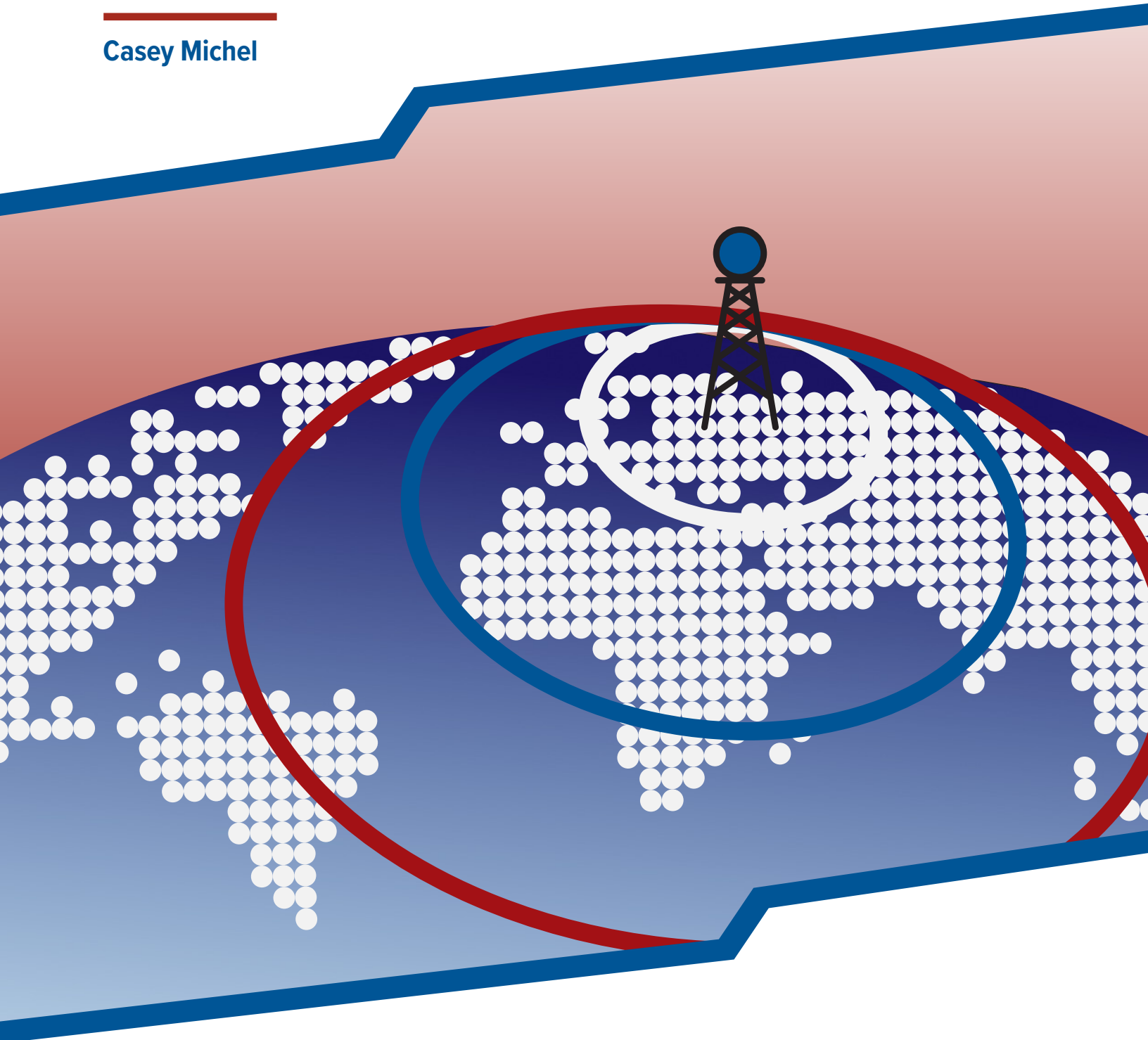


NEW VOICES, OLD FRIENDS:

How Russia targets its messaging in the Global South

Casey Michel



Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 challenged much of the common Western understanding of Russia. How can the world better understand Russia? What are the steps forward for Western policy? The Eurasia Center's new "Russia Tomorrow" series seeks to reevaluate conceptions of Russia today and better prepare for its future tomorrow.

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INTRODUCTION

➤ A new advertisement campaign spread around India late last year. The campaign targeted both print and digital audiences across the country, stretching from New Delhi to Chennai and beyond. Pegged as a “new voice from an old friend,” the ads called on visitors and passersby to tune in to a **new station** launching in December 2025: RT India.

In a **press release**, Russian officials announced that RT India—the latest prong of the broader suite of RT-related outlets in the state-controlled media network targeting non-Western audiences around the world—would feature news bulletins, documentaries, and public affairs shows “tailored to a broad Indian audience.” As Russian President Vladimir Putin said in announcing the launch of the new channel, “Russia Today is a source of truthful and reliable information, focused on serving the interests of its viewers and listeners.”

At first glance, the timing of the ad campaign and the launch were curious. By that point, Moscow was fully mired in its ongoing war in Ukraine. The Kremlin had already lost hundreds of thousands of troops in the fighting and was no closer to toppling Kyiv than in years prior. And Russia’s macroeconomic footing was **clearly shaky**, with a labor shortage, stagflation, and declining oil rents beginning to strangle the Russian economy—and cutting into revenue Russia could otherwise use for its ongoing war effort.

But no matter. For the Kremlin, the time was perfect to expand its propaganda outlets aimed at the “Global South.” Indeed, the launch of RT India was a perfect encapsulation of both how and why the Kremlin has continuously targeted the Global South for years, especially as a way of helping Moscow’s war in Ukraine—highlighting just how important Moscow continues to view such messaging. Despite Russia’s battlefield setbacks, Moscow continues to target audiences in the Global South to shore up its listing fortunes and prevent places beyond the West from actively aiding Ukrainian efforts.

RUSSIAN VISIONS

The purpose of this paper is threefold. Firstly, it’s to examine the most prominent themes that Russia has used to target audiences in the Global South. These themes are consistent across Latin America, Africa, Asia, and beyond. They focus primarily on highlighting colonial legacies in those regions and Moscow’s supposed support for anti-colonial movements around the world, stretching back to the Soviet period. These themes are all related and generally incorporate terms like “independence,” “anti-colonialism,” and “sovereignty,” in addition to numerous linked elements. Interestingly, while Russia spent much of the 2010s trying to play up an image as a bastion of supposed “traditional values,” such thematic framing has largely fallen away during the war, eclipsed by a more geopolitical focus.

The second section of this paper examines how Moscow has propagated such messaging and the kind of architectures of influence employed in its efforts. These campaigns build upon a decades-long effort to create an entire lattice-work of interlocking propaganda outlets, led primarily by platforms like RT. But it's no longer simply traditional Russian propaganda channels that push pro-Kremlin messaging. An entirely new ecosystem of social media accounts, seen most especially in the ongoing recruitment of influencers—including those with relatively small followings—has enhanced Russia's efforts to target and influence the Global South.

Finally, the paper focuses on perhaps the broadest questions: Have these efforts succeeded? And what does this tell us about the future of Russia's relations with the broader Global South? Measured against Russia's disastrous quagmire in Ukraine, it's easy to claim that Moscow's efforts to cultivate support for its war effort in the Global South have largely failed. But that failure obscures more than it reveals. After all, Russia has found remarkable support within Latin America, Africa, and Asia to at least oppose the kind of sanctions and policies that Western nations have imposed. In so doing, this position has helped extend Russia's onslaught for years, largely by helping prevent support for Ukraine within the Global South, setting the stage for deeper relationships moving forward—and potentially for Russia to break a long stalemate and snatch victory from the jaws of defeat in Ukraine.

DEFINITIONS

It's worth laying out a series of definitions. Perhaps the most important term to define is Global South, a contested, nebulous term. For the purposes of this paper, Global South will generally connote Latin America, Africa, and Asia—areas that served as one-time colonies of European empires Britain, France, and Spain, among others. It's worth acknowledging at the outset that this definition contains all kinds of issues, contradictions, and omissions. Are those nations not colonized by European empires, such as Thailand, part of the Global South? Should China, now the second-largest economy in the world, be considered part of the Global South? What about Turkey, which itself once stood as the center of a sprawling, largely European empire?

These difficulties highlight the challenge of such a term but also highlight another element of Russia's war in Ukraine that Global South audiences have tended to ignore or downplay. Ukraine, after all, was a onetime colony of Moscow. So, too, were Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and more—while Chechnya, Sakha, Buryatia, and others *still* are. Few, however, tend to lump in these former and current colonies as part of a Global South, just as few include **Ireland**, one of Britain's first colonies, as part of the Global South. Moscow, of course, downplays at every turn its **own colonial history and nature**. But moving forward, it's worth highlighting as much as possible the **sheer colonial nature and history of Moscow**, especially now, and to highlight that Ukraine's fight against Russia is, in many ways, the same fight that those in the Global South once undertook, beating back a European colonizer, and trying to chart a freer, more democratic future.

SOVEREIGNTY, INDEPENDENCE, AND COLONIZATION



➤ In February 2024, Moscow welcomed hundreds of delegates from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere to the “For the Freedom of Nations” forum. As a **Chatham House analysis noted**, the gathering was not Russia’s first attempt at organizing a meeting of intellectuals, activists, and businesspeople from the Global South, but instead built on things like the 2023 Russia-Africa summit and a parliamentary conference between Russia and Latin American partners. The summit itself paralleled the simultaneous Islamic World Kazan forum, which brought thousands more delegates from dozens more countries.

The “For the Freedom of Nations” summit, however, was not simply about linkages between Moscow and certain regional partners, or about Russia and the Islamic World. It was far broader, featuring visitors from around the world. Moreover, it touched on many of the themes Russia has focused its rhetoric on in targeting potential allies in the Global South. As a **Jamestown Foundation analysis noted**, the event’s agenda included discussion of “foreign involvement in sovereign affairs, countermeasures against destructive neo-colonial practices, and gaining and forging *independence* in political, financial-economic, and informational spheres” (*italics added*).



Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's remarks at the “For the Freedom of Nations” Forum of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neocolonialism, Moscow, February 16, 2024.

Photo: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1932745/.

These three themes—sovereignty, independence, and colonization—have formed the core pillars of Moscow’s messaging efforts at Global South audiences since the expanded invasion of Ukraine began. To Moscow, these three terms form something of a triumvirate; they are all technically distinct but nonetheless part of a unified, overlapping narrative backing Russia’s messaging within the Global South. As the Kremlin sees it, Russia, *contra* the West, was never a colonizing force. Instead, Russia has consistently backed the independence of those colonized nations, as well as their broader sovereignty—both in terms of national territory and the ability to act against Western interests. While these terms are nominally unique, Moscow routinely employs them simultaneously. All three elements are now at play in Russia’s war in Ukraine, which it messages as a war against a neocolonial West, against Russia’s independence, and against Russian sovereignty.

Of course, Russia’s messaging regarding these terms is rife with contradictions. As detailed further, Russia was (and is) as much a colonizing power as any other European empire ever was. And it is, of course, Russia that is threatening Ukrainian independence and sovereignty, just as it’s done in places like Moldova, Georgia, and elsewhere.

But for the Kremlin, those distinctions are irrelevant. Just as with terms like “imperialism” or “multipolarity,” which Russia has likewise favored, the focus on sovereignty, independence, and colonialism has often formed the key elements of Russia’s messaging campaign over the past few years, remaining consistent while spanning continents.

Indeed, Putin himself **elevated these topics** during his own talk at the multiday “For the Freedom of Nations” conference. According to Putin, it is not Russia pursuing neocolonial policies in places like Ukraine, Moldova, or Georgia, where it continues to occupy parts of each country. Instead, it is the West that remains guilty of this kind of colonialism. “Neocolonialism is a shameful legacy of centuries-long plunder and exploitation of the people of Africa, Asia, Latin America and other regions of the planet,” Putin said. “We can see its aggressive manifestations in the attempts by the collective West to preserve their stranglehold and domination at any cost, to economically subjugate other countries, to deprive them of sovereignty and to impose alien values and cultural traditions upon them.” Putin further claimed that Moscow “gave effective help to the young independent states,” and that the Kremlin is “prepared to join forces in the struggle for genuine freedom and justice.”

It’s unclear what the non-Russian attendees of the forum thought, but it’s clear that Moscow’s rhetoric of standing as a bulwark against supposed Western imperialism has found a broader audience among the Global South. Part of this is historic; after all, the Soviet Union, despite its own colonialist imperialism in places like Eastern Europe, North Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and elsewhere, did back certain anti-colonial movements in places like Africa. But part of it also dovetails from the perceptions in the Global South about the unfairness of a global economy in which a wealthy set of democratic governments keep a developing world in limbo—and how Russia can act as an ally. “The Kremlin has embraced a narrative that deeply resonates with the [Global South]: that the Western world order is unjust, positioning Russia as its main challenger,” according to a **2024 analysis by Mikhail Komin** published by the European Council on Foreign

Relations (ECFR). “These initiatives align with Russia’s strategy to promote itself as an ‘anti-colonial leader’ that challenges the perceived injustices of the Western-centric global order. Largely absent from the Kremlin’s diplomacy before 2022, this anti-colonial narrative is now a significant component of its evolving official ideology, aimed at bolstering the regime’s legitimacy both at home and abroad.”

That apparent perception—that Russia is leading a fight *against* a neocolonial, Western-led order, aimed at restoring the sovereignty and independence of non-Western nations—helps explain the contradictions inherent in Russia’s war. After all, it was Moscow that invaded Ukraine, not the other way around; it was Russia aiming at regional hegemony and great-power status, not Ukraine; and it was Russia reigniting a centuries-long effort to colonize Ukraine. These actions fly in the face of Moscow’s claims of backing sovereignty, independence, and anti-colonial efforts. But rhetorically, Komin wrote, Russia’s messaging “enables the Kremlin to recast its self-interested political objectives as part of a global struggle for a more equitable and multipolar global order,” which often finds a **receptive audience in parts of the Global South**.

In many ways, this rhetoric is hardly new. If anything, it goes back to the days of Soviet propaganda efforts, proclaiming the Kremlin as an ally of anticolonial, anti-Western movements. During the Soviet period, Moscow consistently positioned itself as a supposed ally of pro-independence, anti-colonial movements around the world. This storytelling, of course, looked past anti-colonial movements in places like Chechnya, Sakha, Tatarstan, or elsewhere within the Soviet Union and later Russian Federation: Putin and Russia consistently claim that Moscow has never been a colonial power, despite centuries of evidence otherwise.

A further point of evidence is what has faded from view more recently, as the narrative of sovereignty, independence, and anti-colonialism came to the fore. For years, Moscow claimed to be the lodestar of “traditional values.” Whereas Russia spent much of the 2010s constructing an image that it was the center of anti-LGBTQ+, pro-Christian, and pro-family thought—rhetoric that found significant support in both the West and the Global South—that rhetoric has largely faded since the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. It hasn’t disappeared entirely, but it has largely ebbed from the center of Russia’s broader rhetoric, especially aimed at the Global South. For instance, the Russia-backed **World Congress of Families**, which was the one-time centerpiece of Russia’s efforts to peddle anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric—and which brought activists from Latin America, Africa, Asia, and elsewhere together to learn more about those values and Russia’s role therein—has not hosted a conference since the 2022 expanded invasion.

It’s unclear why this focus on supposed traditional values has eroded, but Moscow has clearly refocused on a broader geopolitical framing, prioritizing this kind of geopolitical emphasis when messaging to the Global South.

INFLUENCE AND INFLUENCERS



➤ **M**uch of the rhetoric and messaging mentioned above is, perhaps unsurprisingly, peddled by Russian propaganda outlets, which have flogged these claims (and related conspiracies) time and again. As to reaching audiences in the Global South, it's not simply that Russian outlets in Russia itself have tried to push these lines but that Moscow spent years investing in the kinds of architecture that makes its global reach possible: an architecture it's now taking full advantage of and expanding further.

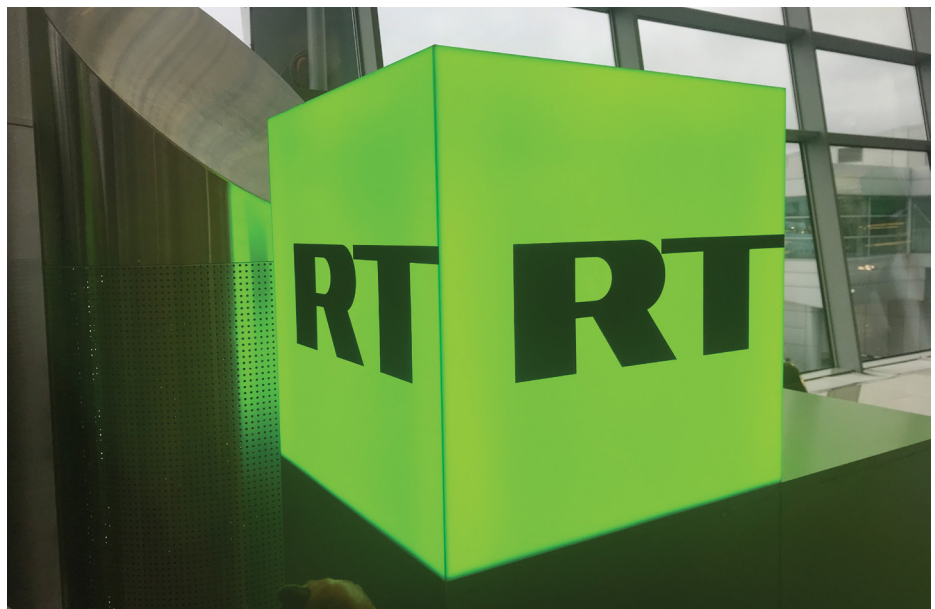
While the salience of Russian propaganda networks like RT has largely faded in the West in recent years, that is not the case amid the Global South. Moreover, as seen with the example of India above, Russian propaganda outlets are spreading their reach, both geographically and linguistically—using new technology and new flexibility to reach new audiences. “State media channels have activated dormant social-media accounts and guided followers to less hostile platforms such as VK, a Russian Facebook clone, and Telegram, a messaging app,” according to an [analysis by *The Economist*](#) on how Russia targets the Global South. “Sputnik’s homepage now includes instructions on how to use [virtual private networks] to access its content in countries where its website is blocked. Researchers report the sudden appearance of large numbers of new Facebook pages and Twitter handles not transparently linked to the Russian government. In one such Vietnamese group, called (in a fit of irony) ‘It’s all within Vladimir Putin’s calculus,’ the 90,000-odd members are treated to high-definition videos from RT, with added Vietnamese subtitles.”

Indeed, it is RT (formerly known as Russia Today) that is the primary prong of Russia’s propaganda efforts to reach audiences in the Global South. Although RT **remains blocked** in numerous Western countries, it has continued spreading its reach and impact across much of Africa, Asia, and Latin America in recent years—with plans, as seen in the RT India example, to expand even further yet.

For instance, across much of Latin America, RT and related social media channels remain widely popular. As [The Economist discovered](#), “RT en Espanol’s 18 million followers are more than twice the original RT English version’s (7.5 million), and even outpace CNN’s Spanish edition (14.6 million).” Dating back to 2009, the channel has built a combined audience of viewers and social media followers in the tens of millions. An [additional analysis from the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab discovered](#) that RT en Espanol is the “third most-shared domain on Twitter for Spanish posts discussing the war [in Ukraine] while Sputnik News is among the top 15.” And as Reuters summed up in its own analysis, “Putin’s propaganda flourishes in Spanish on TV and social media. ... RT en Espanol [is] one of the most followed foreign news services in the region.”

All told, RT en Espanol appears to be far and away the most successful prong of the broader Russian propaganda apparatus, especially in Latin America. As international relations professor Vladimir Rouvinski is quoted as saying in a [Reuters Institute report](#), this is for three primary reasons: “the deficit of non-Western media in Latin America, anti-American sentiment in the region and lack of knowledge of the realities of today’s Russia.” Anti-American views played a key role in Russia’s messaging, as did the notion that Putin was somehow a bastion of stability, and a potential partner for the Global South. The same Reuters Institute report cites the explanation of Iria Puyosa, a senior research fellow at the Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensic Research Lab, that part of Russia’s strategy is blaming any social problems on Western countries while presenting Russia as part of the solution: “The common thread for RT’s communication in the region is questioning US imperialism,” she says, and presenting a narrative that Putin is not only a “global leader who brings stability and progress,” but could help the Global South gain a seat at the table. Meanwhile, Russian propaganda outlets in Latin America “are now much better positioned as an alternative source to more traditional global outlets like BBC or CNN and even better positioned than some local news media,” said Rouvinski, associate professor at the Universidad Icesi in Colombia.

Many of these similar themes were peddled in other RT channels around the world. RT Arabia, for instance, has carved out a leadership space, especially on social media. As German Marshall Fund expert Joseph Bodnar said, RT Arabic is “really a powerhouse” on Facebook, pushing pro-Russian and anti-Western rhetoric at every turn. And in Africa, RT and Sputnik retain high follower numbers—so much so that Moscow plans to expand its propaganda footprint in Africa including opening an RT bureau in South Africa.



“Russia Today” lamp at Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow.
Photo: Benoît Prieur, Wikimedia Commons (CC0)

Nor is it just those traditional Russian propaganda outlets. As **one analysis found**, by 2023 Moscow “had signed partnership agreements with media outlets such as Africa24 (Kenya), Afrique Média (Cameroon), Al-Ghad (Jordan), Pan African TV (Ghana), as well as countries such as Mali, the Central African Republic, and the Comoro Islands,” with further plans to deepen a partnership with the African Union of Broadcasting. As **The Economist observed**, “Russian propaganda has found fertile ground in parts of Francophone Africa, including the Sahel, where resentment of French military interventions and the effects of NATO’s mission in Libya linger.”

INFLUENCING THE INFLUENCERS

One of the biggest shifts in how Russia targets its messaging at the Global South, however, has little to do with specific elements of RT, Sputnik, or other propaganda organs. Instead, it has to do with an emergent space that other autocracies have turned to for help: social media influencers.

Given the recent explosion of influencers as a vector of messaging and propaganda, especially when it comes to partnering with places like Moscow, there’s relatively little analysis published on the topic. However, at least anecdotally, it’s clear that Russia sees partnerships with influencers as a potential path forward in targeting the Global South.

For instance, in 2022 the Spanish newspaper *El Confidencial* published an investigation into a pair of influencers named Ruben and Liu who reported on the war in Ukraine from the Russia-controlled Donbas. Despite blocking Western journalists from the region, Russian authorities allowed Ruben and Liu, who have hundreds of thousands of followers, to access and travel around the occupied Donbas, including to places like Mariupol. The influencers pushed pro-Russian rhetoric; Liu claimed that Russian forces had “liberated” Mariupol. What a contrast to Western human rights groups’ **documentation of Russian war crimes in Mariupol**, Europe’s top diplomat’s assertion that **“what’s happening in Mariupol is a massive war crime,”** **traditional media reports on the allegations**, and the **International Criminal Court issuance of an arrest warrant for Putin** for “alleged war crimes involving accusations that Russia has forcibly taken Ukrainian children.”

An influencer does not necessarily need a significant following to be valuable to the Russian enterprise. Given the relatively low cost of their influence operations, even a small-scale influencer can be worth the price. Russian propaganda outlets have increasingly targeted smaller social media figures, having them disseminate pro-Russian messaging that, as *Deutsche Welle* (DW) found, “originates from local people familiar with linguistic and cultural dimensions.” This is especially true in South Africa, where researcher Aldu Cornelissen tracked the impact of these so-called nanoinfluencers. Russia’s social media strategy in Africa centers on a “global network of key accounts that are interwoven with other key accounts in the African context,” **DW quotes Cornelissen as saying**. “From there, local influencers in each country take over the messages and adapt the narrative to the local context.” Additional accounts, known as “buzzers,” increase the reach of related posts (i.e., generating buzz).

This can be an especially cheap means of blasting pro-Russian and anti-Western messages far and wide. “If you pay a thousand people 200 rand (€10 or \$11) each, it’s a very cheap campaign to establish a narrative in one day,” per **Cornelissen in the DW account**.

Cheap, quick, and easy—so it goes for recruiting influencers, and so it goes for much of Russia’s broader efforts to target Global South audiences. But one question remains: Is it effective?

HAS IT WORKED?

Assessing the efficacy of Russia’s campaign to target messaging at the Global South is not an easy task. After all, measuring the success of *any* messaging campaign is difficult, whether from Russia or elsewhere. (As one expert on Russian propaganda said to *The Economist*, “There’s all the shouting and noise but is anyone listening?”) But focusing on metrics and expectations can help gauge the success of these campaigns—and where Russia may go next.

What is the gauge? Russia’s degree of success in using its Global South messaging to expedite victory in Ukraine? Or to recruit formal allies in its war? If so, the campaign has been a failure, broadly speaking. Not only has Russia already suffered a strategic defeat in Ukraine—perhaps the greatest the world has seen in decades—but extraordinarily few members of the Global South, limited arguably only to Iran and North Korea, have raced to aid Russia from its flagging fortunes. If anything, Russia’s influence across much of Latin America, Africa, and Asia has waned considerably over the past few years, eliminating Russia’s pretensions at being a supposed great power. Allies like Bashar al-Assad and Nicolás Maduro imploded, while Russian-aided regimes in places like Mali have seen **their fortunes collapse**. Pro-Russian regimes in places like Cuba and Iran remain significantly weakened, while nominal partners such as China remain willing to wring Russia of resources in exchange for military and diplomatic support. Aside from North Korea, Russia’s links across much of the Global South have largely atrophied in recent years.

Indeed, despite its considerable efforts at targeted messaging across the Global South, Russia’s influence in Latin America, Africa, and Asia is arguably weaker now than it’s been since at least the 1990s—and perhaps weaker than it’s ever been during Putin’s tenure. That’s thanks almost entirely to Moscow’s debacle in Ukraine, and the fact that Kyiv has sapped so much of Russia’s resources in its ongoing efforts to beat back Russian forces. “Translating this narrative [that the war in Ukraine is about sovereignty and independence] into concrete action has been challenging for Putin’s regime,” **Komin wrote**, especially in Africa. “Any new forms of practical cooperation between Russia and Africa will require funding from the Kremlin, currently difficult to achieve while the Russian economy is dedicated to the war effort in Ukraine.” Or as **another analyst** said about Russian influence in Latin America, “Russia had more influence prior to the invasion than it does now.”

But gauged against a slightly different metric—whether any Global South nations have come to Ukraine’s aid—Russia’s Global South messaging campaign looks more successful. Though few Global South nations have raced to Russia’s aid,

few if any have likewise rushed to help Ukraine. Despite the **clear colonial nature of Moscow's war**, few former European colonies have sided unequivocally against Russian aggression.

In the United Nations, dozens of Global South nations have abstained from condemning Russia's actions. Even in April 2022, in the immediate aftermath of revelations about Russian atrocities in places like Bucha, some two dozen members of the UN **voted to keep Russia on the UN's Human Rights Council**—nearly all of them from the Global South. As one **Chatham House analysis put it**: Approximately forty nations are currently sanctioning Russia, yet “two-thirds of the world's population live in countries that do not,” and most of them reside in the Global South. This comes despite the fact that at least some Global South officials in the UN recognize the colonial nature of Russia's war. In early 2022, Kenyan Ambassador to the UN Martin Kimani **outright compared** Russia's actions to Africa's colonial past and the dangers of stoking the ‘embers of dead empires.’”

But that rhetoric has not yet translated into explicit support for Ukraine. If anything, the opposition to sanctions, and a broader unwillingness to directly back Ukraine, can be seen in much of the rhetoric elsewhere from Global South leaders. **The Guardian published the following responses**:

- “We will not blindly follow the steps taken by another country,” said an Indonesian foreign ministry representative at a recent press conference.
- “We do not consider that [this war] concerns us,” said then-Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador. “We are not going to take any sort of economic reprisal because we want to have good relations with all governments.”
- “Argentina does not consider that [sanctions] are a mechanism to generate peace and harmony or generate a frank dialogue table that serves to save lives,” said Santiago Cafiero, then-foreign minister of Argentina.

More recent statements by Global South leaders in 2025 and 2026 have echoed a similar sentiment:

- “Indonesia has chosen the path of non-alignment. ... In the present world, Russia and China have never had double standards [and] have always defended the downtrodden,” **said President of the Republic of Indonesia Prabowo Subianto** at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2025.
- “I decided, along with the majority of Latin American governments, to remain neutral in the Russia/Ukraine war. That is a war between brothers, armed by powers external to the Slavic peoples,” **posted then-Colombian President Gustavo Petro** on X in February 2025.
- In response to the announcement of new Canadian sanctions against Russia in March 2025, **President of Mexico Claudia Sheinbaum said** that “[Mexico] never agrees with blockades ... we have always fought for peace, and peace is built through dialogue.”

That is not to say that these countries have taken explicitly pro-Russian positions. If anything, their positions may be best described as anti-anti-Russian—or, to use

a term prominent during the Cold War, non-aligned. Echoing back to the Non-Aligned Movement of the era, numerous Global South nations **have elected** to chart a course in which they back neither side and have also consistently batted away Western efforts to gain support for Ukraine's fight.

Nevertheless, this rhetoric often bleeds into pro-Russian conspiracy including the idea, for example, that the war was Ukraine's or NATO's fault in the first place. "War could have been avoided if NATO had heeded the warnings from amongst its own leaders and officials over the years that its eastward expansion would lead to greater, not less, instability in the region," **South African President Cyril Ramaphosa said** in 2022. That same year, **Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva added** that Zelensky was "as responsible as Putin for the war." As **scholar Chris Alden noted**, "This is a view articulated by many governments in the Global South and finds considerable support on social media in countries as large and influential as India, Turkey and Malaysia."

Perhaps most notably (and despite many Global South nations remaining nominally nonaligned), it's worth considering which countries continue to act as vehicles for *helping* Russia dodge sanctions or even rearm in the face of Western pressure and Ukrainian victories. **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the United Arab Emirates**, and other nations across the Global South continue to serve as intermediaries for Russian efforts to elude sanctions. China continues to act as Russia's backstop, both economically and in terms of dual-use technology. **North Korea** provides much-needed men to fight in Russia's war, with more than two thousand casualties.

All of which is to say, while Russia's efforts to target the Global South may initially appear as a failure, especially given Russia's waning influence across these regions, it's entirely possible that Russia hasn't yet collapsed entirely *because* of its links with the Global South. Absent the architecture of propaganda outlets, talking points on colonialism and sovereignty, and broader efforts to woo Global South audiences, Moscow would be far more isolated than it is now—and far closer to outright defeat than ever before. There's a reason, after all, that Moscow plans to continue expanding things like RT in the Global South, and it's not just to provide a "**new voice from an old friend**."

Put another way: If the Global South aided Ukraine as much as the West had, the war likely would have ended long ago.

SOLUTIONS



The question, then, is simple: What now? What should the West do to counteract Russia's efforts at wooing the Global South?

The recommended responses fall into three primary buckets. The first focuses on messaging itself. Given Russia's already broad and now expanding investment in propaganda outlets targeting the Global South, the West must amplify its efforts to counteract such pro-Russian messaging. This can take many forms: e.g., hosting student groups, journalists, and high-level delegations and officials. Perhaps most importantly, this should include rolling back the cuts to entities like Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, and Radio Free Asia. For decades, those three outlets countered Russian (and other authoritarian) propaganda, acting as the primary outlets for transmitting honest, accurate reporting. Efforts to decimate these outlets have been met with nothing but glee by autocrats around the world—including in Moscow. Fund the outlets, expand their services, offer news in languages not previously included (e.g., Sakha, Chuvash, Avar), and restore what had been the best means of combating pro-Russian propaganda, especially in the Global South.

But more than renewed media efforts are needed. Russia has broadened its endeavors to cultivate relations with the Global South in recent years—and the West must do the same: organizing conferences, deepening socioeconomic partnerships, looking for opportunities to expand and enhance ties, wherever they may be. If the Global South is once more a competitive arena for influence, it must be treated as such. Russia may have a head start, but given the deep resources of the West, there's no reason that Moscow's lead must remain. This is especially true of targeting the Global South nations where **Moscow's influence is waning or has already collapsed**, such as Venezuela, Syria, Armenia, and even places like the **Russian-occupied region of Transnistria**.

Along the way, the West must speak openly and honestly about its own colonial past while also highlighting the fact that Russia was as much a part of the story of European colonialism as Britain, France, Spain, and others. From its **efforts to colonize parts of Africa** to the fact that Russia thieved hundreds of thousands of square miles from China—and including the fact that Russia continues to colonize places like Sakha, Chechnya, Tatarstan, and elsewhere, Moscow was a key, constituent part of the story of European imperialism. Few rhetorical points have irked the Kremlin in recent years as much as **pointing out that Russia was a colonial power for centuries and remains a colonizer to this day**—a fact that Global South audiences should hear over and over again.

The final bucket, however, has nothing to do with Russia or the Global South per se, but instead has everything to do with backing Ukraine's ongoing fight. The most proximate cause of Russia's waning influence in the Global South has been its declining fortunes in Ukraine. Therefore, the West must continue to do every-

thing possible to help Ukraine win—including by aiding Ukraine's efforts to cultivate its own support in the Global South. Corrode Russia's military fortunes, and you can corrode Russia's influence in the Global South. Few nations, after all, will stand with Russia as its military efforts falter, presenting an incredible opportunity to unwind all of Russia's gains in the Global South, at least for the foreseeable future. As Russia's military strength wanes, so will its opportunities to act as a security provider, or even potential partner, for the Global South. And as its military prowess and economic health degrade, so will its influence, its appeal, and its impact. As former European empires including the Portuguese, Spanish, Belgian, Dutch, and even French and British ones have watched their influence fade among former colonies and the Global South more broadly, so too will the Russians. It's the West's job to expedite this transformation, and to accelerate Russia's decline, especially in the Global South.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Casey Michel is an author and journalist who writes extensively on international corruption, kleptocracy, national security, and Russia policy. His writing has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Financial Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and many other outlets. His 2021 book, *American Kleptocracy*, was named by *The Economist* as one of the “best books to read to understand financial crime,” and his 2024 book, *Foreign Agents*, was named by *Foreign Policy Magazine* as one of the “biggest foreign-policy book releases of 2024.” His next book, *United States of Oligarchy*, was released on August 4, 2026. He is based in New York and is currently sanctioned by the Russian regime for his work.



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