

# THE DISINFORMATION LANDSCAPE IN WEST AFRICA AND BEYOND

By **Jean le Roux** and **Tessa Knight**

*With contributions from Code for Africa*





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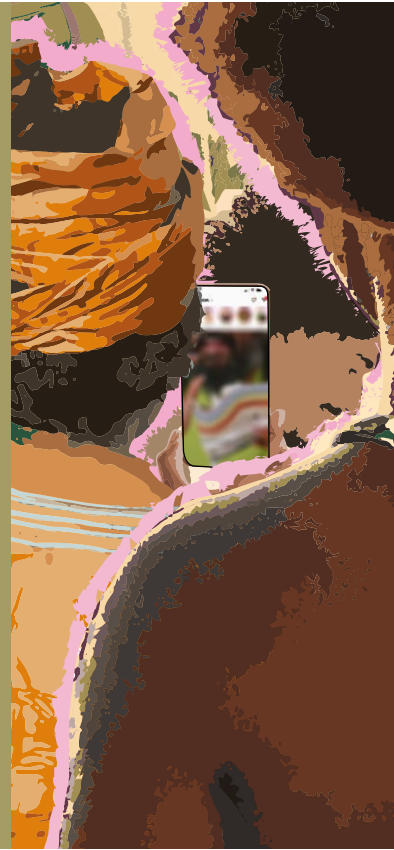
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# The Disinformation Landscape in West Africa and Beyond



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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

**T**he 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.<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> Mapping Disinformation in Africa, Africa Center for Strategic Studies, April 26, 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>.

# Background

**A**frica'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).<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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..<sup>4</sup>

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

	Total Internet Users	Penetration Rate	Social Media Users	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	Mobile Connections
<b>Niger<sup>a</sup></b>	3.72 million	14.5%	2.5%	2.0%	0.5%	0.1%	47.2%
<b>Mali<sup>b</sup></b>	6.33 million	29.9%	10.2%	9.0%	1.2%	0.3%	111.5%
<b>Côte d'Ivoire<sup>c</sup></b>	9.94 million	36.3%	23.4%	20.6%	3.4%	0.7%	137.8%
<b>Burkina Faso<sup>d</sup></b>	5.95 million	27.3%	10.1%	9.4%	0.8%	0.2%	118.1%
<b>Nigeria<sup>e</sup></b>	109.2 million	51.0%	15.4%	12.2%	4.2%	0.2%	82.4%
<b>Central African Republic<sup>f</sup></b>	355, 100	7.1%	2.8%	2.6%	0.2%	0.1%	33.1%

2 Simon Kemp, "Digital 2022: Morocco," DataReportal, February 16, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-morocco>; Simon Kemp, "Digital 2022: Seychelles," DataReportal, February 16, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-seychelles>; Simon Kemp, "Digital 2022: Egypt," DataReportal, February 16, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-egypt>; and Simon Kemp, "Digital 2022: The Central African Republic," DataReportal, February 15, 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-central-african-republic>.

3 "Free Basics," Meta, accessed August 12, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/connectivity/solutions/free-basics>.

4 Kanyali Muthui, "Africa: Facebook's Meta Shuts Express Wi-Fi across Continent," Exchange, February 8, 2022, <https://theexchange.africa/africa/meta-shuts-express-wi-fi-pushing-rural-internet-solutions-needs/>.

# Central African Republic

## 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.<sup>5</sup> Amid this conflict, Bozizé was elected president in 2005 and subsequently reelected in 2011, despite allegations of fraud from the opposition.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> Of the initial 175 instructors deployed in January 2018, all but five were "civilian" military instructors, reportedly employed by the Wagner

5 "Raid on CAR Town 'Leaves 20 Dead,'" BBC, last updated November 23, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4035239.stm>.

6 "Bozize Inaugurated, Prime Minister Appointed," New Humanitarian, June 13, 2005, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/54890/central-african-republic-bozize-inaugurated-prime-minister-appointed> and "Central African President Re-Elected Amid Cries of Fraud," France 24, last updated February 3, 2011, <https://www.france24.com/en/20110203-central-african-president-elected-amid-cries-fraud-francois-bozize-africa-election>.

7 CPJP-Centrafrrique, Séléka CPSK-CPJP, Relatif aux différentes attaques des villes de Damara, Sibut, Grimari et Dékoa [Related to the different attacks on the towns of Damara, Sibut, Grimari and Dékoa], press release, September 16, 2012, <http://cpjp-centrafrrique.over-blog.org/article-seleka-cpsk-cpjp-110140652.html>.

8 Emily Melgard, "What Is the Antibalaka?" Tony Blair Faith Foundation, September 7, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160927203334/http://tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/religion-geopolitics/commentaries/backgrounders/what-antibalaka>.

9 "New Central African President Takes on a Country in Ruins," eNCA, March 28, 2016, <https://www.enca.com/africa/new-central-african-president-takes-country-ruins>.

10 "Sangaris Mission in CAR Officially Ends on October 30," Africanews, last updated October 29, 2016, <https://www.africanews.com/2016/10/29/sangaris-mission-in-car-officially-ends-on-october/>.

11 "Russian-Linked Forces 'Tortured' and 'Executed' Civilians in Central African Republic Since 2019, HRW Says," CNN, May 5, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/05/05/africa/russian-forces-executions-car-intl/index.html>.

12 Hannah Ritchie, "Russia Signs Military Cooperation Deal with Central African Republic," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 22, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-signs-military-cooperation-deal-central-african-republic-wagner-investigation-russian-reporters-killed/29446656.html>.



## OPERATION CARTHAGE AND PR-AUGMENTED ELECTIONEERING IN TUNISIA

Beginning in September 2019, the DFRLab uncovered numerous online assets linked to the Tunisian PR firm, UReputation.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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 Bedie's campaign during the October 2020 presidential elections in Cote 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.

1 Andy Carvin, Operation Carthage: How a Tunisian Company Conducted Influence Operations in African Presidential Elections, Atlantic Council, June 5, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/operation-carthage-002.pdf>.

2 "May 2020 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report," Meta, June 5, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/06/may-cib-report/>.

Group, a Russian mercenary force, and operating under the guise of Sewa Security Services.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> These

additional military instructors, alongside Rwandan troops, were critical in thwarting the rebel advance on Bangui.<sup>16</sup>

In mid-2021, another batch of 600 Russian instructors was deployed to CAR, bringing the total number of deployed instructors to 1,135.<sup>17</sup>

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.<sup>18</sup>

13 Russian Foreign Ministry, "Ответ Заместителя Директора Департамента Информации И Печати МИД России А.А.Кожина На Вопрос СМИ О Развитии Сотрудничества Между Россией и ЦАР" ["Response of the Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian Foreign Ministry A.A. Kozhin to a media question about the development of cooperation between Russia and the Central African Republic"], Telegraph, March 22, 2018, <https://telegra.ph/Otvet-zamestitelya-direktora-Departamenta-informacii-i-pechati-MID-Rossii-AAKozhina-na-vopros-SMI-o-razvitii-sotrudnichestva-mez-03-22> and Cole Spiller, Celia Metzger, and Matthew Crittenden, "Russian Engagement in Africa: Case Study - Mining and Private Security Companies in the Central African Republic," Scope, March 19, 2021, [https://www.scopedata.org/reports/2021-3-19\\_CAR.html](https://www.scopedata.org/reports/2021-3-19_CAR.html).

14 "Covert Activity of Russian Mercenaries of Wagner's PMC in CAR Should Be Subject of International Investigation,' Says SBU Head Vasyl Hrytsak," Security Service of Ukraine, December 20, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20181222082056/https://ssu.gov.ua/en/news/1/category/2/view/5541#.AL0Os7PL.dpbs> and Andrew Perry, "Russia's Growing Influence in the Central African Republic: A New Ally or a New Coloniser?" Foreign Affairs Review, October 11, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairsreview.com/home/russias-growing-influence-in-the-central-african-republic-a-new-ally-or-a-new-coloniser>.

15 Elena Teslova, "Russia Sends 300 Military Instructors to CAR," Anadolu Agency, December 23, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/russia-sends-300-military-instructors-to-car/2085703>.

16 James Tasamba, "Rwanda Commits to Further Helping Central African Republic Restore Peace," Anadolu Agency, August 6, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/rwanda-commits-to-further-helping-central-african-republic-restore-peace/2326189>.

17 "Russia Sends 600 Instructors to the CAR," African Mirror, July 3, 2021, <https://theafricanmirror.africa/news/russia-sends-600-instructors-to-the-car/>.

18 Ruslan Trad (@ruslantrad), "Russian mercenaries 80 km. from Bangui. The rebel coalition of 3R-MPC fighters announced that they have taken control of several settlements in the #Bangui....," Twitter, December 22, 2020, 8:15 a.m., <https://twitter.com/ruslantrad/status/1341371828850348032> and "Three Russian Instructors Killed in CAR," Perild, October 5, 2021, <https://www.perild.com/2021/10/05/three-russian-instructors-killed-in-car/>.

A UN report from June 2021 noted the excessive use of force by FACA and Russian instructors.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

The use of these military instructors and PMCs serves Russian interests on multiple fronts.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> *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.<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> CNN identified Wiredu as the coordinator of an Internet Research Agency-linked troll farm operating out of Ghana.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> These appear to be some of the "easter eggs" planted in the film for discerning viewers.<sup>28</sup>

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

19 United Nations Panel of Experts Established pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2127 (2013), Letter dated 25 June 2021 from the Panel of Experts on the Central African Republic extended pursuant to resolution 2536 (2020) addressed to the President of the Security Council, United Nations, June 25, 2021, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3930373>.

20 Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, CAR: Experts alarmed by government's use of "Russian trainers," close contacts with UN peacekeepers, press release, March 31, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2021/03/car-experts-alarmed-governments-use-russian-trainers-close-contacts-un>.

21 Jakob Hedenskog, Russia Is Stepping Up Its Military Cooperation in Africa, Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206604>.

22 Sebastian Shukla, "Russian Mercenaries Get the Big-Screen Treatment. The Reality Behind the Film Is As Murky As the Plot," CNN, May 28, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/28/africa/wagner-mercenaries-tourist-film-car-cmd-intl/index.html>.

23 *Granit*, IMDb, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt17352384/>.

24 International Crisis Group, Stemming the Insurrection in Mozambique's Cabo Delgado, Report No. 303 (June 11, 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/southern-africa/mozambique/303-stemming-insurrection-mozambiques-cabo-delgado>.

25 "Alleged Leader of Russian Troll Network Arraigned on Money Laundering Charges," CitiNewsroom.com, March 17, 2020, <https://citinewsroom.com/2020/03/alleged-leader-of-russian-troll-network-arraigned-on-money-laundering-charges/>.

26 Sebastian Shukla, "Russian Mercenaries Get the Big-Screen Treatment. The Reality Behind the Film Is As Murky As the Plot," CNN, May 28, 2021, <https://edition.cnn.com/2021/05/28/africa/wagner-mercenaries-tourist-film-car-cmd-intl/index.html>.

27 Yarpova, Liliya, "Как Выяснила «Медуза», Бизнесмен Евгений Пригожин Проспонсировал Съёмки Фильма «Турист» — О Российских Военных В Африке. В Нем Снялись Настоящие Наемники Из ЧВК Вагнера," ["As Meduza found out, businessman Yevgeny Prigozhin sponsored the shooting of the film "Tourist" — about the Russian military in Africa. It stars real mercenaries from PMC Wagner,"], Meduza, May 19, 2021, <https://meduza.io/feature/2021/05/19/amerikantsy-za-demokratuyu-boryutsya-a-my-za-spravedlivost>.

28 Jack Margolin (@Jack\_Mrgln), "The Russian movie 'Tourist' about mercenaries in the CAR aired on NTV, and is now on YouTube. It looks to be an hour and a half of winking. PMC lifestyle..." Twitter, May 10, 2021, 9:59 a.m., [https://twitter.com/Jack\\_Mrgln/status/1395378526094827525](https://twitter.com/Jack_Mrgln/status/1395378526094827525).



Posters for three pro-Russia films, including, from left to right, *Tourist* (CAR), *Granit* (Mozambique), and *Sky* (Syria). The films all take place in regions where Wagner Group mercenaries have been active.<sup>9</sup>

of pro-Russia movies, including *Tourist* and *Granit*, were produced by Parity Films (Паритет Фильм) from mid-2021 until early 2022.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> Petrovna and Prigozhin have been involved in at least eighteen other companies together.<sup>31</sup>

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.<sup>32</sup>

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.



The Wagner Group-linked statue in Bangui, Central African Republic.<sup>h</sup>

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, [30 “ООО ‘AURUM’ \(TIN:7801327032\),” Org-Info.com, accessed June 21, 2022, \[31 “Кислова Елена Петровна: В Каких Значится Организациях,” \\[“Kislova Elena Petrovna: In Which Organizations Does it Appear?”\\], Audit-It.Ru, accessed June 21, 2022, \\[32 Lukas Andriukaitis, “First Russian Mercenary Statue in Africa Identified in the Central African Republic,” Digital Forensic Research Lab \\\(@DFRLab\\\), December 20, 2021, \\\[6\\\]\\\(https://medium.com/dfrlab/first-russian-mercenary-statue-in-africa-identified-in-the-central-african-republic-55f9d5ac3abd.”</a></p>
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<div data-bbox=\)](https://opendata.mkrf.ru/opendata/7705851331-register_movies/#a:eyJkYXRhc2V0IjoilNTliMDU4MDE1ZmEzNzljMTI0ZTkyODY5liwic2NoZWlhjoiNjAxM2U5YjZjc1YTA3NWElY2I3NTk5liwidmVyc2lvcil6JlYwMTNiYTU3ZDE5NDAYnZU4YmYzMWwNmZSIsInRleHRGaWx0ZXliOiliLCJOYWliOiJidWlsZF90YWJsZSIsImZpbHRlciZhbHVlcyI6eyJuYXRpdmVJZCI6eylkaW4iOiIsInJlYwODYwNiJdfX0iImNhcmQiOiI2NDA4NjA2In0=”.</a></p>
</div>
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## XENOPHOBIC VIOLENCE ORIGINATING ON SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIAL MEDIA

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup>

1 Jean le Roux, "Xenophobic Twitter Campaigns Orchestrated by Former South African Soldier," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), September 23, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/xenophobic-twitter-campaigns-orchestrated-by-former-south-african-soldier-9e7702433176>.

2 "Diepsloot Leaders Accuse Nhlanhla Lux of Hijacking Their Protest," eNCA, April 7, 2022, <https://www.enca.com/news/diepsloot-leaders-accuse-nhlanhla-lux-hijacking-their-protest>.

## Côte d'Ivoire's Information Space

### EMERGING TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES

Allan Cheboi, Investigative Manager, Code for Africa, and Justin Arenstein, Editor-in-Chief, Code for Africa, and Christian Ngnie, Investigative Data Analyst, Code for Africa

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.



Screenshots of Facebook posts calling for Côte d'Ivoire to be the next Sahel country to welcome cooperation with Russia.<sup>1</sup>

### Transnational networks

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.<sup>1</sup>

### Proven recipes

Repeating earlier successes in countries such as CAR and Mali, CfA observed networks of accounts on Facebook using “cospasta” 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 cospastas 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.<sup>2</sup>

1 Ibid.

2 PAPA Gbagbo, “Enlèvement d'un soldat russe par les terroristes au Mali (Regarder jusqu'à la fin). Partagez!” [“Kidnapping of a Russian soldier by terrorists in Mali (Watch until the end). Share!”], Facebook video, April 28, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=412420423598374>.

# SNAPSHOT



Still from the Wagner Group video showing a supposed Wagner Group mercenary escaping from his jihadist “captors” in Mali.<sup>j</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup>

## 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.



Screenshot of a January 26, 2022, Facebook post alleging a meeting between former Ivorian president Koudou Laurent Gbagbo and Russian President Vladimir Putin,<sup>k</sup>

3 Afrique Média, “La Télévision Panafricaine Afrique Media, retrouvez toute l’actualité africaine et internationale en direct 24h/24 sur” [“Pan-African Television Africa Media, find all the African and international news live 24 hours a day on”], Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/afriquemedia> and Michael Weiss and Pierre Vaux, The Company You Keep: Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Influence Operations in Africa, Free Russia Foundation, September 2020, <https://www.4freerussia.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/09/The-Company-You-Keep-Yevgeny-Prigozhins-Influence-Operations-in-Africa.pdf>.

4 Parti des Peuples Africains Cote D’ivoire, “URGENT - LE PRÉSIDENT GBAGBO, BIENTÔT EN RUSSIE SUR L'INVITATION DU PRÉSIDENT RUSSE. Selon une source sécuritaire proche du kremlin, le président Poutine auraient formulé une demande d'invitation à l'un des proches du président Gbagbo...” [“URGENT - PRESIDENT GBAGBO, SOON IN RUSSIA AT THE INVITATION OF THE RUSSIAN PRESIDENT. According to a security source close to the Kremlin, President Putin has made a request for an invitation to one of President Gbagbo’s relatives...”], Facebook, January 26, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/119072889895436/posts/487580839711304>.

# SNAPSHOT

## Sponsored content

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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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

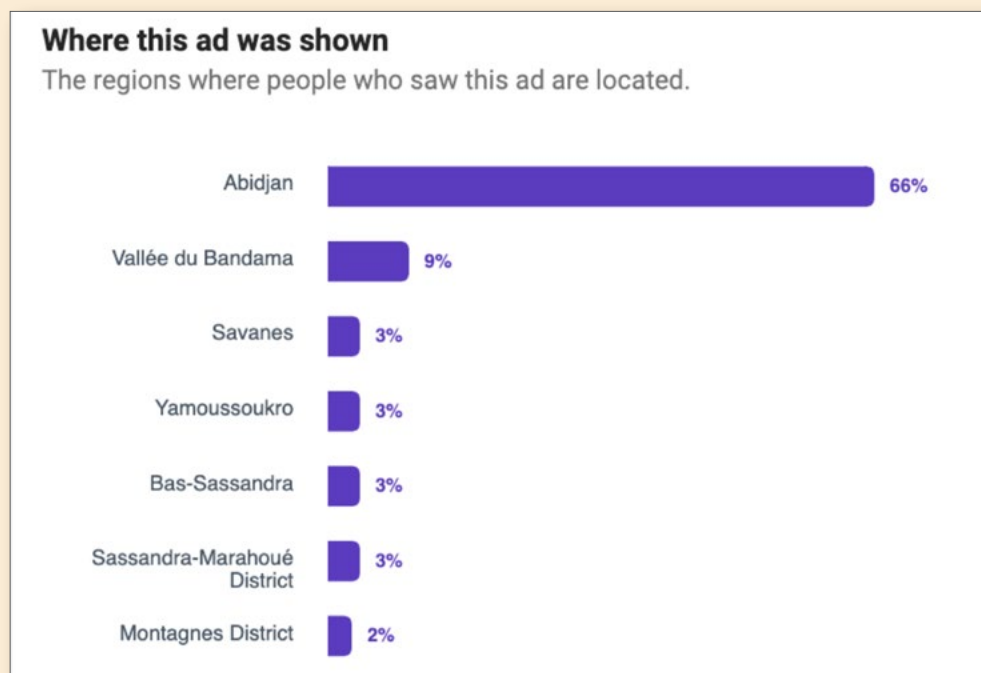
## AMPLIFIED NARRATIVES

### 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> The posts claimed to expose a French plot against Mali, likening it to France's role in the 2010 crisis in



Charts show the target region and audience breakdown for the ad by the Vladimir Poutine Facebook page.<sup>1</sup>

5 Vladimir Poutine, Facebook page, <https://archive.ph/hQ6Fy>.

6 Zoom Mali, "Suivez l'actualité du Mali en continue en vous abonnant pour ne rien manquer..." ["Follow the news of Mali continuously by subscribing so you don't miss anything..."], Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/actualitesdumali/> and Timenowmagazine-TNM, "L'Afrique en Marche! Africa on the rise!" Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/timenowmagazine/>.

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>.

8 L'Afrique d'Abord, "Urgent Urgent ... Les gens là veulent ré coloniser nos états Africains sous nos yeux..." ["Urgent Urgent... The people there want to re-colonize our African states before our eyes..."], Facebook video, January 26, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/109743754136226/videos/639447263774222/> and L'Afrique d'Abord, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/LAfrique-dAbord-109743754136226>.

# SNAPSHOT

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup>

CfA compared Cissé's voice in the video with his voice from other verified public speeches, using a deep fake audio detection algorithm.<sup>12</sup> 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.

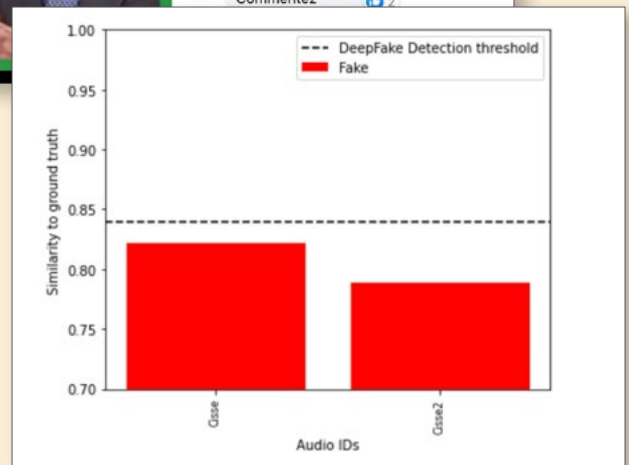
## **Anti-Ukraine messaging**

Russia has spread numerous false narratives in an attempt to justify its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>13</sup> 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.



Above: screenshot of Facebook posts amplifying the alleged telephone conversation between Ivorian President Alassane Ouattara and former Malian prime minister Boubou Cissé.<sup>11</sup>

Right: graph showing the similarity of scores between former Malian prime minister Boubou Cissé's voice in the video and his authentic voice.<sup>12</sup>



9 "Ivory Coast's Ex-President Gbagbo Free to Go Home After ICC Acquittal," BBC News, March 31, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-56595150>.  
10 WhatsApp video shared with one of the authors of this report, February 13, 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zcf-17kxpL-GbqbUP9rxOtmpp4bXqc-q/view>.  
11 Best of News Afrique, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Best-Of-News-Afrique-109706217374160/>.  
12 "Resembyzer 0.1.1.dev0," Pypi, accessed June 21, 2022, <https://pypi.org/project/Resembyzer/>.  
13 Givi Gigitashvili and Roman Osadchuk, "How Ten False Flag Narratives Were Promoted by Pro-Kremlin Media," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), February 18, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/how-ten-false-flag-narratives-were-promoted-by-pro-kremlin-media-c67e786c6085>.



# SNAPSHOT

## ***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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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

CfA 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.<sup>17</sup>

## ***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.<sup>18</sup> 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.”<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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- 14 Givi Gigitashvili, “Russian War Report: Kremlin Claims Bucha Massacre Was Staged by Ukraine,” *New Atlanticist*, Atlantic Council, April 4, 2022, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russian-war-report-kremlin-claims-bucha-massacre-was-staged-by-ukraine/#bucha>.
  - 15 Adimbola (@Adimbola), “#Ukraine La Russie a demandé qu'une enquête soit diligentée par l'Union Européenne sur les événements qui ont eu lieu à Bucha” [“#Ukraine Russia has requested that an investigation be carried out by the European Union into the events that took place in Bucha”], Twitter, April 4, 2022, 5:11 a.m., <https://twitter.com/Adimbola/status/1510907946238197763> and Nathalie Yamb (@Nath\_Yamb), “Leurs mécanismes d'intox et de désinformation sont toujours les mêmes #Moura #Bucha” [“Their mechanisms of intoxic and disinformation are always the same #Moura #Bucha”], Twitter, April 4, 2022, 9:41 p.m., [https://twitter.com/Nath\\_Yamb/status/1511066386965086215](https://twitter.com/Nath_Yamb/status/1511066386965086215).
  - 16 Gary Aliou, “OUTCHA \_ QUE S'EST-IL VRAIMENT PASSÉ \_ - LE MÉDIAMENSONGE DU JOUR - MICHEL COLLON” [“OUTCHA \_ WHAT REALLY HAPPENED \_ - THE MEDIA LIE OF THE DAY - MICHEL COLLON”], Facebook video, April 4, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1363448867467273> and McRapivoire, “UKRAINE: L'OCCIDENT L'EMPIRE DU MENSONGE Cette opération spéciale menée par la Russie en Ukraine, les occidentaux...” [“UKRAINE: THE WEST THE EMPIRE OF LIE This special operation led by Russia in Ukraine, Westerners...”], Facebook, April 5, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/Abidjaninfo24/posts/574930924200994>.
  - 17 CHRIS YAPI TV OFFICIEL (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCrrFW5ckKRfBEOBxH3k9anQ>), “Rien ne prouve que Moscou soit responsable des événements de Bucha ». Cela a été déclaré sur CNN par l'ancien ambassadeur américain en Russie, Jack Matlock.” YouTube video, April 7, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220407111928/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeeENdyIX3Q>.
  - 18 RUSSOSPHERE - En défense de la Russie, “Une opération spéciale de la Russie a révélé la présence de 30 laboratoires...” [“A special operation by Russia revealed the presence of 30 laboratories...”], Telegram channel, <https://t.me/russosphere/10787> and S'INFORMER SOIT MÊME, “Pris ailleurs Armes bactériologiques L'AFRIQUE visée...” [“Taken elsewhere Bacteriological weapons Targeted AFRICA...”], Telegram channel, <https://t.me/FaireTesRecherches/11573>.
  - 19 Pauline Bock, “TF1, France 2 Et 'Livre Noir' À Marioupol: Le Jeu Des Différences” [“TF1, France 2 and 'Black Book' in Marioupol: The Game of Differences”], Arrêt sur Images, April 4, 2022, <https://www.arretsurlimages.net/articles/tf1-france-2-et-livre-noir-a-marioupol-le-jeu-des-differences>.
  - 20 Leader News (@amounomalande), “#Russie: Un français, présent en Russie pour le défilé du 09 mai, met à nu les mensonges, la manipulation...” [“#Russia: A Frenchman, present in Russia for the May 09 parade, exposes lies, manipulation...”], Twitter, May 11, 2022, 4:59 a.m., <https://twitter.com/amounomalande/status/1525265339801645057> and Livre Noir, “On était au défilé de Poutine: on vous raconte” [“We were at the Putin parade: we tell you”], May 9, 2022, YouTube video, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqRLl\\_NhV8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqRLl_NhV8).

# 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.<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup>

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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

This goodwill, however, was brittle. Widespread protests in June 2020 called for the resignation of then president Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta. Keïta and his prime minister, Boubou Cissé, were eventually arrested in August 2020; Keïta later fled the country.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup> N'Daw's ouster was prompted by a cabinet reshuffle that axed two ministers.<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup>

33 Tiemoko Diallo, "Mali Islamists Capture Strategic Town, Residents Flee," Reuters, January 10, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-rebels-idUSBRE90912Q20130110>.

34 John Irish and Bate Felix, "Malian Army Beats Back Islamist Rebels with French Help," Reuters, January 10, 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mali-rebels-idUSBRE90912Q20130111>.

35 "The Danish Effort in the Sahel Region (MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane)," Danish Ministry of Defence, last updated August 6, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200926080917/https://www.fmn.dk/eng/allabout/pages/TheeffortinMali.aspx>.

36 Mohammed Adow, "Maliens Welcome French Intervention," Al Jazeera, January 15, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2013/1/15/maliens-welcome-french-intervention>.

37 Associated Press, "Global Leaders Condemn Mali Coup Amid Worry About Extremists," New York Times, August 23, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200823014902/https://www.nytimes.com/aponline/2020/08/19/world/africa/ap-af-mali-crisis.html>.

38 Emmanuel Akinwotu, "Mali: Leader of 2020 Coup Takes Power After President's Arrest," Guardian, May 24, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/may/24/mali-president-prime-minister-and-defence-minister-arrested-sources-say> and Adow, "Maliens Welcome French."

39 "Mali Junta Leader Says Transitional President, PM Have Been Stripped of Duties," France 24, May 25, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210525-mali-junta-leader-says-transitional-president-pm-have-been-stripped-of-duties>.

40 "France Condemns 'Coup D'état' in Mali, Threatens EU Sanctions," France 24, May 25, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210525-france-condemns-coup-d-%C3%A9tat-in-mali-threatens-eu-sanctions> and Ahmed Baba and Krista Larson, "French Military Suspends Joint Operation with Mali Military," AP News, June 3, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-africa-mali-8a2bd531f3074b7f705fba64c70d5d3e>.

41 John Irish and David Lewis, "EXCLUSIVE Deal Allowing Russian Mercenaries Into Mali Is Close – Sources," Reuters, September 13, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/exclusive-deal-allowing-russian-mercenaries-into-mali-is-close-sources-2021-09-13/>.



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 Keita sports complex in Bamako, Mali. °

## PRO-RUSSIA AND ANTI-FRANCE GROUPS

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.<sup>42</sup> 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 Keita was removed

during the 2020 coup, GPM welcomed the change in leadership and called for increased military cooperation with Russia.<sup>43</sup>

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.<sup>44</sup> 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

42 "Mali: Une Pétition pour Demander L'implication Militaire de la Russie" ["Mali: A Petition to Ask for Russian Military Involvement"], Africanews, September 1, 2017, <https://fr.africanews.com/2017/09/01/mali-une-petition-pour-demander-l-implication-militaire-de-la-russie/>.

43 "Mali: Le Groupe des Patriotes du Mali Opte pour la Coopération Mali-Russie" ["Mali: The Group of Patriots of Mali Opts for Mali-Russia Cooperation"], Mali-Online, May 28, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220326212045/https://mali-online.net/mali-le-groupe-des-patriotes-du-mali-opte-pour-la-cooperation-mali-russie/> and "Le Groupe des Patriotes du Mali Souhaite la Restauration de la Coopération Militaire Mali-Russie" ["The Group of Patriots of Mali Wishes the Restoration of Mali-Russia Military Cooperation"], Maliweb, January 11, 2017, <https://www.maliweb.net/economie/cooperation/groupe-patriotes-mali-souhaite-restauration-de-cooperation-militaire-mali-russie-1984072.html>.

44 Groupe des Patriotes du Mali, "Initiateur du Mouvement pour la pétition afin que les Russes reviennent au Mali, nous aider à récupérer tout notre territoire. Le Groupe des patriotes du Mali..." ["Initiator of the Movement for the petition so that the Russians return to Mali, to help us recover all our territory. The Group of Patriots of Mali..."], Facebook, August 21, 2019, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=225486688362906&id=208343103410598](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=225486688362906&id=208343103410598) and Groupe des Patriotes du Mali, "Vive la coopération entre le MALI ET LA RUSSIE!!! #VIVE\_L\_ARMEE\_MALIENNE!!!" ["Long live the cooperation between MALI AND RUSSIA!!! #LIVE\_L\_ARMEE\_MALIENNE!!!"], Facebook, March 31, 2017, <https://archive.ph/ktvh3>.

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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).<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

- 1 Tessa Knight, "Inauthentic Facebook Assets Promoted Russian Interests in Sudan," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), June 3, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/inauthentic-facebook-assets-promoted-russian-interests-in-sudan-2623c58b1f7f> and "Wagner Group, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Russia's Disinformation in Africa," US Department of State, May 24, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/disarming-disinformation/wagner-group-yevgeniy-prigozhin-and-russias-disinformation-in-africa/>.
- 2 "Russia to Open Nuclear Warship Logistics Hub in Sudan," Moscow Times, November 12, 2020, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2020/11/12/russian-to-open-nuclear-warship-logistics-hub-in-sudan-a72020>.
- 3 Abdi Latif Dahir and Declan Walsh, "'They Lied.' Inside the Frantic Days Leading to Sudan's Coup," New York Times, October 29, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/29/world/africa/sudan-coup-general.html>.
- 4 Tessa Knight, "Sudanese Facebook Network Promoting Paramilitary Group Removed Month Before Coup," Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), October 28, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/sudanese-facebook-network-promoting-paramilitary-group-removed-month-before-coup-48f30b46ffe0>.
- 5 "May 2021 Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior Report," Meta, June 3, 2021, <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/06/may-2021-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-report/>.
- 6 Shelby Grossman, Daniel Bush, and Renée DiResta, Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa, Stanford Internet Observatory, October 29, 2019, [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).

weekly briefings in April 2019.<sup>45</sup> Doulian accepted the petition with 8 million signatures in August 2019.

Another organization, Yerewolo Debout sur les Remparts (Unerringly Standing on the Ramparts), established itself in January 2020.<sup>46</sup> Instead of promoting increased cooperation with Russia, Yerewolo called for French and UN troops in Mali

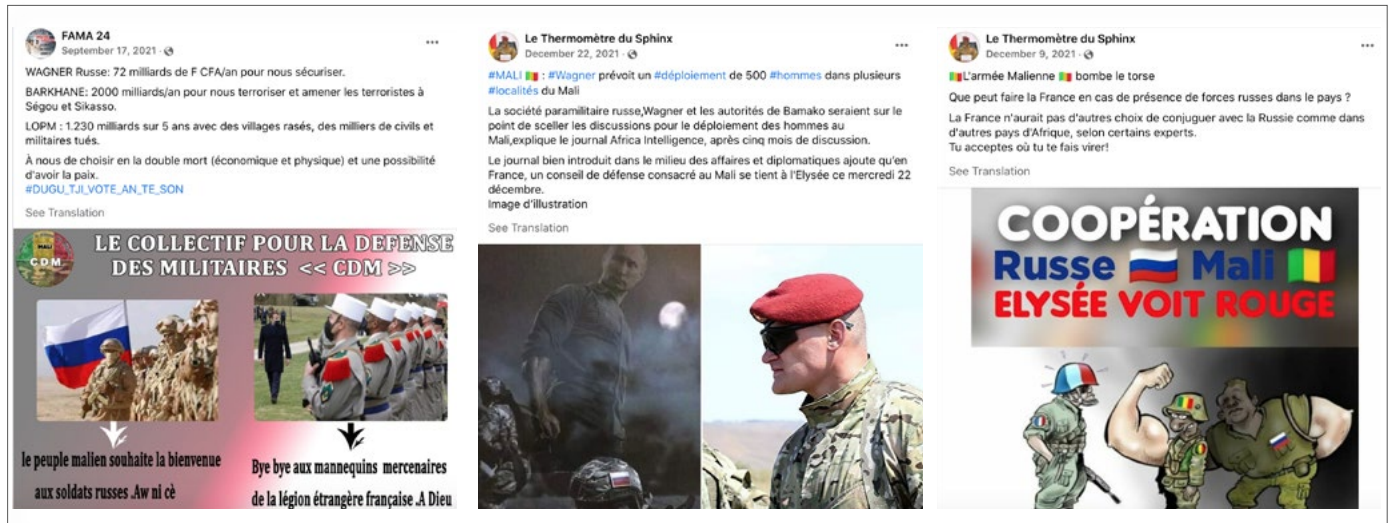
to disengage from military operations attempting to stabilize the region.<sup>47</sup>

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,

45 Groupe des Patriotes du Mali – G.P.M., "C'était le 28 SEPTEMBRE 2017 au stade OMNISPORT #MODIBO\_KEITA lors du 4 eme dépôt de signatures. L'ambassadeur Russe, son excellence M. Alexy DOULIAN..." ["It was SEPTEMBER 28, 2017 at the OMNISPORT #MODIBO\_KEITA stadium during the 4th filing of signatures. The Russian Ambassador, His Excellency Mr. Alexy DOULIAN..."], Facebook, November 13, 2017, <https://archive.ph/LNf2w> and "L'Appel Du 'Groupe Des Patriotes Du Mali' Trouve Un Écho À Moscou" ["The Call of the 'Group of Patriots of Mali' Finds an Echo in Moscow"], Malijet, April 5, 2019, <https://malijet.com/actualite-politique-au-mali/225820-1%E2%80%99appel-du-%C2%ABgroupe-des-patriotes-du-mali%C2%BB-trouve-un-%C3%A9cho-%C3%A0-mosco.html>.

46 "Maliens Protest Foreign Troop Presence," Peninsula, last updated November 8, 2021, <https://thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/10/01/2020/Maliens-protest-foreign-troop-presence>.

47 "Mali: Le Collectif Yèrè-Wolo-Débout sur les Remparts a la Place de L'Indépendance pour Mettre Fin À la Présence Française au Mali" ["Mali: The Collective Yèrè-Wolo-Débout on the Ramparts at Place de L'Indépendance to End the French Presence in Mali"], Maliactu, January 2, 2020, <https://maliactu.net/mali-le-collectif-yere-wolo-debout-sur-les-remparts-a-la-place-de-lindependance-pour-mettre-fin-a-la-presence-francaise-au-mali/>.



Screenshots of Facebook posts from pro-Russia pages portraying Russian military personnel as hardened warriors capable of standing up to and replacing French forces.<sup>4</sup>

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

## 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 Maliennes (FAMA), Mali's armed forces.<sup>49</sup>

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

48 Groupe des Patriotes du Mali, "EN DIRECT DE LA CONFÉRENCE DE PRESSE DE YERE-WOLO DEBOUT SUR LES REMPARTS. À LA MAISON DE PRESSE DE BAMAKO" ["LIVE FROM THE YERE-WOLO PRESS CONFERENCE STANDING ON THE RAMPARTS. AT THE BAMAKO PRESS HOUSE"], Facebook, December 12, 2020, <https://archive.ph/B3otA> and Yerewolo debout sur les remparts, "Conférence de presse du mouvement YEREWOLO débout sur les remparts, en prélude à leur mobilisation du 10 décembre prochain à la place de l'indépendance" ["Press conference of the YEREWOLO movement standing on the ramparts, as a prelude to their mobilization on December 10th at Independence Square"], Facebook, December 8, 2021, 19:56 p.m., <https://archive.ph/XgSHO>.

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/mNxuAu> and Collectif pour la Défense des Militaires, Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/Collectif-pour-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.<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

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.<sup>52</sup> 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.<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup> 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."<sup>55</sup>

50 Collectif pour la Défense des Militaires CDM, "#NOUS\_SOMMES\_WAGNER Wagner bien présent au Mali. Des agents de la société russe Wagner instructeurs et combattants sont déjà sur le sol malien. À Bamako,..." ["#WE\_ARE\_WAGNER Wagner is very present in Mali. Agents of the Russian company Wagner instructors and fighters are already on Malian soil. In Bamako,..."], Facebook, September 27, 2021, <https://archive.ph/Svm2N> and FAMA 24, "#NOUS\_SOMMES\_WAGNER Wagner bien présent au Mali. Des agents de la société russe Wagner instructeurs et combattants sont déjà sur le sol malien. À Bamako,..." ["#WE\_ARE\_WAGNER Wagner is very present in Mali. Agents of the Russian company Wagner instructors and fighters are already on Malian soil. In Bamako,..."], Facebook, September 27, 2021, <https://archive.ph/dFkk1>.

51 FAMA 24, "WAGNER Russe: 72 milliards."

52 Collectif pour la Défense des Militaires, "QUE macron AJOUTE AIR france, LES STATIONS total ET shell vivo AINSI QUE LES RÉSEAUX DE TÉLÉPHONE orange et AUTRES, AVANT DE FAIRE DE #L'AMBASSADE DE france UN..." ["LET macron ADD AIR france, THE total AND shell vivo STATIONS AS WELL AS THE orange AND OTHER TELEPHONE NETWORKS, BEFORE MAKING #THE FRENCH EMBASSY ONE..."], Facebook, December 24, 2021, 7:52 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/102804201771973/posts/302815105104214> and FAMA 24, "Depuis très tôt ce matin les médias du gouvernement français Rfi et France 24 continuent à se decredibiliser en faisant de la propagande disant que le Chef..." ["Since very early this morning the French government media RFI and France 24 continue to discredit themselves by making propaganda saying that the Chief..."], Facebook, January 22, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/105093134404548/posts/487441959502995>.

53 CRPLDJ, "#MALI. #RFI. #FRANCE24 LE COLLECTIF POUR LA DEFENSES DES MILITAIRES #CDM REMERCIE LE MINISTRE DE LA COMMUNICATION MR TOUREH POUR LA REPONSE RAPIDE DE LEUR..." ["#MALI. #RFI. #FRANCE 24 THE COLLECTIVE FOR MILITARY DEFENSE #CDM THANKS THE MINISTER OF COMMUNICATION MR TOUREH FOR THE QUICK RESPONSE TO THEIR..."], Facebook video, February 1, 2022, 11:19 a.m., <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=974747289838646> and "Mali Suspends RFI and France 24, Bars Local Outlets from Distributing Their Content," Committee to Protect Journalists, March 18, 2022, <https://cpj.org/2022/03/mali-suspends-rfi-and-france-24-bars-local-outlets-from-distributing-their-content/>.

54 Reveil des Peuples du Sahel, "LA REVOLUTION DU SAHEL EN MARCHE!!! LES PEUPLES DU SAHEL CONTRE LES TERRORISTES ET LEURS COMPLICES" ["THE SAHEL REVOLUTION IS ON!!! THE PEOPLES OF THE SAHEL AGAINST TERRORISTS AND THEIR ACCOMPLICE"], Facebook, November 24, 2021, <https://archive.ph/evC32>.

55 Reveil des Peuples du Sahel, "Manifstation 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.<sup>1</sup>

The Washington Post found a significant increase in accounts created after November 4, 2020, tweeting about the war.<sup>2</sup> This tactic—creating networks of bots to amplify a topic—has previously been used by governments, authoritarian regimes, and PR companies to distort narratives.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> On social media, opposing narratives about the conflict continue to proliferate, with mis- and disinformation spreading across the political spectrum.

- 1 “The Last Red Line: Ethiopia Nears Civil War as PM Orders Military into Restive Tigray Region,” France 24, November 4, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201104-the-last-red-line-ethiopia-nears-civil-war-as-pm-orders-military-into-restive-tigray-region> and Aggrey Mutambo, “Ethiopia Shuts Down Telephone, Internet Services in Tigray,” East African, November 5, 2020, <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/rest-of-africa/ethiopia-telephone-internet-services-tigray-2731442>.
- 2 Claire Wilmot, “Ethiopia's Cracking Down in Tigray. But Activists Are Spreading the News,” Washington Post, November 17, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2020/11/17/ethiopias-cracking-down-tigray-activists-are-spreading-news/>.
- 3 Carvin, Operation Carthage.
- 4 Tessa Knight, “Ethiopian Diaspora Groups Organize Click-to-Tweet Tigray Campaigns Amid Information Scarcity,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), April 23, 2021, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/ethiopian-diaspora-groups-organize-click-to-tweet-tigray-campaigns-amid-information-scarcity-7e8d7ed73e2f>; Wilmot, “Ethiopia's Cracking Down in Tigray”; and Claire Wilmot, Ellen Tveteraas, and Alexi Drew, “Dueling Information Campaigns: The War Over the Narrative in Tigray,” Media Manipulation Casebook, August 20, 2021, <https://mediamanipulation.org/case-studies/dueling-information-campaigns-war-over-narrative-tigray>.
- 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>.
- 6 Megan A. Brown and Tessa Knight, “Twitter's Ethiopian Interventions May Not Have Worked,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), January 13, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/twitters-ethiopian-interventions-may-not-have-worked-f7c433d7a8d8>.
- 7 Abiy Ahmed Ali (@AbiyAhmedAli), “Medemer is about coming together beyond lines of division....,” Twitter, November 22, 2021, 2:55 a.m., <https://twitter.com/AbiyAhmedAli/status/1462691302424948737>; Yemane G. Meskel (@hawelti), “#NoMore to injustice! #NoMore to external domination!...,” Twitter, 6:21 a.m., November 21, 2021, <https://twitter.com/hawelti/status/1462380520143261699>; and “Assistant Foreign Affairs Minister of China Joins the #NoMore Movement,” Fana Broadcasting Corporate, November 27, 2021, <https://www.fanabc.com/english/assistant-foreign-affairs-minister-of-china-joins-the-nomore-movement/>.
- 8 “Ethiopia: Tigray Forces Accept ‘Humanitarian’ Cease-Fire,” Deutsche Welle, March 25, 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/ethiopia-tigray-forces-accept-humanitarian-cease-fire/a-61248941> and Henry Wilkins, “Ethiopia: Fighting Breaks Out in Amhara Despite ‘Humanitarian Cease-Fire,’” Voice of America, April 28, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ethiopia-fighting-breaks-out-in-amhara-despite-humanitarian-cease-fire-/6550088.html>.

## Niger's Information Space

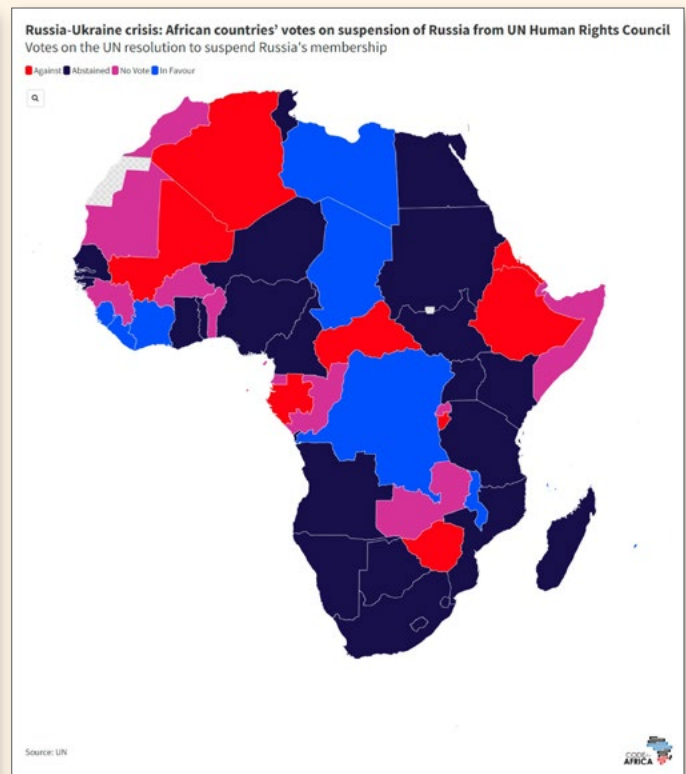
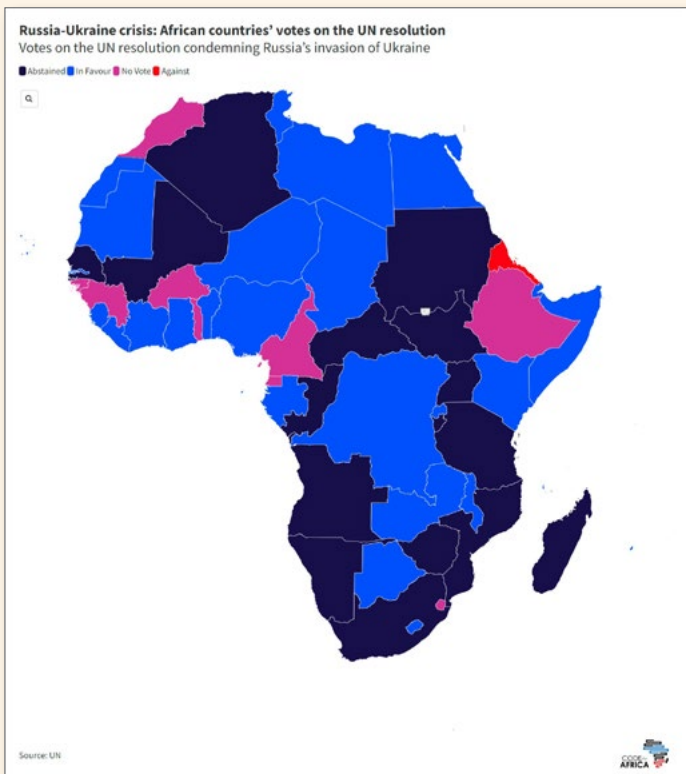
### EMERGING TACTICS AND TECHNIQUES

Allan Cheboi, Investigative Manager, Code for Africa, and Justin Arenstein, Editor-in-Chief, Code for Africa, and Christian Ngnie, Investigative Data Analyst. Code for Africa

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).<sup>1</sup> 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 UNHCR (right).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "With 93 'Yes' Including Italy, UNGA Suspends Russia from Human Rights Council," Onu Italia, April 7, 2022, <https://www.onuitalia.com/2022/04/07/with-93-yes-including-italy-unga-votes-to-suspend-russia-from-human-rights-council/>.



# SNAPSHOT

## Reports of collusion

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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

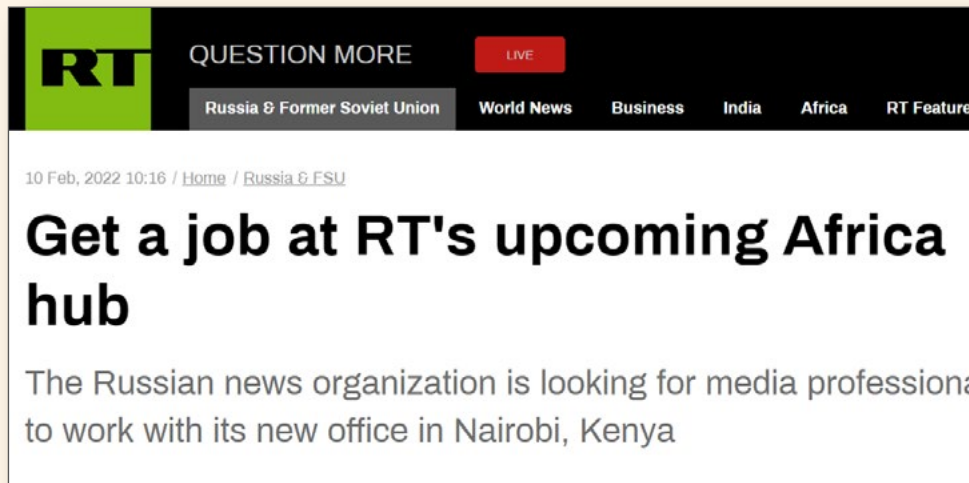
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False media stories have been used to allege anti-Russia cooperation between Niger and France. For example, a 2022 debunk showed how a fake article misleadingly attributed to the Washington Post was used to propagate claims that Macron had strictly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

## Russian media puts down roots in Africa

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In February 2022, Russian state media outlet RT announced it was hiring for a major African media “hub” in Kenya.<sup>3</sup> 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.



Screenshot of an RT post announcing recruitment efforts in Africa.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Oumarou Brah Souleymane, “INTOX: Ces Propos Attribués Au Washington post Sont Faux” [“INTOX: These Comments Attributed to the Washington Post Are False”], PesaCheck, May 27, 2022, <https://pesacheck.org/intox-ces-propos-attribu%C3%A9s-au-washington-post-sont-faux-abf31db6f0e4>.

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@rtfricahub.com](mailto:opportunities@rtfricahub.com)...”, Facebook, February 10, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/326683984410/posts/10160675760959411>.

# SNAPSHOT

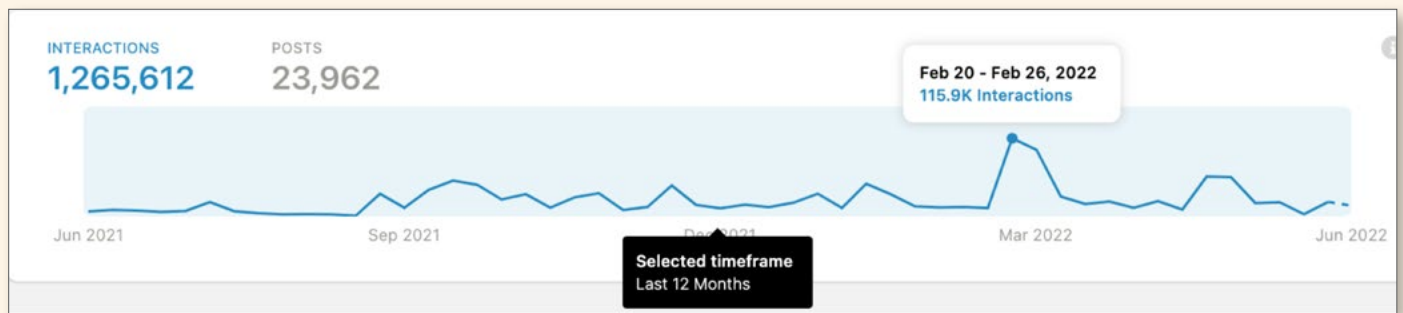
## AMPLIFIED NARRATIVES

### 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.<sup>4</sup>

### 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.<sup>5</sup>



### Timeline of conversations on Russia/Wagner Group involvement in the Sahel by accounts administered from Niger.<sup>†</sup>

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# Burkina Faso

## THE RISE OF PRO-RUSSIA, ANTI-FRANCE NARRATIVES

Burkina Faso remained relatively safe from terrorist attacks until 2015, when it saw an exponential increase in attacks by Islamist terrorists, primarily along the Mali-Niger-Burkina Faso border. In 2019, Burkina Faso saw the largest increase in deaths from terrorism worldwide—a 590 percent increase.<sup>56</sup> In subsequent years, attacks have pushed further away from the border and into the country's interior, resulting in the forced displacement of millions of Burkinabe citizens.

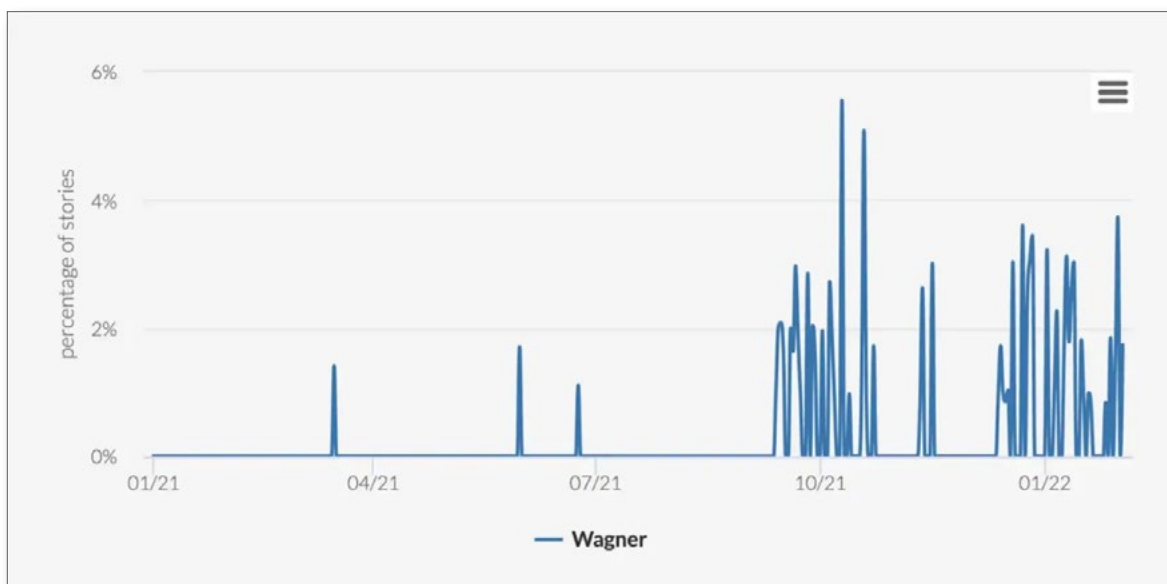
In November 2021, Burkinabe residents blocked an Operation Barkhane convoy, suspecting the containers belonging to the French army contained weapons used to supply Islamist terrorists.<sup>57</sup> Hostilities toward France in Burkina Faso, where the French-led Operation Barkhane was seen to have failed to root out terrorists, have increased as the number of Burkinabe citizens killed by terrorists steadily rises.

On January 24, 2022, growing anti-France sentiment and pro-Russia support resulted in Burkinabe 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.<sup>58</sup>

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 Burkinabe 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

**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.”

56 Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism, Institute for Economics & Peace, November 2020, <https://visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf>.

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## CITIZEN SUPPRESSION AND DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN NIGERIA

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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> Twitter was reinstated after agreeing to pay certain taxes and establishing a local presence in Nigeria.

- 1 Jean le Roux, “Nigerian Government-Aligned Twitter Network Targets #EndSARS Protests,” Digital Forensic Research Lab (@DFRLab), November 20, 2020, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/nigerian-government-aligned-twitter-network-targets-endsars-protests-5bb01a96665c>.
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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.<sup>59</sup>

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.<sup>60</sup> These mentions spiked significantly after Reuters reported that Mali was in talks with the paramilitary organization on September 13, 2021.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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# Conclusion

**L**ike 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.

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