages in CAR, and were created as individual village-level groups that coalesced into the broader grouping. When Séléka’s Muslim forces took power the anti-Balaka shifted their attention to the incumbent government.

This conflict outlasted the official disbandment of Séléka, as leaderless former Séléka rebels maintained control of the northeastern parts of CAR, while anti-Balaka forces maintained control over parts of the southwest. Bangui remained under tenuous government control. This perennial instability served as the backdrop for the election of the current president, Faustin-Archange Touadéra, who was sworn in in March 2016.

CAR’s official armed forces, depleted after decades of partisan loyalty and civil war, struggled to contain the various rebel forces pocketed in the region, despite the assistance of French and United Nations peacekeeping forces. This eventually prompted the UN to expand its efforts to stabilize the region, resulting in the formation of the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (or MINUSCA).

Crucially, in 2017, the UN Security Council lifted an embargo on Russian light-weapons imports and allowed for 175 military instructors from Russia to be deployed in-country. These Russians filled the vacuum left by departing French troops in 2022 and opened the door for an increased Russian presence in West Africa.

MILITARY INSTRUCTORS AS A MEANS OF INFLUENCE

Since August 2018, bilateral agreements between CAR and Russia have allowed for the training of Central African Armed Forces (FACA) soldiers by Russian instructors. Of the initial 175 instructors deployed in January 2018, all but five were “civilian” military instructors, reportedly employed by the Wagner
Beginning in September 2019, the DFRLab uncovered numerous online assets linked to the Tunisian PR firm, UReputation. Facebook would later announce that it had found a network of more than nine hundred assets affiliated with UReputation, deployed on Instagram and Facebook, linking to several off-platform websites.

These Facebook accounts, pages, and groups masqueraded as Tunisian locals, posting and promoting content that corralled other users to off-platform websites. These included pages that posed as independent media outlets or fact-checking organizations but shared politicized content. Individuals linked to UReputation also created and operated social media accounts belonging to bogus journalists. These campaigns blurred the lines between bona fide journalism and strategic communications work, clouding the information environment at a time when citizens were engaging in democratic elections.

The network, dubbed Operation Carthage, targeted ten African countries. It campaigned in favor of Togolese President Faure Gnassingbé’s reelection bid in February 2020 and Henri Konan Bedié’s campaign during the October 2020 presidential elections in Côte d’Ivoire.

The diversity of campaigns suggests the network was motivated by profit. There existed little ideological consistency between the different campaigns, suggesting the sole motivator was providing disinformation as a service to the highest bidder. The trade-off between risking exposure—and the resultant reputational damage—and the benefits of covert campaigning is partly mitigated by the ease with which the companies providing these services can reinvent themselves and carry on.

Group, a Russian mercenary force, and operating under the guise of Sewa Security Services. By February 2020, this number had grown to 235.

Valery Zakharov, a former Russian military intelligence officer, and himself an alleged member of the Wagner Group, was installed as Touadéra’s security adviser in March 2018. The initial group of military instructors was bolstered by an additional 300 operatives sent in December 2020 after national elections were threatened by an alliance of rebel groups rallying behind former president Bozizé, who was excluded from the ballot by CAR’s constitutional court. These additional military instructors, alongside Rwandan troops, were critical in thwarting the rebel advance on Bangui.

In mid-2021, another batch of 600 Russian instructors was deployed to CAR, bringing the total number of deployed instructors to 1,135.

While these instructors were ostensibly deployed to train and support CAR forces, reports quickly indicated that they were engaged in kinetic operations. Reports of non-African soldiers involved in combat could be found on social media and traditional media.


A UN report from June 2021 noted the excessive use of force by FACA and Russian instructors. Despite repeated denials from the coordinator of the Russian forces, the report concluded that Russian instructors were responsible for indiscriminate killings. The UN report cited the killing of three unarmed civilians in Ippy, Paoua, and Grimari. A separate group of UN experts also reported that the lines between official Russian forces, private military companies (PMCs), and official state forces were increasingly blurred. 

The use of these military instructors and PMCs serves Russian interests on multiple fronts. First, bilateral military agreements foster diplomatic relations; in countries such as CAR where the results are arguably effective, it becomes a useful high-water mark with which to denigrate Western efforts in the region. Second, natural resources, including precious stones and metals, are abundant in CAR, which can explain the presence of Russian PMCs near gold and diamond mines. Lastly, entrenched Russian PMCs, security advisers, and military instructors project Moscow’s power outward to countries in which they operate, a strategy that Moscow has used in Syria, Madagascar, and now CAR.

RUSSIAN FILMS

The role of Russian military instructors in CAR has been documented and romanticized by local and foreign proponents. In May 2021, a Russian film titled Tourist (Турист) premiered in CAR. The film, released on Russian television five days later, follows the exploits of Russian military instructor Grisha “Tourist” Dmitriev, reluctantly thrust into the midst of the conflict between CAR forces and “Western-funded” rebel groups. It falls upon Dmitriev and his fellow instructors to defend CAR civilians from hordes of Western-funded rebels.

A second Russian movie focused on the African continent was filmed concurrently, although tailored toward events in Mozambique. Granit (Гранит) tells the familiar tale of a Russian military instructor arriving in conflict-ridden Mozambique to train ill-equipped and ill-disciplined soldiers. Granit and his team eventually triumph against these rebels, saving the local population through their noble sacrifice.

Although neither the Wagner Group nor its founder, Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, are mentioned directly in the films, there are many similarities between the depictions of these military instructors on screen and Wagner Group deployments.

In Mozambique, a deployment of Wagner Group troops unsuccessfully attempted to suppress the Cabo Delgado insurgency in late 2019. Wagner Group withdrew from the conflict after several of its members were killed. At the same time, the film Granit depicted the exploits of Russian military instructors.

In Tourist, the actor Gleb Temnov plays the role of a military instructor resembling Wagner Group leader Dmitry Utkin, even performing his diction accurately. Seth Wiredu, a Ghanaian resident in Russia, played the role of a local priest sympathetic to rebel forces. CNN identified Wiredu as the coordinator of an Internet Research Agency-linked troll farm operating out of Ghana. A former Wagner Group veteran even identified the vehicles used during the production of the film as the same hardware used by Wagner Group forces in Syria and elsewhere. These appear to be some of the “easter eggs” planted in the film for discerning viewers.

Both Tourist and Granit were written by Vladimir Izmailov, the screen name for Vladimir Kochkov. According to records accessible on the Russian Ministry of Culture’s website, a string


of pro-Russia movies, including Tourist and Granit, were produced by Parity Films (Паритет Фильм) from mid-2021 until early 2022.29

The usage rights for these films belong to Aurum (Аурум), a company founded by Kislova Elena Petrovna in 2017. The primary shareholder of Aurum, with a 51 percent stake, is AKTIVSITI, another entity founded by Petrovna; Wagner Group’s Prigozhin owns the other 49 percent.30 Petrovna and Prigozhin have been involved in at least eighteen other companies together.31

The movies serve as a way of influencing African audiences with the narrative that “benevolent” Russian instructors are sacrificing their lives for their protection, while also presenting PMCs as a noble and valiant profession for audiences back home.

RUSSIAN STATUES

In November 2021, a statue of Russian soldiers was unveiled by Touadéra, CAR’s president, in the heart of Bangui. Statues depicting Wagner Group mercenaries had previously been erected secretly in Europe and the Middle East, near locations where Russian mercenary operations had taken place. However, in this case, the president himself unveiled the statue to a crowd of Russian supporters and soldiers that appeared to belong to the Wagner Group. Unlike the other statues, which depict Russian soldiers protecting a child, the CAR statue shows Russian soldiers acting as advisers while CAR forces are shown as active defenders of the woman and child.32

The monument to Russian advisers, the first of its kind to be documented in Africa, represents an expansion of Russia’s soft power measures. Rather than fighting alone to protect the innocent, in CAR, Russia is depicted as aiding and working with local forces.

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29 “Открытые Данные Министерства Культуры России,” [“Open Data of the Ministry of Culture of Russia”], Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation, accessed June 21, 2022, https://opendata.mkrf.ru/opendata/7705851331-register_movies/#aeyJkYXRhIjoiNTliMDU4MDE1ZmEzNzljMTI0ZjkteXN1IiwiaW50ZXJUb2R1dGluZ3MiOiJidWlsZF90YWJsZSIsIj09In0=.
THE DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN WEST AFRICA AND BEYOND

In April 2020, the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst went viral in South Africa’s Twittersphere. The phrase, covered in a veneer of patriotism, would grow into a nationwide movement seeking the displacement and even murder of foreign migrants in South Africa.

The hashtag was originated by the now defunct Twitter account with the username Lerato Pillay. Despite assuming the persona of an ethnic Indian woman from South Africa’s east coast, @uLerato_pillay was eventually attributed to a former South African National Defense Force member, Sifiso Jeffrey Gwala.1

Open-source investigations identified several clues that hinted at the account holder’s exposure to military training. The account displayed an intimate knowledge of South African military deployments and training programs. It specifically appealed to the South African minister of defense to intervene in the plight of a group of soldiers recalled from an African Union peacekeeping force deployed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Gwala would turn out to be one of these repatriated soldiers. Analysis of the Twitter account also identified links to earlier social media accounts used by Gwala.

Although Gwala and his Lerato Pillay persona have since moved on, the narrative that made the account so popular has taken on a life of its own. Decades of broken promises by the ruling African National Congress, rising unemployment, and critical shortages in basic service delivery and housing have left many South Africans disillusioned with the government. The @uLerato_pillay account tapped into this disillusionment, coloring it with South Africa’s history of deadly xenophobia by asserting that foreign nationals are the root cause of these issues.

The combination was effective; in 2020, the hashtag #PutSouthAfricansFirst was used 1.15 million times by one hundred and forty-four thousand unique users, and it would often trend multiple times a week due to clever manipulation of Twitter’s trending algorithms.

Since September 2021, the movement has seen a shift. Smaller political parties began using xenophobic slogans to contest local government elections, legitimizing baseless xenophobia and providing validation to a demographic of disillusioned voters.

In June 2021, a march organized by the leaders of #PutSouthAfricansFirst, labeled Operation Dudula (loosely translated as “Kick Out”), began taking physical action against foreign-owned shops and hawkers. This would become a bi-weekly occurrence, with anti-foreigner demonstrations organized nationwide. Since January 2022, Operation Dudula has been spearheaded by a charismatic young South African, Nhlanhla “Lux” Diamini, who has used his sway in local communities to promote narratives villainizing foreign nationals. Diamini has used his social media accounts—including on Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube—to promote xenophobic narratives.

Diamini was arrested on March 24, 2022, after he and a group of demonstrators illegally entered and searched the home of a Soweto resident during one of these Operation Dudula marches. In a separate incident, demonstrations against crime in the Diepsloot area spilled over into violence after Diamini visited, eventually resulting in the lynching and killing of Elvis Nyathi, a foreign national, after a mob went door to door to check the documentation of residents.2

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Côte d’Ivoire’s Information Space

EMERGING TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES


Tactics, techniques, and narratives initially observed in the Central African Republic and subsequently in Mali and Burkina Faso are now increasingly being observed in Côte d’Ivoire.

Between November 2021 and June 2022, Code for Africa (CfA) mapped a coordinated network, comprised of about 225 Facebook accounts, that targeted countries in the Sahel with influence operations and spread narratives in a synchronized way, often reinforcing or amplifying claims already seeded in the media or on closed social media platforms, such as Telegram. Côte d’Ivoire-based administrators control approximately 9.63 percent of the network, which promotes pro-Russia, anti-France, and anti-West narratives in the Sahel. This makes Côte d’Ivoire home to the third-largest group of network administrators, after Mali, with about 51 percent of the administrators, and France with 10 percent. The network appears to be a franchise operation run by local contractors, modeled on similar high-impact Russian tactics in Libya and Sudan.

Proven recipes

Repeating earlier successes in countries such as CAR and Mali, CfA observed networks of accounts on Facebook using “copypasta” campaigns (slang for copy-and-pasted identical text) to amplify the impact of in-person protests or rallies. For example, on March 27, 2022, a coordinated network of accounts used copypastas to amplify a pro-Russia protest in Burkina Faso, calling for Côte d’Ivoire to be the next country to welcome Russia and the Wagner Group.

Shadowboxing

The murky financing and covert leadership structures extremist groups use to protect themselves are helpful for foreign influence strategists who feed conspiracist claims. Extremist groups’ undeclared sources of funding and weapons provide an information gap that can be filled with bogus accusations. Russian influence operations have used public fear of jihadist groups to frame their forces as the “good guys” or suggest that their opponents secretly fund extremists. The Wagner Group uses this strategy heavily in countries like CAR, Mali, and Côte d’Ivoire.

For example, in April 2022, pro-Russia accounts on Facebook and Twitter amplified a slickly produced video clip showing a supposed Wagner Group mercenary escaping from his jihadist “captors” in Mali. The video shows a US and French flag pinned behind the insurgent flag, intended to suggest that the United States and France support religious extremists.

Screenshots of Facebook posts calling for Côte d’Ivoire to be the next Sahel country to welcome cooperation with Russia.

1 Ibid.
The video was amplified by twenty-three pro-Russia Facebook accounts, garnering a total of 74,229 social interactions and 1.8 million views as of June 14, 2022. A timeline review of the accounts revealed that they consistently share pro-Russia content targeting Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Cameroon. The patient zero post was traced to a previously identified pro-Russia media channel, Afrique Média.³

Political alignment with local leadership

Pro-Russia Facebook accounts run from Côte d’Ivoire have amplified narratives that suggest former Ivorian president Koudou Laurent Gbagbo has ties to Moscow and enjoys the support of Russian President Vladimir Putin. For example, on January 26, 2022, a post from a Facebook page called Parti des Peuples Africains Cote D’ivoire, claiming to be Gbagbo’s political party, announced an alleged meeting in Russia between Gbagbo and Putin.⁴ The post was amplified by Ivorian Facebook groups and a network of pan-African and pro-Gbagbo Facebook pages, mainly run from Côte d’Ivoire.
Influence actors use paid Facebook advertisements to target audiences in Côte d’Ivoire with pro-Russia messaging. The paid campaigns are designed not only to amplify narratives but also to recruit followers for new accounts. For example, the Vladimir Poutine Facebook page, created on January 11, 2022, sponsored a political ad promoting itself as Putin’s official Facebook page. The advertisement was run without a disclaimer, in violation of platform rules. This emulates similar behavior from Malian accounts such as Zoom Mali and TimeNow Magazine, which have sponsored multiple pro-Russia ads without a disclaimer.

The ad primarily targeted the Ivorian city Abidjan. Most of the users who viewed the ad were male.

**Preferred political leaders allied with Russia**

CfA has observed pro-Russia networks on Facebook launching coordinated attacks on political actors they believe to be allied with France, including Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara and Nigerien President Mohamed Bazoum. In 2021, Ouattara spoke out against the involvement of the Wagner Group in Côte d’Ivoire. The networks tend to amplify positive messaging about other political leaders, such as former Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo, who is alleged to have close links with Moscow. Below is a sample of some of the narratives pushed by the pro-Russia networks.

**Claims that Gbagbo is against France’s involvement in Mali**

A video released on January 26, 2022, alleged that Gbagbo was against France’s involvement in Mali. The video was amplified by a network of pan-African and pro-Gbagbo accounts on Facebook. The posts claimed to expose a French plot against Mali, likening it to France’s role in the 2010 crisis in

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5 Vladimir Poutine, Facebook page, https://archive.ph/hQ6Fy
7 David Pilling, “Ivory Coast’s President Warns Against Russian Security Group’s Involvement in Mali,” Financial Times, September 30, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/b08d4d4e-2509-4a01-a2c3-2fe857a04a13
Côte d’Ivoire, which led to the International Criminal Court charging Gbagbo with four counts of crimes against humanity, of which he was later acquitted. As of June 15, 2022, the video had garnered forty-two thousand views.

**Shallow-fake video depicts conversation between Ouattara and Cissé**

A manipulated video, initially detected on WhatsApp, purported to capture a telephone conversation between Ouattara and former Malian prime minister Boubou Cissé. In the clip, the pair discuss a plot to overthrow the Malian military junta, with support from France and rebel groups. The video, which uses a robotic voiceover on a collage of static photos, claims that Ouattara and Cissé do not support Russian involvement in Mali. The audio was shared by several pro-Russia Facebook pages currently monitored by CfA’s iLAB team.

CfA compared Cissé’s voice in the video with his voice from other verified public speeches, using a deep fake audio detection algorithm. The audio in the video had a 78–82 percent similarity score with the verified speeches, which is less than the minimum 85 percent threshold used to confirm authentic matches. This suggests that the video could have used a machine-simulated voice to impersonate Cissé.

**Anti-Ukraine messaging**

Russia has spread numerous false narratives in an attempt to justify its invasion of Ukraine. In West Africa, influencers often reshare these narratives, which espouse anti-West and anti-NATO sentiments. Below are examples of the types of anti-West messages.

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10 WhatsApp video shared with one of the authors of this report, February 13, 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zcf-I7kpL-GbqbUP9xOttmp4bXqc-q/view.
**Bucha killings were a propaganda campaign by the West**

After Russia denied being involved in the killing of civilians in the Ukrainian city of Bucha, key influencers in West Africa amplified claims in support of Russia. Influencers like Adimbola and Cameroonian-Swiss activist Nathalie Yamb, who frequently promote pro-Russia messaging targeted at Côte d’Ivoire, claimed the Bucha killings were “disinformation” and propaganda originating from the West and its allies. The claim was subsequently amplified into Facebook groups in Burkina Faso, CAR, Côte d’Ivoire, and Mali, with most posts criticizing Western media for falsifying the events in Bucha.

**Amplification of anti-Zelenskyy and anti-Ukraine narratives**

CIA identified a network of five Facebook accounts that amplified posts from Chris Yapi, an online influencer in Côte d’Ivoire. The posts claimed to expose how Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Western media have deceived the public, citing the Bucha killings as an example of Western propaganda.

**Amplification of the US bio-laboratories conspiracy**

Two previously identified pro-Russia Telegram channels (Russosphere and Faire Tes Recherches) continue to share claims about the existence of US bio-laboratories in Ukraine. Moreover, the posts share additional allegations that the bio-weapons will target countries supportive of Russia, including CAR, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, and Cameroon. These claims were further amplified on Facebook by a network of sixty-one pro-Russia accounts, including Sputnik Côte d’Ivoire. An in-depth analysis of the accounts’ timelines revealed that they consistently share anti-France and pro-Russia rhetoric while periodically redirecting users to Telegram channels.

**Twitter network amplifies pro-Russia sentiments from French journalist**

In an interview on May 9, 2022, with French broadcaster CNEWS, Erik Tegnér, a French political activist and journalist, claimed to expose anti-Russia media manipulation and propaganda campaigns launched by the West. Tegnér claimed that the Ukraine war had been exaggerated by the media and suggested possible “manipulation on the part of the Ukrainian government.” Tegnér is described as the founder of Livre Noir, a far-right online media outlet. He has been in Ukraine covering the war since March 2022.

The interview was shared on Twitter and the Livre Noir YouTube channel, garnering 115,992 views at the time of writing.
Mali

A HISTORY OF RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

Mali established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in October 1960, shortly after its independence. By March 1961, trade and cultural agreements had further cemented the diplomatic relationship.

Mali’s first president, Modibo Keita, was friendly toward the Soviet Union, unlike his successor, Moussa Traoré. After Traoré seized power in a successful coup in 1968, he fostered relations with former colonizer France and other Western powers instead of the Soviet Union. Relations between Mali and Russia deteriorated further when the Soviet Union fell in 1991. Although infrastructure development and gold mining contracts between Mali and Russia were still prevalent, Mali’s reliance on Russian military technology remained a key vector of influence.

In January 2013, Islamist groups captured the town of Konna, which led France to intervene in an attempt to stabilize its former colony. A series of successful engagements in January 2013 saw combined Malian and French forces retaking several towns from Islamic troops as part of Operation Serval.

In the wake of Operation Serval’s success, a French-led anti-insurgent operation called Operation Barkhane was established.

It consisted of around five thousand French troops situated in Chad, where they were joined by joint forces from Mali, Chad, Burkina Faso, Mauritania, and Niger. During this period, Mali-France relations were in good shape, with Malian authorities and the broader public having a generally positive perception of the French interventions.

This goodwill, however, was brittle. Widespread protests in June 2020 called for the resignation of then president Ibrahim Boubacar Keita. Keita and his prime minister, Boubou Cissé, were eventually arrested in August 2020; Keita later fled the country. The man at the helm of this coup, Col. Assimi Goïta, would go on to repeat this feat less than nine months later by staging a second coup and ousting the transitional president, Bah N’Daw, in May 2021. N’Daw’s ouster was prompted by a cabinet reshuffle that axed two ministers. Shortly afterward, Facebook groups formerly sympathetic to French relations began suggesting that a French hand was behind these dismissals.

France threatened sanctions following the coup; a few months later, it suspended military cooperation with Mali. Relations took another hit when reports in September 2021 suggested Mali was close to signing a deal with the Wagner Group to expand local military capacity and provide VIP protection for the country’s leaders.

Some of the groundwork for this shift in sentiment away from France could be observed on the ground. In 2017, a group called Groupe des Patriotes du Mali (Group of Patriots of Mali, or GPM) began campaigning for increased cooperation between Russia and Mali. GPM leader Mahmoud Dicko toured the countryside of Mali during this time to drum up support for his organization in the form of signatures obtained from the residents of the villages he visited. After Keïta was removed during the 2020 coup, GPM welcomed the change in leadership and called for increased military cooperation with Russia.

Over several years, GPM claimed it had obtained signatures from more than 8 million Malians, collecting reams of physical signatures from local communities pledging their support for increased Mali-Russia relations. Russia noticed GPM’s efforts: Russia sent its then ambassador to Mali, Alexei Doulian, to GPM gatherings, and Russian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova name-checked GPM during one of her speaking engagements.

Left: A photograph taken on September 28, 2017, shows then Russian ambassador to Mali Alexei Doulian (right) at a GPM event held at the Modibo Keïta sports complex in Bamako, Mali.

PRO-RUSSIA AND ANTI-FRANCE GROUPS


PRO-RUSSIA CAMPAIGNING IN SUDAN

In May 2021, Facebook attributed a network of inauthentic, pro-Russia assets operating in Sudan to individuals previously involved in Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Internet Research Agency (IRA), a St. Petersburg-based troll farm.1 Fake profiles promoted Prigozhin and Russia as friends and allies of the Sudanese people while simultaneously amplifying the strategic importance of creating a Russian naval base in Port Sudan.2

On October 25, 2021, Sudan’s military ousted the Sovereignty Council, a transitional civilian-military council created following the removal of strongman Omar al-Bashir to lead the country to democracy.3 The coup was led by members of the military section of the Sovereignty Council and has resulted in mass civilian protests, arrests, and deaths in the months since the military took control.

One month before the coup, an inauthentic network was linked to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).4 The network promoted the paramilitary group and its leader, Mohamed Dagalo, and amplified official RSF statements.

Both the IRA-linked network and the RSF-linked network were removed for violating Meta’s policy against “coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government entity.”5 While the first network was attributed to a foreign entity and the second to a local government entity, both networks operated similarly. Primarily, assets within the networks masqueraded as journalists and news organizations to present their propaganda as legitimate news.

This is not a new tactic for Sudan—in 2019, the Stanford Internet Observatory reported on a Wagner Group-linked network that used pages disguised as news sites to promote Russian interests in Sudan.6

Another organization, Yerewolo Debout sur les Remparts (Unerringly Standing on the Ramparts), established itself in January 2020.46 Instead of promoting increased cooperation with Russia, Yerewolo called for French and UN troops in Mali to disengage from military operations attempting to stabilize the region.47

Although both organizations are unique entities with separate agendas—one pro-Russia, the other anti-France—there has also been some overlap in their operations. For example, before Yerewolo established its own presence on social media,

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GPM promoted its events, and GPM banners were often seen at Yerewolo protests and vice versa.48

SOCIAL MEDIA CAMPAIGNS

In February 2022, the DFRLab found five Facebook pages that coordinated efforts promoting narratives beneficial to Russian interests, while also undermining France and, by extension, the West more broadly. Two of the Facebook pages in this network proclaimed support for the Forces Armées Malienne (FAMa), Mali's armed forces.49

On February 17, 2022, these Facebook pages maintained an aggregate following of one hundred and forty thousand accounts and had posted close to twenty-four thousand posts. FAMA24, the most prolific page in this network, had amassed upward of one hundred thousand followers as of June 19, 2022.

The DFRLab identified extensive coordination between these Facebook pages. Often the same content would be posted across all the pages within the span of a few minutes, generating the perception of wide-ranging support for these narratives.

A familiar set of narratives emerged from the content of these Facebook pages. Topics promoting Russia’s interests or derogating the West featured extensively, with the United States and UN missions in West Africa being particular targets. France, in particular, drew significant ire due to its role as a former colonizer. These Facebook pages also promoted narratives that supported Russian civilian and military interventions in Mali and encouraged cooperation between Goïta’s government and Russia.

For example, when news that Mali was considering using

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49 FAMA 24 “Cette page a pour but de vous donner l’information et l’exploit de nos vaillants soldats (FAMa) a temps reel , #JESUISFAMa” [“This page aims to give you the information and the exploit of our valiant soldiers (FAMa) in real time, #JESUISFAMa”], Facebook group, https://archive.ph/mkxAu and Collectif pour la Défense des Militaires, Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/Collectifpour-la-Défense-des-Militaires-CDM-102804201771973/.
Wagner Group forces to increase its military capacity in September 2021 became public, these Facebook pages began promoting the Wagner Group as a viable alternative to French military interventions, sharing memes with Wagner Group personnel depicted as battle-tested soldiers replacing French soldiers.\(^5\) In addition, the pages frequently called for cooperation between the Wagner Group and the Malian military.

This support for the Wagner Group would be a recurring theme. A frequently seen narrative compared the cost-effectiveness of proposed Wagner Group forces with that of Operation Barkhane, suggesting Russian mercenaries were an economical way to deal with conflict in the area.\(^5\)

The network also promoted calls for Malians to boycott French media organizations such as Radio France Internationale (RFI) and France 24. These calls also extended to French companies operating in Mali, such as mobile operator Orange. In one specific example of this, these pages targeted RFI in an attempt to have its media accreditation in Mali revoked.\(^52\) Mali’s minister of communications subsequently issued a statement in which he confirmed that there would be changes to the accreditation process. In March 2022, Mali banned RFI and France 24 from operating in the country.\(^53\)

The activity of the network also suggested that a focus on pro-Russia relations in the broader Sahel region was significant. A new Facebook page focused on the “liberation of the Sahel” joined the network in November 2021. In short order, the page joined the coordinated posting seen in the rest of the pages in the network. The page, Reveil des Peuples du Sahel (or RPS), paid particular heed to Niger and Burkina Faso in its posts.\(^54\) The geographical focus was particularly interesting considering that the page was administered from Mali, according to Facebook’s transparency features. It repeated the same Sahel-wide narratives seen on the rest of the pages in the network, including support for the Wagner Group and calls for West Africa to be “liberated from the French.”\(^55\)

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51 FAMA 24, “Wagner Russe: 72 milliards.”


55 Reveil des Peuples du Sahel, “Manifestation au Niger pour demander le retrait des forces étrangères, soutien au peuple malien et autres…” “[Demonstration in Niger to demand the withdrawal of foreign forces, support for the Malian people and others…]”, Facebook, February 3, 2022, https://archive.ph/R0hGL.
DIASPORA ACTIVATION FOLLOWING OUTBREAK OF WAR IN ETHIOPIA

On November 4, 2020, the Ethiopian government and the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF) entered into a period of conflict, and the former declared a state of emergency in Tigray. Internet, mobile networks, and landline telephones were shut down, creating an information vacuum ripe for the spread of disinformation and propaganda.1

The Washington Post found a significant increase in accounts created after November 4, 2020, tweeting about the war.2 This tactic—creating networks of bots to amplify a topic—has previously been used by governments, authoritarian regimes, and PR companies to distort narratives.3 In the case of Ethiopia, the recently created accounts appeared both coordinated and authentic.

Further research by the DFRLab, the Washington Post, and Harvard’s Shorenstein Center found that English-speaking Ethiopian diaspora members quickly mobilized after Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed announced the implementation of a state of emergency in Tigray.4 Diaspora members created click-to-tweet campaigns to spread information about the conflict and circulated instructions on how to sign up for Twitter. Speaking anonymously to the Washington Post, activists explained that Twitter was used to spread information instead of Facebook because English-language tweets would reach a broader, more international audience. The organizers of two websites set up to amplify opposing narratives about the conflict told the DFRLab that the overarching goal was to get hashtags to trend.

On November 5, 2021, Twitter announced it was halting Trends in Ethiopia to “reduce the risks of coordination that could incite violence or cause harm.”5 However, an investigation by the DFRLab and New York University’s Center for Social Media and Politics found there was no significant reduction in the volume of tweets posted using conflict-related hashtags on both sides of the political spectrum, or in the prevalence of harmful or threatening content following Twitter’s removal of Trends in Ethiopia.6

While click-to-tweet campaigns are still popular among the diaspora, pro-government accounts have primarily unified under a single umbrella hashtag, which has been used by Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Chinese officials: #NoMore.7 The Ethiopian state-owned media company Fana Broadcasting Corporate regularly posts updates on global #NoMore rallies, many of which are amplified by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ Twitter account.

Although a cease-fire was signed in March 2022, fighting continues to break out across Ethiopia, and tensions remain high.8 On social media, opposing narratives about the conflict continue to proliferate, with mis- and disinformation spreading across the political spectrum.


3 Carvin, Operation Carthage.


5 Twitter Safety (@TwitterSafety), “Given the imminent threat of physical harm, we’ve also temporarily disabled Trends in Ethiopia…,” Twitter, November 6, 2021, 10:40 p.m., https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/1456813765387816965.


Niger’s Information Space

EMERGING TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES


Almost all pro-Russia messaging generated inside Niger or that uses Niger-based actors or assets seeks to amplify narratives or events in Mali or elsewhere in the region rather than focusing on in-country dynamics.

Shifting allegiances

On April 7, 2022, the United Nations General Assembly voted to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC). Seventeen African countries that initially voted in favor of a previous UN resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine did not support the resolution to suspend Russia from the UNHRC. Nine countries abstained, seven did not attend the vote, and one country, Eritrea, voted against the resolution. Niger was one of the countries that demonstrated the shift in policy by abstaining from the vote to suspend Russia from the UNHRC, while Côte d’Ivoire voted in favor of both resolutions.

Maps of the African countries that voted in favor of a UN resolution condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine (left) versus those that voted to suspend Russia from the UNHRC (right).

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Reports of collusion

Code for Africa (CfA) identified a network of five Facebook pages and six Twitter accounts targeting Niger, Mali, and Côte d'Ivoire between March 2022 and June 2022. The accounts amplified narratives that claim the Nigerien government is a “puppet” for French control in the Sahel. Some of these accounts also published allegations that the May 11, 2022, attempted coup in Bamako was backed by French President Macron, Ivorian President Ouattara, and Nigerien President Bazoum.

False media stories

False media stories have been used to allege anti-Russia cooperation between Niger and France. For example, a 2022 debunk showed how a fake article misleadingly attributed to the Washington Post was used to propagate claims that Macron had strictly forbidden Bazoum from signing a defense agreement with Russia or buying Russian military equipment.²

Russian media puts down roots in Africa

In February 2022, Russian state media outlet RT announced it was hiring for a major African media “hub” in Kenya.³ While the ad did not mention other countries, the recruitment is for journalists with French language skills, suggesting that francophone African countries, including Niger, will be the target demographic.

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³ RT, “RT is looking for media professionals to work with our new office in Nairobi, Kenya. If you are interested, please send your CV, cover letter, and portfolio to opportunities@rtafriahub.com...” Facebook, February 10, 2022, https://www.facebook.com/326683984410/posts/10160675760959411.
AMPLIFIED NARRATIVES

Niger’s opposition to the Wagner Group’s involvement in the Sahel

In September 2021, Nigerien Foreign Minister Hassoumi Massaoudou expressed opposition to a proposed deal between Mali and the Wagner Group. He warned that international sanctions would be severe if Malian soldiers did not surrender power by February 2022. His comments sparked widespread media coverage and social media chatter. Mali’s responding press release branded Massaoudou’s comments as unacceptable, unfriendly, and condescending. The ordeal triggered online discussions that suggested France was behind both insecurity and terrorism in the Sahel.

Russia’s Wagner Group and the war in Ukraine

In December 2021, CfA observed an increase in online conversations in Niger regarding a potential deal between Mali and the Wagner Group. A similar increase was seen after Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Conversations focused on the local impact of the Ukraine war, with discussions centered on the fuel crisis and economic impact of the war. The posts with the highest number of interactions originated from Abdourahamane Oumarou, the founder of the Union of Pan-Africanist Patriots. Oumarou was a candidate in Niger’s 2020 presidential election and consistently shares anti-France and pro-Russia messaging.

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Burkina Faso

THE RISE OF PRO-RUSSIA, ANTI-FRANCE NARRATIVES

On January 24, 2022, growing anti-France sentiment and pro-Russia support resulted in Burkina citizens holding Russian flags as Lt. Col. Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba ousted the democratically elected president, Roch Marc Christian Kaboré. According to reporting by the Daily Beast, Kaboré was allegedly urged to contract with the Wagner Group by Damiba prior to the coup but resisted these attempts.58 The coup itself was supported by Wagner Group founder Prigozhin, who welcomed the military putsch and labelled it a “new epoch of decolonization” in Africa. The Community of Officers for International Security (COSI), a nongovernmental group representing Russian contractors, also offered to train the Burkina army.

Calls for Russian assistance in fighting jihadists in Burkina Faso appeared to have been heavily influenced by Russia’s perceived military success in other African countries, including the CAR and Mali. In September 2021, Facebook pages administered in Burkina Faso Line graph showing that the frequency of mentions of the Wagner Group published in traditional media in Mali rose significantly beginning on September 12, 2021.

Source: Knight and Cheboi, "Local Support for Russia Increased on Facebook."

On October 4, 2020, a viral video recorded near the Wetland Hotel in Nigeria’s Delta State sparked one of the largest online mobilizations in Nigeria’s history. The footage, shot from a pedestrian’s mobile phone, showed a young Nigerian man with a bloody head injury following a high-speed chase with police authorities. The man survived the encounter and was visited by officials in the hospital days after the incident.

The video set off the #EndSARS movement, referring to Nigeria’s brutal Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS). The movement spread widely on Twitter; the hashtag was used 185 million times between October 1, 2020, and November 18, 2020.

Despite falsehoods surrounding the video—claims that the young man was killed or that SARS officers were not involved—years of police brutality targeting civilians found a vent in the weeks-long public demonstrations that flowed from it.

A key inflection point occurred on October 20, 2020, when the Nigerian army opened fire on scores of peaceful protesters at the Lekki tollgate south of Lagos, killing and injuring several demonstrators. The Nigerian government initially claimed that reports of these shootings were “fake news,” but in a cascading series of admissions, eventually conceded that the army had fired at protesters but did not use live ammunition.

In the aftermath, the DFRLab identified Twitter accounts linked to the Nigerian government that attempted to suppress further participation in the #EndSARS protests. The same accounts also cast doubt on the events around the Lekki tollgate shooting, suggesting that the shooting was fabricated and that activists had ulterior motives.

Despite being a contributor to the polluted information environment, the Nigerian government cited misinformation as a motive when it banned Twitter from June 5, 2021, to January 13, 2022. “There has been a litany of problems with the social media platform in Nigeria, where misinformation and fake news spread through it have had real world violent consequences,” Garba Shehu, an aide to Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari, said in statement. Twitter was reinstated after agreeing to pay certain taxes and establishing a local presence in Nigeria.

Burkina Faso saw significant increases in mentions of the Wagner Group, increasing by nineteen-fold. The increased mentions followed reports that the Wagner Group would be deploying to Mali.

Protesters celebrating the coup in Burkina Faso told the New York Times that Russia’s interventions in CAR and Mali were one of the main reasons for celebrating.

The influence of CAR and Mali on anti-France and pro-Russia narratives was evident in the lead-up to Burkina Faso’s 2022 coup. The DFRLab found that, between September 12, 2019, and September 12, 2021, the Wagner Group was referenced just sixty-six times by Facebook pages administered in Burkina Faso. These mentions spiked significantly after Reuters reported that Mali was in talks with the paramilitary organization on September 13, 2021. Engagement on posts mentioning the mercenary group increased by 6,363 percent in the four months before the coup. Many of these posts supported Russian involvement in Mali and heavily criticized France for failing to control insurgents in the region.

Similarly, there was an increase in mentions of the Wagner Group in traditional media following reports that Mali was in talks with the private military company. However, unlike the mainly supportive narratives prevalent on social media, the narratives spread by traditional media took a balanced or even more critical view of the Wagner Group and Russia’s presence in the Sahel.

Previous disinformation campaigns by Russia focused heavily on Mali and CAR as influential narrative battlegrounds. In Burkina Faso, the ripple effects of these campaigns resulted in a clear increase in calls for Russian aid and the expulsion of French troops.

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4 Irish and Lewis, “EXCLUSIVE Deal Allowing Russian Mercenaries.”
Conclusion

Like the countries they target, influence campaigns in Africa are varied and unique. The actors behind these campaigns are foreign states, independent local opportunists, or local governments. Their apparent objectives span the spectrum from spreading bona fide awareness to global audiences to targeting vulnerable communities to manipulating the outcome of democratic elections.

Russia’s role in Africa is particularly significant. After failures in Mozambique left Russian private military companies (PMCs) in the lurch, they have managed to secure a comfortable foothold in parts of West Africa, including the Central African Republic. Russian military contractors have a notable influence on unstable regions facing armed conflict, and the perceived efficacy of Russian PMCs is a narrative exported wholesale into francophone countries in particular.

Tied to this is Russia’s recurring role as the “benevolent benefactor,” a state unsullied by the taint of colonialism. Russia wields the rod of France’s colonial history against it in the region and against the West more broadly by reminding West African countries of the history of exploitation at the hands of the West. A combination of colonial resentment and pan-African nationalism has made the acceptance of Russian military assistance that much easier in these countries.

The pitfalls and opportunities that social media platforms provide in Africa are obvious. The #EndSARS campaign brought the issue of police brutality in Nigeria to the world’s attention in the same way that Ethiopian diaspora communities have used access to social media platforms to elevate the voices of their blocked and banned compatriots back home. But the same social media platforms have also been used to suppress participation in the #EndSARS protests, target activists, and deny the Nigerian authorities’ mass murder of peaceful protesters. In addition, social media galvanized South Africans against foreign nationals by blaming a lack of jobs and ailing service delivery on asylum seekers and refugees, all packaged in a thin veneer of nationalism.

Ultimately, in an interconnected world, the political and social instability caused by influence operations is tangible across borders. A proper understanding of the tactics and techniques as well as the impact of these influence campaigns in Africa can serve as a lesson for the rest of the world.
THE DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN WEST AFRICA AND BEYOND

Endnotes


k Screenshots, left to right: Parti des Peuples Africains Côte D’Ivoire, “URGENT - LE PRÉSIDENT GBAGBO, BIEN TÔT EN RUSSIE” and Code for Africa-generated graph using Meta-owned social media monitoring tool.


q Code for Africa-generated maps, using data pulled from: United Nations (@UN_News_Centre), “BREAKING The UN General Assembly adopted a resolution that condemns Russia’s ‘illegal so-called referendums’ in regions within Ukraine’s...” Twitter, October 12, 2022, 10:15 p.m., https://twitter.com/UN_News_Centre/status/1580299641653411845 and United Nations (@UN_News_Centre), “UGENT The UN General Assembly votes to suspend Russia’s membership in the UN Human Rights Council @UN_HRC In favor: 93 Abstained: 58 Against: 24,” Twitter, October 12, 2022, 5:51 p.m., https://twitter.com/UN_News_Centre/status/1580299641653411845.


t Code for Africa-generated graph using Meta-owned social media monitoring tool.