

THE BEAR AND THE BOT FARM: COUNTERING RUSSIAN HYBRID WARFARE IN AFRICA

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SUMMARY

- Russia has made significant inroads in Africa—particularly in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic and Mali—deploying military operations that, while limited in scope, are often devastating for local civilian populations.
- At the same time, Moscow has developed a powerful propaganda machine that taps into existing antipathy towards Europe, particularly France, to push African governments closer to its foreign policy objectives.
- Europeans have no genuine, resolute partner in Africa today. Most governments and elites are skilfully hedging their bets between Europe and Russia.
- Like-minded Africans and Europeans should push back with comprehensive sanctions on enablers, counter-disinformation campaigns, a re-evaluation of outdated development models, stronger military aid, and support for influencers who can challenge Russia-aligned narratives in local networks.

Fantasy and fact

Day and night, week in and week out, thousands of Russian agents, proxies, Kremlin-controlled media outlets, co-opted journalists and paid influencers weave a compelling story for Africa.^[1] In this fantasy, Russia is a champion of freedom, sovereignty and African dignity. Putin appears shoulder to shoulder with revolutionary leaders, as the Soviet Union once did. Russian soldiers are valiant comrades fighting alongside African forces against Western-funded insurgents. Ukraine is a fascist abomination, while Russia is the wronged and righteous power resisting a neo-colonialist international order that keeps Africa weak and aid-dependent.

Nowhere is this story more visible than in Burkina Faso. Since taking power in a September 2022 coup, 37-year-old president Ibrahim Traoré has become a cult-icon in both Africa and the West. On TikTok, Instagram and YouTube, content shows Burkina Faso developing Africa's "first indigenous electric vehicle," creating a sovereign central bank, wiping out IMF debt and undergoing an industrial renaissance—none of which is true. Fake propaganda videos that have been seen millions of times claim that Traoré rejected a direct invitation from Donald Trump to the White House and that France and the US want to "eliminate" him.

The young junta leader has received AI-generated endorsements from Pope Leo XIV, Rihanna, Eminem and Beyoncé, while his own AI-generated speeches have been used as political ammunition in places as far from his country as Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. Meanwhile, foreign influencers post slick travel videos parroting junta talking points from the comfort of plush hotels in the capital. One video, by travel YouTuber GoWithAli titled "I Don't Trust the Media, So I Visited Burkina Faso", drew more than 5 million views. Regime lines are then recycled naively in "alternative" or left-leaning media sites in West, such as the UK-based *Novara Media*, which has a limited history of reporting on African affairs.

Russia's fingerprints are, unsurprisingly, all over this campaign. *Le Monde* showed that, in late 2023, Russian agents were embedded in Burkina Faso's intelligence service to assist the junta in monitoring opponents, run influence operations and train up Burkina Faso's own propagandists. Traoré has since made ever bigger overtures to Russia, which in 2024 began deploying military personnel in his country.

While naive observers hail Burkina Faso's pivot from away from the West, the reality on the ground is bleak. Traoré is struggling to control territory beyond major urban centres, and many African and European analysts now fear Ouagadougou could fall to jihadist groups.^[2] Others warn of fragmentation or a Somali-like scenario, where the national government is largely contained to its embattled capital. Weekly reports of heavy military casualties and sagging morale among the rank and file paint a picture of a country on the brink.

Burkina Faso is where the gap between fantasy and reality is widest. But in every African country where Russia has intervened or assumed the role of security guarantor, crises have deepened. Moscow's "strings-free" weaponry is often of poor quality. Economic support is meagre and food aid rarely arrives. Its agents have tricked thousands of people into effective slavery, either fighting on the frontline in Ukraine or working in ammunition or drone factories. Meanwhile, its vast disinformation operations are reshaping public discourse and undermining decades of hard-won democratic progress.

Moscow's goal is simple: to apply pressure—by overt or covert means—on governments to shift foreign policy, inspire coups favourable to Moscow's interests and sow confusion among African diaspora populations in the West. "They want more client regimes in other African states and don't mind supporting coups to get there," said one former African foreign minister.^[3]

This policy brief does not aim to provide a full historical account of Soviet-African relations, nor a comprehensive timeline of the post-1989 evolution. Instead, it seeks to: Provide an overview of Russia's military operations across key African regions; examine Russia's propaganda networks on the continent; and recommend a strong course of action to African and European governments who are concerned about Russian hybrid warfare and want to push back.

Europeans must adopt a more assertive stance: strengthening military partnerships, coordinating sanctions against Russian networks, preparing for the worst in the Sahel, and focusing resources on coastal West African states, where Russian influence is still somewhat limited. Europeans should also back free and independent media and go on the offensive against Russia in the information space with credible local voices and non-official communication channels. Ultimately, European governments need to overcome their cautious, bureaucratic habits and build a coherent, convincing strategic narrative if they want to stay relevant and resist Russian advances in Africa.

Of course, none of that will work without Africans. And indeed, they are not standing still. Governments, civil society groups and media actors across the continent are building mechanisms to strengthen digital resilience and push back against foreign manipulation. Yet, despite their creativity and commitment, these initiatives are often fragmented and underfunded, limiting their impact against the scale of Russia's operations. With the right partnerships and resources, however, Africans could expand these efforts significantly—on their own terms—to safeguard sovereignty, strengthen institutions and ensure external engagement works for their long-term stability.

Russia is not as strong as it appears. It has many quiet enemies in Africa. Working together, like-minded Africans and Europeans can roll back its troublesome influence.

The chef's kitchen

From the mid-2010s, Russia's Africa strategy revolved around the Wagner private military group. After emerging in the Donbas, Wagner deployed to Syria in 2015 to support Bashar al-Assad and then expanded into Africa: First, Sudan in 2017 (under Omar al-Bashir), and then to the Central African Republic (CAR), to prop up the embattled government of Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Wagner's ruthless and charismatic founder and leader Yevgeny Prigozhin crisscrossed the continent in private jets, striking mining deals, security contracts and building bot farms for warlords, generals and presidents alike.

Often referred to as "Putin's chef" for his early Kremlin catering contracts, Prigozhin moved far faster than any opposing state actor, hamstrung as they were by the banalities of due process. With Russian state backing, ties to organised crime and Siberian prison-yard morality, he thrived in the grey zones, where formal institutions were nascent or crippled, supporting local actors while others hesitated. It exploited opportunities left open by the West's failed campaigns, like France's military operations in the Sahel and the CAR—where now a statue of Prigozhin stands, right in the heart of the capital, Bangui.

Under Prigozhin's leadership, Wagner built a sprawling empire that fused military support, disinformation, election manipulation and extractive industries into a potent model of influence. But that model was ultimately a disruptive force, not a sustainable strategy. Prigozhin was more interested in profit and performance, making a lot of noise then moving on. After his spectacular—and fiery—fall from grace in August 2023, the Kremlin moved swiftly to prevent any single figure from amassing such autonomous power again.

The gun and the megaphone

Moscow dismantled the Wagner model and redistributed its core functions across two distinct but interlinked entities—one military, one media. Both now report directly to state structures, shedding the deniability and opportunism that defined Wagner, but gaining formal backing and long-term integration into Russian foreign policy.

The Africa Corps

Clearly echoing Erwin Rommel's Nazi force, the Africa Corps is the Kremlin's new expeditionary formation in Africa. Built on the remnants of Wagner's combat units, it currently fields an estimated 10,000 men, with stated ambitions to grow to 20,000–40,000—though scaling may be constrained by the war in Ukraine. Like Wagner before it, it is still laden with neo-Nazi

and white supremacist symbology.

It draws recruits from Russia, Belarus and, increasingly, African states. Africa Corps is reportedly offering recruits a one-off payment of up to 2.1mn roubles (approximately €24,000), more than twice Russia's average annual salary, as well as plots of land on top of their regular payment, for signing a contract with the Ministry of Defence.

The organisation's structure remains opaque, but it is clear it is led by Putin's inner circle. Although he has not been formally named as the leader of the Africa Corps, deputy defence minister Yunus-bek Yevkurov appears to be closely involved in operations. The chief of operations is likely Major-General Andrei Vladimirovich Averyanov, a Russian military intelligence officer who used to work for GRU Unit 29155, an infamous intelligence group linked to disinformation, sabotage and assassination campaigns across Europe.

The Africa Initiative

The Africa Initiative is the information warfare wing of Russia's new approach. Launched in late 2023 and run by Artem Kureyev, a Russian intelligence officer, it is presented publicly as a news agency focused on African affairs. However, it is recognised by the EU and Western intelligence agencies as a covert information manipulation operation.

The initiative operates across east and west Africa, publishing content in English, French, Arabic, Russian and local languages like Hausa and Swahili. It maintains both covert and overt footprints in the Sahel, recruiting or training hundreds of local journalists, influencers and activists to seed pro-Russian narratives across Telegram, radio and community media.

Hard power

In this arena, Russia is more trickster than guardian—noisy and disruptive, but ultimately unstable and unreliable. In early 2025, one African foreign minister told ECFR that the Kremlin is planning to develop a Russian equivalent of the French Foreign Legion with a focus on Africans.^[4] In October, parliamentarians and government officials from another African country said their intelligence showed Russia was now stepping up efforts to recruit many more Africans to fight in its theatres, be it on the continent or in Ukraine.^[5] However, Russia still faces a big credibility issue around equipment, tactics and clear white-supremacist undercurrents, which will likely grow increasingly off-putting for many Africans.

While Russian military engagement in Africa remains patchy for now, a potential peace deal with Ukraine could dramatically change this by freeing up immense amounts of manpower,

military expertise and industrial capacity. After the cold war ended, many African nations found themselves inundated with Soviet-era weapon systems and characters like Viktor Bout, the Kremlin-linked arms dealer. This time, the diplomatic, legal and personnel infrastructure has been laid for a much more coordinated Kremlin push for influence. This is something that few, if any, governments seem to be prepared for.

Overall, Russia's military interactions with Africa are concentrated in (but not limited to) three key theatres of operations: Libya and the Sahel, the Atlantic Coast, and central Africa.

Libya: The lily pad

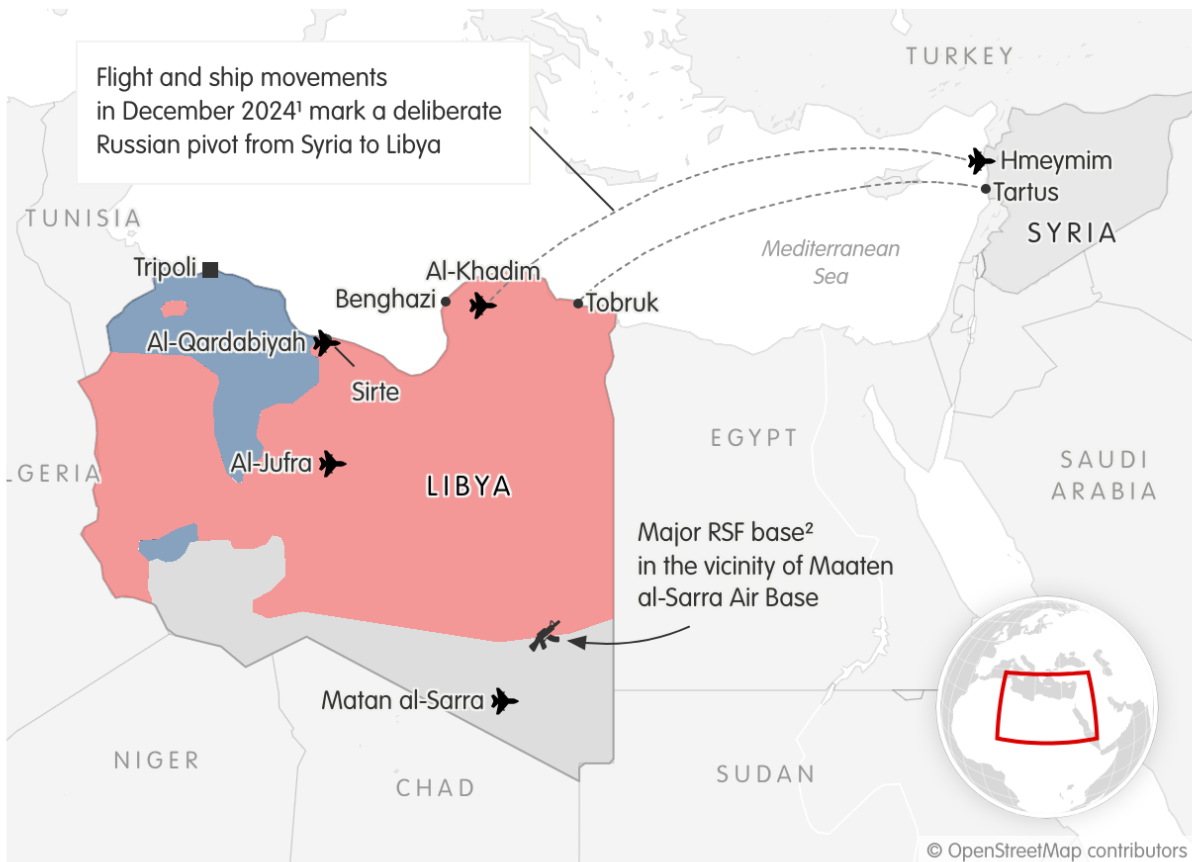
Around 2018, Wagner personnel began deploying to eastern Libya to support Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA). From 2020, they started securing critical infrastructure, airbases such as al-Khadim and energy sites. Russia's presence has allowed it to project force across the Mediterranean with its navy, anti-ship missiles and air defences, as well as deep into the Sahel.

Since the fall of Syria's Assad regime in December 2024, Libya has become even more central as the lily pad for transporting troops and equipment into Africa by air directly from Russia. Russia now relies heavily on Haftar, his extended family and the LNA. This gives Haftar more leverage over Russia's foreign and military policy south of the Sahara.

Moscow's long-term objective appears to be securing a semi-permanent military foothold on NATO's southern flank and controlling migration and trafficking routes into Europe, which would give it a strategic card against the bloc and could further push its politics towards a far-right, pro-Russian stance. Satellite imagery and flight-tracking data show that a Russian An-124 made at least two round-trip flights from Syria to the al-Khadim airbase near Benghazi, Libya, in late December 2024 and that an Ilyushin-76 made at least nine round-trip flights between Syria and al-Khadim during the first three weeks of January 2025. During the same period, analysts tracked a flotilla of Russian landing ships—the Ivan Gren and the Alexander Otrakovsky—docking in Tobruk to offload artillery pieces, armoured personnel carriers and other equipment. There were also several cargo shipments reportedly flown into Mali, via Syria. These movements mark a deliberate pivot from Syria to Libya as Russia seeks to sustain power projection across the Sahel and the wider continent.

Areas of control and Russian presence in Libya. October 2025

■ Libyan National Army (Haftar)
 ■ GNA
 ■ Tribesmen and other militias



✈ Air bases hosting Russian military and logistical facilities¹

¹ As reported by criticalthreats.org as of January 2025

² Geolocated by the Centre for Information Resilience as of July 2025

Source: EIA; Liveuamap.com; Centre for Information Resilience; criticalthreats.org
ECFR · ecfr.eu

In late December 2024 and early 2025, a flurry of analysis and reporting indicated that Russia was significantly modernising the south-eastern Maaten al-Sarra Air Base, located near the border with Chad and Sudan. However, this airfield seems to be far more important to the United Arab Emirates as a means of funnelling weapons and arms to the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in Sudan's civil war than as a staging ground for the Africa Corps. The *Centre for Information Resilience*, a UK-based investigative organisation, geolocated a major RSF base in the vicinity of the Maaten al-Sarra Air Base. Absent other evidence, al-Jufra airbase, located in the centre of Libya, likely remains the most important base for Russian operations.

Central Africa: The first fortress

The CAR has for several years been the most complete case of Russian influence in Africa. Since 2019, Wagner operatives have been embedded in President Touadéra's guard, trained local forces, and taken control of lucrative diamond and gold concessions—with some individuals even getting a sizeable share of alcohol imports. In return for providing regime security, Moscow's agents secured outsized political and economic influence, from diplomatic privileges to mining revenues that fund its operations.

Attempts to transition Wagner operations into the Africa Corps have met resistance. Touadéra, who counts advisers such as Dmitry Salem Podolsky among his inner circle, has pressed the Kremlin to keep Wagner operatives in place, without changes in the command structure. Yet in early August, a CAR military official told the *Associated Press* that Yevkurov demanded the country shift its contracts to the Africa Corps and start paying for services. The outcome remains uncertain and hard to read: some former Wagner fighters may integrate into the Africa Corps while other members may stay on independently to protect their business interests.

“We know exactly where they are and how many they are,” one military contractor who tracks Russian activity in the CAR said. “They are sitting on their holes in the ground, making boatloads of money. As long as that continues to happen, they do not give a damn about the direction the country goes in, they don't give a damn about development,” they added.^[6]

Judging from recent actions by CAR officials, the government regrets being drawn into the internal power struggle between Wagner and the Russian state and clearly sees a hard limit to what Russia can offer. Touadéra has been busy travelling, both publicly and privately, to capitals like London and Tokyo. On one such trip, the CAR foreign minister Sylvie Baïpo-TemontoldECFR that her government was keen to “diversify relationships” and that relying only on security partners has reached its limits.^[7]

While Cameroon has not seen a major Russian troop build-up, Russian operatives rely heavily on a section of the port of Douala to move goods and equipment for their operations in Central Africa—thanks to its international access and reputation for corruptible staff.

Chad is another prime target of Russian engagement. The country sits in a precarious neighbourhood: Sudan's civil war to the east, rebels in Libya and the CAR to the north and south, and jihadist groups still active around Lake Chad to the west. At home, President Mahamat Déby faces tensions even within his own Zaghawa community, fuelled in part by his support for Sudan's RSF, which is fighting Zaghawa groups across the border.

In 2024, Chad broke off a defence cooperation agreement with Paris, resulting in the departure of French forces. The move was done partly to get ahead of rising anti-French sentiment, but

also because of Déby's personal animosity towards certain French officials. In doing so, the government in N'Djamena lost its final security guarantor. Chad's land army is formidable, but French Mirage jets had always been the last line of defence against rebel convoys. Today, Déby is trying to fill the gap with Turkish TB2 drones and money from the UAE, now his main external backer. A well-connected source said the regime is flush with Emirati cash even as the average Chadian remains among the poorest people on earth.^[8] But without air cover capabilities of Mirage jets, N'Djamena is exposed—especially amid the recent threats by the Sudanese Armed Forces to bomb the Chadian capital because of Déby's support for the RSF.

In this context, Russia has made strong overtures to Chad, viewing it as a key potential client that could help connect its operations in the Sahel, Central Africa and potentially Sudan. Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov visited the country in June 2024, but President Mahamat Deby is likely wary of Russian overtures. In 2023, leaked Pentagon documents detailed how the Wagner Group attempted to recruit Chadian rebels and establish a training site for 300 fighters in the CAR as part of an “evolving plot to topple the Chadian government.” Indeed, in 2024, Maxim Shugaley, a Wagner operative, was mysteriously arrested in N'Djamena before being expelled. For now, Déby seems content to play each side off against the other to secure the best possible deal.

Meanwhile, a bizarre confluence of actors has visited N'Djamena in the past year. In addition to the UAE royals and Russia's foreign minister Sergey Lavrov, Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orban—Russia's key European ally—and his son are also attempting to secure a Hungarian military base in Chad, purportedly to counter migration to Europe. Marine Le Pen, France's far-right leader, has also visited the capital recently.

The Sahel: The crumbling outpost

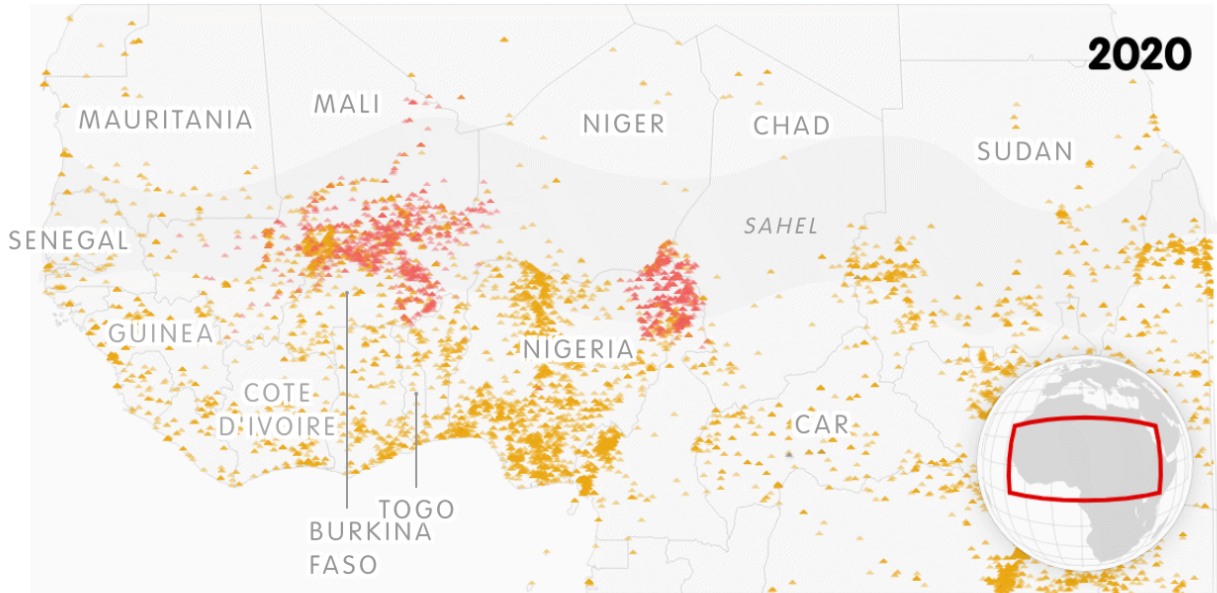
Nowhere has Russia's African gamble gone further than in the Sahel. In Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, successive coups have torn up Western alliances and created a golden opportunity for Moscow's soldiers, spin doctors and mercenaries.

What Russia calls “counterterrorism cooperation” or “training operations” often involves soldiers pillaging and raping, propaganda networks filling Facebook feeds and economic deals helping the Kremlin sidestep sanctions. Combatting jihadist groups is secondary. In fact, they are gaining ground across the Sahel's frontlines. But the beauty of Russia's strategy is that it wins either way. If their operations are successful, Russia secures client states and mining deals. If they lose—and they are losing—and the Sahelian capitals collapse, a vast expanse of territory underneath Europe tumbles further into chaos.

Violence in the Sahel, 2018-2024

Violent incidents involving ■ Wagner/Africa Corps ■ jihadist groups ■ militias, state forces and others

2018 ● — ● — ● — ● 2024 

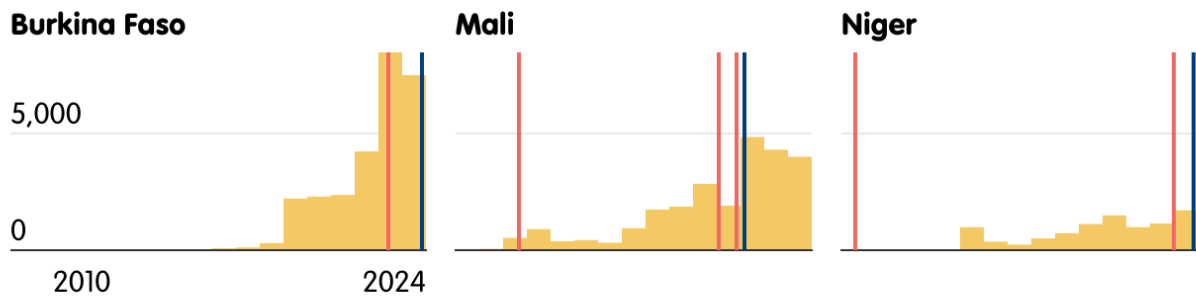


Source: ACLED
ECFR · ecfr.eu

In mid-2024, following the coup in Niamey and the threat of a Nigeria-led ECOWAS intervention, the three juntas in Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali formed the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), promising mutual defence—an attack on one would be treated as an attack on all. In April 2025, Russia publicly pledged at a summit in Moscow to back the three AES states, offering training and weapons for a 5,000-strong joint force to fight jihadists and resist foreign interference. However, multiple West African officials claim that Russia's true objective was to drive a wedge between AES and ECOWAS, thereby cutting the Sahel off from its neighbours.^[9] In August 2025, the AES countries' defence ministers went to Moscow to sign a memorandum of cooperation, most probably to formalise the Africa Corps presence.

Deaths from armed violence in the Sahel, 2010-2024

■ Military coups ■ Wagner/Africa Corps deployments



Source: ACLED
ECFR · ecf.eu

At the UN Security Council in the same month, Russia’s deputy permanent representative Dmitry Chumakov called for global support for the AES in its fight against jihadists—a statement that could be interpreted as a quiet admission of how badly Moscow’s gamble is failing.

Mali

In June 2025, Wagner released a statement saying it was ending its three-and-a-half-year operations in Mali, declaring “the completion of its main mission.” Formally, the Africa Corps has taken over operational control, although informal arrangements mean some troops still operate under Wagner’s identity and neo-Nazi symbolism. Numbers are difficult to verify, but current estimates suggest around 2,000 Russian personnel remain in Mali, alongside smaller units from other mercenary outfits.^[10]

Wagner and Africa Corps units have categorically failed to restore order in central and northern Mali. Lacking resources, local informants, language skills and reliable air support, Wagner fighters turned increasingly to indiscriminate violence against civilians. In the Moura massacre in March 2022, Wagner mercenaries, alongside Malian forces, killed an estimated 500 civilians. The vast majority were summarily executed, according to a UN investigation. According to investigators from the US-based outlet *The Sentry*, who in August 2025 published a major report on Wagner’s operations in Mali, Russian personnel’s use of drones and raids has also resulted in scores of civilian casualties. Notably, in February 2024, strikes on a wedding and burial site killed at least 14 civilians, including four children.

Some of Russian soldiers’ most barbarous acts have been grimly documented by the mercenaries themselves. In the invite-only Telegram group “White Uncles in Africa 18+”, which

had more than 350 members before it was shut down in mid-2025, they regularly shared photos and videos of murder, rape, torture, cannibalism and desecration of corpses against alleged insurgents and civilians.

In one video, reportedly shot in Mali, an African man lies naked and face-down on sun-baked ground, his hands tied behind his back, his thighs soaked in blood, presumably from injuries to his genitals. His ears have been hacked off, and a Russian flag has been forcibly inserted into his anus. The caption describes the image as a fond “safari” memory, punctuated with a monkey emoji to underline its racial cruelty. Another photo shows seven heads laid out in the sand, with the caption: When White Power, the [Ku Klux Klan] and [racial holy war] get together. Photo inspired by the book Ten Little [n-words] (but we only found seven).”

Russian conduct has further undermined the trust between civilians and the Malian Armed Forces (known by its French acronym, FAMA) and deepened already existing rifts in the armed forces. Wagner operatives frequently operated outside the FAMA chain of command, seized Malian equipment without permission and carried out unilateral operations. Sources who spoke with *The Sentry* accused Wagner fighters of racist behaviour toward FAMA soldiers while favouring militia allies whom they can control more easily. “These people are scum, they come from prisons, they have done unspeakable things,” one Malian security official told *The Sentry* investigators.

The Sentry highlights Wagner’s delayed response to an attack by Nusrat-al-Islam (JNIM, a jihadist network operating in the Sahel) on September 17th 2024 in Bamako, which killed up to 100 people and injured more than 250. Despite being stationed just outside the airport—one of the attack’s main targets—Russian units waited five hours before intervening. Witnesses told investigators the Russians would not act without assurances of payment.

Operational blunders have compounded these problems. In 2023, a Malian air force Il-76TD transport aircraft linked to Wagner overran the runway at Gao and crashed, likely killing dozens. In June 2025, a Russian Africa Corps Su-24M bomber went down in the Niger River near Gao, officially due to poor weather, though ethnic Tuareg separatists claimed it was shot down in combat.

The nadir of Russia’s engagement came at the battle of Tinzaouaten in July 2024, when a convoy of Russian and Malian soldiers was surrounded in the desert by Tuareg rebels— allegedly supported by Ukrainian special forces—and fighters from JNIM. Reportedly, 84 Russians and 47 Malian soldiers were killed.

This all reflects the strain on Russia’s military logistics and the limits of what it can deploy while engaged in a full-scale war in Ukraine. A recent shipment of Russian equipment to Mali primarily consisted of Soviet-era hardware, including three outdated T-72 tanks, according to a

source in Bamako familiar with the cargo manifest.^[11] For Ulf Laessing, director of the Sahel programme at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in Bamako, “deploying tanks makes no sense against a ghost enemy arriving on motorbikes from the bush”.

Russia appears to have failed to secure the lucrative mining concessions in Mali, unlike in the CAR and other countries, where such contracts typically fund their operations. This is likely because Mali’s mining sector is already open to major international mining firms, which can offer more competitive terms. Instead of doing like the CAR, which simply offered Russia a load of mining concessions, Mali has opted to renegotiate the terms of its many mining deals, while Burkina Faso (discussed below) has generally pursued the nationalisation of mines.

Indeed, given the litany of failures, it is unclear why Russia continues to keep operatives in Mali at all. Much of it is rooted in local interests. *The Sentry* investigators documented how defence minister Sadio Camara and his allies have profited under Wagner’s protection, building lavish houses near Bamako. “Some junta members and their friends are omnipotent now; they can get whatever they want, as quickly as they want it. License to build in a certain area? Granted. License to have this or that guy be promoted within the army? Granted”, a FAMA colonel told investigators.

These dynamics have deepened divisions within the junta. In August 2025, the regime arrested several prominent officers, including General Abass Dembele and General Nema Sagara, accusing them of plotting a coup with French backing—though no evidence was provided. Sources suggest the real motive was internal resentment at Camara, Russia’s key ally in the junta.^[12] Meanwhile, *The Sentry* researchers report that President Assimi Goïta, wary of Camara’s closeness to Russia, has sought alternative security partners, such as Turkey. So far, he has secured deliveries of Bayraktar TB2 drones and discussions with Turkish security firms to train his personal guard—a clear move to hedge against internal junta rivalries.

Laessing observed that while “there has been some disillusionment among officials about the Russian military cooperation”, it is “too early” to talk about a break. “Mali has put out feelers to Turkey and Europe to re-engage, but the leadership still thinks maintaining ties with Russia makes the most sense,” he added. However, in September 2025, the Wall Street Journal quoted US officials saying there was serious “buyer’s remorse” among all three Sahelian states, who were considering bringing Moroccan trainers in to push the Russians out.

Meanwhile, the security crisis appears to be worsening. Between August and September, JNIM launched a fuel embargo in the country and has carried out a number of attacks near the Senegalese border, where much of Mali’s imports and exports travel through, in an attempt to starve the government in Bamako of supplies.

Burkina Faso

Since coming to power in 2022, the Traoré-led junta has made strong signals towards Russia, a shift framed domestically as an assertion of sovereignty and self-determination. These sentiments, rooted in decades of grievances with French cultural, political and economic hegemony, have been amplified by a Russian-orchestrated manipulation campaign. The digital propaganda system is now largely run by Traoré's brothers Inoussa and Kassoum—who have become so skilled in it that they now run social media operations targeting neighbouring governments, such as Ivory Coast's.^[13]

Traoré attended the second Russia–Africa Summit in St Petersburg in 2023, where he met with Putin and expressed interest in deepening military and economic cooperation. By early 2024, Russia had reopened its embassy in Ouagadougou, closed since 1992, and begun deploying personnel from the Africa Corps.

The initial deployment numbered around 300 Russian military advisers and contractors, including soldiers from Redut private military company's "Bear Brigade" (part of the Africa Corps). These troops were largely deployed to the Loumbila base, some 20km northeast of Ouagadougou, at the end of 2023, but also to the presidency and the national intelligence agency. These personnel trained Burkina Faso's armed forces and provided direct security for senior members of the junta, including Traoré himself, who was growing increasingly fearful of coup attempts.

In June 2024, Russian officials confirmed the delivery of weapons and the expansion of military training initiatives in Burkina Faso. However, many of these troops were withdrawn to the home front later in 2024, following Ukraine's Kursk offensive.

It is unclear how many Russian personnel remain in Burkina Faso. The figure is clearly far less than in Mali, perhaps no more than a few hundred men, mainly engaged in intelligence work, training and propaganda operations.^[14] Whatever the scale of involvement is, Russian support has not translated into any measurable security gains for the country.

Since the withdrawal of Western forces, Al-Qaeda-linked JNIM and the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (ISGS), the two main jihadist organisations operating in the region, have made significant territorial and political advances. JNIM in particular has embedded itself within local communities, often providing more reliable security and economic governance than the state. What was once racketeering now increasingly resembles systems of tax collection and resource management—particularly in long-neglected northern regions of the country.^[15]

Like in neighbouring Mali and Niger, JNIM appears focused more on controlling people rather than territory. In many areas, they are outperforming state authorities in terms of efficiency,

according to experts. JNIM appears content, for now at least, to avoid targeting any urban settlements, as that would make them too vulnerable to Burkina Faso's air firepower (although in May they launched a major attack on the northern town of Djibo, overrunning the military camp there). Instead, JNIM adopts a strategy of attrition, slowly bleeding out state forces while sowing disaffection in the military's ranks.^[16]

Videos sent to ECFR from inside Burkina Faso show graphic violence committed by the Burkinabé military. One shows families (apparently of Fulani ethnicity, which is widely targeted across the region for being perceived to have ties to jihadist groups) being tied up and thrown into the back of donkey carts before having their throats cut. As the state crumbles on itself, civil society actors or journalists who speak out about the violence or question the official narrative are often arrested or disappeared. Despite the very real threat of arrest, Hermann Yameogo, politician and son of Burkina Faso's first president, went public in July 2025 to warn: "Our country finds itself, for the first time in its contemporary history, hanging over an abyss."

Some officials say the 37-year-old Traoré is unqualified for the role. "He has the mental ability and the views you would expect of someone of his military rank, age and level of education," one senior Western official who has met Traoré said.^[17] "He promotes himself as a Sankarist figure but does not remotely have the intellectual depth," the official added, referring to Thomas Sankara, the former Burkinabe president and pan-African intellectual who was assassinated in 1987. Another senior West African official put it more succinctly: "These boys in khaki are dangerous jokers."^[18]

Economic gains for Russia in Burkina Faso have likely been small. In April 2025, Nordgold, owned by oligarch Alexey Mordashov, was granted an industrial gold mining licence at the Niou deposit in Kourwéogo province through its subsidiary Jilbey Burkina, in which the Burkinabe government holds a 15% stake. Nordgold already operates two other industrial gold mining sites elsewhere in the country. The two countries have also signed agreements on the construction of nuclear energy plants, but these are unlikely to proceed anytime soon.

Niger

Since the July 2023 coup that ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, Niger's ruling junta has shifted decisively away from Western military partnerships, apart from Italy. While it initially courted Russia, it is not clear where General Abdourahamane Tchiani's regime ultimately stands and which international partners he favours.

Shortly after seizing power, the junta ended its military cooperation agreements with France forces and with the US—following what appears to have been a bungled warning from the US State Department to Niamey not to cooperate with Iran on uranium sales. This led to the withdrawal of American troops and the closure of the vast Airbase 201 in central Niger, once

central to American counter-terrorism strategy in the region.

In early 2024, Niger formalised defence ties with Russia. The Russian ministry of defence confirmed new bilateral cooperation agreements that included the arrival of roughly 100 Africa Corps personnel as instructors and military advisers. In April 2024, Russian troops were deployed to Niamey's Air Base 101—before US forces had left—marking a highly symbolic transition of foreign military presence. It is unclear whether these Russian personnel remained beyond a few days, but the deployment was a significant propaganda victory widely reported worldwide.

Niger state media reported that Russia would also deploy anti-aircraft systems to bolster Niger's defences amid paranoia of a joint Nigerian-French intervention to restore the ousted president Bazoum in late 2023. Again, this was likely just propaganda signalling—there is no evidence that such systems were ever delivered.

An unconfirmed report on the Nigerian site *Military Africa* in March 2025 claimed Niger's government terminated all intelligence cooperation with Russia over trust concerns. Currently, there could be around 200-300 Russian personnel in the country.^[19] Like in Burkina Faso, it is thought that these personnel primarily worked on intelligence, training and surveillance.

It is not just the Russians who have struggled to gain access to Tchiani's regime. Media reports and interviews with sources describe him as paranoid, conspiratorial and rarely leaving the presidential palace.^[20]

Sudan

Under Prigozhin, Wagner openly backed the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) when fighting broke out in April 2023. US officials reported that Wagner supplied the RSF with surface-to-air missiles from its bases in the CAR. These weapons were pivotal: they blunted the air advantage of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), allowing RSF fighters to withstand bombardments in Khartoum and other contested areas. The support also underscored Prigozhin's opportunistic approach: backing a non-state militia that was willing to pay and facilitate gold flows, even at the expense of Russia's formal relations with Sudan's military establishment.

Since the Kremlin consolidated Wagner's operations into the Africa Corps, however, Russian support has shifted significantly towards the SAF. Moscow's overriding goal is to secure a durable partnership with Sudan's state institutions, especially the army leadership, as a path to a Red Sea naval facility at Port Sudan and long-term influence in the Horn of Africa.

That shift was made explicit in April 2024, when Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, visited Port Sudan and pledged "uncapped" support for the SAF. Subsequent reports

indicate that, alongside Iran, Russia has provided the SAF with millions of barrels of fuel, thousands of weapons and jet components, and additional surface-to-air missile systems. These supplies not only strengthened the SAF's battlefield position but also dragged Khartoum further into Moscow's orbit.

Russia used its veto power at the UN Security Council to scupper a UK and Sierra Leone-led ceasefire resolution on Sudan. Then, in early 2025, Sudan's foreign minister Ahmed al-Sharif visited Moscow and said Russia could finally have a port on the Red Sea, the Kremlin's long-standing goal. In combination with naval facilities on the Mediterranean in Libya, this would create a potent strategic presence in the region.

West Africa: The rising tide

Since Prigozhin's death, Russia has shifted some of its attention to the West African coastal states. Most likely, the Kremlin aims to reinforce its influence inland and secure control of vital African shipping routes that service energy and commodities to Europe and the US. Many African governments have shown considerable skill in wooing Moscow to obtain more concessions or support from the West.

Guinea

Russia has a long-standing economic and political relationship with Guinea Conakry, with Russian mining companies active there for years. Moscow also had strong ties with former president Alpha Condé, even supporting him to stay in office for an unconstitutional third term.

However, the new leader, General Mamady Doumbouya—a former French Foreign Legionnaire married to a French gendarme—has played a far more careful gamble with Moscow and the West. Unlike Mali or Burkina Faso, the government in Conakry has maintained its Western ties while signing selective deals with Russia, including a memorandum on energy and university exchanges. But he has also opened the door to logistics. In early 2025, satellite imagery caught two Russian cargo ships—the *Baltic Leader* and the *Patria*—docking at the port in Conakry. Days later, convoys of military trucks were spotted rolling into Bamako under escort.

Togo

Togo has shown signs of deeper alignment with Moscow. *Africa Intelligence* reported that Russian soldiers were present in 2024 to help build forward operating bases, and Yevkurov, the deputy defence minister, visited the country in November of that year. The Gnassingbé regime, in power for over six decades, is probably inclined towards Russia's authoritarian style. Moreover, the government seems to be carefully diversifying its relations away from Paris amid

the wave of anti-French sentiment across the region. An example is Togo's entry into the Commonwealth in 2022 despite its limited history of British rule.

Togo faces significant jihadist pressure along its northern border. The regime therefore highly values security guarantees, making Moscow's promise of protection especially appealing. In July 2025, the Russian parliament ratified a military cooperation agreement with Togo, providing joint exercises, training, weapons deliveries and anti-piracy support. This could be a precursor to an Africa Corps deployment. Reports suggest Russia is seeking privileged access to the Port of Lomé, one of the most capable logistics hubs in West and Central Africa.

Equatorial Guinea

President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, who has been in power for over four decades, has become increasingly open to Moscow. Obiang offered to host the third Russia-Africa Summit in 2026, a key selling point being the fact that Equatorial Guinea is not a signatory to the International Criminal Court. In November 2024, just weeks after Yevkurov visited Malabo, Russia deployed some 200 Africa Corps soldiers. Their mission: train local forces and protect Obiang directly.

Guinea-Bissau

Guinea-Bissau's president, Umaro Sissoco Embaló, also visited Moscow in February 2025. According to reports, Russian metals oligarch Oleg Deripaska was present at the talks, and a Guinea-Bissau minister stated that Rusal was interested in building a railway and port in the country, as well as exploring for bauxite. This was hardly a grand coup for Moscow, however; more likely an act of an African president carefully hedging between options. After Moscow, Embaló visited Kyiv and then met with Trump in July.

São Tomé and Príncipe

In early 2024, Moscow signed a military cooperation agreement with the island nation, covering joint training, intelligence sharing, logistical support and port access. The indefinite accord came into effect in April 2025 and permits Russian naval vessels to dock and refuel at São Toméan ports. On paper, this looks significant, but there has been no sign of any military activity. In practice, the deal is likely a way of São Tomé getting concessions from other partners. Indeed, according to Africa Confidential, the deal coincided with São Tomé's prime minister endorsing separate defence memorandums with Turkey and Serbia—a sign of the country's desire to diversify its partnerships.

*

Together, these moves signal Russia's intent, at least, to establish an arc of influence across the Atlantic—a corridor of ports and partnerships that secures supply lines to the Sahel, thereby underwriting embattled regimes and positioning Moscow on key maritime routes that threaten European trading lanes. Intent does not equal success, however. African governments seem to be skilfully navigating the tension between Europe's antipathy towards Russia and Moscow's own desperate desire to remain relevant.

Soft power

Even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Prigozhin and Wagner-linked entities had already built extensive information manipulation and electioneering operations in Africa, such as Project Lakhta, a covert Russian disinformation programme, and were using opaque NGOs like the Association for Free Research and International Cooperation (AFRIC) to promote Russian-African relations. These early efforts amplified resentment towards French and Western operations in the Francophone Sahel, exploiting narratives such as Russia's lack of a colonial empire in Africa, or the Soviet Union's support for African liberation movements. Many of these early influence and manipulation attempts—such as those in Mozambique, Madagascar and Sudan—largely failed as operatives misread local political dynamics and, in Mozambique's case, massively underestimated the jihadist security threat in the north. However, Russian operatives have learned from their mistakes.

Since 2022, Russia's propaganda and media networks have expanded dramatically, building on these foundations and extending into the Anglophone and Lusophone spheres, as well as into major African languages such as Swahili, Hausa and Amharic.^[21] Today, these operations are immense, spanning dozens of African countries and thousands of online channels, TV deals and bot accounts.

These operations thrive in Africa's rapidly transforming digital media landscape. According to the World Bank, more than 160 million Africans gained broadband access between 2019 and 2022. Overall internet use—including mobile connections—expanded by 115% in the same period. This explosion of connectivity has revolutionised commerce, agriculture, education and remittances. It has also empowered a booming youth population across the continent to put greater pressure on political elites where governance is weak.

The combination of rapid digital expansion, a young population, low literacy rates—just over 30% in Mali—and fragile and underfunded institutions make populations susceptible to disinformation. The very transformation that could drive Africa's development is being weaponised by Russia and other malign actors to confuse and control.

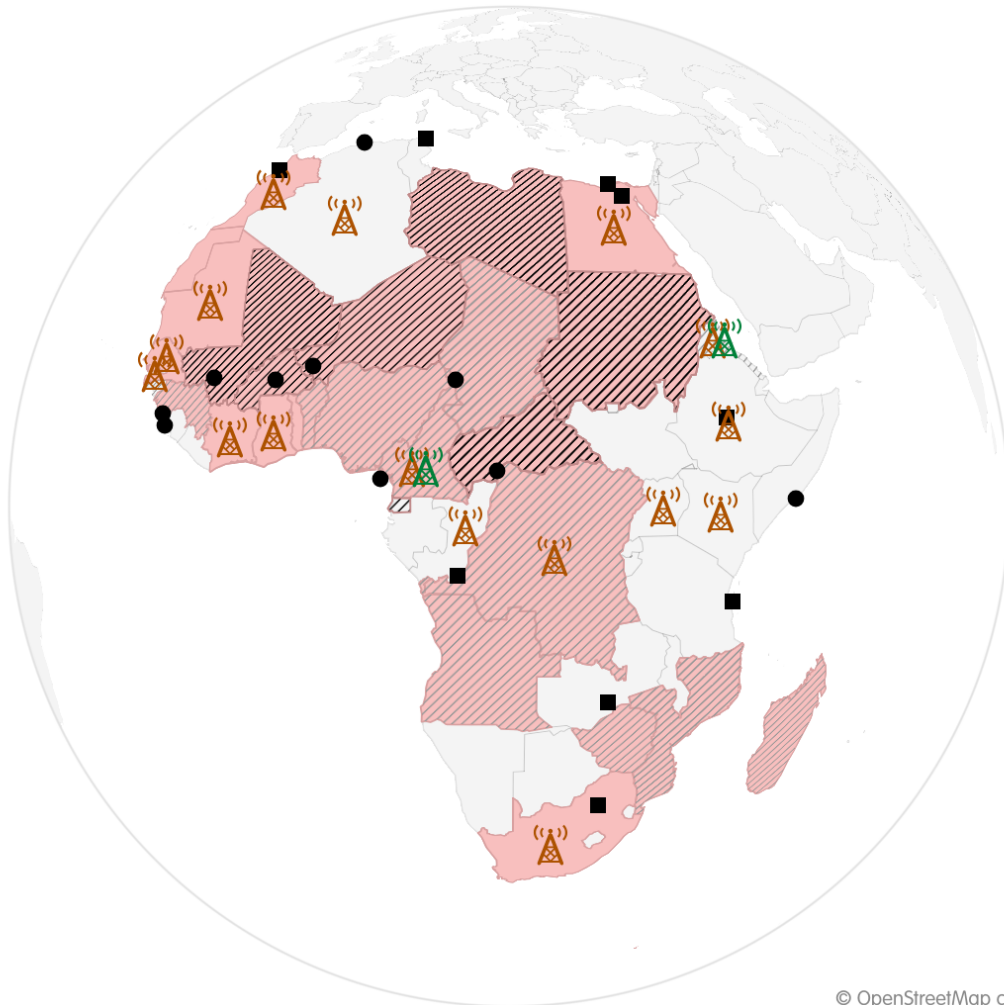
Russia's influence operations in Africa can be understood as an anthill, with a small visible mound hiding vast and complex tunnels underneath.

- **Above the surface:** state media outlets like *TASS*, *RT* and *Sputnik*; official Telegram channels; NGO fronts; set-piece events like the Russia–Africa Summit or the Russia House network.
- **Beneath the surface:** paid African influencers and journalists; AI-enhanced bot farms; payment handlers; accounts hijacking pan-Africanist or anti-neocolonial discourse and nudging content towards pro-Russia stances.

Together, the visible and hidden tiers reinforce one another, feeding off the parallel information system that enables Moscow to flood Africa's digital space with narratives that advance its interests—or those of governments and elite groups willing to pay.

Russia's footprint in Africa

- Countries targeted by Kremlin-linked disinformation campaigns
- Wagner/Africa Corps known and suspected military presence
- Presence of formal partnerships between local media and RT and Sputnik
- Russian Houses (cultural centers operated by Rossotrudnichestvo)
- Local NGOs partnered with Rossotrudnichestvo



© OpenStreetMap contributors

Source: Africa Center for Strategic Studies (reports as of April 2022 and March 2024); Maxime Audinet, "In search of "de-Westernization": Russia's strategy of influence in sub-Saharan Africa" ECFR · ecfr.eu

Above ground

When Russia's major state-controlled outlets, such as *RT* and *Sputnik*, were banned from Europe, Canada and Britain in 2022, much of their capacity was immediately redirected to

Africa and Latin America.^[22] *RT* expanded its Francophone and Anglophone coverage with specific Africa-programming, such as the documentary series “Lumumba’s Africa”. *Sputnik France* ceased operations in mid-2022 and relaunched as *Sputnik Afrique*, while *RT France*’s operations were relocated to Moscow in April 2023 and transformed into *RT Afrique*.^[23]

Africa’s media is chronically under-resourced, with many outlets struggling to afford full access to international news wires. This created an opening for Russian state outlets, which in recent years signed a series of deals with local media to provide content for free. Maxime Audinet, a leading researcher of Russian information operations in Africa, catalogued such deals in early 2025. They included outlets in Burundi, Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, South Africa and Uganda. The outlets range from major national outlets to those trying to cast themselves as niche, “alternative” or “counter-hegemonic”. Ukrainian intelligence says that formal Russian propaganda now reaches audiences across 40 African countries through multiple platforms.

At the same time, Russian outlets are investing heavily in African bureaus. In early 2025, *Sputnik* opened an editorial centre in Addis Ababa, where one local journalist told ECFR their job, taken for economic reasons, was essentially to “translate Russian propaganda” into Amharic.^[24] In June 2025, it also set up a Swahili centre. In March 2025, *TASS* announced plans to open six new African bureaus by 2026. *RT* and *Sputnik* have limited direct viewership and followers in Africa—*Sputnik Africa* has only around 50,000 subscribers on Telegram. However, the content they produce and package ricochets around its local TV partners and, importantly, through informal networks. This expansion comes as major Western outlets like *BBC World Service* and *Voice of America*, are culling Africa operations due to budget constraints and different domestic priorities.

Russia also invests in media training and trips. More than 1,000 African journalists have reportedly completed RT Africa courses, creating a network of Moscow-trained journalists across 35 nations. While the courses resemble basic journalism training, they are steeped in Kremlin propaganda. *Meduza*, a Riga-based investigative outlet, reported that one lesson used a video from occupied Mariupol portraying surrendered Ukrainian soldiers as “neo-Nazis.” Another session on fake news dismissed as “textbook fake news” the OPCW’s findings that the 2018 Douma chemical attack in Syria was carried out by Bashar al Assad’s forces. Several African journalists have also been taken on state-funded trips to occupied Ukrainian territories, including Mariupol, to view the Russian perspective on reconstruction. These training courses and trips provide ample opportunities for Russian intelligence agents to establish connections with a network of potential collaborators and propagandists in the future.

Beyond its media outlets, Russia has leaned on public-facing institutions such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation which provides grants to universities, NGOs, and cultural institutions that

preserve or celebrate Russian culture. Then there is the Rossotrudnichestvo, which manages a network of what is known as “Russian Houses” that promotes Russian culture and language abroad. At least eight Russia Houses have opened across the continent since 2024, mainly in Francophone West Africa, offering grants and programming that often doubles as low-level propaganda for domestic consumption. One video produced in cooperation with Rossotrudnichestvo shows Burkinabe children in Ouagadougou singing a song in Russian to celebrate June 12th, Russia Day, while another in the CAR shows people singing a tribute to the Russian air force in front of a Russian jet on August 12th, Russian Air Force Day.

Finally, The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is perhaps the most understudied and one of the more intriguing examples of soft power instruments. The ROC casts itself, and by extension Russia, as a defender of “traditional values” in contrast to Western “decadence.” That message lands in Christian-majority states in Africa where conservative family norms run deep and where Western advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights are often perceived as intrusive or patronising. At the Russia–Africa Summit in July 2023, Patriarch Kirill of Moscow told African leaders: “We are united by the adherence to traditional values, a conservative view of human nature, [and] the rejection of the ideology of permissiveness and overconsumption.” Measuring the impact of such messaging is difficult, but the pace of ROC activity in Africa has clearly accelerated since 2021. Its priests have been dispatched to lead services and conduct trainings across the continent, from Nigeria and Kenya to Uganda and Madagascar, embedding the Church’s presence alongside Moscow’s wider influence. This connection has particular influence in Ethiopia, where “mutual understanding” and “shared values” are emphasised regularly at high-level meetings between the ROC and the influential Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Below ground

Alongside the formal Kremlin-controlled media connections, Russia has developed a decentralised network of influence operations across the continent. Following Prigozhin’s death, the African Initiative appears to have assumed control of many of Wagner’s media operations.

The structure of the Africa Initiative-led influence campaigns remains opaque. Originally, Wagner’s information campaigns were set up with the help of Russian intelligence agencies and the telecommunications ministry. Unlike with its arms sales or combat deployments, Wagner initially did not seek payment from African or Middle Eastern clients for information operations. Instead, Wagner or the Russian government funded these efforts directly to boost Russia’s image, attract new clients, and discredit potential threats and local critics.

Wagner did not invent anything radically new during this period. Foreign governments, companies and grey-zone actors have long paid significant sums for information operations in

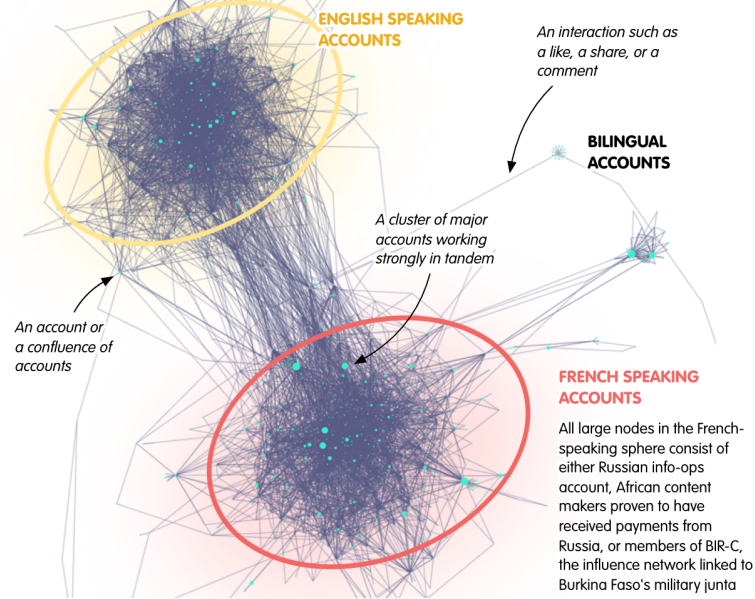
Africa and elsewhere. What set Wagner's approach apart was its scale, its coordination and its innovative use of influencers. While brands pay influencers to advertise products, Wagner became extremely adept to do this for political warfare in Africa.

According to interviews with Wagner personnel conducted by Antonio Giustozzi, a senior research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, the group worked with African politicians to finance daily payments of up to \$3,500 for influencers and online supporters. Wagner itself spent about \$35,000 per month, roughly \$450,000 per year, on these schemes. At the core of all campaigns is the attempt to appear local and authentic. Wagner also used bot networks to push Russia-related content into African feeds and to harass or discredit critics.

Infosphere of Coastal West African states and Burkina Faso

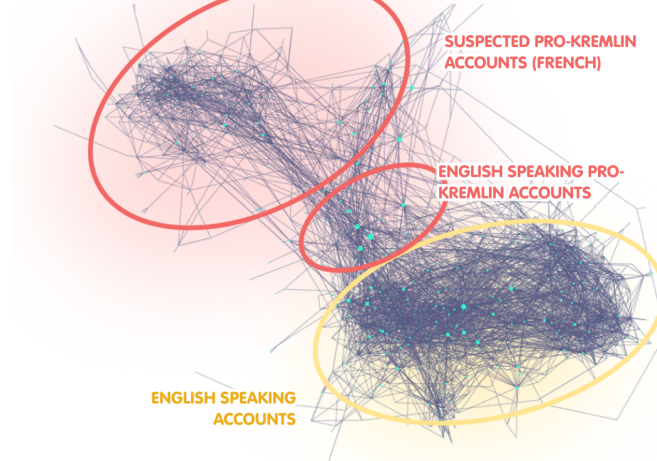
Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo | YouTube

November 2024 – April 2025



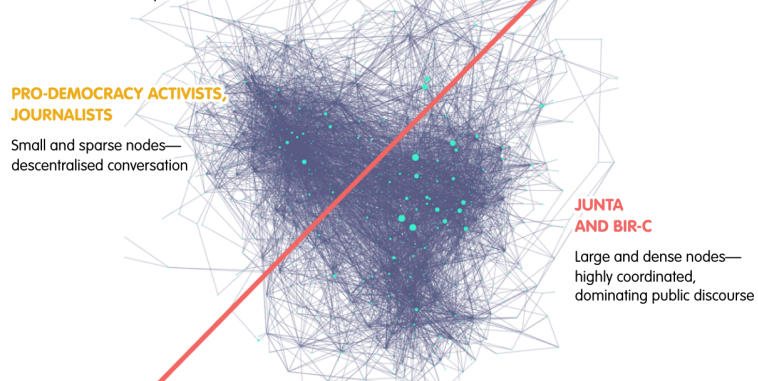
Benin, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Nigeria and Togo | Twitter

November 2024 – April 2025



Burkina Faso | Twitter

June 2024 – February 2025



Source: Bloom Social Analytics

BLOOM

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The level of disruption Wagner achieved with relatively modest sums is striking. Even if those figures were multiplied tenfold, they would still be negligible compared with the scale of typical European aid. There are no precise figures on Russia's current spending on influence operations in Africa, but if the recent expansion of formal activities is any clue, it is likely far higher than Wagner's previous expenditures. Some experts who monitor Russian disinformation operations believe the total annual spending could reach billions. ^[25]

Local influencers or journalists enjoy a high degree of autonomy in tailoring Russian talking points to their context and language. Some are ideologically motivated, but many are financially incentivised, creating a thriving cottage industry. Interviews with Malian and Burkinabè journalists revealed that the going rate for writing a Russia-leaning article covering key talking points in a major newspaper and sharing it on WhatsApp groups(where people are "far more likely to trust the information", as they said) was around \$120 a piece. ^[26] The payment then varies depending on how many followers or how strong a network the journalist or influencer has. These grunt journalists are typically managed by a well-paid local intermediary, operating in a pyramid-like structure.

The content itself varies—from attempts to discredit ECOWAS to attacks on African politicians deemed too close to the West, or conspiracy theories that Western troops are funding jihadists. One particularly pernicious campaign in 2024 targeted Western health initiatives, attacking malaria vaccine programmes that could save millions of children's lives. "We are served alternative facts and manipulated images, making it easier to disseminate disinformation and sow seeds of division. These are dangerous outcomes," said Ghana's president John Mahama at the UN General Assembly in September 2025.

These schemes are also clearly targeted, at least in part, at the large African diaspora in Western countries. African pride or cultural pages on Instagram or Facebook—ostensibly focused on heritage, landscapes or fashion—at times appear to promote Sahelian putschists or Kremlin talking points. This gradual blending of cultural identity with political propaganda nudges diaspora audiences toward viewing Russia as the champion of Pan-Africanism and sovereignty, while eroding Western support for the rules-based order or liberal norms.

These narratives are not conjured out of thin air. Like all well-designed influence campaigns, it builds upon and amplifies existing ideas and resentments within in a society or community. Moscow conducts highly sophisticated polling in Africa to understand the key narratives, attack points, and buzz phrases that will land best, before launching operations. Indeed, two sources indicated that Russia is using the same polling methods, via proxies, in Europe for upcoming disinformation campaigns. Above all, the aim has been to bind pro-Russia sentiment to powerful African currents: Pan-Africanism, sovereigntism and anti-neo-colonialism, while

simultaneously undermining Western engagement.

It is important to note that not all of this is Russia, however. Local actors, such as the “videomans” in the Sahel, are more often than not working on their own initiative. They are highly effective and industrious, and drive much of the local day-to-day disinformation in the Sahel. However direct Russian agents seem to be working on a much wider level, diving down for specific political events like elections in Ivory Coast or Nigeria. ^[27]

Propaganda works

Many Russian-linked channels attract minimal audiences, and some of the content is crude, AI-generated sludge. But others are extremely sophisticated and clearly widespread. The Africa Center, a research body linked to the US Department of Defense, documented nearly a fourfold increase in disinformation campaigns in Africa between 2022 and 2024, with Russia responsible for the lion’s share. In countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, Kremlin-linked actors reportedly held a significant share of the social media space—around half on platforms like X and YouTube in 2024.

Polling indicates that the propaganda has been highly effective in several regions. For example, Gallup World Poll data indicates approval of Russia’s leadership rose by 22% in West Africa between 2020 and 2023, despite Moscow’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. One extensive data set, seen by ECFR, showed an overwhelming majority of people in the Sahelian nations supported Russian action and Russia as a partner. ^[28]

Many officials in West African states that do not host Russian soldiers have voiced alarm at these operations, which often glorify coup leaders or “strongman” pro-Russian autocrats, while ridiculing democratic leaders. Some warned that Moscow is trying to instigate military takeovers similar to those in the Sahel. “They are trying to undermine support for our nation and our democracy,” one West African foreign minister said. “This is war.” ^[29]

Officials and parliamentarians from another African country said that there was a major pick up of Russian disinformation hitting Ghana during the election period in 2024, and hitting Nigeria when President Bola Tinubu visited France in early 2025. Right now, these officials said, Russia and Russia-trained Burkinabè teams were aiming much of their resources at Ivory Coast ahead of the presidential election there in late October. “They are in the eye of the storm,” one official said. ^[30] This targeting is clearly having a marked impact on Africa foreign policy at least publicly, as officials were far more cautious of being seen close to European countries or the wider West in public.

Why Europe is losing the hybrid game

Most European attempts to resist Kremlin influence at home and abroad have been poor. Often, they have been hamstrung by insufficient funding, bureaucratic inertia and a misplaced desire for politically correct, “safe” strategies better suited to a world that no longer exists.

When Russian mercenary and propaganda operations emerged in African countries like Mali, the European response was depressingly familiar: first shock, then retreat. The instinct has been to hunker down, reducing exposure by what some called “strategic silence” or “strategic patience”. Sometimes, Europeans have walked away entirely, abandoning crises which directly impact them.

This may seem prudent in the short term. Indeed, it shields European governments from domestic blowback for being seen alongside rights-abusing Russians, and it gives the Kremlin clear ownership over crises which are spinning out of control. Behind closed doors, some officials argue for letting those crises run their course so the Kremlin suffers the consequences.^[31] But those officials seem to forget that Russia is not burning itself out in a vacuum: it is doing so right on Europe’s doorstep.

Russia is already involved in migrant trafficking networks, while other southern Mediterranean countries use the “migration tap” to blackmail European governments. The crisis could also pave the way for international criminal networks, which are blossoming in West Africa, according to researchers. By effectively vacating the field, Europe cedes the initiative to Moscow, allowing it to deepen crises and shape narratives unchallenged.

Dud sanctions

Many European governments have resorted to sanctions, which look significant but often lack real bite. Russian-linked actors and the oligarchs behind Russian criminality in Africa have become adept at evading them through proxies. Too often, these measures lack coordination across Canada, EU, Norway, Switzerland, the UK, and the US to have maximum impact. Moreover, little is done to hit known Kremlin-linked propagandists—African and non-African—working and living in European countries.

All analysis, no strike back

Europe has made real progress in tracking Russian disinformation. The EU and national governments can map foreign information manipulation and interference in impressive detail. “We’re very good at analysing the gun which shoots us—we can tell you everything about how it

works,” one European official put it. “But we cannot shoot back.”

Efforts remain overwhelmingly defensive and reactive: debunking, fact-checking and media training. Meanwhile, Russia deploys relatively modest sums on influencers and local communicators who understand their audiences and speak in engaging and relatable ways. Constantly on the offensive, they force their targets—Europeans and non-aligned African governments—into an endless cycle of parries and rolls.

One fundamental division here is between bureaucratic and entrepreneurial approaches. In the information marketplace, Russia’s agents are the equivalent of gangster capitalists of the post-Soviet 1990s —fast and opportunistic, ready to partner with local entrepreneurs chasing easy cash. Many of these techniques or “political technologies” were perfected on Russia’s own population. Europe still relies on diplomats and bureaucrats who may excel in their ministries, but whose tweets in pre-approved Brussels lingo land flat at home—let alone in African societies already rightly sceptical of former colonial powers.

Internal bias also matters. Even when Europeans leak damaging evidence of Russian atrocities, they typically speak to outlets like *Le Monde*, the *New York Times* or CNN—many of which have paywalls. That may resonate in Paris or Washington, but not in Bamako or Bangui, where these outlets are rarely trusted and barely read.

A clunky funding model

The EU has ample cash to spend, but its funding structure stifles agility. Every euro is scrutinised and every programme risk-proofed, making it hard for anything unconventional to gain approval quickly. The result is often mundane initiatives like jargon-soup conferences, where most of the EU funding goes to the owner of a hotel chain and per diems. Europe spends thousands of times more on aid than Russia, but it lacks the courage to experiment with new ways to communicate.

“Can you imagine an EU bureaucrat signing off on a luxury trip to Europe for an African or Asian influencer who, I don’t know, likes to blog about their breakfast, or flying them to Ukraine to witness Russian obliteration first-hand?”, a former European foreign minister put it. “They’d be too worried about oversight to approve it.”^[32]

The liberal Roman collar

A peculiar aspect of European-African relations is how quickly European officials grow vocal about values and rights once they cross the Sahara. Weeks before they may have approved billions of dollars’ worth of lethal or riot control equipment to Saudi Arabia, Israel or Egypt, but

when it comes to African countries they offer the equivalent of a Roman Collar.

“If you talk all the time about *your* values, you imply the other party has none,” said one senior European official working on West Africa.^[33] The dynamic is immensely damaging to European interests, breeds resentment and plays directly into narratives of hypocrisy. “Never again will I listen to a lecture on human rights from a European government that stood by on this horror show in Gaza,” one West African foreign minister told ECFR privately.^[34]

A holier-than-thou defence

This paternalistic dynamic often veers into self-destruction when it comes to defence. During the Sahelian deployments, some European troops were barred from training local soldiers fighting for their country’s survival with real guns, so they were forced to use gun-shaped sticks.

The European Peace Facility has made important progress—for example, Benin’s soldiers can now receive real weapons for training. However, the supplied ammunition can only be used for drills, not for fighting the advancing jihadist insurgents in the north. In early 2022, Germany was justifiably ridiculed for hesitating to send mere helmets to Ukraine—yet Africans have been grappling with this for a long time, often forced to beg for basic equipment. Overall, Europe does not have a strong counter to Russia’s mercenary presence, but even existing military aid is often tentative, piecemeal and designed more to limit domestic exposure than to change realities on the ground.

Recommendations

Europeans can be certain of one thing: they have no genuine, resolute partner among African governments today. Most are hedging against them, scouting out the many other options available, such as China, Turkey or the UAE—and some are openly embracing Russia. Indeed, we are living in an à la carte world.

For their part, many democratic African governments have arguably been too lackadaisical about the threat Russia poses to their hard-won civil societies and institutions. The temptation to hedge against Europe by flirting with Moscow is understandable, especially in a time when a recalcitrant Trump is overturning the international order as we know it. But by now, the Kremlin’s playbook should be clear: Russia thrives on chaos. It seeks to destabilise societies to exploit them. Entertaining Moscow may seem like a clever balancing act, but it is, in fact, an invitation to predation.^[35] There are a host of other actors available to hedge against Western actors who do not seek to create mayhem in the same way.

There is a strong mutual interest for like-minded African and European players to work together on issues related to hybrid warfare on their respective systems. Indeed, there are now numerous initiatives from African governments and civil society organisations aimed at reclaiming their digital space.

Follow Africa's way

Kenya established a National Computer and Cybercrimes Coordination Committee under its 2018 cybercrimes law to coordinate state responses to online threats. Ghana launched its Cybersecurity Authority in 2021 to regulate and strengthen digital resilience. Nigeria has experimented with codes of practice for online platforms, while independent initiatives also exist. Africa Check, the continent's best-known fact-checking organisation, runs offices in Johannesburg, Dakar, Lagos and Nairobi. In Senegal, Africa Check has already played a role in ensuring more credible elections.

During recent elections in Nigeria, the Abuja-based Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) partnered with the *Daily Trust* newspaper to establish an "election war room," a hub dedicated to reporting on monitoring and reporting disinformation and fake news. CDD collaborated with local journalists and fact-checkers to expose these claims and published real-time analyses that were disseminated to Nigerian media outlets.

Another player is Code for Africa (CfA), Africa's largest civic technology and data journalism initiative, based in Cape Town and active across more than 20 countries. CfA incubated PesaCheck, a Nairobi-based fact-checking site that claims to debunk around 2,000 misleading posts a year. CfA has also spearheaded multiple accountability initiatives, such as portals that serve as repositories for public data, helping African journalists and researchers hold misleading claims to account. Other African media organisations have been highly innovative in the face of the challenges of the internet age. For example, the South Africa-based online outlet *The Continent* sends its readers fact-checked and high-quality reportage to its followers for free every week through Signal, Telegram and WhatsApp.

Meanwhile, several African governments, or at least factions within those governments, are furious at being targeted by Russian actions and disinformation campaigns. Some are willing to push back and doing things that Europeans would not: one African government, which will not be named here, showed ECFR how they are going on the offensive with their own social media influencers against Russian disinformation.

However, these initiatives are under-resourced, fragmented or, in the case of some government initiatives, politicised. Governments may have the laws and agencies on paper, but

they rarely have the resources, credibility or trust to act effectively. Fact-checkers are credible but tiny compared to the scale of Russian-backed networks. Europe can help—not by parachuting in clumsy and banal embassy TikToks, but by scaling up and partnering with these efforts, giving them resources and autonomy to succeed.

Develop a compelling narrative

First and foremost, Europeans need to be clear about what their interests are and what they can credibly offer on a public and diplomatic level. Saying they want to push back on Russia's influence is a self-defeating strategy if they do not have anything to offer in its place. Vague allusions to development goals or mutterings on countering migration are no substitute—they do not cut through.

Senior African officials frequently complain that, while they understand Chinese or Russian interests well, they struggle to comprehend European interests or objectives. A major reason is that much of the European approach to Africa is dominated by development and humanitarian perspectives, while commercial interests are generally viewed with suspicion.

This does not mean that development and humanitarian perspectives should be exorcised from European thinking. However, a rebalance is overdue. Officials have to ensure European development funding for construction projects do not go, for example, to Chinese companies. Of all the Africa funding from the KfW—Germany's state-owned development bank, which has more projects in the continent than the World Bank—only 11% goes to German companies. The rest goes to competitors—and according to two German analysts, much of that to Chinese companies.^[36]

Carry a big stick

A more muscular, confident European military offer would make Russia's options far less attractive. That does not mean trying to mimic Wagner or Africa Corps ruthlessness—but it does mean providing meaningful training, equipment and rapid-response capacity. It also means working with African militaries as partners. Ukraine, with its low-cost defence industry and immense military know-how, has valuable lessons to share with African governments.

On sanctions, too, there must be more comprehensive tracking of Russian influence and financial networks. They should be treated as if they were transnational criminal enterprises, targeting them with a coordinated approach across multiple countries.

On the Sahel, prepare for the worst

European states should prepare for the worst-case scenarios in the Sahel, including more coups against unstable juntas, Mogadishu-like scenarios where capitals are effectively besieged by insurgents or even full jihadist take-overs of capitals. Coups in Burkina Faso, Mali or Niger would not necessarily bring liberals to the fore. For now, engagement should be cautious and respectful. João Cravinho, EU Special Representative for the Sahel, has been doing an exceptional job uniting European efforts over the past year. His efforts should be supported and his mandate expanded to allow more coordination with coastal states.

Indeed, much European effort should be focused on regional leaders like Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Senegal —places that are relatively stable and where Russian influence is limited. There is a world where European countries counter Russia's offer in Mali and particularly in Niger, but it is hard to see how anything can be done in Burkina Faso, where the scale of the violence by the Russian-backed state forces against the Fulani population is beyond the pale.

Boost funding for independent media

This is one of the easiest things Europeans can do. Defunding outlets like the *BBC World Service*, which reaches some 500 million people across the continent, to save pennies is a bad idea. It also means increasing strings-free grants for African-owned and African-led outlets to do their own reporting or access trustworthy Western news wires, such as *Reuters*, *Agence France-Press* or *Associated Press*. Efforts by some European governments to support local community radio stations like *Studio Tamani*, which have immense reach in many African countries, are promising but should be upscaled.

Flex the funding rules

Above all, Europeans must learn from the Russian offensive methods. This does not mean feeble attempts to make embassy communications more “hip” and suitable for social media, it does not mean simply pouring more money into fact-checking, and it does not mean lying.

Instead, Europeans need to make sure information showing Russian corruption, rape and murder, which is sitting on their hard drives, reaches the right audience in the right way. This requires cultivating informal channels of communication that speak to people in their own language, rather than relying solely on former colonial languages like French or English. It means giving local influencers, communicators or thought leaders a high degree of autonomy to convey messages that may be critical of Europeans at the same time. Britain, Ukraine, and the Baltic states are the European leaders in countering the digital elements of hybrid warfare

and have a strong role to play in coordination and capacity building here.

Credible local voices are key. Some African governments are beginning to push back against anti-democratic narratives, but intra-government rivalries and a lack of resources dilute their efforts. Here, European support could make a difference. They could draw on the expertise of eastern European and Baltic countries, some of which are world leaders at countering Russian disinformation, besides having experienced Russian imperialism themselves.

The narratives and ideologies which Russia seeks to harness, like Pan-Africanism, sovereigntism and anti-neo-colonialism, are not illegitimate and Europeans should never dismiss them as such. They are grounded in a deeply destructive collective experience which lasted some 500 years. But these narratives can be used against the very Russians who, in the 21st century, not the 19th, clearly seek personal enrichment from the debasement and plunder of proud African nations.

Finally, Europeans desperately need to loosen regulations, whether at the EU level or at the national level, to better align with the realities and challenges of today. Officials and third parties must have space to operate and move at speed. Work cannot be left solely to intelligence agencies, which have limited oversight. Introducing commercial incentives could create an entrepreneurial spirit among third-party operators or institutions staffed by Europeans and Africans. However, this cannot just be left to “fat cat” big-name contractors who have privileged access to contracts but who often simply subcontract work out to local freelancers after taking a significant cut.

Target emerging fronts

There is little point in investing heavily in countries where Russian influence is already entrenched. While some pushback is necessary, it is more realistic to focus attention on Russian supply line states and countries on the edge, where there is still a fight to be won. That said, where countries show “buyer’s remorse” after deep engagement with Russia—as appears to be the case in Mali or the CAR—Europeans must be prepared to offer governments an off-ramp, which undermines Moscow’s position.

Pushing back, moving forward

The futures of Europe and Africa are inextricably linked by history, demographics, economics and geography. It is a relationship that, if managed right, may still define the 21st century. But democratic governments on both continents have been far too complacent about the threats they face in the digital age from authoritarian and predatory actors like Russia. It is in their

strong mutual interest to push back together against those who seek to destabilise and exploit them.

For several of Europe's key nations, which brought much destruction and suffering to the African continent in the 19th and 20th centuries, this is a hard position to navigate. Decades of paternalistic lecturing, however well-intentioned, have led to increased mistrust and frustration. But Russia's actions in Africa and in Europe are driven by the same imperialism that Africans have fought against, laden with white supremacist ideologies and aimed at personal short-term gain.

Europe can and must offer a much better partnership to democratic African countries, acknowledging the past and empowering Africans to defend the nations and institutions they have painstakingly built. There will be many conversations about the injustices of the past, and there are many places where the interests of governments on both continents diverge radically. But here, at least, both sides' interests are aligned.

About the author

Will Brown is a senior policy fellow with the Africa programme at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Previously, he worked for a decade as a multi-award-winning journalist and reported from more than 30 countries, including from Ukraine, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad. He was the Africa bureau chief for the *Telegraph* newspaper based in Nairobi, the west Africa correspondent for *The Economist* based in Dakar, and a freelance journalist in New Delhi.

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- [1] ECFR reached out to Russian officials, but they declined to meet.
- [2] Interviews with officials and analysts in Abuja, Brussels, Accra, Ouagadougou, Bamako and London, June 2024 to July 2025.
- [3] Interview with a former African foreign minister by phone, February 2025.
- [4] Interview with African Foreign Minister in home country, February 2025.
- [5] Interview with parliamentarians and government officials in home country, October 2025.
- [6] Interview with head of Western private military company, September 2025.
- [7] Interview with CAR foreign minister Sylvie Baïpo-Temon, September 2025.
- [8] Interview with source with strong connections to Chadian government, May 2025.
- [9] Interviews in Abuja, March 2025. Interviews in Paris, January 2025. Interviews in Accra, July 2024.
- [10] Interviews with officials and analysts in Paris, Warsaw, London, Bamako and Abidjan from January to July 2025.
- [11] Interview by phone with analyst in Bamako, August 2025.
- [12] Interview by phone with Sahelian official, August 2025.
- [13] Interview by phone with two analysts tracking Sahelian and Russian disinformation networks, September 2025.
- [14] Interviews with officials and analysts in Paris, Warsaw, London, Ouagadougou, Abuja and Abidjan from January to July 2025.
- [15] Private round table of officials and Sahel analysts in Brussels, March 2025.
- [16] Private round table of officials and Sahel analysts, Brussels, March 2025.
- [17] Interview with senior Western official in person, March 2025.
- [18] Interview with ECOWAS official, June 2024.
- [19] Interviews with various European and African officials from January 2025 to September 2025.
- [20] Interviews with various European and African officials from January 2025 to September 2025.

[21] Interviews with an Ethiopian expert, March 2025. Interviews with officials in Madrid, March 2025. Interviews with officials and former military actors in Abuja, March 2025. Interviews with officials and analysts in Paris, May 2025. Interviews in London with private company tracking Russian influence operations, September 2025.

[22] Interviews in Madrid, September 2024 and April 2025.

[23] <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/09/russia-turns-to-tv-to-influence-african-audiences/>
https://therussiaprogram.org/russia_information_influence

[24] Interview by phone, July 2025.

[25] Interview in London and Paris, August and September 2025.

[26] Interviews conducted with journalists in Bamako and Ouagadougou, May to June 2025.

[27] Interviews with various Sahelian experts Berlin, October 2025.

[28] Interview London, September 2025.

[29] Interview with senior West African official, April 2025.

[30] Interviews with parliamentarians and officials in a West African country, October 2025.

[31] Interviews Brussels, Paris, London, Berlin. January to September, 2025.

[32] Interview in Europe, March 2025.

[33] Meeting with a European official working on West Africa, Warsaw, July 2025.

[34] Interview with West African Foreign Minister, March 2025.

[35] Interview with a former US intelligence official, July 2025. Interview with former UK intelligence official, March 2025.

[36] Interview in Berlin with analyst, September 2025.

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