

# Russian Interference in Africa: Disinformation and Mercenaries

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## Abstract

Russia is trying to gain a foothold in Africa via subversion and disinformation tactics. Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia increased its interference in Africa by sending mercenaries to show force as opposed to making direct security interventions. At the same time, Russia struck arms deals and plans to expand its military presence. Russia also used social and broadcast media to support national leaders and other actors involved in conflicts. Although Russia's current involvement is limited to conflict areas and nations trying to transition from autocratic regimes and/or under international sanctions, its involvement in Africa is a concern nonetheless. It is clear that Africa is one of the regions where Russia is attempting to consolidate its influence and hegemony despite confrontation with various players such as the United States, China, France, and Turkey. To compete, Moscow is applying the Gray Zone concept, including implementation of subversion and disinformation campaigns.

## Introduction

Russia's activities worldwide have repeatedly made the headlines on virtually every major media medium around the world in recent years. Pundits, politicians, and talk show hosts have drawn attention to Moscow's involvement in Syria, its interference in the US elections, its support of far-right movements in Europe, its damaging activities in Baltic

states, and its recent aggressive covert and overt operations in Africa. Notwithstanding its modest economic power, Russia, under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, is pursuing an aggressive and comprehensive national security strategy that encompasses various aspects. Overall Russia aims to strengthen Moscow's international influence, undermine the leverage of its American and European adversaries, and reposition itself on the geopolitical landscape.

Russia's damaging activities are not limited to its traditional sphere of influence (Ukraine, Baltic states, and former Soviet republics), nor are they targeted exclusively against its Western adversaries. These activities are now forcefully implemented in other parts of the world, including Africa. These efforts include building military bases, deploying non-traditional security forces, concluding arm deals, and exploiting natural resources. Russia's strategy in Africa has also included disinformation campaigns in several countries. This policy brief attempts to unpack Russia's increased interests in Africa and to outline Russia's understanding of influence and hegemony tactics and how they are implemented by Moscow.

## Russia's Warfare Paradigm

Under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin, Russia is conducting a more aggressive foreign policy to defend its national security, depicting itself as a world power capable of safeguarding and expanding its sphere of influence. Moscow's interference in the 2016 Presidential election in the United States, the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and direct military intervention in Syria in 2015 are a few examples of Russia's aggressive warfare strategy. In Africa, Russia's involvement is most notable and worrying in the complex and never ending war in Libya. All these interventions were multidimensional and holistic. They were neither exclusively military actions nor covert operations, rather they were complicated, comprehensive strategies involving various elements of modern warfare.

In 2009 President Dmitry Medvedev approved a Presidential Decree on the National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation to 2020. This document detailed Moscow's domestic and foreign affairs strategic priorities and outlined how they should be implemented. The strategy indicated that Russia's deterrence doctrine is not limited to the use of force but includes other asymmetric aspects. According to the strategy, Russia's means of ensuring national security involve use of «technologies, and likewise technical, programming, linguistic, legal, and organizational resources, including telecommunications channels, which are used within the system of provision of national security in order to collect, formulate, process, transmit or receive information on the status of national security and measures for its

reinforcement»<sup>1</sup>. It became evident that Russia's warfare paradigm is not limited to demonstrating its military might, but includes some broader toolkits that also focus on technological advancements.

In her testimony before the US Senate on March 5, 2020, Dr. Alina Polyakova, President of the Center for European Policy Analysis, argued that Russia sought to gain more influence on the international stage by employing low-cost warfare tactics without resorting to the full deployment of its military force<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, Dr. Polyakova recognized that «Russia has been particularly adept at using asymmetric tools of political warfare—information operations and cyberattacks—to project power, undermine democratic institutions, and influence public opinion. In brief, Russia's great power ambitions supersede its capacity to act as a great power—militarily, economically, and politically».

This type of asymmetric warfare, also called the Gray Zone, is a concept used by national security practitioners and disinformation experts in the United States. In 2016, the Special Operations Center of Excellence and the National Defense University's College for International Security Affairs organized a forum to discuss Russia's engagement in the Gray Zone and the progress it has made in incorporating nonmilitary tactics to ensuring not only the reestablishment of its hegemony over its immediate sphere of influence but also expand its leverage globally. Consequently, the participants in the forum suggested that the Gray Zone concept within the context of Russia's national security apparatus prioritizes so-called contactless wars<sup>3</sup>. It is based on the notion of placing a higher priority on subversion over direct conflict. It also entails using political and information narrative warfare methods to achieve Moscow's national security objectives. Moreover, participants in the forum argued that actors within the boundaries of the Gray Zone might «use not only military aggression but also psychological and information operations to influence the will of the people and

1. Center for Security Studies. (2009, May 12). Russia: National Security Strategy to 2020. <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/154915>

2. Dr. Alina Polyakova. (2020, March 5). Hearing on "The Global Engagement Center: Leading the United States Government's Fight Against Global Disinformation Threat". United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. [https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030520\\_Polyakova\\_Testimony.pdf](https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/030520_Polyakova_Testimony.pdf)

3. The Special Operations Center of Excellence. (n.d.). Russian Engagement in the Gray Zone. <https://www.soc.mil/>. [https://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Russian\\_Symposium\\_EXSUM.pdf](https://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Russian_Symposium_EXSUM.pdf)

undermine governments»<sup>4</sup>. Thereby, Russia's increasing use of disinformation combined with the deployment of mercenaries beyond its traditional sphere of influence may explain Moscow's heightened interest in Africa.

## Africa: Russia's New Frontier for Mercenaries and Disinformation

In 2019, President Putin hosted the Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi with the participation of 43 African heads of state and government. During the summit, the Kremlin announced that \$12.5 billion of investment deals were struck during the summit<sup>5</sup>. However, many observers argued that Russia was incapable of competing in Africa, especially against China<sup>6</sup>. For instance, the value of trade between China and Africa amounts to \$204 billion annually, and Beijing has committed to spending \$60 billion on development projects across the continent. It is difficult to see Russia's economic ambitions challenging the longstanding experience China, the US, and the European Union have in Africa<sup>7</sup>. Additionally, Russia does not appear to match growing interests from Turkey, Japan, and Brazil<sup>8</sup>. It is therefore difficult to imagine Russia gaining the same political and economic influence in Africa as China, the United States, or France, but it can still expand upon its hegemonic ambitions for the continent. So far, Russia's strategy in Africa continues to aim for a higher standing on the global stage, becoming a great power by applying the Gray Zone concept that incorporates subversion and disinformation.

## Subversion

The deployment of hundreds of private military contractors in different African countries might be

4. Ibid.

5. Foy. (2019, October 24). Russia turns on the charm at first Africa summit. Financial Times. <https://www.ft.com/content/b042bd8e-f648-11e9-9ef3-eca8fc8f2d65>

6. Penney, J. (2019, October 25). Vladimir Putin signed dozens of MOUs with African countries this week but can't match China. Quartz Africa. <https://qz.com/africa/1735708/vladimir-putins-russia-africa-promises-wont-match-china/>

7. Kimberly Marten (2019) Russia's Back in Africa: Is the Cold War Returning?, *The Washington Quarterly*, 42:4, 155-170, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2019.1693105>

8. Ibid.

viewed as the most evident show of Russian force on the continent. Russian private security company, the Wagner Group, is actively used by the Kremlin to prop up regimes across Africa. The Wagner Group deployed between 800 and 1,200 mercenaries to support General Khalifa Haftar in Libya and helped oust President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan by quelling peaceful protests<sup>9</sup>. Additionally, hundreds of Wagner mercenaries were actively deployed in the Central African Republic to guard diamond mines and provide security for President Touadéra. In Guinea, Wagner also played a significant role in advising President Alpha Condé and providing security for a Russian aluminum company<sup>10</sup>. Moscow is also planning to build a military base in the Somaliland coastal town of Berbera, a naval base in Eritrea, and has deployed military planes in Mozambique to transport Russian private military contractors<sup>11</sup>. More recently, US Africa Command (AFRICOM) showed satellite images of Russian fighter jets being flown in Libya by state-backed Russian private military contractors<sup>12</sup>. In 2017, Russia launched a range of security and non-security activities in the Central African Republic, such as training the local army, rebuilding state institutions, and establishing media outlets while isolating state officials perceived to be close to France<sup>13</sup>.

Mercenaries and mining companies affiliated to the Russian government through contractors have therefore been operating in a number of African countries in recent years. Most of these countries appear to be either under sanctions, governed by dictators, or in conflict<sup>14</sup>. Although it remains insignificant, Russia's involvement

9. The Economist. (2020, May 28). "Why African governments still hire Mercenaries," <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2020/05/28/why-african-governments-still-hire-mercenaries>

10. Dionne Searcey. (2019, September 30). "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic," updated 04 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/russia-diamonds-africa-prigozhin.html>

11. Eric Schmitt, & Thomas Gibbons-Neff. (2020, January 28). Russia Exerts Growing Influence in Africa, Worrying Many in the West. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/world/africa/russia-africa-troops.html>

12. US Africa Command. (2020, June 18). "New Evidence of Russian Aircraft Active in Libyan Airspace," <https://www.africom.mil/pressrelease/32941/new-evidence-of-russian-aircraft-active-in-li>

13. Luke Harding & Jason Burke. (2019, June 11) "Leaked Documents Reveal Russian Effort to Exert Influence in Africa," <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>

14. Dionne Searcey. (2019, September 30). "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic," updated 04 May 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/30/world/russia-diamonds-africa-prigozhin.html>

in countries affected by conflict in the West African Sahel is increasing. Russia's presence is evident through trade and arms deals concluded in recent years with Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso<sup>15</sup>. While Russia's intentions in the Sahel remain unclear, it is currently a concern and likely to remain one as the US and Western allies attempt to stabilize the region. The US is committed to the region but has also expressed intentions to shift resources from the Sahel to focus on Russia's threat worldwide, including elsewhere in Africa.

## Disinformation

Richard Stengel, who served as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, defines disinformation as «the deliberate creation and distribution of information that is false and deceptive in order to mislead an audience»<sup>16</sup>. Russia has historically been and is currently adept at employing this damaging tactic to achieve its political goals against its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) adversaries and on a continent where its influence is limited.

Audiences in Africa are no stranger to Moscow's disinformation campaigns. According to Rid (2020), the Russian KGB intelligence agency covertly produced and distributed a forged pamphlet titled TO OUR DEAR FRIENDS in 1960<sup>17</sup>. The goal was to exploit America's racial tensions and divides in order to create hostility towards the United States among African populations. Rid also notes that the pamphlet was published in sixteen African countries, including French-speaking nations.

More recently, Russia used Africa as a base for its continuing disinformation campaigns targeting the United States. A CNN investigation uncovered Russian

bot farms set up in Ghana and Nigeria to target audiences in the United States ahead of the 2020 Presidential election. The investigation also indicated that the narrative promoted by these bots «focused almost exclusively on racial issues in the US, promoting black empowerment and often displaying anger towards white Americans. According to experts on Russian disinformation campaigns, the goal is to inflame divisions among Americans and provoke social unrest»<sup>18</sup>.

While Russia is directing most of its efforts on the disinformation front toward the United States and NATO countries, Africa is increasingly becoming a new battleground for Moscow's information wars. Russia launched several disinformation campaigns to prop up President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and President Alpha Condé of Guinea and set up disinformation campaigns to interfere in elections in Libya and Madagascar<sup>19</sup>. It is also important to note that Russia's coordinated disinformation campaigns targeted other African countries such as Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and Mozambique<sup>20</sup>.

Furthermore, the Africa Center of Strategic Studies, a Washington DC based think tank, reported that “in October 2019, Facebook removed dozens of inauthentic coordinated accounts operating in eight African countries that had been engaged in a long-term disinformation and influence campaign aimed at promoting Russian interests»<sup>21</sup>. The most worrying and most analyzed Russian media meddling in Africa to this day is the funding of Libyan broadcast media reported by Cyber Policy Center

15. Eric Schmitt. (2019, March 31). “Russia's Military Mission Creep Advances to a New Front: Africa,” <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/31/world/africa/russia-military-africa.html>; see also Stratfor Worldview. (2019, December 16), “Western Reluctance in the Sahel Opens Doors for Russia”, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russian-military-influence-sahel-terrorism-france>; see also Mining Review. (2019, March 18), “Nordgold Expands investment in Burkina Faso”, <https://www.miningreview.com/gold/nordgold-investment-burkina-faso/>

16. Stengel, R. (2019). *Information wars: How we lost the global battle against disinformation and what we can do about it* (1st ed.). p. 290. Atlantic Books.

17. Rid, T. (2020). *Active measures: The secret history of disinformation and political warfare* (1st ed.). Profile Books.

18. Ward, E. C., Polglase, K., Shukla, S., Mezzofiore, G., & Lister, T. (2020, April 11). How Russian meddling is back before 2020 vote. CNN. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/12/world/russia-ghana-troll-farms-2020-ward/index.html>

19. Paduano, S. (2019, October 31). Putin lost his African Great Game before he started. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/31/putin-russia-africa-great-game-china-united-states/>

20. RFE/RL. (2019, October 30). Facebook says Russian disinformation campaigns targeted Africa. RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty. <https://www.rferl.org/a/facebook-ussian-disinformation-campaigns-targeted-africa/30244666.html>

21. Africa Center for Strategic Studies. (2020, February 18). Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman. [www.africacenter.org](http://www.africacenter.org). <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>

at Stanford University<sup>22</sup>. The Internet Observatory discovered transformation and manipulation of information using social media which fed into local media in Libya. According to the investigations, Russian actors now play a key role in broadcast media<sup>23</sup>. One key finding is the narrative surrounding Saif al-Islam, one of Muammar Gaddafi's surviving sons, and revival of the family's support base. It is worth noting that Gaddafi and his family enjoyed popular support not only in Libya but also in neighboring countries like Niger and Mali. As Sahel observers and social media monitoring experts, we can attest that a nostalgic narrative around the Gaddafi regime is repeatedly expressed on social media by Malians and Nigeriens, especially by communities who feel neglected by their respective governments. If Russia's media influencers gain a foothold in Libya, this could have repercussions not only in Libya but also in its southern African neighbors and on their Western allies. Niger is a strategic US ally in the region in current efforts to fight violent extremist organizations in the Sahel and Lake Chad Basin<sup>24</sup>. France and other EU countries have also been heavily active in the region since 2013.

Russia considers Africa «a vehicle through which it can weaken the West's dominance of global governance, find partners for its vision of a post-US multipolar world, and find economic opportunities for Russian companies, particularly those closed off to Western markets because of sanctions»<sup>25</sup>. African countries are most likely aware and suspicious of Russia's individualistic and insincere efforts. However, it is important for US and EU allies to closely monitor and assess Russia's actions in Africa. Russia appears determined to weaken democratic institutions and to escape its economic difficulties due to sanctions and falling oil prices. If overlooked, Russia is likely to gain gradual influence in Africa through continuing subversion and disinformation efforts as demonstrated by recent cases.

## Conclusion

Russia's influence and success in Africa have been limited despite the hype that has been generated. Moscow's deployment of mercenaries and the use of disinformation campaigns did not keep President Omar al-Bashir in Sudan in power nor make General Khalifa Haftar an unchallenged leader in Libya. However, Russia's resolve and the ability of its security apparatus to adapt its tactics should not be overlooked or underestimated. Africa must expect more aggressive Russian involvement in its internal affairs, and leaders across the continent will undoubtedly seek Moscow's assistance in their quest to stay in power unchecked. The Kremlin will happily provide cheap and unrestricted services in the form of mercenaries and disinformation campaigns.

Nonetheless, most African countries will maintain that they reject destructive and suspicious attempts to block their paths to democracy and development. The US and Western allies have decades of experience in a range of cooperation methods and a mere "0.0005 percent of Africans believe that Russia serves as the best development model for their country"<sup>26</sup>. The US and EU allies should therefore capitalize on this reputation, and continue to strengthen their ties with Africa.

22. Shelby Grossman, Khadija H., Renee Di Resta. (2020, March 20). "Blurring the Lines of Media Authenticity: Prigozhin-linked Group Funding Libyan Broadcast Media," <https://cyber.fsi.stanford.edu/io/news/libya-prigozhin>

23. Ibid.

24. Alexis Arieff, "Niger: Frequently Asked Questions About the October 2017 Attack on U.S. Soldiers," 27 October 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44995.pdf>

25. Stronski, P. (2019, October 16). Late to the party: Russia's return to Africa. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/16/late-to-party-russia-s-return-to-africa-pub-80056>

26. Paduano, S. (2019, October 31). Putin lost his African Great Game before he started. Foreign Policy. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/31/putin-russia-africa-great-game-china-united-states/>

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## About Policy Center for the New South

The Policy Center for the New South (PCNS) is a Moroccan think tank aiming to contribute to the improvement of economic and social public policies that challenge Morocco and the rest of the Africa as integral parts of the global South.

The PCNS pleads for an open, accountable and enterprising "new South" that defines its own narratives and mental maps around the Mediterranean and South Atlantic basins, as part of a forward-looking relationship with the rest of the world. Through its analytical endeavours, the think tank aims to support the development of public policies in Africa and to give the floor to experts from the South. This stance is focused on dialogue and partnership, and aims to cultivate African expertise and excellence needed for the accurate analysis of African and global challenges and the suggestion of appropriate solutions.

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