

**Faculté des sciences économiques,  
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# **Russian Disinformation in Africa: Threat to Democracy and Reinforcement of Authoritarianism and Corruption**

**Research Thesis**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Andise Schmidt". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Andise" and the last name "Schmidt" clearly distinguishable.

03 juin 2024

**Foreword :**

I would like to thank my advisor, Tanguy de Wilde, for his support throughout the thesis process. He provided invaluable insight and recommendations for my project and was notably invested in the research topic. I would also like to thank Dr. Andrew Armstrong, Grant Godfrey, Dr. Mark Duerksen and Sébastien Babaud for taking the time to discuss the research with me. Their knowledge and expertise on the topic were essential for the project and the information they provided was indispensable. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Lauren Van Metre for her additional support and encouragement throughout the project.

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## **1. Introduction**

The African continent is plagued with a record of unsuccessful democratic transitions. Recently, successful elections in Senegal were a positive occurrence on a continent that struggles to execute free and fair elections and successful transitions of democratic power. Africa's struggle to adopt democratic regimes is due to a variety of causes, including the issue of foreign influence. Since 2014, Russia has increasingly become a pariah state among the world's democracies when it annexed Crimea and many Western states implemented sanctions against the country.<sup>1</sup> This process of Western ostracization of the Russian state was further entrenched when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As a result, Russia has increasingly sought to build partnerships with non-Western states. Russia has therefore expanded and deepened its relations with many states on the African continent. When the United Nations voted on the March 2022 Resolution condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine, thirty-five countries abstained. Sixteen of these abstentions were African states.<sup>2</sup>

Russia has a long historical legacy of interactions with states on the African continent. It was mainly under the Soviet Union, however, that Russian influence in Africa rapidly expanded.<sup>3</sup> When the Soviet Union collapsed, Russian influence in Africa waned. Throughout the 1990s, Russia worked half-heartedly on re-establishing relations with African countries. Its foreign policy focus was largely on other regions.<sup>4</sup> In the 2000s, under Putin, Russia began to turn some of its focus back on Africa. During this period of initial re-engagement, Russia boosted political exchanges with African countries, expanded its partnerships with African multilateral and regional organisations, and grew its economic and cultural interactions on the continent.<sup>5</sup>

In the 2010s, Russia made its grand return to Africa.<sup>6</sup> It capitalised on global doubts around US leadership caused by the 2008 global financial crisis. It devoted more attention to the African

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<sup>1</sup> Allard Duursma and Niklas Masuhr, 'Russia's Return to Africa in a Historical and Global Context: Anti-Imperialism, Patronage, and Opportunism', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2022): 407–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2022.2136236>, 414

<sup>2</sup> 'UN Resolution against Ukraine Invasion: Full Text', *Aljazeera*, 3 March 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/3/unga-resolution-against-ukraine-invasion-full-text>.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023), 18

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 75

<sup>6</sup> Duursma and Masuhr, 'Russia's Return to Africa', 407

continent in its foreign policy, sharpening its anti-Western position and opposition to American norms and policies. Russia made this a selling point for itself on the Continent, amid the collapse of its own relations with the US.<sup>7</sup> During this period, Russia sought to expand its commercial and economic interests, relying heavily on soft power strategies.<sup>8</sup> It developed a customised foreign aid strategy for Africa that avoided multilateral institutions by promoting bilateral development assistance deals with African countries, replicating the Chinese model. These were coordinated through the Russian International Aid Agency, established in 2012.<sup>9</sup> Many of Russia's present strategies for expanding its influence in Africa (i.e. debt forgiveness, arms contracts, resistance to American unilateralism) were largely developed during this post-Soviet transition period of its African foreign policy.<sup>10</sup> Moscow's quest for influence on the African continent through more traditional means of hard power influence such as military and economic activities were bolstered by a reliance on soft power through public diplomacy.<sup>11</sup>

This started to change during Putin's third term in office from 2012 to 2018.<sup>12</sup> During this period, tensions between Russia and the West expanded. Russia therefore re-oriented its foreign policy towards states that were more inclined to pursue anti-Western policies, many of which could be found in Africa.<sup>13</sup> Russia still tried to pursue soft power strategies for expanding its influence there, but these strategies were starting to be undermined by Wagner Group misconduct and Russia's policy of promoting authoritarianism among African regimes. Russia reinforced its reputation as a partner for authoritarian regimes on the continent with a normative commitment to non-interference and the respect of state sovereignty. Moscow built partnerships with regimes on the continent that were also facing isolation within the international system.<sup>14</sup> This has allowed Russia to boost its reputation on the continent as a non-imperial and anti-Western player, as it also faces isolation within the international system due to the structure of its domestic

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<sup>7</sup> Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?*, 97-98

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 107

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 114

<sup>10</sup> Steven Gruz, Samuel Ramani, and Cayley Clifford, 'Russia in Africa: Who Is Courting Whom?', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2022): 401-5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2022.2146184>, 401

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Antwi-Boasiako, 'The Quest for Influence: Examining Russia's Public Diplomacy Mechanisms in Africa', *South African Journal of International Affairs* 29, no. 4 (2022): 463-82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2022.2153728>, 464

<sup>12</sup> Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?*, 132

<sup>13</sup> Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?*, 132

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 138-139

political regime. Furthermore, the Russian oligarchic political state structure has many parallels to African neo-patrimonial governance structures. Thus, Russian involvement in Africa is also a reinforcement and endorsement of these similar political models. These shared similarities have allowed Russia to boost false narratives about neo-colonialism and to build partnerships on the African continent, hiding their kleptocratic and extractive nature from citizens.

In June 2019, several internal Russian documents describing its foreign policy and priorities vis-à-vis Africa were leaked. Among these documents was a March 2018 paper entitled ‘African World.’ It called for Russia to support the development of an anti-imperial African self-identity. Promotion of such an identity and ideology would be beneficial to Russia because anti-Western sentiments are inherently central to anti-imperial and anti-colonial ideologies.<sup>15</sup> The paper also suggested that Russia should move towards building a “loyal chain of representatives across Africa,”<sup>16</sup> and identify “agents of influence”<sup>17</sup> to groom as future leaders on the continent and internationally. Therefore, pro-Russian and anti-Western sentiment and discourse are related and highly intertwined. By the time these documents were leaked, Russia had signed military cooperation deals with around 20 African states.<sup>18</sup> In October 2019, the first Russia-Africa Summit was held in Sochi. It proved to be a major turning point for relations between Russia and the African continent.<sup>19</sup> The aim of the summit was to strengthen and expand military, economic, political, technical, and cultural cooperation between Russia and African states.<sup>20</sup> It helped to shed light on Russia’s geopolitical goals on the African continent and to boost its commercial presence, but it did not give any insight into the power projection tools Russia was and is now using on the African continent.<sup>21</sup>

Russia currently takes a hybrid approach to its interventions in African countries. Its current aims in Africa are multifold: secure commercial profits, outbid rival great powers for geostrategic influence, secure the futures of its authoritarian allies, and promote its image as a counterinsurgency partner.<sup>22</sup> Russian interventions in Africa are implemented by an array of both

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<sup>15</sup> Duursma and Masuhr, ‘Russia’s Return to Africa’, 410-411

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 411

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Eguegu, ‘Russia’s Private Military Diplomacy in Africa: High Risk, Low Reward, Limited Impact’, 445

<sup>20</sup> Duursma and Masuhr, ‘Russia’s Return to Africa’, 407

<sup>21</sup> Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?*, 245

<sup>22</sup> Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?*, 245

state and independent state-aligned actors including private military contractors (PMCs), political technologists specialising in disinformation tactics, and state-owned companies and businesses.<sup>23</sup> In general, Russia's current approach in Africa is much less state-centric than before,<sup>24</sup> mirroring its own evolution to a kleptocratic, oligarchic-controlled state. Russian interventions in Africa are for the most part implemented by a network of groups that are not legally part of the Russian state but are still connected to the Kremlin. This system of affiliated state agents characterises the structure of the Russian state's power diffusion system in general. Such a system is often described as patronalism:

*A social equilibrium in which individuals organise their political and economic pursuits primarily around the personalised exchange of concrete rewards and punishments, and not primarily around abstract, impersonal principles such as ideological belief or categorisations that include many people one has not actually met in person.*<sup>25</sup>

Russia therefore diffuses official, hierarchical power through systems of informal networks with affiliated state agents. This corresponds with the structure of authoritarian African states which are often described as patrimonial or neo-patrimonial, also reflecting systems of state reliance on informal, corrupt inter-personal networks to implement state policies and projects.<sup>26</sup> The Russian form of intervention on the African continent is therefore not unfamiliar to African states. It corresponds with means of power diffusion in authoritarian or illiberal African states. This could be another reason why Russia seeks partnerships with authoritarian states on the continent – their political regimes are similar and mutually reinforcing. This makes authoritarian or weak African states more susceptible to Russian influence, and explains why Russia is mainly involved in unstable African countries where patronage politics thrive.<sup>27</sup>

The most significant methods of intervention that Russia currently employs on the African continent are private military contractors and various tactics for undermining democracy in African nations. PMCs are a key element of Russia's drive for influence in Africa. Russian

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<sup>23</sup> Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?*, 246

<sup>24</sup> Duursma and Masuhr, 'Russia's Return to Africa', 411

<sup>25</sup> Henry E. Hale, 'Russian Patronal Politics beyond Putin', *Deadalus* 146, no. 2 (2017): 30–40. in Duursma and Masuhr, 'Russia's Return to Africa', 412

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Graham, *Contemporary Africa*, 1st ed. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Duursma and Masuhr, 'Russia's Return to Africa', 413

PMCs generally offer two kinds of services: political or military consultancy and spreading disinformation.<sup>28</sup> PMC's allow Moscow to export security by providing consultancy and military training and expertise on anti-insurgency and anti-terrorist operations. Russian military training programmes are offered by both Russian military instructors and members of PMCs. Evidence has also arisen that Russian PMCs may be involved in military counter-insurgency operations and the suppression of anti-government protests in certain African countries.<sup>29</sup> The Wagner Group was the most notorious of these PMCs operating on the African continent, but its status for continuing operations on the African continent appears precarious after its June 2023 mutiny and Prigozhin's death in August 2023. PMCs also played a significant role in spreading disinformation on the African continent, assisting in undermining African democracies. PMC-promoted disinformation also serves to mask illicit financial flows and natural resource extraction in Africa, which directly benefit Russia and PMCs.<sup>30</sup> Besides spreading disinformation, Russia also employs two other key strategies for undermining democracy on the African continent: electoral interference, and support for extraconstitutional claims on power. All three of these methods of democratic interference are reinforcing, and Russia mainly targets countries with relatively weak democratic institutions, helping African authoritarian regimes endure.<sup>31</sup> By undermining weak democracies, Russia is normalising authoritarianism abroad which validates its own non-democratic practices and presents authoritarianism as a viable alternative to democracy.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Sergey Sukhankin, 'The "Hybrid" Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa', War by Other Means: Russia's Use of Private Military Contractors at Home and Abroad (The Jamestown Foundation, 10 January 2020), [https://jamestown.org/program/the-hybrid-role-of-russian-mercenaries-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-moscows-scramble-for-africa/#\\_edn81:~:text=Igniting%20tensions%20within,less%20affluent%20countries\).](https://jamestown.org/program/the-hybrid-role-of-russian-mercenaries-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-moscows-scramble-for-africa/#_edn81:~:text=Igniting%20tensions%20within,less%20affluent%20countries).)

<sup>29</sup> Sukhankin, 'The "Hybrid" Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs and Irregulars in Moscow's Scramble for Africa'.

<sup>30</sup> ADF Staff, 'Russia Uses Wagner To Plunder Sudan's Gold', News website, *Africa Defense Forum* (blog), 6 December 2022, <https://adf-magazine.com/2022/12/russia-uses-wagner-to-plunder-sudans-gold/>.

<sup>31</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa' (Washington, DC: Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 21 June 2023), <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-interference-undermine-democracy-africa/>, 2

<sup>32</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa', 1

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) is thus a key Russian strategy for interfering in African states' affairs. This strategy includes the tactic of disinformation.<sup>33</sup> It is a strategy pursued both directly by the Russian state and by PMCs. Disinformation, as both a concept and a practice, is not new. It is the *deliberate* targeting of a country or community's information environment by an adversary in order to influence some sort of change in the socio-political environment. The rise of the internet and social media has made disinformation a critical issue of late. Internet technologies, artificial intelligence, social media algorithms, etc. make spreading disinformation much easier and alter the ways in which countries can spread their influence. Russia is one such state massively exploiting the limits of digital disinformation. The strategy of spreading disinformation is attractive for Russia because it is cheap. Russia has only invested tens of millions of dollars into its disinformation campaigns.<sup>34</sup> This is a relatively small figure compared to other defense and military spending numbers, so any achievement or success for such a small investment is a win.

Disinformation is a policy tool for Russia – it allows it to advance any policy goals it may have, especially vis-à-vis other countries. Social media is a particularly useful tool for the spread of Russian disinformation because there is no question of credibility, as with traditional media sources. On social media, it is easy to disguise the source of information. Russia often creates fake social media accounts or news websites mirroring pre-existing ones in a target country. This makes it difficult for social media audiences to distinguish between legitimate and false sources of information. Furthermore, more traditional media outlets in the target country may pick up on false information being spread online and diffuse it even further. This pattern is often observed when news sources with a more partisan inclination seek to confirm their information bias. Russian disinformation is most often generated by troll farms who curate the information they put online in such a way that it will resonate and be diffused further by the target audience. Many experts interviewed for this paper described disinformation as a 'virus' – once the information is put online and starts resonating, it gets spread by others to a wider and wider audience. Russia has been able to perfect identifying existing false narratives in target countries, and simply

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<sup>33</sup> Strategic Communications, Task Forces and and Information Analysis Data Team, '1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence' (Brussels: European External Action Service, February 2023).

<sup>34</sup> Andrew Armstrong, Russian Disinformation Strategies and Practices, Online video call interview, 13 March 2024.

amplifies these. It does not need to invent any narratives, especially in countries where partisan discord already exists. Russia will simply reinforce the political or social extremes to further division in such environments.<sup>35</sup>

Since 2022, the number of disinformation campaigns on the African continent have quadrupled, and even this number is likely undercounted.<sup>36</sup> Africa has more than 400 million active social media users and 600 million internet users. African social media users have some of the highest global rates for using these platforms for news consumption.<sup>37</sup> This makes the continent particularly vulnerable to disinformation campaigns. Almost sixty percent of disinformation campaigns on the African continent are foreign state sponsored. Primary sponsors include Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar.<sup>38</sup> However, Russia is the ultimate purveyor of disinformation in Africa, sponsoring about forty percent of all disinformation campaigns on the continent. Russia has spread disinformation to undermine democracies in at least nineteen African countries, contributing significantly to African states' democratic backsliding.<sup>39</sup> Spreading disinformation in Africa falls within Russia's geostrategic interests: it undermines democratic practices, promotes coups in African countries, stokes anti-Western and anti-United Nations sentiment, and spreads confusion about climate change, pandemic science, etc. Russian disinformation campaigns on the African continent employ local influencers, fake digital avatars, and the circulation of fake and/or out-of-context videos and images. The use of images and videos is particularly pertinent in the African context with its high illiteracy rates. Messaging from these sources is either copy-pasted from Russian state-controlled media, radio, and official communications, or pulled from social media and amplified through various Russian-state controlled channels. It also appears that Russian embassies have helped to establish a network of supposedly grassroots African front media organisations to promote the spread of disinformation. The Wagner Group has also served as a key vehicle for establishing Russian disinformation networks in Africa, holding direct links to almost half of all Russian disinformation campaigns on the continent.<sup>40</sup> However, with the death of Prigozhin, it appears

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<sup>35</sup> Armstrong, Russian Disinformation Strategies and Practices.

<sup>36</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Mapping Disinformation in Africa', *Africa Center for Strategic Studies* (blog), 26 April 2022, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>.

<sup>37</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Mapping Disinformation in Africa'.

<sup>38</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Mapping Disinformation in Africa'.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

that Russian disinformation operations in Africa are being absorbed into the Russian Africa Corps, a newly established special branch of the Russian military,<sup>41</sup> as well as the Africa Initiative News Agency which is linked to Russian intelligence services with oversight in Moscow.<sup>42</sup>

Russia does not only lead disinformation campaigns on the African continent through social media. It also uses its own state-backed media outlets and African news websites and television networks with partnerships and funding from the Kremlin. Since the European Union banned the Russian news network Russia Today (RT) in the EU zone, its operations have expanded in Africa. Both the Russian news outlets RT and Sputnik have signed agreements with many African news outlets. RT and Sputnik are also both making moves to set up their French-language news services in French-speaking Africa. As Russian news outlets have been expanding, there has been a simultaneous retrenchment of other European and Western news outlets such as the BBC, Radio France Internationale and France 24. This has allowed Russia greater space in the African media environment to spread pro-Russian narratives.<sup>43</sup>

## **2. Research Question and Methodology**

This paper will explore the following research question: How does Russian disinformation diffusion vary across African countries? Russia has a variety of strategies for intervening in African countries. It seems to take a tailored approach to its disinformation diffusion based on context. I propose the following hypothesis: Russia adapts its strategies for the diffusion of disinformation based on the nature of its relations with the African countries that it seeks to infiltrate, as well as the socio-political context on the ground in that country.

This paper will evaluate this research question and hypothesis by assessing the means and strategies through which Russia diffuses disinformation in two case study countries: Mali and South Africa. These two case studies were chosen because Russia takes two different approaches

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<sup>41</sup> Frédéric Bobin and Morgane Le Cam, “‘Africa Corps’: Russia’s Sahel Presence Rebranded”, *Le Monde*, 17 December 2023, [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/12/17/africa-corps-russia-s-sahel-presence-rebranded\\_6352317\\_124.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2023/12/17/africa-corps-russia-s-sahel-presence-rebranded_6352317_124.html).

<sup>42</sup> African Digital Democracy Observatory, ‘African Initiative: Russia’s New Mouthpiece in Africa’, News website, *Medium* (blog), 6 February 2024, <https://disinfo.africa/african-initiative-russias-new-mouthpiece-in-africa-65aa76fcc255>.

<sup>43</sup> Elian Peltier, Adam Satariano, and Lynsey Chutel, ‘How Putin Became a Hero on African TV’, *The New York Times*, 13 April 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/13/world/africa/russia-africa-disinformation.html>.

to the structuring of its foreign relations and thus disinformation diffusion in these two countries. In Mali, Russia mainly relies on the presence of the Wagner group to carry out foreign interventions and to spread disinformation.<sup>44</sup> Russia took advantage of pre-existing local narratives about French neocolonialism to enable the rise to power of a military authoritarian regime. Meanwhile, in South Africa, Russia relies more on official diplomatic ties with corrupt members of the African National Congress (ANC) to influence South African policy and to diffuse pro-Russian disinformation. By studying two cases whereby Russia takes different approaches to Russian disinformation, this paper hopes to shed light on the similarities and differences in Russia's disinformation strategies to potentially enable more targeted and appropriate policy responses to the issue.

This paper relies largely on primary and secondary source research. Primary sources included news and media reports and articles, policy documents, and webpages. Primary and secondary source research was conducted first to gather a significant base of background information. Gaps in the research were then identified. Based on the specific subjects of the research gaps in question, expert interviewees were identified and contacted for further information. Four experts were interviewed for this research: Dr. Andrew Armstrong, Lecturer at George Mason University and expert on disinformation and character assassination in the United States; Grant Godfrey, Senior Program Director for the Central and West Africa Team at the National Democratic Institute; Mark Duerksen, Research Associate at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies; and Sébastien Babaud, Programme Manager with the Strategic Communications & Information Analysis Team at the European External Action Service.

In the interview phase, the research relied upon a system of semi-structured interviews – questions were prepared in advance of each interview based upon the expertise of the individual being interviewed and the gaps in the initial research, but interviewees were also given the space to expand upon their answers. In some instances, follow-up questions were asked of the individual being interviewed to gather more detail on a previous response. Interview questions for later interviewees were drafted based upon responses given by previously interviewed individuals. This allowed gaps in the research to be filled and served to validate information previously given.

### **3. Literature Review:**

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<sup>44</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Mapping Disinformation in Africa'.

The topic of Russian disinformation is one that is increasingly being examined in the literature. There are also several organisations looking specifically at the spread of Russian disinformation in Africa, particularly the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies, the South African Institute for International Affairs, and the National Democratic Institute which conducts resilience to disinformation work in the Sahel. Many studies look more generally at patterns of Russian disinformation diffusion or foreign influence strategies on the African continent, or they focus on prominent case studies such as Russian interventions in Mali and the Central African Republic. Mali is a case study for this paper and there was noticeably more information, particularly academic sources, available on Russian activities there. There were fewer academic sources available on Russian disinformation practices in South Africa, where news sources proved to provide more insight on Russian online disinformation activities. These, along with expert interviews helped to fill gaps in information regarding the South African case study. Efforts were made to talk to actors in South Africa or individuals with specific expertise on the South African information environment, but none of these proved fruitful. Instead, the case study on Russian disinformation in South Africa will rely largely upon media reports, information pulled from general reports on Russian disinformation on the African continent and an interview with a general expert on Russian disinformation practices in Africa – Mark Duerksen from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

Samuel Ramani's book *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* served as a significant source of background information for this paper. In his book, Ramani provides an in-depth overview of Russia's growing re-involvement in Africa after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The book traces how Russia's foreign policy practices with regards to the African continent often pull from old patterns of behaviour and discourse. This source is detailed and well-researched with a significant number of historical examples. It was an invaluable source for this project. However, Ramani's book did not explore in-depth current Russian strategies in Africa. It was mostly helpful for providing historical background and showing the evolution of Russian activities in Africa. Another important source for outlining the general nature of Russian disinformation in Africa were the reports on disinformation in Africa published by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies. These reports provide a comprehensive and comprehensible overview of Russian disinformation practices on the African continent. They provide statistics, graphics, and specific examples of cases of Russian disinformation diffusion in various African

countries. They proved to be a good starting point for further research by referencing examples and overviews of Russian activities in a more general manner. Specific profiles of particular African countries and their information environments could be a potential project for the Center in the future.

In terms of the theoretical framework for this research, several sources were consulted. These can be categorised based on the three theories that served to construct the theoretical framework of this research: sharp power, dark social capital, and neo-colonialism. To develop the section on sharp power, this paper relied on seminal texts by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig<sup>45</sup>, the National Endowment for Democracy's *Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence* report,<sup>46</sup> articles by Joseph Nye<sup>47</sup> and a literature review by Łukasz Skoneczny and B. Cacko,<sup>48</sup> among others. The concept of sharp power is a framework built around inductive research on Russian and Chinese behaviours within the international system. This is what made this theory relevant for this study. However, it is acknowledged that this theory may not be as robust as theories such as hard or soft power that are more universally applicable and not regime-dependent or politically charged. For the exploration of the theory of dark social capital, this paper relied on a key article by Ludovico Alcorta et al.<sup>49</sup> The authors apply this theory to civil conflict in Africa. The idea to apply this theory to authoritarian influence came from seeing it applied in Lauren Van Metre and Thomas Scherer's study on community resilience to violent extremism,<sup>50</sup> as well as from reading texts on the concept of neo-patrimonialism in African regimes. We can conceptualise the spread of authoritarian influence as a sort of internationalisation of corruption

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig, 'The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence', *Foreign Affairs*, 16 November 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2017-11-16/meaning-sharp-power>.

<sup>46</sup> Christopher Walker et al., 'Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence', International Forum Report (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017).

<sup>47</sup> Joseph S. Nye, 'Countering the Authoritarian Challenge', *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development*, no. 15 (Winter 2020): 94–109; Joseph S. Nye, 'Soft Power: The Evolution of a Concept', *Journal of Political Power* 14, no. 1 (2021): 196–208.

<sup>48</sup> Łukasz Skoneczny and Bogusław Cacko, 'Sharp Power: Introduction to the Issue', *Homeland Security Review* 13, no. 25 (2021): 325–40.

<sup>49</sup> Ludovico Alcorta et al., 'The "Dark Side" of Social Capital: A Cross-National Examination of the Relationship Between Social Capital and Violence in Africa', *Social Indicators Research*, 23 January 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-019-02264-z>.

<sup>50</sup> Lauren Van Metre and Thomas Leo Scherer, 'Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism: Assessing Missteps and Promising Community Approaches', Evidence Review (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, March 2023), <https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Preventing-and-Countering-Violent-Extremism.pdf>.

through these dark social networks and relations that have negative rather than positive impacts. Finally, two seminal sources by Kwame Nkrumah<sup>51</sup> and Jean-Paul Sartre<sup>52</sup> were examined to discuss the theory of neo-colonialism. These sources mainly served to define the concept of neo-colonialism which is being referred to in Russian disinformation campaigns. This paper mostly examined seminal literature to glean a definition of the concept of neo-colonialism, but it is acknowledged that there is much more existing literature on the concept.

In developing the case study on Mali, several sources were particularly significant. The Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Research Lab report<sup>53</sup> provided significant detail on the disinformation space in Mali with concrete evidence and proof of Russian interference. It also had a detailed timeline of events and key examples of groups and their online activities that were crucial for fleshing out the case study on Mali. Lassane Ouedraogo's report for the Centre for Democracy and Development<sup>54</sup> was also a key source for developing the case study on Mali. The report raised many questions about the spread of disinformation in online and offline realms that helped frame interview questions. It also raises important questions about how we can manage disinformation when it spreads to the offline realm. Most other sources on Mali tended more to follow the timeline of events in Mali with the withdrawal of French, and EU forces as well as the resulting impact for Mali and Russia. These sources did, however, show that Russia was able to fill a power vacuum in Mali with its own private security forces.

Regarding the case study on South Africa, there were a decent number of academic sources that explored the links between the ANC and Russia and how the two are bolstering corresponding narratives to promote their continued partnership. However, there was a lack of sources examining the information environment in South Africa in detail, unlike for Mali. This seems to be a gap in the research. As a result, this paper had to rely more on news media sources

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<sup>51</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1965).

<sup>52</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations 5, Colonialisme et Néo-Colonialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

<sup>53</sup> Jean Le Roux, 'Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests', DFR Lab blog, *Medium* (blog), 17 February 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-russian-facebook-assets-in-mali-coordinated-support-for-wagner-group-anti-democracy-protests-2abaac4d87c4>.

<sup>54</sup> Lassane Ouedraogo, 'Mali's Fake News Ecosystem: An Overview' (Abuja: Centre for Democracy & Development, February 2022).

to develop the South Africa case study. Fortunately, South Africa still has independent and relatively reputable news outlets that the research was able to pull from.

#### **4. Theoretical framework**

Three key theories are important for this paper's examination of Russian disinformation in Africa: sharp power, dark social capital and elite capture, and neocolonialism. Sharp power, a term coined by Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig (2017) at the National Endowment for Democracy (NED),<sup>55</sup> is an important framework for thinking about Russian power projection abroad. It helps to describe and frame Russian activities and distinguish them from other more traditional forms of power such as hard and soft power. As addressed above, Russia's foreign policy approach in Africa has evolved, and the concept of sharp power helps describe Russian activities currently occurring in Africa. Ludovico Alcorta et al. (2020) developed the concept of dark social capital to describe the relationship between social capital and violence in Africa.<sup>56</sup> This concept was also applied by Van Metre and Scherer in their study on community resilience to violent extremism (2022).<sup>57</sup> The concept of dark social capital helps describe the ways in which Russia capitalises on patrimonial social systems in Africa to advance its own interests. Finally, the concept of neocolonialism deserves to be detailed because it is a key element of Russian disinformation discourse in Africa. Russia co-opts the language and discourse of neocolonialism to advance pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives and disinformation in Africa.

Joseph Nye (2020) conceptualises power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes you want.”<sup>58</sup> As such, power can be exerted in several different ways. Soft power and hard power are the more traditional conceptualisation of power projection mechanisms. Hard power rests upon using coercion, “a function of military or economic might,”<sup>59</sup> and emphasises using incentives and threats of the use of force to achieve one's interests.<sup>60</sup> Soft power is “based on attraction, arising from the positive appeal of a country's culture, political ideals, and policies

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<sup>55</sup> ‘What to Do about China's “Sharp Power”’, *The Economist*, 14 December 2017

<sup>56</sup> Alcorta et al., ‘The “Dark Side” of Social Capital: A Cross-National Examination of the Relationship Between Social Capital and Violence in Africa’.

<sup>57</sup> Van Metre and Scherer, ‘Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism’

<sup>58</sup> Nye, ‘Countering the Authoritarian Challenge’.

<sup>59</sup> Walker and Ludwig, ‘The Meaning of Sharp Power: How Authoritarian States Project Influence’.

<sup>60</sup> Skoneczny and Cacko, ‘Sharp Power: Introduction to the Issue’, 326

– as well as from a vibrant, independent civil society.”<sup>61</sup> It rests upon encouraging participants in the international system, through persuasion, to accept the actions of a state.<sup>62</sup>

After the Cold War, there was a moment of ‘democratic optimism’ that pushed liberal democracies to engage with states like Russia and China and bring them into the international fold. At the time, liberal democracies believed that these more illiberal states would ultimately come around to the democratic model and be ‘responsible stakeholders’ within the international system. However, in retrospect, democracies made a significant mistake in their engagement with autocracies.<sup>63</sup> Instead of liberalising, over time, authoritarian regimes hardened and began to assert their own preferences abroad. Both China and Russia simply pursued transactional forms of engagement with the West and managed to reverse engineer the liberal logic of ‘Change Through Trade,’ turning globalisation to their advantage.<sup>64</sup> The mutual benefits of the post-Cold War liberal policy of authoritarian engagement never emerged, and by the early 2000s, authoritarian regimes were already rebuilding their influence exertion capabilities.<sup>65</sup> As both globalisation and global integration processes deepened in the post-Cold War period, authoritarian states enhanced their capabilities to infiltrate democratic political and media spaces.<sup>66</sup> During this same period, many analysts, policymakers, and media in democratic countries were interpreting authoritarian external influence campaigns as soft power. However, this conceptualisation of authoritarian states’ means of power projection did not entirely capture the nature of their activities. Authoritarian states were employing means of power projection that were not entirely soft nor hard – these were neither ‘charm offensives’ nor openly coercive. These means of power projection were centered on distraction and manipulation and applying domestic means of authoritarian power abroad.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, the rapid evolution of the technological space and global internet allowed for the emergence of this new type of power.<sup>68</sup> Again, liberal democracies assumed that the widespread diffusion of information technology

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<sup>61</sup> Walker and Ludwig, ‘The Meaning of Sharp Power’

<sup>62</sup> Skoneczny and Cacko, ‘Sharp Power: Introduction to the Issue’, 326

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Walker, ‘Rising to the Sharp Power Challenge’, *Journal of Democracy* 33, no. 4 (October 2022): 119–32., 121

<sup>64</sup> Walker, ‘Rising to the Sharp Power Challenge’. 122

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Walker, Shanthi Kalathil, and Jessica Ludwig, ‘The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power’, *Journal of Democracy* 31, no. 1 (January 2020): 124–37., 125

<sup>66</sup> Walker and Ludwig, ‘The Meaning of Sharp Power’

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Nye, ‘Countering the Authoritarian Challenge’, 98

would open up access to closed political spaces and allow for the liberalisation of authoritarian environments and transmission of democratic norms.<sup>69</sup> Instead, authoritarian states used this to their advantage to penetrate the information environments of democracies and spread their own influence.

The concept of sharp power emerged in 2017, when Walker and Ludwig (2017) published their seminal article on the subject.<sup>70</sup> The concept was further developed in a multi-author report published by the NED in that same year.<sup>71</sup> The Economist magazine then picked up on the concept and applied it to its own analysis of Chinese foreign policy.<sup>72</sup> Walker and Ludwig initially defined authoritarian influence efforts as ‘sharp’ because they “pierce, penetrate, or perforate the political and information environments in the targeted countries.”<sup>73</sup> Unlike with soft power, authoritarian regimes are not necessarily trying to ‘win hearts and minds,’ but are instead looking to manipulate target audiences by distorting the information they have access to. Per Walker and Ludwig, sharp power therefore allows authoritarians to “cut into the fabric of a society, stoking and amplifying existing divisions”<sup>74</sup> It allows authoritarian states to project the unattractive values of authoritarian systems outwards and to undermine democracies by impairing free expression, compromising independent institutions and distorting the political and information environments of foreign states.<sup>75</sup> Furthermore, according to Walker and Ludwig, unlike hard power, sharp power requires a significant degree of stealth. Sharp power is successful because it exploits an important asymmetry: authoritarian regimes put up barriers to foreign political and cultural influence while simultaneously taking advantage of the openness of foreign democratic regimes. Skoneczny and Cacko (2021) define sharp power as “aggressive actions of the state carried out with the use of methods imitating soft power elements in order to manipulate the image of a given country or to destabilise its socio-political system, or to force

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<sup>69</sup> Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig, ‘The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power’, 128-129

<sup>70</sup> Walker and Ludwig, ‘The Meaning of Sharp Power’; İlhan Aras, ‘Understanding China Through Sharp Power: Dragon’s Teeth?’, *İctimaiyat Journal of Social Sciences* 6, no. 2 (2022): 623–35, <https://doi.org/10.33709/ictimaiyat.1174961>, 624

<sup>71</sup> Christopher Walker et al., ‘Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence’, International Forum Report (Washington, DC: National Endowment for Democracy, December 2017).

<sup>72</sup> ‘How China’s “Sharp Power” Is Muting Criticism Abroad’, *The Economist*, 14 December 2017,.; ‘What to Do about China’s “Sharp Power”’.

<sup>73</sup> Walker and Ludwig, ‘The Meaning of Sharp Power’

<sup>74</sup> Walker and Ludwig, ‘The Meaning of Sharp Power’

<sup>75</sup> Walker, Kalathil, and Ludwig, ‘The Cutting Edge of Sharp Power’, 127

certain actions by its authorities.”<sup>76</sup> The authors highlight the similarities to soft power while emphasising the distinct nature of sharp power. They list various concrete methods of exercising sharp power. These include information warfare, history politics, election interference, the promotion of hybrid conflict among others. Finally, Joseph Nye (2020) has also weighed in on the sharp power debate and points out that authoritarian states resort to sharp power because they struggle to generate their own soft power. According to Nye, the significant limitations that authoritarian states place on their civil societies is what limits their ability to employ soft power – they do not allow civil actors to freely spread cultural influence abroad.<sup>77</sup>

Sharp power influence also crucially rests upon the cultivation of personal relationships between authoritarian states and foreign political elite, thought leaders, and information gatekeepers of democratic societies.<sup>78</sup> The international engagement of authoritarian states usually mimics their domestic governance practices – it relies frequently on elite capture and corruption.<sup>79</sup> Authoritarian states, through their sharp power strategy, identify local actors who can act to pursue their interests on their behalf and can introduce their ideas and narratives directly into the local information environment.<sup>80</sup> We can therefore make links between the theoretical concept of sharp power and that of dark social capital and elite capture.

Social capital is “the potential of individuals to secure benefits and invent solutions to problems through membership in social networks.”<sup>81</sup> It is comprised of three dimensions: interconnected networks of relationships between individuals and groups, levels of trust that characterises these ties, and resources or benefits that are both gained and transferred through social ties and social participation. It is generally understood that a high degree of trust among members of a social network enables a sense of mutual obligation. This then allows members of the network to effectively pursue shared objectives.<sup>82</sup> Social capital can also be conceptualised as “the resources available to individuals and groups that arise from their formal and informal social

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<sup>76</sup> Skoneczny and Cacko, ‘Sharp Power: Introduction to the Issue’, 329

<sup>77</sup> Nye, ‘Countering the Authoritarian Challenge’, 107

<sup>78</sup> Walker et al., ‘Sharp Power: Rising Authoritarian Influence’, 19

<sup>79</sup> Walker, ‘Rising to the Sharp Power Challenge’, 129

<sup>80</sup> Christopher Walker, ‘What Is “Sharp Power”?’, *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 9–23., 16

<sup>81</sup> Margarita Poteyeva, ‘Social Capital’, in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Online: Encyclopedia Britannica, 16 May 2016), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-capital>.

<sup>82</sup> Poteyeva, ‘Social Capital’.

networks.”<sup>83</sup> It is believed to reduce the costs of social transactions and boost communal or group ties. A general assumption is that high levels of violence equate to weak social capital.

However, Alcorta et al. point out in their study<sup>84</sup> that there is a possible dark side to social capital: increased social capital can potentially lead to negative consequences including constraints on individual freedoms and the social exclusion of individuals who are not perceived to be members of a given community. Social capital can therefore contribute to violence and instability rather than trust-building. Exclusionary behaviour resulting from social capital can especially promote conflict: “participation in groups or communities often requires members to conform with the group, increasing social control and potentially restricting personal freedoms and individual thinking.”<sup>85</sup> We see this pattern playing out with Russia’s policy forays into the African continent. Russia builds partnerships with African leaders and elite, forming a pro-Russian/anti-West in-group whereby Russia is able to spread its authoritarian influence in Africa and encourage conformity with the authoritarian state model and divergence from democratic systems. In doing so, African elites are captured by Russian authoritarian ideals and norms, gaining Russian support and backing, while African civil society is increasingly marginalised from the political space leading to a local environment of violence and instability.

A key tool that Russia uses to promote sharp power and elite capture is the spread of disinformation. Russia relies particularly on the narrative of neocolonialism in the African context. The theory of neocolonialism emerged in the period of decolonisation, and was largely developed by theorists in the European colonies in Africa and the Caribbean: Frantz Fanon, Kwame Nkrumah, etc. In his book *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, Kwame Nkrumah defines a neo-colonial state as one that is legally independent and sovereign but that has an economic and political system that is directed externally. The power exercising control from the outside is often, but not always, the colonial state which previously ruled the territory. Nkrumah notes that neo-colonial dominance can also be held by non-state actors with particular financial interests in a state. The result of neo-colonialism is that foreign capital is used for exploitation rather than development of the state. This in turn increases the global gap between rich and poor countries. With regards to security and defence, Nkrumah notes that “neo-

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<sup>83</sup> Alcorta et al., ‘The “Dark Side” of Social Capital’

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

colonialism is based upon the principle of breaking up former large united colonial territories into a number of small non-viable States which are incapable of independent development and must rely upon the former imperial power for defence and even international security.”<sup>86</sup> Military assistance is self-destructive for the state under neo-colonial influence: flows of weapons and a growing weapons stock increase the likelihood of civil war and greater social misery. Nkrumah also identifies intelligence services, multilateral aid provided through Bretton Woods institutions, and news media as tools of neo-colonialism. Jean-Paul Sartre highlights capitalism and methods of economic exploitation put in place during colonialism and which persist in the post-independence period as systems of neo-colonialism. He underscores racism and structural racism as inherently colonial and neo-colonial tools of dominance.<sup>87</sup> Russia capitalises on these narratives and the familiarity and popularity of these theories on the African continent to advance its own interests. While the concepts and tools outlined in these theories could just as easily apply to Russian activities on the African continent, Russia has seemingly been able to co-opt these narratives and use them in its favour. The following two case studies will show how Russia tailors its sharp power strategy in varying African countries to undermine democracy and capture key elites, relying heavily upon disinformation and narratives around Western neo-colonialism to pursue Russian interests on the continent.

## **5. Russian Disinformation Activities in Mali: A Bottom-up Approach**

Mali experienced a military coup d'état in August of 2020. The coup leaders were encouraged by nationalist populist movements in Mali, particularly the *Movement of June 5 – Rally of Patriotic Forces* (M5-RPF) which saw the military as a harbinger of meaningful change and a facilitator of ‘true democracy.’<sup>88</sup> These social movements were pan-Africanist and anti-globalisation in nature and were especially anti-French and anti-operation Barkhane. Between October 2019 and January 2020, Mali had already experienced several anti-French and anti-MINUSMA demonstrations. The French had been leading a military counter-insurgency operation in the Sahel called Operation Barkhane since 2014, although it was a continuation of

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<sup>86</sup> Kwame Nkrumah, *Neo-Colonialism, The Last Stage of Imperialism* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1965).

<sup>87</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations 5, Colonialisme et Néo-Colonialisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 51-52

<sup>88</sup> Sebastian Elischer, ‘Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali’, *West African Papers* (Paris: OECD, July 2022), 6

the earlier Operation Serval launched in 2013. The French operation was conducted in tandem with both the United Nations Multidimensional Stabilisation Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and an EU special forces task force, Operation Takuba. The military operations in Mali struggled to bring successes and positive results in the fight against insurgency and violent extremism in the region which spread further to Mali's neighbouring countries.<sup>89</sup>

Growing anti-Western sentiment in Mali coincided with the first Russia-Africa Summit held in October 2019 in Sochi. However, as far back as 2017, there were pro-Russian groups emerging in Mali. In September 2017, the civil society organisation *Groupe des Patriotes du Mali* (GPM) were encouraging greater cooperation with Russia. Several GPM gatherings were attended by the Russian ambassador to Mali, Alexei Doulian. The GPM also posted information and photos online on its two Facebook pages. The civic organisation *Yerewolo debout sur les ramparts* emerged in January 2020 with the aim of pushing for French and UN military disengagement from Mali. GPM helped to boost Yerewolo's messaging online through social media.<sup>90</sup> Russian media and social media campaigns aided in motivating protests against the Malian President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta prior to the 2020 military coup.<sup>91</sup> Russian disinformation would also play a role after the coup in paving the way for the arrival of Wagner and the entrenchment of military authoritarianism in Mali.<sup>92</sup>

In September 2021, after a second military coup in Mali, there started to emerge indications that Russian mercenaries, particularly members of the Wagner Group were operating in Mali.<sup>93</sup> The arrival of Wagner mercenaries in Mali coincided with the withdrawal of French troops, and the arrival of Wagner in Mali severely worsened relations between France and Mali.<sup>94</sup> At the time, France, Germany, the European Union and other countries with peacekeeping military

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<sup>89</sup> Nathaniel Powell, 'Why France Failed in Mali', *War on the Rocks* (blog), 21 February 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/02/why-france-failed-in-mali/>.

<sup>90</sup> Le Roux, 'Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests'.

<sup>91</sup> Elischer, 'Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali', 23

<sup>92</sup> Le Roux, 'Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests'.

<sup>93</sup> Igor Soroceanu, 'The Activity of Mercenaries in the State of Mali - a Negative Factor on Regional and International Security', in *The Youth of Today - The Generation of the Global Development* (The 17th Edition of the International Conference of European Integration Realities and Perspectives, Danubius University: EIRP Proceedings, 2022), 299–304., 301

<sup>94</sup> Rida Lyammouri, 'For Mali and the Sahel, New Tensions and an Old - and Worsening - Security Problem' (Washington, DC: MEI Policy Center, November 2021)., 5

operations in Mali voiced opposition to a potential agreement between Mali's government and the Wagner Group.<sup>95</sup> For Russia, however, having its mercenaries in Mali would strengthen its global prestige and influence as part of a broader campaign to overturn established power dynamics in Africa.<sup>96</sup> Wagner's presence in Mali fits into a larger pattern of Russian intervention on the African continent. There seem to be two goals to Russia's Africa strategy: the export of manufactured weapons and gaining access to local natural resources. As a means of achieving these goals, Russia tends to exchange the provision of security services to African governments for privileged access to raw materials.<sup>97</sup> Russia only recently identified Mali as a strategic partner on the African continent, with its presence in the country increasing after the second coup. For Russia, the political and social success of Mali's authoritarian military regime is not of any concern. Rather, its goal is to prop up the authoritarian regime in Mali because it will be more likely to share Russian aims and objectives and will thus be easier to collaborate with.

While Wagner, and more generally speaking, Russian PMCs, operate independently of the Russian state and Russian military, they still play a large part in Russia's larger strategy for Africa. In Mali, Wagner forces train Malian soldiers and security specialists, provide protection to senior officials, and provide private consultations on specific matters.<sup>98</sup> Meanwhile, the Malian government claims that it is simply Russian military instructors that are present in the country to help strengthen the operational capabilities of the national military.<sup>99</sup> What is most interesting in the Mali case, though, is that prior to the arrival of Wagner, a network of Facebook pages promoting anti-French and pro-Russian narratives garnered support for the mercenary group before it officially arrived in the country.

Disinformation and fake news have directly contributed to the deterioration of the political environment in Mali, dominating both the online and traditional media. Traditional media in Mali is owned and dominated by the political elite who use it to promote narratives that promote their own interests. Facebook and WhatsApp are growing in popularity in Mali as sources for

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<sup>95</sup> Lyammouri, 'For Mali and the Sahel, New Tensions and an Old - and Worsening - Security Problem'.

<sup>96</sup> Soroceanu, 'The Activity of Mercenaries in the State of Mali - a Negative Factor on Regional and International Security', 302

<sup>97</sup> Elischer, 'Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali', 24

<sup>98</sup> Soroceanu, 'The Activity of Mercenaries in the State of Mali - a Negative Factor on Regional and International Security', 302; Eguegu, 'Russia's Private Military Diplomacy in Africa', 450

<sup>99</sup> Soroceanu, 'The Activity of Mercenaries in the State of Mali - a Negative Factor on Regional and International Security', 302

disseminating information. These media sources are particularly popular, because in a country like Mali which has high illiteracy rates, they allow users to share audio and video media. Thus, even illiterate people can access, produce, consume and share information. Facebook and WhatsApp are incredibly popular means of circulating fake news, as well. Malian politicians will often pay young people on social media to propagate fake news for them, especially information that may be fact-checked by media outlets if directly stated by politicians. These ‘cyber-warriors’ play a particularly important role during election periods in boosting support for particular candidates.<sup>100</sup> Recently, several main false narratives have been circulating in Mali’s information environment, most of these are about the French presence in Mali and its counter-terrorism operations there. The most prevalent narratives are that the French were smuggling gold or secretly lending military support to jihadist groups. Much of this false reporting helped to galvanise youth to protest against the French presence in the country. Many youths in Mali will often knowingly share disinformation because they see it as their patriotic duty to spread fake news to help get rid of France.<sup>101</sup> Disinformation is not only shared online in Mali, though. Content that circulates online will also get shared offline through word of mouth. Information from social media will shape conversations in public spaces. In these contexts, the veracity of the information is not evaluated based on the source of the information, but rather based on the reputation of the messenger.<sup>102</sup> Such a situation thus changes the nature of the disinformation entirely, as the question of credibility becomes altered.

Based on the above description, it is easy to see how Russia was able to infiltrate Mali’s information environment and spread its own disinformation. Russia has been overwhelming the Sahel region with disinformation since 2018, helping to prime and promote military coups in countries such as Mali. According to fact checkers in Mali, Russian disinformation campaigns in the country are produced on an industrial scale and have significant impacts on the narratives and information spread online.<sup>103</sup> Furthermore, the military regimes in Mali and the Sahel, which are increasingly isolated within the international system and more and more dependent on Russia are mimicking Russian disinformation techniques in their own countries while also cracking down

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<sup>100</sup> Lassane Ouedraogo, ‘Mali’s Fake News Ecosystem: An Overview’ (Abuja: Centre for Democracy & Development, February 2022).

<sup>101</sup> Ouedraogo, ‘Mali’s Fake News Ecosystem: An Overview’.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

on information spaces by banning local reputable media outlets and targeting journalists.<sup>104</sup> In Mali, the colonels heading the military regime have fed the idea of *Mali Kura* (New Mali) within the country's information environment. Activists in Mali have been trying to promote a French Revolution-type atmosphere in Mali and advancing the notion of throwing off the chains of oppression to create a new society. The military junta has been feeding this narrative. Many in Mali felt that there was a loss of control in the North of the country under the former government because the French and other foreign actors were in collusion with the jihadists there. These were of course false narratives, but the military junta in Mali has used these to their advantage to formulate a new narrative of the military government as a security provider and unifying agent for the country. These narratives have served to reinforce the military authoritarian regime in Mali who claims that elections are not a priority until the country is secure.<sup>105</sup>

In Mali, as well as elsewhere on the continent, Russia promotes several narratives online. Russian officials describe Russia as a non-Western power which has experienced humiliation at the hands of the West. In this way, Russia tries to align its experiences of exclusion from the international system with African countries' historical experiences of economic exploitation and Western colonialism. Furthermore, Russia also pushes the importance of national sovereignty, particularly with regards to formerly colonised nations. Russia is thus drawing on discourses of colonialism and neocolonialism to forge partnerships with African countries, and Mali in particular.

Russia takes advantage of the fact that the information environment in Mali exists in both the online and offline realms. According to Grant Godfrey from the National Democratic Institute (NDI), Russian disinformation in Mali not only circulates online but offline as well, and then sometimes back to the online realm. Godfrey states that Russian disinformation mainly circulates online first and is then transported to the offline realm by word of mouth where these narratives are further shaped and formulated and potentially put back online. In Mali, Russia does not circulate disinformation offline, but is incredibly skilled at pinpointing conspiracy theories circulating offline and amplifying these online to create an environment of mistrust based upon ideas that are already circulating. Godfrey notes that the Wagner group has an online

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<sup>104</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Mapping Disinformation in Africa'.

<sup>105</sup> Grant Godfrey, Russian Disinformation in Mali, Video Call interview, 25 March 2024.

disinformation wing which sends representatives to different countries to meet with locals to identify potential partners on the ground. Based on information gathered from NDI partners in the Central African Republic, Godfrey explained that in formulating these partnerships with disrupting agents, Wagner members were likely also accumulating a repertoire of offline narratives that could be exploited for online use. It is possible this strategy was used in Mali given the nature of the information environment there and the Wagner presence in the country. Russia also directly forms links with African influencers that have significant followings across the continent, often paying them for spreading pro-Russian disinformation. In West Africa in particular, such influencers often refer to themselves as Pan-Africans and have tended to attack the Franc CFA system through their online messaging. They frame the monetary system as neocolonial and a form of continued abuse by the West. Finally, self-censoring has played a significant role in aiding the spread of Russian and Malian government disinformation. After the military coup in 2021, the government began arresting citizens who spoke out against it. They even arrested social media influencers for asking questions about topics that were not necessarily political in nature but touched on or challenged the political environment or government practices or policies, such as electricity cuts.<sup>106</sup>

In June 2023, the Wagner Group mutinied, and in August 2023, Prigozhin was killed in a private jet crash. As a result, The Russian government has sought to overhaul the Wagner Group and internalise many of the Group's former operations. Many Wagner campaigns in Africa are still going strong but have been incorporated into Russian intelligence services.<sup>107</sup> In the Sahel region, Russia's military presence has been rebranded as Africa Corps, a special branch of the Russian military.<sup>108</sup> The disinformation branch of Wagner operations in the Sahel has been replaced with the Africa Initiative, a supposed news agency that aims to "share insights on Russia's opportunities in Africa"<sup>109</sup> and "highlight postcolonial legacies, promote collaboration, and open Russia to its African partners."<sup>110</sup> Mark Duerksen from the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies states that the current assumption is that both of these new organisations are running former Wagner campaigns on the continent. Yet, with the emergence of these new entities there

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<sup>106</sup> Godfrey, Russian Disinformation in Mali.

<sup>107</sup> Mark Duerksen, Russian Disinformation in Africa, Online video call interview, 26 March 2024.

<sup>108</sup> Bobin and Cam, "Africa Corps": Russia's Sahel Presence Rebranded'.

<sup>109</sup> African Digital Democracy Observatory, 'African Initiative: Russia's New Mouthpiece in Africa'.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

have been no Russian strategy pivots regarding its spread of disinformation. Russia is still cheerleading authoritarian regimes and spreading conspiracy theories linking the West to neocolonial practices. Duerksen states that it is simply “Wagner by a different name.”<sup>111</sup> However, the genius of the Wagner Group was the plausible deniability it allowed Russia. This has now disappeared, as the links to the Kremlin have become clearer with these new government-led initiatives.<sup>112</sup> Finally, the presence of Russia on the ground poses future issues for Mali beyond the degradation of its political and social environment. Russia cannot fill the gap in economic and military support that was created when many Western partners withdrew from Mali. This could very well signal a greater spread of insurgency and instability in the region, as even the Malian army and Russian forces have been accused of committing human rights violations.<sup>113</sup> Furthermore, Mali’s association and partnership with Russia has jeopardised its access to Western sources of funding and training<sup>114</sup> which Mali is still dependent on.<sup>115</sup>

Russia takes a purely sharp power approach to its dealings with Mali. It has used disinformation to undermine democracy in the country and promote the rise of authoritarianism there. Furthermore, Russia has co-opted existing narratives circulating in Mali’s information space about French and Western neo-colonialism regarding the presence of French, EU, and UN military counter-insurgency operations there. Russia has also employed these narratives in presenting itself as a viable partner for the new authoritarian regime in Mali, especially in the face of sanctions placed upon the regime by Western states and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). In formulating partnerships with Russia, Mali has further isolated itself in the international system. This has made the regime dependent on Kremlin support to fight the insurgency in the North of the country and to maintain its grip on power. We thus see a process of elite capture occurring in Mali whereby the military junta has now solidly been incorporated into the sphere of Russian influence and power, and a system of transactional relations has been established between Mali and Russia: Mali provides Russia access to raw materials and serves as an export market for Russian arms and other goods, and Russia serves as

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<sup>111</sup> Duerksen, *Russian Disinformation in Africa*.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Lyammouri, ‘For Mali and the Sahel, New Tensions and an Old - and Worsening - Security Problem’, 7

<sup>114</sup> Soroceanu, ‘The Activity of Mercenaries in the State of Mali - a Negative Factor on Regional and International Security’, 302

<sup>115</sup> Elischer, ‘Populist Civil Society, the Wagner Group, and Post-Coup Politics in Mali’, 6

a provider of military expertise and training for counter-insurgency operations. Meanwhile, greater censorship of the political space is occurring as well as human rights violations.

## **6. Russian Disinformation Activities in South Africa: A Top-down Approach**

In 1992, diplomatic relations between Russia and post-apartheid South Africa were established. In the following years, several different agreements, treaties, and joint committees were established between the two states on a variety of areas but mainly pertaining to political positioning, trade and development issues, banking and finance, and scientific cooperation.<sup>116</sup> One treaty in particular, the Treaty on Principles of Friendly Relations and Partnership, was a turning point in Russia-South Africa relations,<sup>117</sup> as it laid out the envisaged partnership between the two countries and laid the foundation for the two countries to coordinate their positions on different international issues through established diplomatic channels.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, Russia and South Africa cooperate economically across a variety of sectors. The two countries have signed a couple of trade agreements, with Russia standing as one of South Africa's largest trade partners. Russia-South African economic cooperation has increased particularly in the mineral resources sector in recent years.<sup>119</sup> South Africa is also one of Russia's leading trade partners on the African continent, and the addition of South Africa to the BRICS forum in 2010 was seen as an opportunity to improve bilateral relations between the two countries.<sup>120</sup>

Russia seeks access to mineral resources on the African continent and perceives African states as particularly amenable to the notion Russia is promoting that the international system needs to be overturned. Russia's involvement on the African continent is thus not just about access to natural resources, it is part of a "broader strategy to use their influence and historical ties with African states as a vehicle to re-affirm their status regionally and globally."<sup>121</sup> South Africa has minerals, metals and natural gas sources that are of value to Russia.<sup>122</sup> As far back as

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<sup>116</sup> Alexandra Arkhangelskaya and Vladimir Shubin, 'Russia-South Africa Relations: Beyond Revival', Global Powers and Africa Programme Polict Briefing (Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, October 2013).

<sup>117</sup> Vongani M. Nkuna and Kgothatso B. Shai, 'What Drives Russia's Involvement in Africa? [An Afrocentric Review of Russia-South Africa Relations, 2000-2018]' (South Africa, University of Limpopo, 2019)., 6

<sup>118</sup> Arkhangelskaya and Shubin, 'Russia-South Africa Relations: Beyond Revival'., 2

<sup>119</sup> Nkuna and Shai, 'What Drives Russia's Involvement in Africa?'., 6-7

<sup>120</sup> Arkhangelskaya and Shubin, 'Russia-South Africa Relations: Beyond Revival'., 3-4

<sup>121</sup> Nkuna and Shai, 'What Drives Russia's Involvement in Africa?'., 2

<sup>122</sup> Nkuna and Shai, 'What Drives Russia's Involvement in Africa?'., 1

the early 2000s, Moscow sought to forge partnerships with a geopolitically significant state in Africa that could serve as a springboard for expanded influence on the continent. South Africa was an ideal candidate because it was the most-industrialised state in Africa and has held the status of either the largest or second largest market in Africa. Putin leveraged historical Soviet ties with former African liberation movements to establish economic and political ties with several countries on the continent whose post-liberation movements had turned into leading political parties.<sup>123</sup> South Africa is such an example. Since Russia cannot match the economic importance of South Africa's relations with the West, it instead picks off suggestible elites, particularly ones that are amenable to corruption or who hold anti-Western sympathies.<sup>124</sup> Jacob Zuma is one such example. The former South African President has historical ties with former Soviet Russian leaders, and Russia took advantage of this when he became President of South Africa in 2009.<sup>125</sup> There was a significant strengthening of relations between Russia and South Africa during Zuma's presidency, which was "marred by ambivalent leadership and corruption scandals."<sup>126</sup> Russia has also recently been taking advantage of its connections with Zuma and his daughter, who has a significant social media following in South Africa, to promote pro-Russian messaging in the wake of the war in Ukraine.<sup>127</sup> Generally speaking, there have also been other links uncovered between specific ANC politicians and elites and Russia.<sup>128</sup>

On the South African side, the ANC likes to promote the narrative that the Soviet Union supported the anti-apartheid struggle,<sup>129</sup> which is why the ANC continues to cooperate and work in partnership with Russia.<sup>130</sup> Officially, the South African government has insisted on its neutral position vis-à-vis the war in Ukraine, stating that it "wants to promote dialogue" by remaining

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<sup>123</sup> Vongani M. Nkuna, 'Russia-South Africa Relations within the Context of the Ukraine Invasion', *Journal of African Foreign Affairs* 10, no. 1 (April 2023): 71–88, <https://doi.org/10.31920/2056-5658/2023/v10n1a4>, 76

<sup>124</sup> 'Why South Africa Is Drifting into the Sino-Russian Orbit', *The Economist*, 19 February 2023, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/02/19/why-south-africa-is-drifting-into-the-sino-russian-orbit>.

<sup>125</sup> Nkuna, 'Russia-South Africa Relations within the Context of the Ukraine Invasion', 76

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 74

<sup>127</sup> Centre for Information Resilience, 'The #IStandWithPutin & #IStandWithRussia Campaign in South Africa' (London: Centre for Information Resilience, May 2023).

<sup>128</sup> 'Why South Africa Is Drifting into the Sino-Russian Orbit'.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> Nkuna, 'Russia-South Africa Relations within the Context of the Ukraine Invasion', 72

neutral.<sup>131</sup> However, this position goes against South Africa's guiding foreign policy principles and commitments to promoting values such as human rights and democracy.<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, South Africa's actions regarding Russia have not indicated any respect of these principles and commitments either. South Africa did not condemn the Russian invasion of Crimea in 2014, and South Africa was one of the twenty-six African countries that failed to condemn the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the UN General Assembly. Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov paid a visit to South Africa in January 2023. After the meeting, ANC officials stated that the BRICS bloc should work towards being part of a "redesigned global order."<sup>133</sup> As if to reinforce this statement, and symbolically on the one-year anniversary of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, South Africa hosted Russia and China for joint naval exercises in February 2023.<sup>134</sup> The ANC's ideologies and organisational politics dictate South Africa's foreign policy. As a result, President Cyril Ramaphosa is influenced by the party's position towards Ukraine. Leaders with closer ties to Russia largely influence intellectual and ideological debates within the ANC, hence South Africa's "biased neutrality in favour of Russia." This has had the result of weakening South Africa's traditional foreign policy principles.<sup>135</sup>

The position that the ANC has taken with regards to the conflict in Ukraine has generated significant domestic polarisations, both among civil society and in the political sphere. Opposition to the war has mostly stemmed from opposition parties and ANC-aligned apolitical organisations including the clerical establishment.<sup>136</sup> Public opinion in South Africa mostly disapproves of Russia's actions in Ukraine. The General Industrial Workers Union scheduled a march on the Russian embassy in Pretoria in May 2022<sup>137</sup>, and several civil society events and protests were organised during the BRICS summit in 2023 which was held in South Africa.<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> 'South Africa Is Interested in Strengthening Relations with Russia', *The Diplomatic Affairs*, 2 April 2023, <https://www.thediplomaticaffairs.com/2023/04/02/south-africa-is-interested-in-strengthening-relations-with-russia/>.

<sup>132</sup> Nkuna, 'Russia-South Africa Relations within the Context of the Ukraine Invasion', 72

<sup>133</sup> 'Why South Africa Is Drifting into the Sino-Russian Orbit'.

<sup>134</sup> 'America Accuses South Africa of Sending Arms to Russia', *The Economist*, 11 May 2023, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2023/05/11/america-accuses-south-africa-of-sending-arms-to-russia>.

<sup>135</sup> Nkuna, 'Russia-South Africa Relations within the Context of the Ukraine Invasion', 79-80

<sup>136</sup> Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power of Bellicose Pretender?*, 385-386

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 386

<sup>138</sup> Naledi Sikhakhane, 'This Week — Civil Society Organisations to Protest at BRICS Summit to Highlight Ukraine Human Rights Violations', *Daily Maverick*, 21 August 2023,

Particularly, the Ukrainian Association of South Africa and Amnesty International South Africa organised a protest on August 22<sup>nd</sup> at the park outside the convention centre where the BRICS conference was being held to “call to international societies and BRICS leaders to demand that Putin and Russian authorities withdraw from Ukraine and stop all military actions there.”<sup>139</sup> However, the protest was described by local news outlets as being small, and protesters accused the summit’s organisers and law enforcement of censorship because they were not allowed to protest outside the venue and were instead redirected to a park 3.7km away from the summit location.<sup>140</sup>

Some pro-Russian sentiment has also been sticking in South Africa, though, according to Mark Duerksen of the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies. It is not just the ANC who has been promoting Russian narratives – the Economic Freedom Party, Jacob Zuma’s new party, has also participated in amplifying Russian disinformation. Shortly after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine, the #IStandWithPutin and #IStandWithRussia social media campaign was launched. South African influencers played a prominent role in spreading this online campaign. In South Africa, the most notable player in the campaign was former President Jacob Zuma’s daughter Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma. She posted about a trip she took to Russia around the time of the launch of the campaign, posted about links between her father’s government and Russia, Russia’s support under apartheid, and ‘Western imperialism.’<sup>141</sup> Sambudla-Zuma adopted the campaign hashtag before it was officially launched by Russian government accounts,<sup>142</sup> suggesting she played a crucial role in implementing the social media campaign. Her content was also re-used by others online, spreading even to the regional level, amplified by suspicious accounts and Russian government accounts. Sambudla-Zuma continues to post pro-Russian content and disinformation online. There has been a growing “irritation among young Black South Africans

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<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2023-08-21-this-week-civil-society-organisations-to-protest-at-brics-summit-to-highlight-ukraine-human-rights-violations/>.

<sup>139</sup> Sikhakhane, ‘This Week — Civil Society Organisations to Protest at BRICS Summit to Highlight Ukraine Human Rights Violations’., ‘Civil Rights Groups Gather to Protest the BRICS Summit’, Online video (Johannesburg: Eyewitness News, 22 August 2023).; Yoliswa Sobuwa, “‘Putin Wants to Completely Destroy Ukraine’: Protesters Call on BRICS Leaders to Address Russia War”, *News24*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/putin-wants-to-completely-destroy-ukraine-protesters-call-on-brics-leaders-to-address-russia-war-20230822>.

<sup>140</sup> Rorisang Kgosana, ‘Brics Summit Protestors Urge Russia’s Ukraine Exit’, *Business Live*, 22 August 2023, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/national/2023-08-22-brics-summit-protestors-urge-russias-ukraine-exit/>.

<sup>141</sup> Centre for Information Resilience, ‘The #IStandWithPutin & #IStandWithRussia Campaign in South Africa’.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

toward the West and to mainstream South African media” which social media influencers such as Sambudla-Zuma capitalise on to promote pro-Russian narratives.<sup>143</sup> The ANC has also participated in spreading disinformation. During the 2019 elections, the ANC collaborated with the Wagner Group to drive division and xenophobia in South Africa.<sup>144</sup> Russia has been the main disinformation actor in South Africa. Russian disinformation in South Africa is largely being spread by local accounts belonging to political elites and prominent social media influencers.<sup>145</sup> The Russian playbook in South Africa is to spread false information to spur riots, violence, and social division, as well as bolster the ANC.<sup>146</sup> Unfortunately, it is striking a nerve in South African society, as exhibited by the incredibly violent and deadly 2021 riots spurred in part by Jacob Zuma’s, Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma’s and other ANC-affiliated social media accounts.<sup>147</sup>

Russia clearly also takes a sharp power approach to its relations with South Africa, seeking to spread discord and unrest in political and social spheres through disinformation. Generally, Russia targets weak democracies on the African continent, but South Africa is the exception to this rule. This indicates that Russia has perceived an opening in co-opting South African leaders to gain further influence on the continent.<sup>148</sup> South Africa represents not only a historical ally for Russia who is willing to promote and uphold Russia’s aims of formulating a new order for the international system, but is also, more immediately, an in-road for Russia on the African continent and a partner for facilitating greater cooperation between Russia and other countries in Africa. This is why Russia is working to support the ANC and pro-Russian actors’ grip on power in South Africa. Neocolonial narratives are also frequently spread in South African pro-Russian and anti-Western discourse, as in Mali. However, in the South African context, these narratives are serving to attempt to justify both Russia and South Africa’s inability to rise to a greater status in the international system. They are also playing on the West’s lack of support for the ANC during the apartheid era (compared to the support lent to the ANC by the Soviet Union)

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<sup>143</sup> Peltier, Satariano, and Chutel, ‘How Putin Became a Hero on African TV’.

<sup>144</sup> Duerksen, Russian Disinformation in Africa.

<sup>145</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘Mapping Disinformation in Africa’.

<sup>146</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘Mapping Disinformation in Africa’ ; and Duerksen, Russian Disinformation in Africa.

<sup>147</sup> Rebecca Davis, ‘How the Reports into the July 2021 Unrest Let South Africa Down’, *Daily Maverick*, 30 January 2024, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2024-01-30-how-the-reports-into-the-july-2021-unrest-let-south-africa-down/>; Duerksen, Russian Disinformation in Africa.

<sup>148</sup> Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘Mapping Disinformation in Africa’.

to frame ongoing Russia-South Africa relations and to justify the strengthening of these ties. We also see a clear co-optation of ANC elite by Russia in spreading its disinformation. Russia largely relies on ANC leaders to spread false Russian narratives online. ANC leaders are more than willing to do so when they have corrupt links to Russia, which many do. We thus see a system of dark social capital being built as Russia uses corruption to co-opt and exploit ANC leaders for its own interests in Southern Africa. This in turn has a significant disruptive and violent impact on the South African populace who are clearly being excluded from access to the power-maintenance benefits that these relations are bringing to ANC leaders.

## **7. Conclusion**

Disinformation poses a significant risk to democracy and democratic institutions because it undermines the social structure of a state and divides the population. In some cases, this can even lead to violence. Disinformation and foreign manipulation are strategies increasingly employed by authoritarian states such as Russia and China to shift the structure of the international system away from the dominance of Western liberal democracies. Russia is more than ever using disinformation as a tool for undermining democracies on the African continent. Russia's strategies and means of intervention on the continent have evolved over the course of the post-Soviet period. As Russia has become an outcast of the international system, it has increasingly turned towards employing sharp power tactics, dark social capital, and elite capture. This has especially been the case in the African context, whereby Russia has co-opted the discourse and narratives of neo-colonialism to push anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation.

This paper compared the disinformation strategies which Russia has taken in Mali versus South Africa. Russia takes a tailored approach to the means and methods through which it spreads disinformation, catering these to the socio-political context of the country which it seeks to influence. In Mali, Russia takes a bottom-up approach to its spread of disinformation. Mali's information environment was ripe for co-optation and manipulation. Pro-Russian narratives were already circulating on and offline in Mali before the arrival of the Wagner Group. This made it much easier for Russia to simply amplify pre-existing narratives that were being generated by anti-Western activists. With the arrival of the Wagner Group, the identification and amplification of local narratives that favoured anti-Western and pro-Russian sentiment was made much easier.

These narratives then helped bolster support for the military coup in Mali. Furthermore, Russian disinformation campaigns have helped the military authoritarian regime in Mali to maintain power. The military regime has also followed the Russian lead in generating its own online disinformation campaigns in a bid to hold on to power.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, Russia takes a top-down approach to its spread of disinformation. Russia has used historical ties with the ANC to co-opt party members and leaders to push anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives online. Russia plays on its historical diplomatic ties with South Africa and especially the ANC to push narratives of anti-Western solidarity going back to the days of Soviet support for African liberation movements. These narratives are then passed down to the South African population through social media disinformation campaigns that are often launched by South African influencers or politicians.

While Russia takes different approaches to spreading disinformation in Mali versus South Africa, based on the existing socio-political environment in the country and the pre-existing relations with that country, there are some similarities that can be highlighted. In both cases, Russia has relied on neo-colonial narratives to push its agenda in both countries. Russia has found that these narratives resonate with African populaces and align with the anti-Western sentiment that it is trying to catalyse. Furthermore, in both cases, Russia has co-opted social media influencers in its bid to spread disinformation on the African continent. In a way, we can think of this as another form of elite capture. Social media influencers are the elite of social media platforms – they are at the top of the hierarchy with hundreds, thousands, if not millions of online followers who listen and adhere to their messaging. Many social media influencers on the African continent also have reach beyond the national level to the regional level, as well. This is particularly the case in francophone Africa and was a trend observed during the #IStandWithPutin and #IStandWithRussia campaign in southern Africa.<sup>149</sup> Thus, by capturing these online elite, Russia also has access to regional social media networks for spreading disinformation.

We therefore need to rapidly start thinking about approaches to dealing with and countering disinformation. The European Union and European External Action Service (EEAS)

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<sup>149</sup> Duerksen, Russian Disinformation in Africa.

have taken a lead in defining the terminology and a methodology around addressing disinformation. In February 2023, the EEAS published the *1<sup>st</sup> EEAS Report on Foreign Manipulation and Interference Threats*. The report outlined a novel framework developed by the EEAS' Stratcom division to identify best case practices for addressing Foreign Manipulation and Interference Threats (FIMI). The framework is designed to evaluate ongoing FIMI activities, actors, and threat levels to improve policy decisions on response. The report considers disinformation as one of several FIMI tactics.<sup>150</sup> In January 2024, the EEAS published the *2<sup>nd</sup> EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats*. The second report further develops the evaluative framework of the first report, but also proposes a 'FIMI Response Framework' aimed at "linking analysis and insights even more effectively to timely responses."<sup>151</sup> The report emphasises a need for a multi-stakeholder response in addressing FIMI threats. These reports were largely produced within the context of the upcoming 2024 European elections. The EU has identified disinformation and FIMI as a significant threat to its democratic institutions and the frameworks for evaluating and responding to FIMI threats have been their policy response. However, the frameworks are still in the process of being applied to broader EU activities such as EU international development programming.

Moves to address disinformation within the EU ignited with the Russian large-scale invasion of Ukraine with the efforts of Russian actors globally to promote Russian narratives to undermine the EU's role as a global actor as well as EU partnerships with other countries. Furthermore, local backlash to the European presence in Africa, especially in regions such as the Sahel, have reinforced the need for stepping up EU engagement and strategic communication regarding disinformation on the African continent. Today, the Stratcom office within the EEAS has an Africa Taskforce that works on disinformation issues in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Africa Taskforce seeks to address disinformation on the continent by engaging with civil society

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<sup>150</sup> Strategic Communications, Task Forces and and Information Analysis Data Team, '1st EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: Towards a Framework for Networked Defence' (Brussels: European External Action Service, February 2023).

<sup>151</sup> Information Analysis Data Team, '2nd EEAS Report on Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference Threats: A Framework for Networked Defence' (Brussels: European External Action Service, February 2024)., 5

organisations, think tanks, and media actors to build the resilience of African information environments and to strengthen the capacities of local actors in addressing disinformation.<sup>152</sup>

The Africa Taskforce has been developing a five-strand strategic framework for their approach to addressing disinformation in Africa, translating the FIMI framework to the African context. The strands include: strengthening African actors' situational awareness capacities (analysing disinformation in one's own environment); providing reliable and fact-based information (building the capacities of local media outlets and journalists to operate independently); linking fact-checking with other actors; boosting media and information literacy (of the public and target groups susceptible to disinformation); ensuring social media platform engagement of civil society groups, think tanks and media outlets. At the moment, this is simply a framework that the EEAS testing: its aim is to incorporate all five strands of the framework in future projects and partnerships on the African continent. EEAS officials highlight the need for a holistic approach to dealing with disinformation in Africa, hence the drive to use the five-strand framework for generating tailored approaches to partnerships with different African countries.<sup>153</sup>

The EU sees itself and its partnerships in Africa as being undermined by competing actors, such as Russia. It therefore seeks to understand the dynamics of information environments on the continent and promote outreach in different ways. Hence, the EU has begun to take disinformation more seriously in its development programming, investing more money into communication budgets to more proactively message on development partnerships it is implementing globally. Furthermore, the EU is now increasingly pushing the Global Gateway narrative vis-à-vis the Global South, no longer speaking about development cooperation but rather partnerships. The EU has also realised that if societies in Africa are better equipped, their capacities are strengthened, and their abilities to deal with information manipulation are improved, then it will enable the EU to indirectly address the challenges it faces in building partnerships in Africa. Thus, the EU is gradually starting to build the capacities to act more strategically in its development projects on the African continent, adjusting both the nature and frameworks for its projects and partnerships and the narratives it uses to frame them. However,

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<sup>152</sup> EEAS Employee, The EU, EEAS and Disinformation (in Africa), Interview, 17 May 2024.

<sup>153</sup> EEAS Employee, The EU, EEAS and Disinformation (in Africa).

this process has only just been launched and it remains to be seen whether the EU's model for dealing with disinformation is effective.

The EU's FIMI frameworks for evaluating and responding to disinformation threats and the EEAS Stratcom Africa Taskforce's five-strand framework for addressing disinformation and FIMI threats in Africa are a good start. However, we need more actionable implementation mechanisms for counter-disinformation programming. Above all democracy support to African civil society needs to focus on preventing the spread of disinformation. Just as strategies for spreading disinformation are tailored to the specific socio-political contexts of the targeted countries, strategies for preventing and countering disinformation will also need to be tailored to the local information environment of a given country. This is why a multi-stakeholder approach is critical for countering the threat of disinformation. However, as Dr. Andrew Armstrong noted, while it may be appealing to shut out bad actors from our information environment, we need to be careful that "the cure is not as bad as the disease." Limiting free speech, even online, destroys what is a foundation of democracy. With the rise of internet technologies, we have opened a can of worms to false information but fixing it could be just as damaging.<sup>154</sup> We therefore need to think holistically and systemically about our approaches to dealing with disinformation.

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<sup>154</sup> Armstrong, Russian Disinformation Strategies and Practices.

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### **Summary and Keywords:**

This research thesis explores Russia's disinformation strategies on the African continent. To assess the variations in Russian disinformation strategies, two case studies were examined: Mali and South Africa. Russia takes a bottom-up approach to its spread of disinformation in Mali while it takes a top-down approach to its spread of disinformation in South Africa. However, more generally, Russia's strategy in Africa is the diffusion of disinformation through sharp power to spread dark social capital and capture African elites. This in turn promotes the spread of corruption and authoritarianism in Africa, making it easier for Russia to secure its own interests on the continent. Russian disinformation narratives in Africa highlight discourses of neo-colonialism as these resonate most effectively with African audiences and effectively dismantle Western influence on the continent. In order to counter the threat to democracy that Russian disinformation poses in Africa (and globally), a holistic approach to policy and development programming is crucial. The European Union and European External Action Service (EEAS) are making strides in this regard, but it remains to be seen whether their strategies and programmes will be effective.

Russia; disinformation; Mali; South Africa; sharp power