Russian Disinformation Strategies in Africa

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Strategic Multilayer Assessment

Impact through Insight

Russia's "Return to Africa"

Strategic Objectives:

- Avoid isolation, project power, and displace Western influence

- Acquire strategic ports and weaponize humanitarian crises

- Access natural resources, lucrative contracts, and evade sanctions

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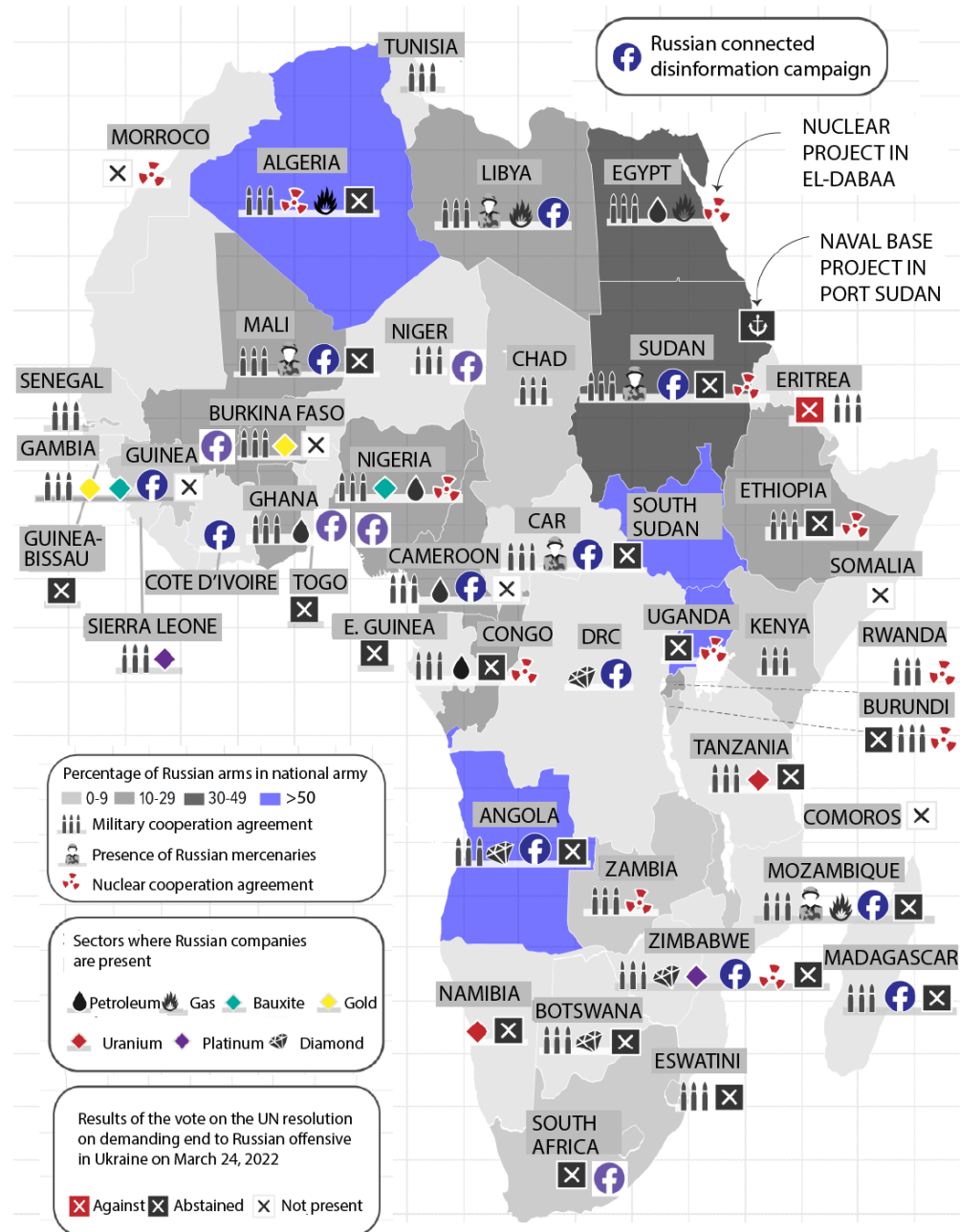
Russian-Sponsored Narratives in Africa

Country-Specific Messages: cheerleading and positive coverage of regimes/Russian proxies in power; inflaming of domestic debates and hot button issues.

Inauthentic pro-ruling party Facebook page in Mozambique
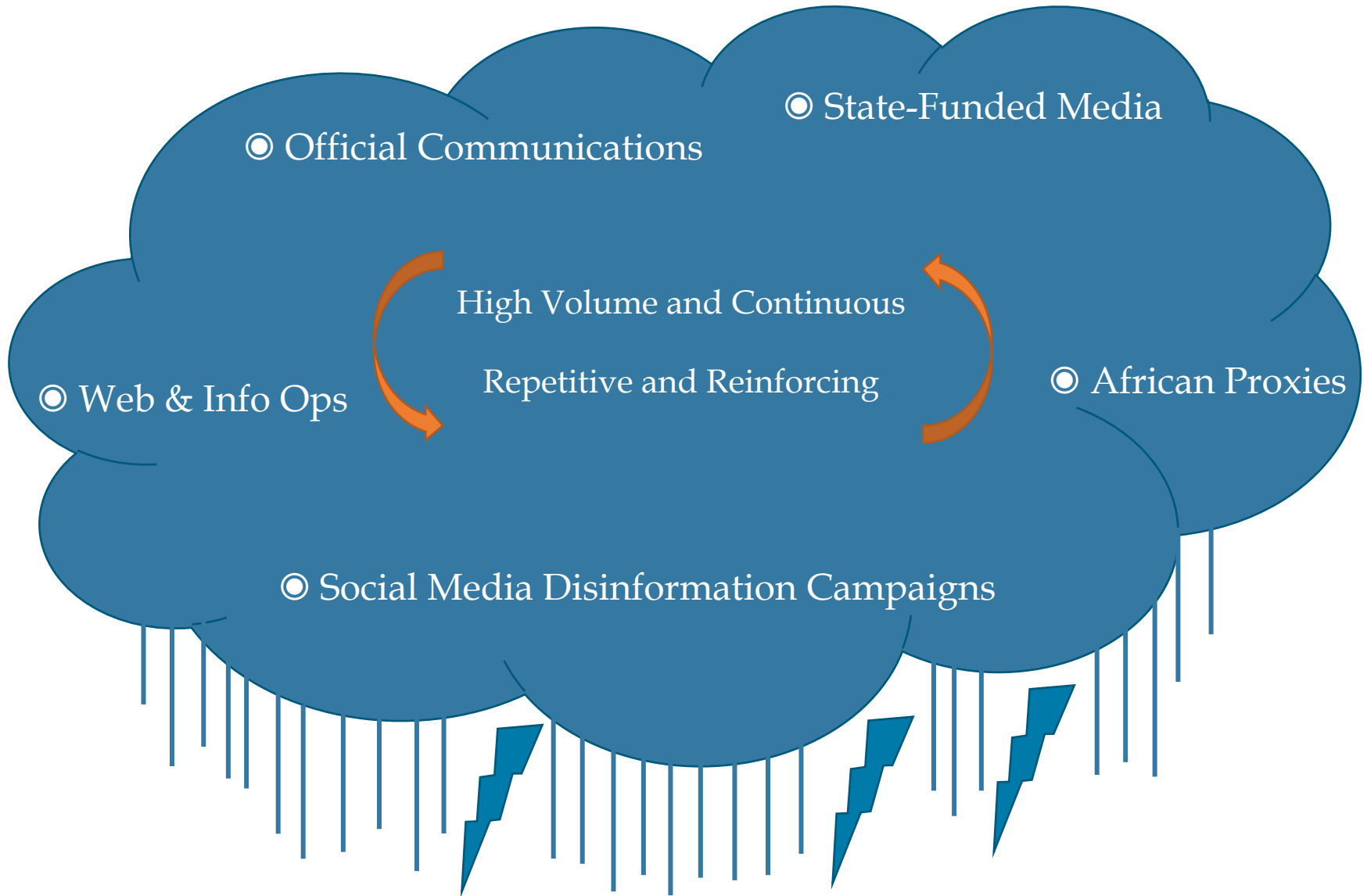
Post decrying France's "stranglehold" and calling on the CAR government not to attend France's "humiliating convocation" of the CEMAC countries
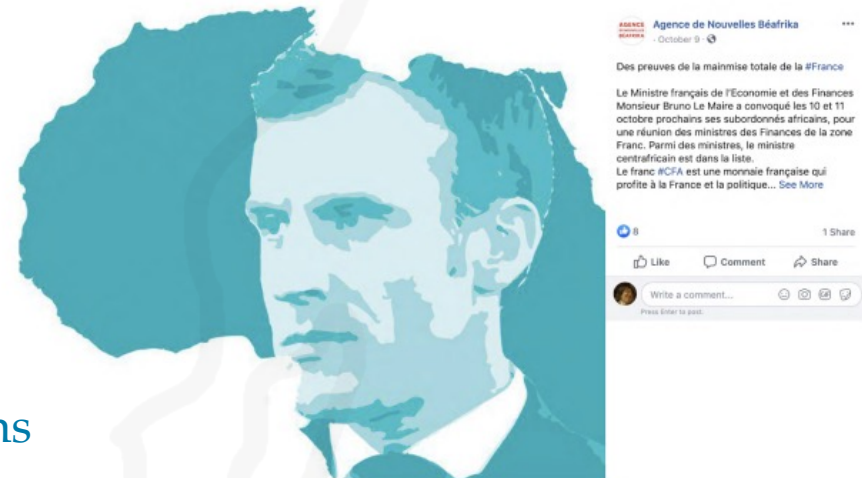
Africa-Wide Narratives

a. The West is the source of Africa's problems

b. Russia continues to support Africa's anti-colonial struggles

c. African countries should be able to make independent decisions

The Russian Disinformation System in Africa

◎ Official Communications

◎ State-Funded Media

High Volume and Continuous

Repetitive and Reinforcing

◎ Web & Info Ops

◎ African Proxies

◎ Social Media Disinformation Campaigns

Social Media Disinformation Campaigns

Disinformation Campaigns in Africa

Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian oligarch, has exported digital disinformation campaigns to every African country where Wagner has operated.
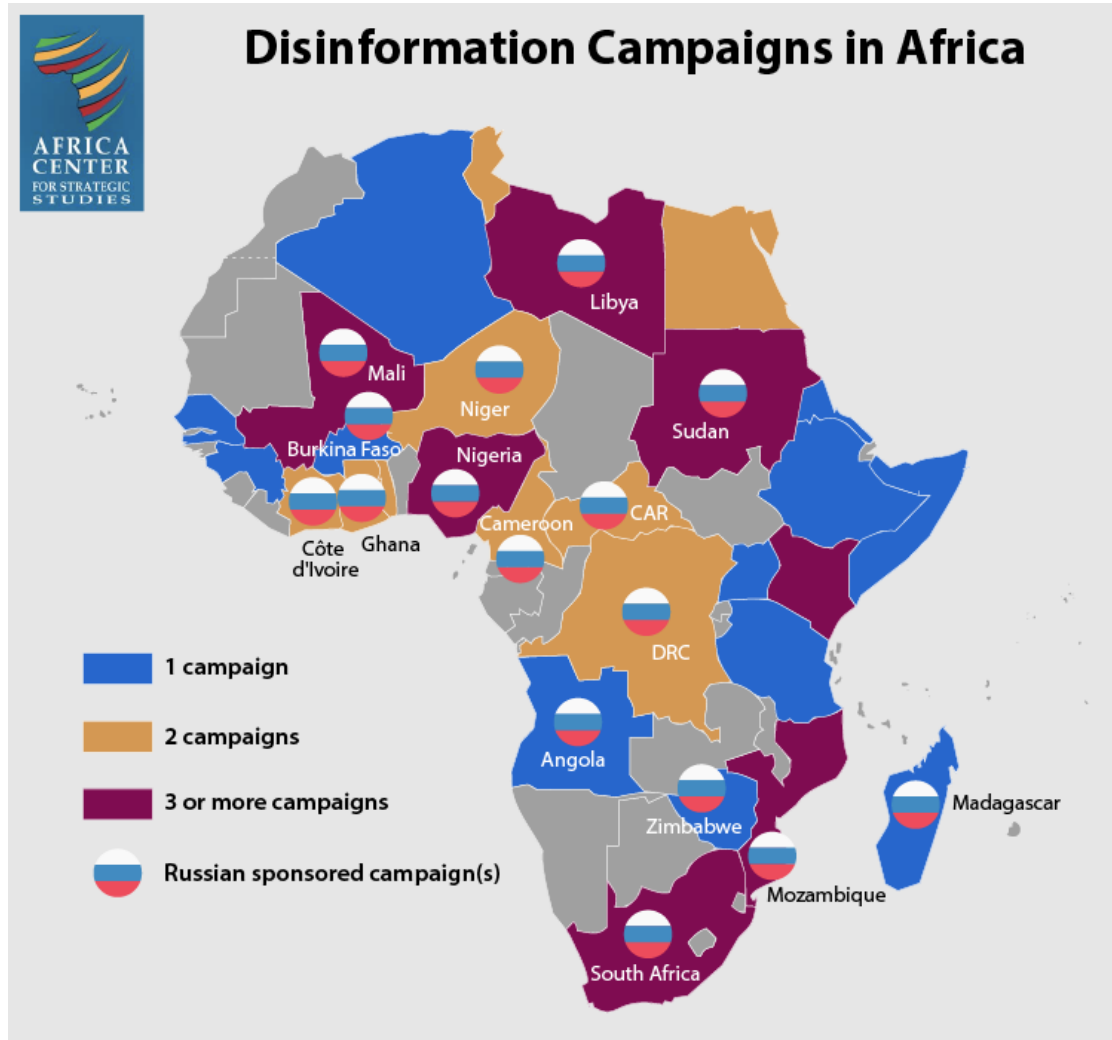
- At least 16 social media disinformation campaigns connected to the Wagner Group have been detected and documented in Africa

- These campaigns have increased in sophistication and their ability to avoid detection and removal from social media platforms

Cultivation of African Proxies

- Recruitment, instruction, and financing of African social media influencers, intellectuals, and media figures beginning at Sochi Summit

- Journalist tricked and/or paid to promote pro-Kremlin propaganda

- Pro-Russian social media assets and franchised operations amplify Kremlin messaging

Radical ethno-nationalists Kémi Séba & Aleksandr Dugin in Moscow.

A network of Malian social media pages ostensibly showing a Malian soldier wearing a t-shirt proclaiming support for a Wagner-FAMA cooperation

Active Measures: Web and Info Ops

- "A galaxy of amplification": in 2018 622 websites (blogs, content aggregators, conspiratorial sites) were identified that actively relay RT/Sputnik African coverage indiscriminately

- 2021-2022: hacked social media accounts of African journalists in order to share pro-Kremlin articles and hashtags

- Fraudulent African "NGOs"/"Think Tanks" and false flag ops

"The French army filmed Russian mercenaries from the paramilitary group Wagner burying bodies near a Malian military base, in an attempt to falsely accuse France's departing troops of leaving behind mass graves."

– *commonspace.eu*, April 2022

State-Sponsored Media

- RT and Sputnik are expanding their African footprint

- 2020-21 Sputnik monthly web views from Mali: 107k (VOA monthly web views from Mali: 18k)

- Two-thirds of RT/Sputnik coverage of French military mission in Sahel (Operation Barkane) analytical/factual

- RT has been registering new domain names (Rt-afrique.com, Africa-rt .com, Rtafrica.media, Rtafrica.online) and planning for new African bureaus (South Africa and possibly Kenya)

RT

SPUTNIK

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Official Government Communications

High Profile Summits

" We see how an array of Western countries are resorting to pressure, intimidation and blackmail of sovereign African governments… Our country played a significant role in the liberation of the continent, contributing to the struggle of the peoples of Africa against colonialism, racism and apartheid. "

– Vladimir Putin ahead of Sochi Summit

Heads of state session and arms expo at the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, Russia

Visits by Senior Officials

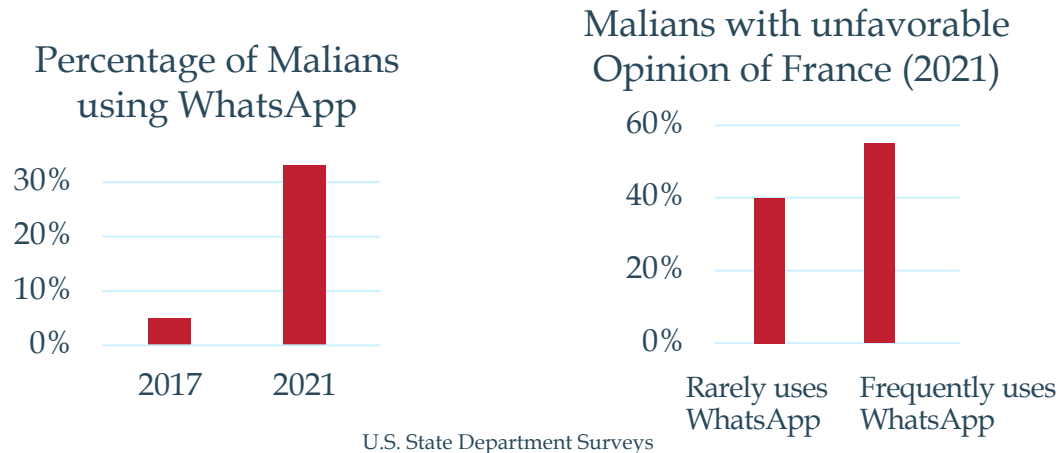"Russian FM Sergey Lavrov dismisses 'so-called food crisis' on last leg of Africa tour"

– *Deutsche Welle*, July 2022

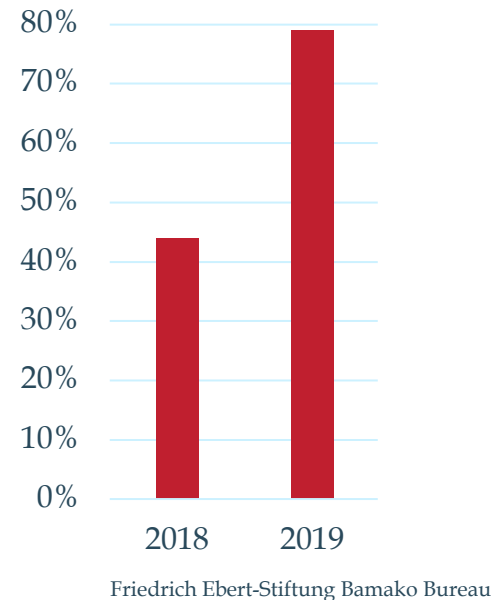© Russian Foreign Ministry Press Service/AP/picture alliance

FM Lavrov in Ethiopia, which is currently facing record-breaking food assistance needs

Impact of Russian Disinformation System on Africa?

- Russia's social media disinfo campaigns that were detected and removed in 2019 had posted 48,000 times, received more than 9.7 million interactions, and were liked by over 1.7 million accounts

- Recent cluster of Sahel social media pages (not removed) were followed by 140,000 accounts and posted 24,000 times

- In 2022, 1,552 African social media accounts were hacked in a single attack and used to spread unauthorized messages on social media

Dissatisfaction with French Operation Barkhane in Mali

Percentage of Malians using WhatsApp

Malians with unfavorable Opinion of France (2021)

U.S. State Department Surveys

Friedrich Ebert-Stiftung Bamako Bureau

Destabilizing and Anti-Democratic Record but No Reputational Cost?

Central African Republic: "Murdered journalists were tracked by police with shadowy Russian links, evidence shows" – *CNN*, January 2019

"[Madagascar] was one of Russia's most overt attempts at election interference to date" – *New York Times*, November 2019

"Russian mercenaries linked to civilian massacres in Mali" – *Guardian*, May 2022

"Russia is plundering gold in Sudan to boost Putin's war effort in Ukraine" – *CNN*, July 2022

¯_(ツ)_/¯ Shrug?

- African approval of Russian leadership increased from **34%** to **42%** between 2017 and 2021 (Gallup).

- It rose **25%** in Mali, **17%** in Ivory Coast, and **13%** in Nigeria, and **10%** in Ghana.

Driven by Information Warfare

#IstandwithPutin

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Ongoing Damage and Costs to African Information Spaces

- Russia is conducting ongoing attacks to distort and corrode African information spaces

- Good information becomes increasingly difficult to find, impairing democratic dialogue and decision-making, and driving disengagement

- A loss of African sovereignty occurs when citizens are pushed out of information spaces, ceding narratives/decision-making to external actors and co-opted elites

Responses to Russian Disinformation in Africa

- Build **AWARENESS** of the extent and impact of disinformation

- Involve African **YOUTH** and **CIVIL SOCIETY** in counter disinfo initiatives

- Support **AFRICAN CAPACITY** to counter disinfo through critical praxis

- Impose **COSTS** on disinformation architects

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