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Miniailo, Artem

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ANALYSIS

Russian Disinformation Strategy in Africa: Impact on Ukraine and Relations with the West

Artem Miniailo (“We Are Ukraine,” Kyiv)

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Abstract

Africa plays a pivotal role in Putin’s foreign policy, which seeks to shift global power dynamics. Putin promises Russian support to African nations while tapping into the legacy of the continent’s colonial trauma in efforts to bolster Russian interests in the region. In the UN, where African countries hold a quarter of the votes, African support is essential for Russia’s resolutions. Russian disinformation in Africa targets countries with fragile democracies and conflicts, promoting the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and portraying the Russian presence positively while criticizing the involvement of Western countries, particularly France. African fact-checking organizations—including Africa Check, Pesa Check, FactSpace West Africa, and Dubawa—work to counter misinformation and encourage healthier online discussions.

Africa plays a significant role in Putin’s foreign policy agenda, which is committed to dismantling what he sees as an inequitable “unipolar” global order characterized by U.S. and European dominance and establishing a more balanced “multipolar” framework of major powers, including Russia. Within this narrative, Putin extends a promise of Russian support to African nations as they strive to shed the remnants of European colonialism.

Furthermore, Africa stands out as the focus of Putin’s efforts to counter diplomatic isolation. The backing of African allies has assumed paramount importance for Russia, especially within the United Nations (UN), where African countries account for a quarter of all votes in the General Assembly. The participation of African states plays a pivotal role in Moscow’s periodic calls for support from nations, seeking their votes—or at least abstentions—on critical UN resolutions.

During the UN General Assembly held in February 2023, nations including Botswana, Zambia, and Tunisia lent their support to the cause of “a comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine.” Conversely, Mali and Eritrea expressed their dissent through opposing votes, while a further 15 African nations chose to abstain from the voting process (UN News 2023).

According to research conducted by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2023), an academic institution operating under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Defense, Russian efforts to influence the political agenda in Africa manifest in various ways. The most frequently observed tactics are disinformation campaigns, interference in electoral processes, and backing of extraconstitutional power claims.

The U.S. State Department (2022), as well as think tanks like the Atlantic Council (le Roux and Knight 2023) and the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

(2022b), has linked a significant portion of Russian disinformation campaigns to the deceased (according to Russian media) Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner private military company. In their view, Prigozhin’s network in Africa is actively working to exert a forceful influence on public opinion throughout the continent, with the ultimate goal of promoting increased Russian presence and influence in the region.

Advancing War in Ukraine and Expanding Russian Influence

Geographically speaking, Russian disinformation campaigns have reached a significant portion of the African continent. According to the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022b), such campaigns have been documented in no fewer than 16 countries on the continent, including South Africa, Sudan, Libya, and Mozambique. The primary targets of these disinformation efforts tend to be nations characterized by fragile democratic systems and those embroiled in ongoing conflicts (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2023). It is noteworthy that Russia’s interference in the democratic processes of these nations is having the detrimental effect of perpetuating these conflicts, as it hinders the prospects for negotiated political resolutions.

Russian disinformation campaigns in the region have two primary objectives. First, they seek to garner support for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by framing it in a favorable light. Second, they aim to portray Russia’s increasing presence on the African continent as advantageous while simultaneously depicting American and European (particularly French) involvement in Africa in a negative manner.

Concerning the extensive Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russian disinformation tactics involve the utilization of well-known narratives. These include

depicting the conflict as a “proxy war between Russia and Western powers,” characterizing the Ukrainian government as “Nazi,” spreading baseless allegations about “biolaboratories,” and other unfounded claims. Russian figures actively employ social media platforms to disseminate these narratives.

In the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine on March 2, 2022, there unfolded a concerted effort involving thousands of newly created, counterfeit, and compromised accounts (Africa Center for Strategic Studies 2022a). These accounts launched a large-scale, synchronized operation aimed at manipulating Twitter’s algorithm to propel two pro-Russian hashtags onto the list of trending topics in South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria. These hashtags were #IStandwithPutin and #IStandwithRussia.

In a separate incident, over 1,500 social media accounts belonging to Nigerian journalists fell victim to hacking. Of these, more than 600 were commandeered to disseminate nearly 800 unauthorized messages and promote pro-Kremlin narratives regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine across various platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn.

Notably, these disinformation efforts are not limited to conventional social media and news networks, but also extend to various levels of officials, including local embassies.

According to *Deutsche Welle*, in early July 2023, the Russian embassy in South Africa shared what it claimed was a screenshot of a *POLITICO* article entitled “20,000,000 Lives for the Sake of Freedom” (Wesolowski and Gatanazi 2023). Commenting on the alleged screenshot, the embassy accused NATO of prolonging the conflict in Ukraine, suggesting that the latter was willing to sacrifice Ukrainian lives.

Upon closer examination and subsequent research, it became evident that the screenshot was fraudulent. *POLITICO* had never published such an article. Furthermore, the fake screenshot featured numerous grammatical and spelling errors, and the *POLITICO* logo that appeared in it was fabricated. Although the Russian embassy in South Africa eventually removed the post, it garnered over 100,000 views on Twitter.

Disinformation about Ukraine has also targeted the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which, since August 2022, has exported over 32 million metric tons of Ukrainian grain and food products globally, aiding food-insecure regions like the Horn of Africa and the Sahel. However, Russia has deployed disinformation to downplay the deal’s significance for Africa and spread false narratives about it. (For more in-depth information on Russia’s disinformation tactics related to the Black Sea Grain Initiative and its impact on food security, please see the We Are Ukraine [2023] report entitled “Russia’s Myths about Food Security and the Black Sea Grain Initiative.”)

Nevertheless, in a recent survey conducted among people with an active interest in news and politics in South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Uganda, and Zambia, it was discovered that most of them perceive the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a violation of international law (Ipsos 2023). Furthermore, a considerable number of respondents shared the belief that Russia bears responsibility for war crimes committed in Ukraine.

It is important to understand that the threat of Russian disinformation not only affects Ukraine and issues surrounding the war against Ukraine, but also deepens the chasm between Africa and Europe, created and expanded by centuries of European colonialism, the consequences of which are felt to this day. The Russian “anti-West” disinformation campaign, which is largely anti-French, aims to spread false narratives claiming that France has ambitions to control the entire African continent. It portrays French troops as weak and hints that Russia will provide African states with assistance in liberating themselves from France. Misleading Facebook posts are the key tool of this campaign. Pro-Russian pages actively share content depicting Russian soldiers as superior and ready to replace French forces. A video that circulated in Mali, Burkina Faso, and the Ivory Coast shows Russian Wagner private military company soldiers aiding Malian soldiers in the fight against symbolic “French zombies” (Cartes du Monde 2023). Ultimately, Russia is weaponizing the traumatic legacy of European colonialism in Africa as a means of propelling itself to the position of a trusted outsider.

Conclusion

Africa plays a crucial role in Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy agenda as Russia aims to reshape the global order. Putin offers support to African nations seeking to overcome colonial legacies and has made Africa central to countering Russia’s diplomatic isolation. Russian disinformation campaigns in Africa serve two purposes: (1) garnering support for the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and (2) portraying the Russian presence in Africa favorably while casting Western involvement in a negative light.

Several tools are available to combat Russian disinformation campaigns in the region. Media giants such as Meta and Google have actively engaged in detecting and blocking Russian disinformation networks in Europe, making them valuable assets for similar efforts in Africa (*Associated Press* 2022). Additionally, over 30 countries have taken measures to block Russian media outlets like *RT* and *Sputnik* from broadcasting within their borders to counter disinformation (National Council of Television and Radio Broadcasting of Ukraine 2022).

Africa has also developed its own solutions to confront and counter disinformation online, thereby foster-

ing healthier online discussions. Africa Check (<https://africacheck.org>), launched in 2012 in South Africa, was the continent's first initiative to promote media literacy and has since evolved into a prominent fact-checking organization for Africa. Other initiatives—such as Pesa

Check, Africa's largest indigenous fact-checking organization (<https://pesacheck.org>); FactSpace West Africa (factspace.org); and Nigeria's Dubawa (dubawa.org)—are actively contributing to reducing the spread of misinformation on the continent.

About the Author

Artem Miniailo serves as the Managing Editor of and a contributor to WeAreUkraine.info, bringing with him 8 years of experience in the realm of international relations within both the governmental and civil sectors. We Are Ukraine is a repository of truth about Ukraine's contribution to freedom and lasting peace in the world. The initiative was launched in 2022 as a response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, aimed at disseminating comprehensive insights about the resilient Ukrainian nation and providing a truthful account of the war in Ukraine. This project is being implemented by the civil society organization "Resilient Ukraine."

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