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**Russian information operations
outside of the Western
information environment
(Revised version)**

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Executive summary

Introduction

In February 2023, the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) held an event ‘How to Lose the Information War’ detailing the Kremlin’s failed efforts to decisively sway Western populations to its narrative in the initial phase of its war of aggression in Ukraine. But while the Western community’s resilience to Kremlin narratives has been strong, the invasion has exposed deep rifts in perspectives between the West and the Multi-aligned Community (previously known as the Global South)¹ that the Kremlin aims to exploit through Information Influence Operations (IIOs).

The March 2022 UN vote condemning the Kremlin’s war of aggression in Ukraine had 35 abstentions, 17 of them from African states. Multiple statespeople and diplomats outside the Western environment have either hesitated to condemn the Kremlin or espoused its talking points. Afrobarometer found that in 24 of 30 African countries, approval of authoritarian governance has risen since 2014. On average, across 36 countries, more Africans (53%) would be willing to consider a military government than would rule it out (42%) “if elected officials abused their power” demonstrating a developing disillusionment that removing corrupt elected officials can be done through democratic institutions.² Furthermore, just 38% expressed satisfaction with “democracy”, the lowest share since at least 2014, and in the Africa Youth Survey, just 39% of respondents said that Africans should emulate “Western democracy”.³

Meanwhile, there has been a 41% rise in Russian Embassy social media followers from February 2022 – March 2023 and the embassies have increased their messaging output.⁴ *RT Arabic* has seen 10 million more users since

the invasion, and the frequency with which *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic* published on social media platforms increased by 30-35% and 80% respectively.⁵

This report, drawing from research, qualitative and quantitative data, Key Insight Interviews (KIIs), digital tools, and Russian information and deception doctrine, explores the Kremlin’s IIOs in non-Western environments using five selected countries as case studies: Egypt, Mali, Kenya, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates. The initial set of countries were selected based on their international importance and to represent a cross-section of critical national issues pertinent to Russian information operations, which include food insecurity (Egypt, Mali, Kenya), energy security (UAE), trade and investment relationship with Russia (Mali, Egypt, UAE), military aspects (Mali), and political relevance to the West and Ukraine. The political regime of the countries concerned and stability of governments was also considered.

Central to understanding and explaining the process and potential threat of these operations has been the Theory of Reflexive Control (TORC), a Soviet era methodical framework for shaping perceptions via information inputs based on a cultural and psychological profile or ‘model’ of the target and disseminated via propaganda, *maskirovka* (masquerade, i.e., deception), and *provokatsiya* (provocation, such as false-flag attacks and hoaxes) to create voluntary decision-making (a ‘reflexive action’) that is favourable to the practitioner (see Annex A for the full description). Despite being the subject of increased scrutiny in the West since the Crimea Crisis of 2014, it has rarely been used as a guiding framework to analyse ongoing Russian IIOs. This report adapts the

existing framework to provide clarity to an intentionally complex and obscure process. Each country report uses the TORC to provide a clarifying overview of Kremlin IIOs and their

potential outcomes. Full analysis is provided in Annex A.

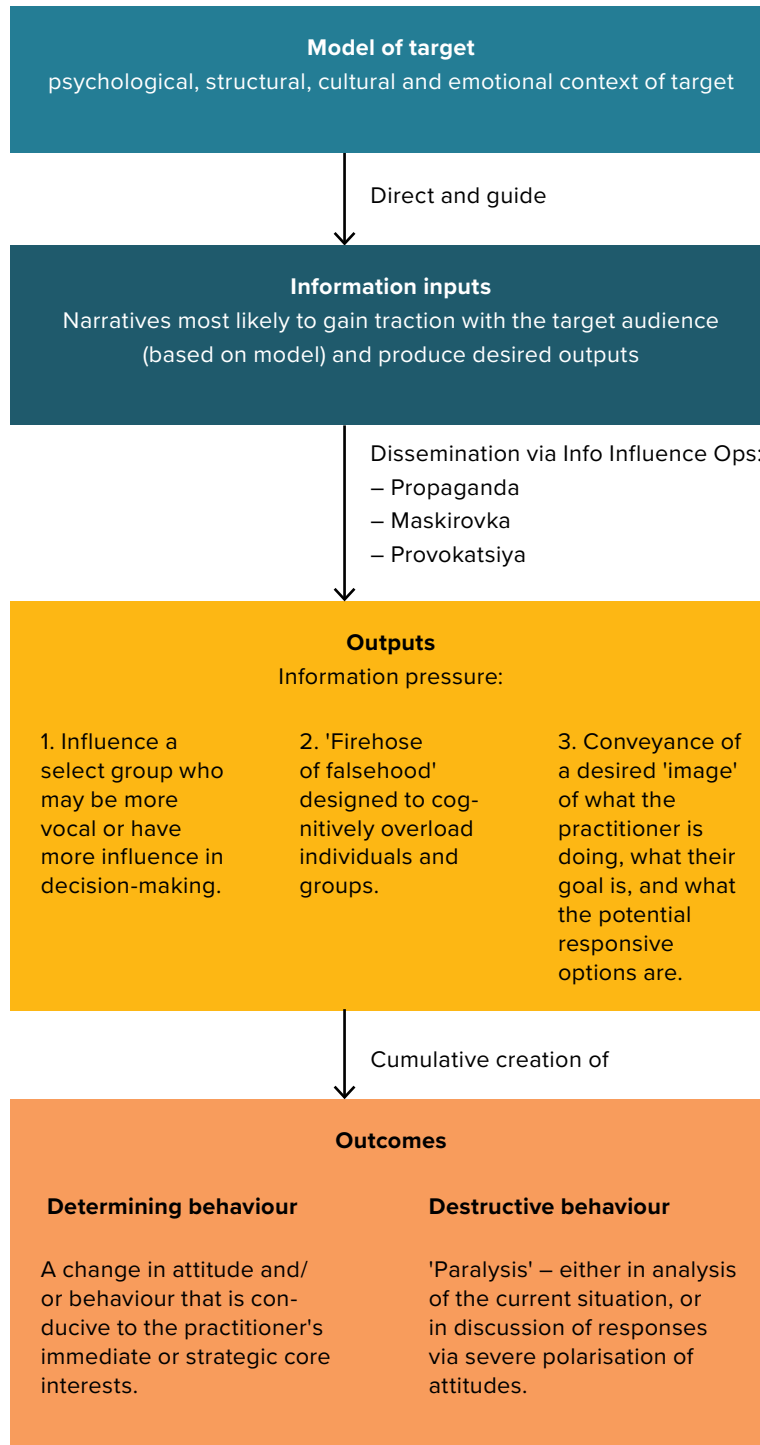


Fig. 1. Theory of Reflexive Control Framework

Findings

The reach and penetration of Kremlin narratives varied across the five countries. But there was significant traction among individual themes that are cause for concern.

The historical memory of colonialism — and the Soviet Union’s perceived role in combatting it — remains a powerful force in the Multi-aligned Community. The Soviet Union is often conflated with the modern-day Kremlin, and that anti-colonial legacy cultivates a nostalgia that works to the Kremlin’s narrative advantage by allowing it to frame itself as an anti-imperialist power. In its framing, it continues to champion this cause, with NATO as the new colonial power and universal values as a method of neo-colonial control.

This has been reinforced by a narrative vacuum around NATO that has been filled by negative perceptions stemming from its engagements in the Middle East at the beginning of the 21st century and Libya in 2011 in line with NATO interventions in those respective areas and time periods. Both engagements are perceived by local populations as the origin of local instability, a perception which is being amplified by organic dis/mis/mal-information and Kremlin IIOs to cultivate negative sentiment against NATO and the West. This further legitimises Kremlin narratives in Ukraine and wider dis/mis/mal-information narratives regarding the West.

The colonialism narrative has been further leveraged to exploit the grievance of perceived hypocrisy by the West. Rwanda, Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Israel-Palestine conflict were cited by multiple interviewees as examples of failings by the West that contributed to disillusionment with Western democratic narratives and concepts of universal norms. While these are legitimate criticisms, pro-Kremlin and anti-Western actors leverage them through ‘whataboutism’ to deflect criticism of the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine and beyond. At the same time, encouraging scepticism of the West has reinforced the concept of the West

being inherently untrustworthy. Consequently, Kremlin messaging suggesting atrocities committed by itself or its allies are ‘false-flags’ and disinformation surrounding fictional biological warfare laboratories or ‘biolabs’ in Ukraine, has found traction in the Multi-aligned Community.⁶

The Kremlin also seeks to burnish its own image through three key narratives: strength, salvation and sovereignty.

1. Firstly, that it is a defender of “traditional values” against the “moral decadence” of the West (primarily Western defence of LGBTQ+ rights). This has appealed to more traditional cultures, with South Africa largely considered the exception due to the perceived centrality of human rights and equality to its values among the five states.
2. Secondly, the Kremlin has leaned on faith-based narratives; either to incite Islamic hatred against the West or use the Russian Orthodox Church as a tool of influence to enhance the Kremlin’s desired image as a natural ally and further the central narrative of the Kremlin as a check against the imposition of Western values on the rest of the world.
3. Thirdly, in contrast to the West, the Kremlin holds itself up as a benevolent partner that provides ‘no strings attached’ aid, thereby encouraging ‘decoupling’ from the West. This is more accurately described as ‘no values attached’, in that the aid comes without any expectations or concerns about alignment with universal values and norms like human rights. As this report demonstrates, in reality the trade-off is rhetorical alignment with the Kremlin and neutrality towards its violations of international norms and universal values.

These factors have contributed to an apathy towards Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

Both the literature review and Key Insight Interviews (KIIs) suggested that many concerns were focused on the impacts to food and energy security that were driving up the cost of living. However, perceptions on the causes of the conflict were mixed. Although audiences in Kenya and South Africa generally condemned Russia's invasion, others within those states and the remaining countries saw it as the fault of NATO's "expansion" driven by the US. Consequently, large numbers blamed the West for the food and energy crises and were sympathetic to Kremlin narratives around sanctions being the cause of the food and energy crises and the Black Sea Grain Initiative being a ruse to provide for Western states over others. Furthermore, Western condemnation of neutrality was likely to lead to entrenchment of these views due to perceptions of Western disinterest in conflicts outside of the West (especially on the African continent).

These themes were further reflected in the digital analysis — with the overarching themes of Western hypocrisy and anti-establishmentarianism/neo-colonialism being the most prominent, and pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content outweighing pro-Western or pro-norms content. Overt content was frequently accompanied with links and invitations to closed groups on Telegram, Facebook and WhatsApp. Access to these platforms lay outside the project's capabilities, but qualitative research indicated that these were key areas of dissemination and indoctrination through closing off their communities to rival viewpoints.

Although pro-Kremlin content was prevalent across all platforms, 'X' (formerly Twitter) was a significant hub. Based on secondary research, this is likely due to its takeover by Elon Musk and the ensuing degradation of its monitoring and safeguarding capabilities.⁷

Both qualitative and quantitative findings identified a range of actors involved in the dissemination and reinforcement of pro-Kremlin narratives ranging from 'official' actors like *RT*, *Sputnik*, and local officials and local media, to more subtle agents of influence

like entrepreneurs of influence, 'useful idiots' and cynics, and sock puppet and bot accounts.

Interviewees agreed that the major target audiences of Kremlin IIOs were the political elites and the youth so as to create a dual prong of influence from the top-down and grassroots levels. This has a second order effect of affecting both present and future discussions about Russia, the West, and the international system which has a third order effect on present and future policy making.

Our findings also demonstrated several common Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) in these operations:

1. State and elite capture.⁸ This further leads to media influence.
2. Astroturfing.⁹
3. Discrediting critics through 'swarming'.¹⁰
4. Edited imagery (including memes,¹¹ deep-fakes,¹² and photoshopped imagery).
5. Outsourcing/franchising.¹³
6. Information laundering.¹⁴
7. Doxing.¹⁵

In contrast, Western strategic communications were deemed to be at a disadvantage both in volume and how they are perceived compared to Kremlin IIOs. There are perceptions of a 'say-do gap' around application of international law and universal norms—with Israel-Palestine, Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan given as examples of Western failures. Concurrently, limited local language capabilities restrict the capacity of the West to communicate to audiences at a hyper-local level and thus prevent pro-norms messaging from achieving its full potential. In the digital findings, pro-Western content was significantly outweighed by that of an anti-Western and pro-Kremlin ilk.

The main advantages for Western strategic communications were anti-authoritarian voices, lack of Kremlin soft power, and a general acceptance of universal norms like territorial integrity as a positive necessity. Likewise, although the youth were suffering a crisis of confidence in Western-style democracy and the international order, it was asserted

by interviewees that this reflected a desire for change and reform rather than to break away. It was further opined that civil society would be critical in reaching this audience and required significant reinvigoration.

Country summaries

See Annexes B to F for Country Reports in full.

Egypt

Digital analysis highlights a substantial volume of pro-Kremlin content, notably in Arabic, surpassing pro-Western or normative content in volume, actors promoting it, and persuasiveness. Qualitative data reveals a rising distrust of the West, creating opportunities for Kremlin-aligned groups to amplify anti-Western conspiracies and ‘whataboutism’ arguments. Despite this, KIIIs don’t foresee Egypt severing ties with the West due to reliance on US aid and grain from Ukraine. However, Egypt might shift towards positive neutrality and indifference to the Ukraine conflict and Kremlin violations; especially when considering the prominent role Russia plays in its food security alongside Ukraine.

Applying the TORC, Kremlin IIOs aim to cultivate apathy towards the Ukraine conflict or a desire for a swift resolution (even favouring a Kremlin victory) to ease living costs. They also seek to promote conspiratorial thinking, fostering doubt in the West and the concept that there can be any such thing as objective truth, making the population more susceptible to future Kremlin influence operations.

Mali

Qualitative and quantitative analysis highlights prevalent anti-Western sentiment in Mali, aligning with pro-Kremlin views. This stems from disillusionment with Western models, perceived unequal treatment in a neo-colonial system, and distrust in Western

security approaches. Many see aligning with the Kremlin as anti-colonial liberation, reflected online where pro-Kremlin content dominates social media and closed groups, surpassing pro-Western narratives. This shift in sentiment may lead to overtly pro-Kremlin behaviours.

Applying the TORC, Kremlin IIOs aim to bolster support for Kremlin influence, instil hyper-distrust of the West, and hinder objective analysis of the cooperation between the Kremlin and the Malian junta.

Kenya

Kenya maintains a predominantly pro-norms stance but highlights a rising anti-Western sentiment. Engagement with Kremlin-aligned arguments reflects discontent with Western interference, notably by Western institutions like the International Criminal Court (ICC) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), leading to disillusionment with ‘Western solutions.’ While pro-Kremlin content struggles for traction, prevalent anti-Western narratives impact perceptions of universal norms as Western constructs. Both digital and qualitative studies identify the Chinese Communist Party as a significant communicator in Kenya, reinforcing Kremlin IIOs by amplifying anti-Western messages.

Using the TORC, these operations aim to foster apathy towards Kremlin aggression in Ukraine and distrust of Western institutions, encouraging detachment from the West and polarising debates on engagement based on values and interference concerns.

South Africa

A robust free media landscape limits Russia's dominance in shaping narratives, despite concerns over actions affecting media freedom. Concrete evidence of specific Russian influence beyond public diplomacy remains elusive, but localised pockets of influence intertwine with political agendas, rooted in perceptions of Russia's historical role in apartheid-era struggles. Pro-Russian sentiments span political spectrums, notably among elites. Western communication faces challenges due to perceived arrogance and historical events, fostering a disillusionment with the international order, aligning with the Kremlin's narrative for a new 'multilateral' order. Independent media outlets like the *Daily Maverick* and *News24* offer diverse perspectives, emphasising the importance of multiple sources for truth. Digital findings reveal substantial pro-Kremlin content from select influencers rather than widespread dissemination.

Assessment

The key to the Kremlin's success has been the ability to identify, exploit, and exacerbate existing socio-political fault lines and grievances within individual societies, as emphasised in the TORC. These include a disillusionment with Western actors built on a 'say-do gap' that has undermined concepts of universal values and norms and created a perception of norms as a purely Western construct designed to control non-Western states. This is compounded by the critical finding that a narrative vacuum exists around NATO, with most 'first impressions' formed by its interventions in Afghanistan in 2001 and Libya in 2011. Consequently, perceptions are being formulated by malign actors, including the Kremlin. These issues are further exacerbated by the volume of content put out by the Kremlin at multiple societal levels. These are likely to create cumulative impacts

Utilising the TORC, these IIOs likely aim to cultivate positive neutrality towards Kremlin violations while creating elite-level alignment and polarising debates about engaging with the West.

United Arab Emirates

Our findings indicate that engagement with the Kremlin is perceived as a 'win-win' cooperation among Emiratis and that sanctions go against Emirati interests. Furthermore, perceptions of hypocrisy by the West, pushback against LGBTQ+ (which is actively associated with the West) and a general climate of conspiratorial thinking are actively exploited by Kremlin IIOs to undermine Western interests and cultivate apathy towards its violations of international norms.

Based on the TORC it can be assessed that the aim of these IIOs is to encourage the 'determining behaviour' of further narrative and institutional alignment with the Kremlin, as well as encouraging 'destructive behaviour' of increasing conspiratorial thinking regarding the West to bolster Kremlin narratives and further truth decay in Arab social media.

on perceptions and reactions to voting in international bodies, perceptions and reactions to the cost-of-living crisis, and critical national and international issues.

The risk of respective states voting with the Kremlin in international bodies naturally varied in all five states. In Mali, interviewees agreed it was almost certain that Kremlin influence was shaping the government's voting patterns. But others felt more confident their governments would follow their best interests. However, unchallenged IIOs within the countries made it more likely that the local populations would become less likely to object to further alignment with the Kremlin on issues regarding its violations of norms or other issues that risk undermining the international system.

While criticism of the cost-of-living crisis largely centred on domestic mismanagement, any association of the crisis with the Russian invasion of Ukraine was more likely to lead for calls to end the conflict whatever the cost, rather than calls for a defeat of the Kremlin.

Likewise, while the critical national issues outlined in the research questions were not always framed in a pro-Kremlin narrative (for instance, while there was ample anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric and distrust of the West

in Kenya, this did not translate to pro-Kremlin sentiment), many were couched in anti-Western grievances. It is likely this will make cooperation on a range of issues increasingly difficult.

These qualitative findings were reflected in the digital sentiment analysis of thousands of comments and conversations across major platforms.

Conclusions

Pinpointing the exact tactical aim of an adversarial IIO can rarely be done with absolute certainty, especially those of the Kremlin. Kremlin IIOs can be opportunistic even while following a strategic goal, leading to changes of intensity and immediate planned effects according to the environment. Furthermore, the nature of Kremlin security policy that governs its grey-zone operations has always been a challenge to comprehend, even more so after the Kremlin's clampdown and isolation following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine. However, based on the findings of this research report, it can be assessed that there are two possible aims and impacts of these IIOs:

1. To create shifts in support for the Kremlin across the case study countries, with Mali, the exemplar, going the way of the Central African Republic toward a 'laboratory for state capture'.¹⁶
2. The maintenance and cultivation of 'positive neutrality/apathy'.

The first of these is not impossible, but unlikely. Qualitative analysis found that the Kremlin suffers from a soft power deficit that will not be ameliorated in the short or medium term. At the same time, hard-headed pragmatism prevents even autocratic states from severing ties with the West completely due to their dependency on Western economic connections and security guarantees that

the Kremlin cannot fill. Therefore, the second option is more likely, as the current status of apathy toward the victor of the war benefits the Kremlin even if it cannot push perceptions towards a pro-Kremlin stance. This is due to calls for the war to end in order to alleviate food insecurity regardless of the victor, and the criticism of the West that the war has created based on perceptions of hypocrisy.

The immediate second order effect for the West is that this will likely prolong the current war of aggression in Ukraine, as the failure to move states from neutrality/apathy prevents the full combined pressure of the international community to bear on the Kremlin in terms of sanctions and diplomatic isolation, thus providing it the diplomatic and logistical power to continue its war.¹⁷ This creates the third order effect of increasing the likelihood of 'Ukraine fatigue' amongst Western audiences. Interest in the war is declining, and the cost-of-living crisis is beginning to dominate political debates. Consequently, there is a realistic possibility it will become difficult to contribute aid to Ukraine with the same levels of support as time goes by.¹⁸

Another likely second order effect is continued international norms segregation/fragmentation. Continued undermining of the 'Western-led International Order' and concepts of universal values and norms, increases the likelihood of a divide of international actors

operating according to their own concepts of norms and values. This creates the third order effects of increasing the likelihood of conflict globally and undermining multilateral cooperation. There are more than 150 territorial disputes across the globe—100 of them in Africa alone.¹⁹ Cultivating apathy to the Kremlin's aggression against Ukraine risks other actors following their example, heightening risk of conflicts globally. At the same time, a growing suspicion against institutions perceived as Western-led undermines multilateral cooperation at a time when it is essential in combatting

threats like climate change and terrorism. It also creates a direct threat to the safety of those acting on behalf of these institutions, especially peacekeepers. Secondary source reporting suggests that Germany is increasingly becoming a target of Kremlin IIOs on the continent of Africa.²⁰ Concurrently, pro-Kremlin narratives and profiles have been circulating similar content in Niger and Gabon,²¹ and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.²²

Recommendations

Addressing the root causes of Kremlin IIOs outlined in our findings (disillusionment and proliferation of harmful narratives) will require structural changes both to the international system and the regulation of online media. To a degree, these are under way, but structural progress is likely to be slow. Consequently, the recommendations outlined below will focus on messaging.

In his study of International Human Rights pressure,²³ Jamie Gruffydd-Jones identified several key variables that dictate the successful pressure of a campaign among domestic audiences of the target state:

1. Where the pressure comes from (i.e. who is the messenger)—If the main messenger is a figure from a perceived hostile force, it will convey less authority and credibility. By contrast, 'neutral' or 'positive' figures (e.g. respected domestic public figures) are more likely to encourage greater engagement and acceptance of criticism. This, in turn, links to the necessity of local credible messengers that will be best achieved through the reinvention of civil society.
2. What is under scrutiny: The more sensitive the issue, such as issues of sovereignty, the more pushback from a domestic audience it is likely to receive.

3. The form and presentation of the pressure: Overly combative stances, while understandable, can sometimes be counter-productive by encouraging psychological retrenchment. By contrast, a well laid out, evidence-based approach that is emotionally engaging is shown to better hold audience attention and encourage engagement.

4. Who is implicated: Clearly implicating the prime initiators and implementers of the crime is shown to allow audiences to disassociate themselves from regimes and be more open to criticism of regimes and partners. For example, broad labels of a whole society as having collaborated with the Kremlin are likely to produce backlash due to perceptions of such criticisms as paternalistic and an attack on sovereignty. By contrast, criticisms that target unelected juntas or corrupt leadership are more likely to encourage objective analysis by the populace.

This report has used this framework and the findings of its country reports to establish the following strategic and operational recommendations.

Strategic recommendations

1. Establishment of a NATO entity specifically aimed at engaging with the Multi-aligned Community. Despite existing cooperation between NATO and the African Union, our qualitative research demonstrated a prominent perception was that NATO was, at best, a non-entity or, at worst, perceived as an aggressor due to its perceived role in the collapse of Libya, which influences perceptions of its involvement in countering the current invasion of Ukraine. Challenging this perception is critical to undermining the Kremlin's central narrative that it is fighting a defensive, anti-imperialist war. A recommended solution is the establishment of a NATO entity tasked with establishing partnerships with states and civil-society actors in the Multi-aligned Community. Such engagement could be through mutual capacity building in deterring and resisting malign IIOs and grey-zone threats as well as threats from Violent Extremist Organisations (VEOs). The publicising of these efforts could be tailored by local partners according to their perceptions of what their domestic audiences are most likely to respond positively to. Concurrently, a diplomatic branch can act as a forum for dialogue between Western security actors and Multi-aligned Community populations to air regional grievances.

This entity could closely follow the existing model provided by the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF)²⁴; a Command-and-Control centre based in the High North that offers 'opt-in' agreements under which every nation can provide capability and expertise as it sees fit, depending on the nature of the task and the partners involved.

It is further recommended that such an entity be led by Eastern European NATO member states. These states contributed to anti-colonial struggles as part of the Soviet Union and did not take part in the colonisation of the Multi-aligned Community. Furthermore, as former Soviet states that were theoretically independent but actually controlled by Russia, they can act as effective and credible

messengers to counter Soviet nostalgia in the Multi-aligned Community as well as push back on the narrative that the Kremlin has never been a colonial power.

2. Connecting universal values to Multi-aligned Community initiatives: Our research demonstrates that the concepts of universal values, norms and institutions are largely viewed as a purely Western construct or are undermined by a perception of 'selective morality' in the application of international finance and justice. The root cause of this is legitimate grievances with the international system that requires reform. To a degree this is already under way, with a permanent representative from the African Union now within the G20 and similar moves under way within the UN Security Council, but this process will be gradual. As an immediate action, reframing universal values in relation to Multi-aligned Community initiatives in public discourse is more likely to inspire greater stakeholder buy-in. For example, the core principles of the non-aligned movement confirmed at the Bandung Conference of 1955,²⁵ and the African Union's initiatives on democratic governance and peace, both align with universal norms of the United Nations Charter while accommodating critical regional contexts. However, despite these being evidence that contradicts the Kremlin's narrative of international institutions and universal values as a cover for Western hegemony, these initiatives and others like them are not emphasised in Western strategic communications and remain undiscussed within the five countries studied.

3. Not just about the message, but also delivery: The Kremlin's IIOs demonstrate a holistic and multi-dimensional nature, and, therefore, counter operations should embrace a similar approach. This will require detailed understanding of the information environment and the innovative use of existing and emerging sources of information and entertainment before they become dominated by adversarial actors. For example, although beyond the

scope of this project, mobile games are a growing industry on the African continent and have already been successfully utilised by the Kremlin and Western actors in Ukraine.²⁶ Such interactive engagement can prove an effective ‘hook’ to bring audiences to a narrative. At the same time, any messaging should also be calibrated to emphasise empowerment and respect rather than lecturing to avoid perceptions of arrogance or paternalism. This will be best achieved through engagement with local voices and civil society (see Operational, paragraph 2.).

4. Reinvigorating civil society: This has been a common phrase in recent literature and was recommended by several Interviewees during our research, but has also been perceived as unrealistic for some of the case study countries due to their authoritarian environments. However, reinvigoration can still be achieved through reinforcing and creating hospitable conditions for indigenous and organic civil society actors. This can be achieved in the following ways:

- There are significant diaspora communities that have cultural insights necessary for designing engaging and compelling counter narratives and maintaining networks within countries to ensure dissemination, active monitoring, evaluation, and improvement.

- Sharing expertise through diaspora and alumni networks of individuals from Asian, African and Latin American backgrounds in NATO Allied and partner countries. This, in turn, will grow the community of interest and ensure the sharing of Western and non-Western methods.
- Providing local actors with the tools and research methods currently denied to them due to lack of funding, such as secure investigative software like LongArm, speech recognition and translation products like Dragon NaturallySpeaking and Speakai, data analysis and visualisation tools provided by the likes of IBM, and monitoring and evaluation tools such as Pulsar, Hootsuite and other developing software for tracking the spread of narratives.
- Similarly, startup funding could be given to individuals and groups to engage in journalistic and civil-society activities and build their own institutions.

Operational recommendations

1. Approach to responding to Kremlin IIOs must be ethical: For the reasons outlined above, the West cannot allow Kremlin IIOs to continue unchecked. However, as outlined in a recent RAND paper, information and influence operations tend to encourage a negative backlash due to their perceived impact on a person’s autonomy as being antithetical to democratic values.²⁷ Further, attempting to ‘fight fire with fire’ is likely to be counterproductive due to it severely damaging the credibility of Western actors (as was demonstrated by rival Russian

and French influence operations in the Central African Republic)²⁸ in exchange for limited benefits, as making the information environment more conducive to disinformation is more likely to benefit adversarial actors via heightening a general lack of trust in which they thrive. The suggestions are to develop and follow ethical frameworks based on necessity, proportionality (i.e., be an appropriate level of volume, tone and intensity to achieve the desired response), and effects; with a focus on avoiding deception or ‘invoking strong negative emotions’ (fear,

anger, guilt) and following principles of do no harm in possible effects.²⁹

2. Investment in local language campaigns: Local languages were a significant information gap but were highlighted in the qualitative research as an avenue of influence for the Kremlin, particularly in states in which they had strong advocates and proxies. Implementing local language campaigns is proven to increase engagements and trust among diverse audiences through authenticity by demonstrating respect for the community's identity and facilitates a more profound understanding of their messages.³⁰ No campaign can be complete without it. The best way to achieve this is likely to be engagement with diaspora communities and reinvigoration of civil society.

3. Meeting audiences in the middle/reaching objectivity as a starting point: A unifying theme across the Interviewees is that the West is viewed with significant distrust due to perceptions of injustice in the international system. Furthermore, behavioural science literature suggests that confronting audiences' beliefs in dis/mis/mal-information narratives outright is more likely to lead to further psychological entrenchment.³¹ Therefore,

efforts to counter Kremlin narratives should mirror the 'Call Russia' campaign that seeks to counter Kremlin narratives among Russian audiences by calling individual members of Russian society and meeting them in the middle on the arguments.³² Acknowledging flaws in the system and acknowledging that we do not know everything undermines perceptions cultivated by the Kremlin that the West ignores concerns outside of its values and views its own system as absolute. Instead, stress the need for reform and how it is already taking place.

4. Drilling deeper: To gain full understanding of the issue will require methods that were outside the scope of this project. Further investment is required to hire on the ground researchers with local contextual knowledge who will be able to fully understand the offline dimensions of Kremlin influence, further ensure the removal of bias from findings and analysis and identify methods that are likely to achieve maximum effects in strategic communications campaigns to promote universal values and international law and counter Kremlin IIO campaigns.

Caveats

1. Balancing legitimacy and empowerment: A major concern with supporting civil society actors dedicated to opposing Kremlin influence is the risk that they may be seen as Western puppets, which could damage their credibility. One way of managing this is through complete transparency—making it clear that content and output is in the hands of local reliable partners even while funding originates from Western partners. Western powers, therefore, appear as visible but relatively silent partners while preserving oversight frameworks over funding to prevent corruption.

2. Meet in the middle while avoiding giving legitimacy to dis/mis/mal-information: When engaging dis/mis/mal-information

narratives, it is critical to respect differing opinions, particularly when Multi-aligned Community audiences criticise the International System. However, it is equally important to push back on any information that is missing critical context or is patently false. Entertaining or engaging it risks legitimising it and furthering its spread. This is a fine balance to strike that requires less of a script and more flexible intuition. Joint programmes like a NATO entity specifically engaging Multi-aligned Community audiences will avail much needed expertise to navigate unfamiliar socio-cultural environments successfully.

Methodology

The research took the recognised methodology of case study research, analysing “a phenomenon occurring in a bounded context”.³³ These phenomena were significant themes within the selected countries. However, if there were significant political ramifications, the case studies also highlighted these. This approach helped identify the most relevant thematic narratives to address the research questions. All results were validated through triangulation of various sources and methods, including digital data collection and analysis, reviews and cross-referencing with existing research, and Key Insight Interviews (KIIs). Some direct quotes from KIIs have been edited for correct grammar and better understanding.

The research used a mixed-method exploratory sequential design that was empirically

driven and inductively based,³⁴ whereby, for each country, a literature review identified relevant case studies and informed the design of questions for the KIIs, which subsequently informed the quantitative examination of the relevant geographic and temporal digital space by providing on the ground perspective of critical timeframes and events.

This methodology was critically reviewed by the COE community of interest, including through an in-person workshop held in early June 2023, and a period for comment and review later that month. After adjustments, the final methodology was submitted and approved in late June.

Research questions

A Concerning Russia’s information operations:

1. To which audiences is communication targeted?
2. Which Russian narratives resonate in the countries concerned?
3. What current and historical circumstances of those affected countries are likely to create a receptive environment to Russian narratives?
4. Who are the main actors of communication?
5. Can targeted operations be identified?
6. What tactics, techniques and procedures are used in these operations?
7. Are local media manipulated and instrumentalised and how?
8. What are the effects of these operations?

B Concerning Western strategic communications:

1. Which narratives compatible with Western values and interests are

- working in the countries concerned?
2. Which are the most susceptible audiences?
3. Who are the actors of communication, and can be considered as potential allies?

C What are the short- and medium-term (1-3 years) ramifications for Western countries in terms of:

1. Voting in international bodies, including the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly.
2. How have Russia and pro-Russian actors in the region framed the cost-of-living crisis in their favour?
3. How have Russia and pro-Russian actors in the region framed critical national issues in each country?
 - a. Egypt – The cost-of-living crisis.
 - b. Mali – Security and regime stability.
 - c. Kenya – Traditional values and moral decay.

- d. South Africa – The emerging multipolar world order and South Africa’s place within it.
- e. United Arab Emirates – Sanctions and unilateral Western economic measures.

Limitations

As specified in the proposal, the literature review and KIIs were largely conducted in English only. This initially limited the sample pool of potential interviewees to solely English speakers. However, given the limitations on the number of English speakers in Mali, several interviews were conducted in French.

The data collection and analysis used translation software to translate online social media content in the dominant languages of the specific country. However, such translation might have missed certain nuances. Thus, it was highly unlikely that this software produced highly accurate results for large documents or interview transcription. This created an information gap that limited insight and foresight into the issues being studied under this methodology.

The methodology also had limited scope for on-the-ground research beyond KIIs, which limited the ability to monitor oral media beyond secondary source research. It was likely that this impacted the levels of insight into the select countries, all of which typically had limited independent funding in media and a rich oral tradition that translated to the contemporary information environment.

The data collection and analysis were unable to access closed messaging platforms (e.g., WhatsApp and Telegram). Preliminary secondary source research indicated that such platforms played a critical role in the sharing of information and the spread of disinformation in the selected countries. Being unable to monitor them left an information gap that could only be filled by on-the-ground researchers who could access these platforms or contact those on them directly.

The list of research questions was extensive. The resources allocated to this research did not allow for a definitive examination of all the research questions. Although the desk research and KIIs attempted to address all the research questions, qualitative reporting required a degree of inference regarding causality, making key assumptions. Where such inferences were made, they were made explicit in the research report.

Literature review

The literature review was conducted in English or used pre-translated sources only, to establish insight into Russian and Western relations with each country and historical grievances within them, existing information environments in each of the select countries, and Russian information operations. This provided important context to inform the research and identified critical information gaps. The literature review was also used to establish definitions that anchored analysis going forward.

In brief, definitions for this methodology are:

■ Information Influence Operations

(IIOs): The organised attempt by one or more actors to achieve a specific effect among a target audience, often using illegitimate and manipulative behaviour. IIOs draw on communicative tactics such as fabrication, false identities, malign rhetoric, symbolism, and technological advantages to exploit vulnerabilities in the information environment.³⁵ Can be applied at a strategic narrative level or a tactical targeted level.

■ **Propaganda:** Information systematically disseminated by an organisation of actors with the purpose of influencing perceptions in favour of the actors' political narrative. Comes in the shades of **White, Grey and Black**. White is favourable facts. Grey is misleading information (or 'cherry-picked') or from a disguised source to increase its authenticity. Black is outright lies or falsehoods usually disseminated from a disguised source.³⁶

■ **Disinformation:** False or misleading information spread intentionally by an actor or actors to influence perceptions. Often, but not always, from a disguised source.³⁷

■ **Misinformation:** False or inaccurate information spread without malicious intent, although its effects can still be harmful.³⁸

■ **Malinformation:** Information based on fact but used out of context to mislead, harm, or manipulate.³⁹

■ **Conspiracy theory:** Information that attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.⁴⁰

Through the literature review, the research methodology was refined through an extensive examination of the Theory of Reflexive Control (TORC. See Annex A)⁴¹, aspects of which form a core methodology for modern Russian information operations. Where such inferences were made, they were made explicit in the research report.

This enhanced our understanding of the Kremlin information tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) and how they are scaled from specific events and social groupings up to a national or region-wide level.

The analysis of the TORC and Kremlin TTPs were further informed by existing research on Russian information operations. This included directly translated sources such as Messner's theory of *subversion warfare*, Panarin's theory of *information warfare*, and Dugin's theory of *net-centric warfare*. It also included Western studies of Russian information warfare, including Thomas Rid's *Active Measures* and previous research by the NATO StratCom COE.

Case studies

Case studies were selected to examine, and thus be representative or typical of specific phenomena, namely Russian IIOs. Case studies were chosen via literal replication logic, as in, they were selected to have similar results (with contextual variations) rather than similar study characteristics.⁴²

The selection of the proposed case study themes outlined in Table 1 has been based on initial discussions at the COE's workshop held in June 2023, secondary source research and digital analysis. With a focus on energy and food security-linked phenomena, we also prioritised themes where we may see

the greatest likelihood of Russian information operations activity and competing narratives.

Country	Themes
Mali	Security and regime stability
Kenya	Traditional values and moral decay
Egypt	Cost of living crisis
South Africa	The multipolar world and South Africa's place in it
United Arab Emirates	Sanctions and unilateral Western economic measures

Table 1: Case Study themes

Key Insight Interviews and qualitative analysis

The KIIs were conducted in English and French and then transcribed for subsequent thematic coding analysis (TCA).⁴³ They were limited to five per country, (due to time scarcity) unless there were exceptional circumstances. The selection criteria for potential interviewees included their recent, relevant academic or journalistic output, their political, security communications and/or media specialist knowledge, their local, cultural background and their recent proximity to the geographical area of study. The latter were included as we wished to maximise ground-truth via interviewees with deep and recent experience on the ground, rather than academics far removed from those circumstances, spatially and temporally.

All interviewees were informed of the scope of the research and their consent was requested. Further, their consent to be credited in the final research paper was established. However, for security reasons or otherwise, several interviewees wished to remain anonymous. This will be honoured and a list of those interviewees consenting to being named will be made available separately.

The KIIs were in the format of semi-structured questions given over a period of 45–60 minutes, conducted over VoIP systems (Teams, Zoom). Multi-case study protocol ensured that certain questions were common across all interviews, regardless of case study, with other questions designed for the specific case study context.

Digital data collection and analysis

Our approach has differed for each of the core social media platforms and associated large content and news providers that deliver content engagement. The commonality of cause has been combining the views and reach with their associated output in text, image, and video formats across these platforms into a comparable dataset.

We focused on the time window of 1 January 2022 until 1 September 2023. This covers the build-up of the Ukraine conflict and covering 18 months of the war. All digital media was searched for within the date parameters. For relevance, we used the following parameters: Region, Country, City, Names, Keywords, #HashTags. Once this dataset was established, we sorted by Views, Shares (Posts), Comments and Likes. Our process involved seeking out the source-point and then cascading through the time stamps and collating accounts and organisations that participated in significant engagement.

This has enabled us to centre the analysis around each of the five countries. Our approach uncovered that the largest content metric (be it text, image, or video) was produced mostly outside of each country and amplified inside the country concerned. Unsurprisingly, the largest media companies and social media ‘influencers’ from around the world featured heavily in source material prior to in-country engagement. This approach considers the larger diaspora and interested parties across the wider communities worldwide, as none of these analysed search terms remain isolated within the borderless internet. Material reviewed and analysed within the original source from outside of a country was discovered through the process of targeted search profile terms and subsequent engagement using the parameters described above.

The analysis of all material and the presentation of significant material was based on the following metrics: Views, Shares (posts), Re-edited Posts, Comments, and Likes. This

enabled us to filter out the material that might be seen as interesting, topical, or relevant, but which had no significance in volume and did not engage within the public space. Engagement was our first priority; once the material was extracted, we applied three core data visualisations: (i) Sentiment Analysis (ii) Word Cloud (iii) Emoticon Usage. Visually we have limited this to something that can be readily viewed and understood. We focused on short statements and questions that had garnered a motivational response (engagement) through Comments. These were collected and collated from sources that represented that question or statement. These were then custom analysed through bespoke software and output through a Word Cloud for the Top 100 words, and Parliament Graphs for the Top 10 Emoticons by volume per statement/question.

The approach we have taken has demonstrated that conversations coalesce around a topic that is often personal to the audience, resonates with the individual and is personality driven. Leaders, not countries and their perceived collective personalities, drive the traffic and engagement—Putin before Russia, Zelensky before Ukraine. This played out in the keywords, hashtags and engagement.

Unsurprisingly, humour and subversion receive the strongest engagement. Something that individual large-scale global influencers have understood and exploited to the maximum. The most effective social media asks the question, poses an opinion and often delivers the answer. Controversy drives traffic, ‘clout’ and, therefore, financial gain for all concerned. Outside of the region, media companies and social media influencers drive the conversations. Politically-motivated influencers from another geographical region can, and do, have both immense sway and are often used and amplified for nefarious purposes. The unintended consequences of an ideological viewpoint in one country is being utilised by regimes to support their own narrative elsewhere. This is another definition and an example of the ‘useful idiot’.

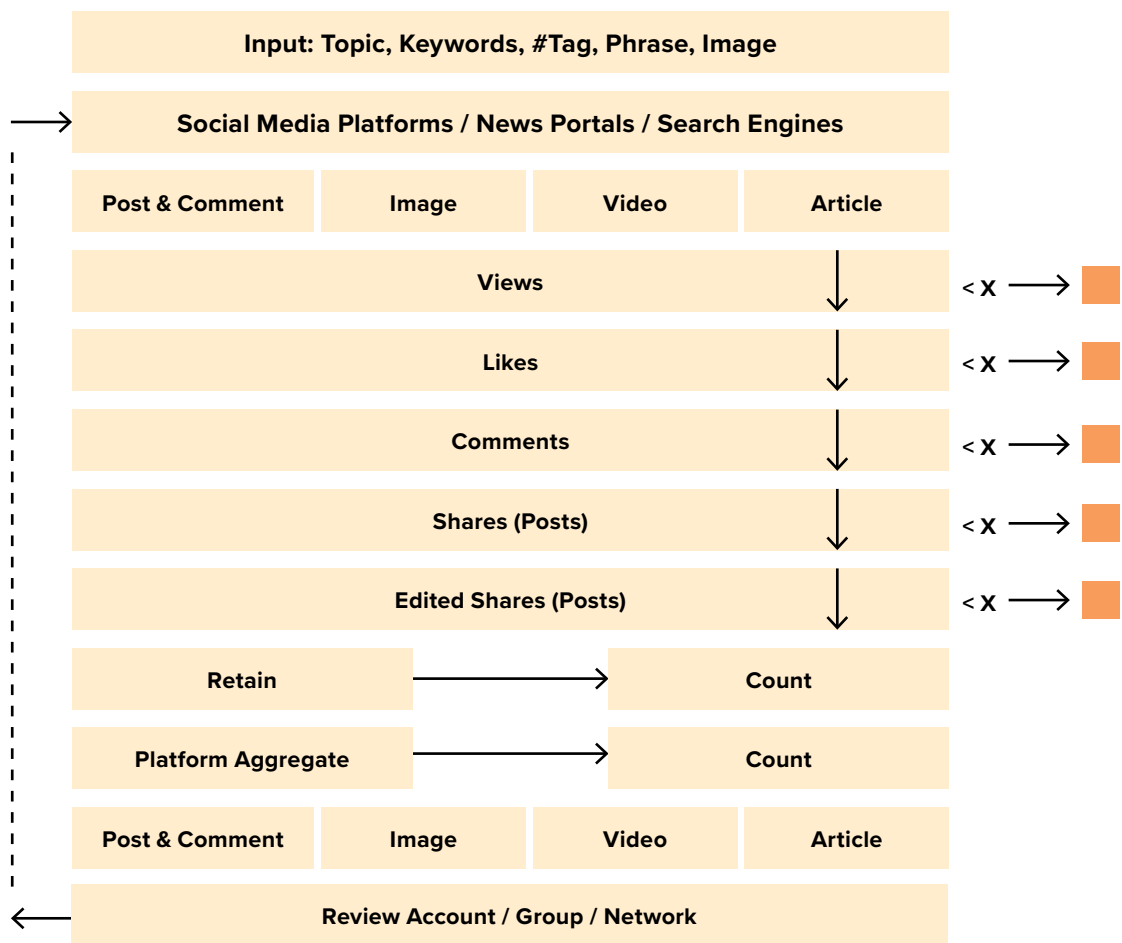


Fig. 2. Digital data scrape process.

The social media platforms vary widely in their suppression of content, accounts of individuals and organisations. With rulesets operating for different countries, often based on national laws and operating requirements and, through other ideological and political policy reasons, are enforced by the source country, mostly driven by the US.

Parliament graphs have been used to display the percentage of Emoticon Usage as a response in-line or as a response to a question, statement or theme posed within social media. Using the full Emoji Unicode TF8 sets, Emoticons and Emojis have been pattern matched and merged to produce a consistent dataset to run. A simple counting metric was used to generate percentage usage for each Emoji within the analysed comments.

The comments were collected against questions or statements that resonated along the same line of enquiry. This data was collected from all the major social media platforms. The Parliament Graphs do not ensure any analysis of weighting that is used within the Sentiment Analysis, this is purely usage. It is clear to all that the standard three Emojis of Grinning Face, Grinning Face with Smiling Eyes, Face with Tears of Joy, are used most heavily. These three represent the universal response to agreement and are often used in an ironic way as a response to a statement. As such, contextualisation is important when analysing for Sentiment. It is also worth noting that both mobile devices and the tools provided by the social media companies to respond within a post use a frequently/most frequently used display for the Emoji used by the

individual responding. This also generates a positive reinforcement loop for most frequently used Emojis. Therefore, it is worth reviewing the smaller percentages on each Parliament Graph to see more 'nuanced' responses to the questions and statements posed. We restricted the displayed datasets to the Top 10 for both display purposes and because the data often

reduced dramatically to an equal weighted number of dozens of minor used Emoticons further down the usage list. The data analysed for each Question, Comment Group consisted of at least 1,000 individual post responses, with some receiving up to 100,000 responses.

Annexes

- A: Researching Russian IIOs – Refining the Methodology
- B. Country Report – Egypt
- C. Country Report – Mali
- D. Country Report – Kenya
- E. Country Report – South Africa
- F. Country Report – United Arab Emirates

Annex A

Researching Russian IIOS: Refining the Methodology

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Introduction

Russian Information Influence Operations (IIOs) have become a growing topic of interest among policymakers, practitioners of information resilience, and the general public since the advent (and weaponisation) of social media and as part of the wider study of dis/mis/mal-information and Russian *gibridnaya voyna* (hybrid warfare). This growing interest in IIOs has yielded positive results in terms of increased resilience and awareness. But it has also led to the term being redefined and politicised across Western literature. It is therefore necessary to define what we mean by IIOs.

IIOs are defined by the NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence (StratCom COE) as systematic campaigns by one or more actors to achieve a desired effect using a range of online and offline measures, often using illegitimate and manipulative behaviour 'drawing on communicative tactics such as fabrication, false identities, malign rhetoric, symbolism, and technological advantages to exploit vulnerabilities in the information environment.'⁴⁴ However, this definition is not complete, as it implies that such operations exclusively use disinformation tactics (black propaganda). But states frequently use a blend of propaganda 'shades' (white, grey and black) in their operations. Therefore, this methodology has chosen to expand the

definition to include factual information that is beneficial to the disseminator (white propaganda), while acknowledging it frequently comes from a disguised source, as well as misinformation (grey propaganda) and the desire to create a cumulative effect on attitudes and behaviours. IIOs can be applied at a strategic narrative level or a tactical targeted level.

IIOs seek to exploit vulnerabilities in the public information sphere. One of the most common vulnerabilities across the international community is the rise of conspiracy theories as everyday explainers for events.⁴⁵ This is particularly true in areas of lower media literacy and with lower levels of trust in government, which was a common factor to varying degrees among the selected countries of study. It was therefore appropriate for the methodology of this study to further define 'conspiracy theories.' By conducting a smaller literature review of several authoritative works on conspiracy theories and public consumptions of them, this methodology arrived at Douglas et. al.'s definition that they are 'information that attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors.'⁴⁶

Analysis using the Theory of Reflexive Control (TORC)

The Kremlin has always assigned special importance to information-psychological operations⁴⁷ with reference to them in both the 2015 National Security Strategy and 2016 Information Security Concept.⁴⁸ According to former KGB Maj. Gen. Oleg Kalugin, information operations, rather than intelligence gathering, were the 'heart and soul of Soviet intelligence.'⁴⁹ Western information operations are continuously held as responsible for the

Soviet Union's collapse by Russian observers,⁵⁰ and the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine cited information as a key component of full-spectrum warfare. While primarily a document on military strategy that focuses on measures outside of the traditional military spectrum as a complement to military operations (and therefore out of the scope of this report), it is nevertheless indicative of the centrality of IIOs in the Russian mindset. However, while Gerasimov's

paper attracted much attention in the West, the prior resurgence in Information Warfare literature went remarkably unnoticed until the Crimea crisis of 2014. This report analysed three prominent Russian works on the subject highlighted in Fridman's authoritative work on Hybrid Warfare: Evgeny Messner's theory of Subversion Warfare, Igor Panarin's theory of Information Warfare, and Alexander Dugin's theory of Net-centric Warfare.⁵¹

In the twentieth century, Messner highlighted the shift in warfare from direct military force to manipulating a nation's will through propaganda. This required a blend of 'propaganda by deed', 'propaganda by word' and 'offensive' and 'defensive' propaganda'.⁵² He also coined the term 'psycho-reconnaissance' to understand the target's socio-cultural context for effective manipulation.⁵³ Messner also argued that peaceful and aggressive relations were inseparable, implying the necessity for ongoing IIOs.

Though Messner's anti-communist views led to his work being overlooked in Soviet Russia, it has gained prominence in Putin's Russia, particularly in the context of modern IIO theory. His ideas resonate in the works of Dugin and Panarin, although the latter two take a more detailed approach to strategic influence.

Igor Panarin, a political scientist in the Russian Military Academy of Science, aligns with Messner by viewing the informational domain as a critical battleground throughout history.⁵⁴ But Panarin broadens the scope by defining three parallel stages of information warfare:

- 'Collection, aggregation and exchange of information on adversaries and allies for the purpose of conducting active actions.'⁵⁵
- 'Infiltration of negative commentaries and disinformation into the informational domain of the adversary' as well as countering any attempt by the adversary to combat it or receive factual information.⁵⁶

- Informational defence—blocking the adversary's attempts to do the same.

He views IIOs not only as a means to enhance national power, but also as a defensive strategy against perceived Western information warfare targeting Russia.⁵⁷ Moreover, Panarin argues that information warfare is not exclusive to the military domain; it extends across civilian economic, financial, and diplomatic spheres.

Panarin primarily emphasises exploiting various facets of national power to influence adversaries' decision-making processes through the manipulation of 'social objects', categorising them into groupings of 'large'—such as state-level social classes and professions; 'medium'—such as commercial industries, organisations, and military units; and 'small' such as families, small military units, neighbourhoods, etc.

Similarly, Dugin argues that 'reality is secondary to the virtual' due to the fact 'reality itself only becomes real after reports about it appear in the informational dimension.'⁵⁸ He extends Messner and Panarin's theories by targeting not only institutional networks but also demographic groups. Dugin advocates for the manipulation of 'natural networks,' such as minorities, through 'agents of influence' and global systems like international institutions and media to propagate favourable narratives.

Fridman succinctly summarises that Dugin's net-centric warfare aims to influence networks to promote specific ideas for political goals. Dugin's theory was adopted to the Command and Control Research Group, which promoted it becoming a method of enhancing military combat power.⁵⁹ However, Dugin sees it as transcending military application, altering the world's political, economic, social, cultural, and anthropological landscape in the ongoing struggle between Eurasian and Atlantic cultures.

Ultimately, Messner's observations on modern warfare heavily influenced later thinkers like Dugin and Panarin, who expanded and detailed the strategies and stages of information warfare, encompassing its use for both offensive influence and defensive protection

in the global geopolitical landscape that are evident in modern Kremlin IIOs.

Despite Russian assertions that the West is the original practitioner and even expert on information operations, study of the subject has only entered the popular public domain in the West relatively recently.⁶⁰

One of the first things to note regarding Western literature on Russian information operations is an apparent focus on simplicity, or even a lack of strategy, especially in the internet age. Instead, most of the prominent literature focuses on the operational (campaign) and tactical level.

One of the most popular understandings of Russian IIOs (specifically its use of propaganda) is Paul and Matthews's 'Firehose of Falsehood' model, in which Kremlin propaganda is defined by its 'high number of channels and a shameless willingness to disseminate partial truths or outright fictions'. The benefit of this model is that the appearance of multiple sources endorsing the same argument is more persuasive than a single source, especially when within the target's social group. Likewise, repetitiveness creates an illusory effect of truth via a natural tendency by people to use frequency as a metric for truth when confronted with masses of information. Furthermore, removing the obstacle of establishing facts allows the Kremlin to create first impressions, which are resilient to change, especially when presented through 'peripheral cues' like a professional format.⁶¹

An equally popular conception is that, when confronted in its IIO activities or other malign operations, the Kremlin engages in a simple but effective formula of rebuttal, dubbed by Ben Nimmo as the '4 Ds':⁶²

- **Dismiss** – either by denying the allegations on the ground or denying the accuser.
- **Distort** – misrepresenting information to align with the overarching narrative.
- **Distract** – launching counter accusations about separate topics to the one being discussed (often in the form of 'whataboutism').⁶³
- **Dismay** – conveying the belief that any opposition to Russian objectives or that achieving objective truth is a hopeless endeavour.

Others have since added a fifth D: **Divide** – messages designed to create conflict between subgroups and widen divisions within a community.⁶⁴ This material is often presented in a manner as to gain an emotional reaction. Content that angers, disgusts, or shocks is more likely to be engaged with according to psychological literature.⁶⁵ Likewise, this material also focuses on an entertainment factor, which increases its chances of being shared and gaining positive interactions,⁶⁶ as well as achieving a lasting impression on viewers even if untrue.⁶⁷

These narratives are typically disseminated via several methods:

1. **Front organisations:** A seemingly independent entity or group that conceals its true affiliations and aims, serving as a tool in propaganda campaigns. Typically, a front organisation presents itself as separate from the entity it represents or serves, often adopting a benign or relatable facade to gain trust and influence. These fronts are strategically created or manipulated by a controlling entity, such as a government or special interest group, to disseminate propaganda or advance specific agendas. Front organisations engage in activities that appear altruistic or aligned with community interests, allowing them to infiltrate social, cultural, or political spheres.
2. **Agents of influence:** Individuals strategically positioned to promote specific ideas, messages, or agendas within a target audience or society. Their role in propaganda campaigns involves subtly shaping public opinion or decision-making by spreading information, narratives, or ideologies that

align with the propagandist's goals. These agents often exploit their credibility, connections, or authority in various domains, such as media, academia, politics, or social groups, to gain trust and influence over the targeted population. By appearing as independent sources or trusted figures, agents of influence can effectively sway opinions, provoke reactions, and foster an environment conducive to the propagandist's aims, all while maintaining a façade of impartiality or autonomy. These can include 'entrepreneurs of influence'⁶⁸ or 'useful idiots'⁶⁹ and cynics.⁷⁰

3. **Information laundering:** *RT* and *Sputnik* play a critical role in this form of dissemination. Either by directly producing propaganda content that is then provided to local organisations free of charge or bringing in social media commentary (often linked to pro-Kremlin inauthentic networks) to legitimise a narrative.
4. With the advent of social media, the employment of **sock puppet profiles** (fake accounts posing as an individual established to manipulate online discussions)⁷¹ and **bot networks** (semi-automated or automated programs that use the normal functions of communications platforms to amplify an existing message)⁷² also play an increasingly significant role in dissemination.

In Western literature, Kremlin IIOs are viewed as prioritising quantity over consistent quality messaging. Rid observes that Kremlin IIOs in the digital age have become more active, sacrificing control for increased output and relying on societies to spread propaganda.⁷³ Dr Rory Cormac emphasises the trade-offs between reach and deniability, highlighting the outsourcing and limited control in IIO strategies.⁷⁴ While this suggestion of a 'throw it out and see what sticks' approach to Kremlin IIOs is debatable, what is undeniable in Western literature is these operations' effectiveness. The West faces challenges countering these threats while preserving free speech and determining the best deterrent strategy. In his book *Subversion*, Dr Andreas Krieg goes as far

to say that 'Russia provides the most sophisticated case study for how states weaponise narratives in an effort to subvert the opponent's information-psychological stability'.⁷⁵ And even sceptics like Rid who suggest that usually the impacts of IIOs are overstated acknowledge that the perception of them is such that it helps 'expand and escalate that very threat and its potential'.⁷⁶

Many scholars have successfully utilised these commonalities to create research frameworks for identifying Kremlin TTPs within IIOs. However, these commonly focus on vague outputs like 'winning the information war' or 'muddying the water' rather than the ultimate effects of influencing attitudes, behaviours and, ultimately, decision-making. These risk creating misconceptions that Kremlin IIOs are unguided or lack a strategic goal beyond 'chaos'. Considering our research questions focus not just on narratives but also on opinion and decisions to engage with Russian narratives over Western ones, we chose to use an existing Soviet concept (since revamped in modern Russian IIO strategies), which focuses on creating a cumulative impact on decision-making through information inputs: The Theory of Reflexive Control (TORC).⁷⁷

First established by Dr Vladimir Lefebvre in the 1960s, and then built on by V. Druzhinin and D. Kontorov, the TORC is a methodical framework for shaping perceptions of target audiences via information inputs to create voluntary decision-making (a 'reflexive action') in the target (or 'agent') that is favourable to the practitioner.⁷⁸ It encompasses not only the logical processing of information (including information systems), but also psychological, emotional, and cultural frameworks within which decisions are made.⁷⁹

As detailed in the diagram below,⁸⁰ the TORC begins with a 'model of the enemy'—this is an overall profile of an individual, group, or state that acts as the target audience (similar to Messner's concept of psycho-reconnaissance). It includes detailed psychological, structural, cultural, and emotional contexts in order to understand the best choices of information

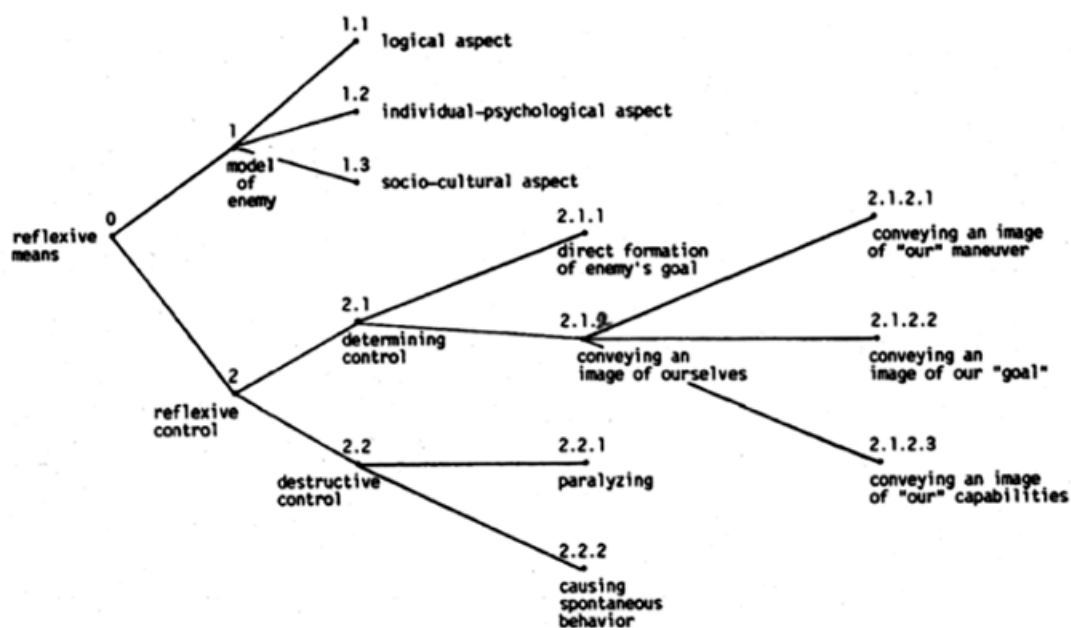


Fig. A1. Original concept of the Theory of Reflexive Control.

input to achieve the desired reflexive action. The information input chosen will then be determined by the desire to create a destructive action or determining action. Information inputs will target cultural, psychological and/or emotional issues and contain narratives most likely to gain traction with the target audience and produce desired outputs. These outputs can include information pressure, which can encompass: (1) tailored information or narratives designed for a select group that may be more vocal or have more influence in decision-making; (2) a ‘firehose of falsehood’⁸¹ designed to cognitively overload individuals and groups; or (3) conveyance of a desired ‘image’ of what the practitioner is doing, what their goal is, and what the potential responsive options are.

This process aims to achieve several behavioural outcomes: either those falling under ‘determining action’, such as a change in attitude and/or behaviour that is conducive to the practitioner’s immediate or strategic core interests; or destructive actions, primarily ‘paralysis,’ either in analysis of the current situation, or in discussion of responses via severe

polarisation of attitudes. The primary difference between determining and destructive actions should, therefore, be viewed as being based on the severity of the impact.

The TORC was first analysed by Western practitioners in the 1980s.⁸² Consequently, it can be broken down even further based on existing literature and technological changes in the 21st century. For instance, Kasapolgu rightly recognises the presence of *maskirovka* (masquerade, i.e., deception, such as the disguise of Russian special forces during the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014),⁸³ but it can be legitimately argued that this is only one of three overlapping (and often concurrent) concepts underneath the umbrella of the TORC. In practitioner efforts to provide carefully calculated informational inputs, it can engage not just in *maskirovka*, but also *provokatsiya*⁸⁴ (provocation, such as false-flag attacks and hoaxes), and *informatsionnaya voyna* (taken in this context as the application of white, grey and black propaganda to manipulate information systems and cognition). In the context of the 21st century, inputs and activities can constitute a range of

online and offline activities, but heavily utilise social media.⁸⁵ A further benefit of the TORC is its flexibility of scale. As Kasapolgu highlights, the 'insidious merit' of the TORC is how it can be applied at an operational, tactical and/or strategic level.⁸⁶ But in a non-military context,

this can be used to observe its usage at an individual/community, regional, and policymaking/national level. Therefore, this report adapts the existing framework to accommodate the larger scale and methods in which the TORC now operates (Fig. A2.).

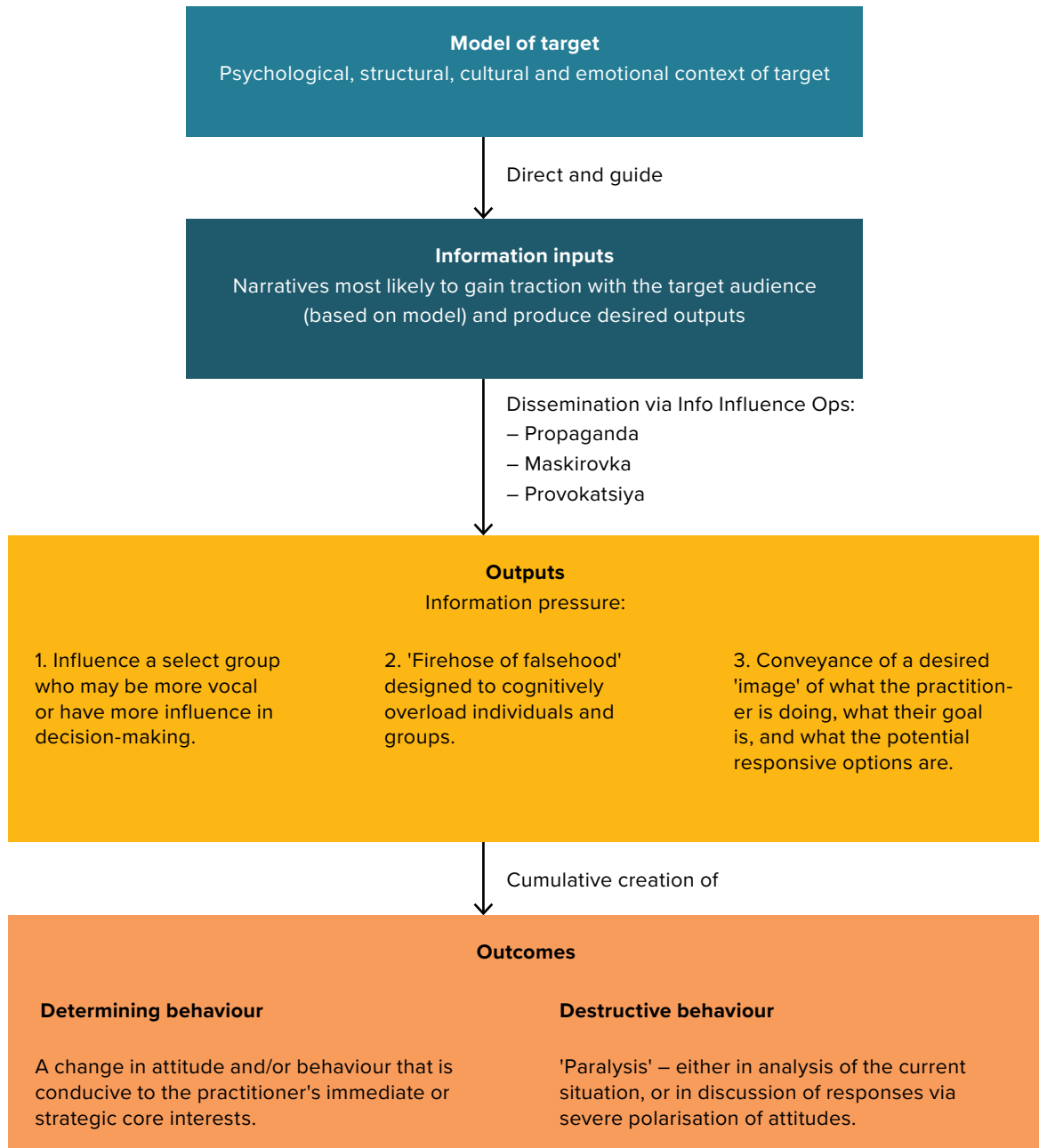


Fig. A2. Theory of Reflexive Control research framework.

Applicability to Research Methodology

The TORC has been the subject of increased scrutiny in the West since the Crimea Crisis. But remarkably, it has rarely been used as a guiding framework to understand and analyse ongoing Russian IIOs. This is largely because it has traditionally been viewed through a military lens. But as Giles and Seaboyer attest, it is not a purely military discipline.⁸⁷ Indeed, it can be argued that, according to Russia's own texts on information warfare, the TORC cannot be viewed as separate from non-military operations precisely because information warfare is considered both a peacetime and wartime activity. Therefore, it is entirely legitimate to adapt the TORC as a framework for analysing Kremlin IIOs. At the same time, this is not a foolproof framework. The entire point of IIOs and the TORC in the 21st century is to create changes that will not always be readily apparent. Nevertheless, by adopting the framework in our study, we were better able to understand the likely target of information inputs (in terms of historical, cultural, and psychological fault lines), the target audiences, and intended outputs and outcomes. This can also act as a further guide for measurements of a 'successful' IIO.

There is significant debate as to how one measures the success of IIOs, or even if you can measure impact at all. According to Jamieson's study of the 2016 US presidential campaign, they were critical in getting Trump elected by shifting perceptions of Clinton and Trump.⁸⁸ Whereas Rid sees the overall impact as 'impossibly hard to measure by design'.⁸⁹

In his seminal work on subversion, Dr Andreas Krieg focuses on 'mobilisation'—to what extent the attitudes, decisions, and behaviours produce real action.⁹⁰ He suggests five levels of impact according to this metric ranging from 1 (low impact) to 5 (high impact):

1. Social media discourse among genuine users.
2. Offline civil-societal discourse involving conventional media.

3. Policy-relevant discourse between experts and policymakers.
4. Nonvirtual civil-societal mobilisation (e.g. protests and riots).
5. A strategic shift in policy making.

However, this cannot be applied to all systems at the same level. In democracies, freedom of expression and assembly (and, therefore, protest) are guaranteed. But in more authoritarian systems, such as several of the selected countries in this study, the public space is tightly controlled, making public protests much less likely. Therefore, we settled on "reach" and "penetration" as metrics of success.

Reach quantifies the total number of users exposed to a campaign, regardless of whether they are part of the target audience or not.

Penetration specifically looks at the percentage of the target audience that has been reached, and how many have shared or engaged with that content, indicating the level of adoption or engagement within that group.

Both metrics are important to understanding the aimed impacts of IIOs in the 21st century. While reach indicates the potential reach and visibility of a campaign, penetration provides insights into the campaign's effectiveness in engaging and influencing the intended audience. In the context of our work, this is especially important as the penetration is about mainstream media and influencers and how they respond and amplify material that may be misinformation or disinformation. This further fits within Russian concepts of IIOs⁹¹ and the TORC. Although it is almost certain that any immediate destabilising actions would be welcomed by the Kremlin, multiple studies note that the Russian approach is marked by strategic patience with the aim of creating a fragmented information environment, which leads to the desired destructive reflexive actions of cynicism

and apathy or withdrawal into bias-confirming sources. This leads to further polarisation and the desired strategic outcome of 'paralysis' or actions that are designed to align with the constructed images the Kremlin projects. For instance, a favourable image of Russia leads to potential demonstrations supporting alignment with Russia or at least acquiescence to it. This is summarised by former KGB Chief Yuri Andropov's belief that exposure to disinformation was similar to cocaine: 'a little bit every so often won't hurt, but if you start to use it every day, you become a different man all together.'⁹²

Annex B

Egypt

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Introduction

Scholars frequently cite the 1950s and 60s as the heyday of Russian-Egyptian cooperation. In the latter 20th century, relations between Cairo and Moscow were increasingly balanced by Egypt's growing alignment with the West up to and after the Camp David Accords in 1978. Western-Egyptian relations were further solidified in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks of 2001, as the US and other Western states sought partners who similarly rejected political Islamism. However, the US-led War on Terror has soured relations by inadvertently

cultivating an image of the West as Islamophobic and following a selective morality. By contrast, Russia, seen as the heir to the Soviet Union, has enjoyed a reservoir of goodwill. The Kremlin's rejection of the Arab Spring and lack of focus on human rights has also cultivated an 'honest' and sincere presentation of itself in contrast to the West. Coupled with its significant role in Egypt's food supply, as well as its media presence, these factors have given the Kremlin subtle influence over narratives in Egypt that should not be dismissed lightly.

Desk Research

Historic and contemporary relations with the West and Russia

Russian-Egyptian relations have experienced an evolution from historical to contemporary times, marked by a mixture of cooperation and occasional tensions. The roots of their relationship date back to the 18th and 19th century, when Egypt sought Russian support against the Ottoman Empire and Russia sought influence in its rival's backyard to further its own foreign policy goal of dominating the Black Sea and its ideological goal of protecting Orthodox communities in Palestine.⁹³ However, like many states in the Multi-aligned Community, it was during the Cold War that their ties solidified significantly, as Egypt, under Gamal Abdel Nasser, leaned towards the Soviet Union for political and military backing as relations between Nasser and Britain broke down and resulted in the Suez Crisis in 1956. During this time, the USSR offered Egypt significant technical and diplomatic support.⁹⁴ This era saw the establishment of numerous Soviet aid projects and military assistance to Egypt.⁹⁵ The latter proved highly important in the build-up and outset of the Yom Kippur War in 1973.⁹⁶ However, the relations saw a downturn as Soviet economic fortunes declined along with its military aid.

After Egypt's peace treaty with Israel in 1979, the Soviet Union began to withdraw its support in order to maintain relations with its other Arab allies.⁹⁷ However, this only enhanced views of Russia among the Egyptian public for its perceived stance against Israel and Sadat's 'betrayal'.⁹⁸

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia and Egypt have sought to rebuild their partnership on new grounds. Russia has positioned itself as a mediator on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) that threatens Egypt's water supply,⁹⁹ and both countries have engaged in increased military deals and joint exercises.¹⁰⁰ But a pivotal turning point for Egypt and the wider region's relations with Russia and the West was the Arab Spring.

Russia's intervention in Syria from the autumn of 2015 onwards and its support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya further elevated its role as a powerbroker in regional politics. This stood in stark contrast to the West's perceived failures to resolve both these issues and allowing chaos to spread, as well as gradually shifting its

narratives from celebration of the uprisings to disavowal of their outcome.¹⁰¹ In Egypt, Moscow was highly critical of pro-democracy protests across the region (often implying they were CIA backed)¹⁰² and was quick to support Sisi after he came to power; further stressing its view of Egypt as one of its most important partners without the contingent of human rights.¹⁰³ This created increased trade, tourism, military and foreign policy ties.¹⁰⁴ Perhaps the most critical of these are energy cooperation, with an agreement in 2018 for Russia's state-owned Rosatom to contribute to the development of nuclear power in Egypt (an agreement that has progressed despite the Ukraine war)¹⁰⁵ and food exports, with up to one-third of wheat coming to Egypt originating in Russia.¹⁰⁶

The West's—and particularly the US'—refusal to designate Abdel Sisi's seizure of power from the Muslim Brotherhood-led government as a coup further entrenched existing public views of the US as pursuing selective morality

Information environment

Traditional press continues to play a significant role in Egypt; with its four largest papers, *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, *Al-Youm Al-Saba'*, *Al-Shorouk*, and *Al-Ahram*, maintaining significant followings.¹¹⁴ The more intimate format of chat-show style video outlets has played a significant role in shaping the opinions of older generations.¹¹⁵ Since taking power, President Sisi has significantly clamped down on all forms of public expression and dissent, including by blocking hundreds of websites. The Supreme Council for the Administration of the Media, whose director and members are appointed directly by Sisi, holds a tight grip over print, broadcast, and social media.¹¹⁶ This has rendered editorial lines relatively unimportant, even at traditionally independent newspapers. It has also limited public mobilisation and driven the majority of discourse into the online sphere, especially from the youth.¹¹⁷ According to Elmasry and el-Nawawy, this has created a third order effect of journalistic messages adopting a less objective and more personable format that appeals to reader taste and emotion.¹¹⁸

and an anti-Islam agenda. This was further exacerbated by the US-endorsed NATO mission in Libya in 2011. Due to the West's deference to the US, other Western states have become tainted by association.¹⁰⁷ At the same time, in response to criticism from the US and European leaders about human rights abuses committed by his regime,¹⁰⁸ Sisi has sought to diversify Egypt's global partnerships by cementing ties with the Kremlin.¹⁰⁹ In short, the West has won over neither the elites nor the general population.

It is in this context that Egypt has refused to condemn the Kremlin's war in Ukraine.¹¹⁰ Egypt has instead chosen to maintain a policy of 'positive neutrality'¹¹¹ in the conflict and has rejected the idea of imposing sanctions on Russia despite the fact that the conflict's impacts on global food security threaten Egyptian stability.¹¹² Addressing the International Economic Forum held in St. Petersburg on 15-18th June 2023, President Abdel Sisi praised Egypt's "distinguished" relations with Russia.¹¹³

This creates a more conducive environment for IIOs.

Conspiracy theories are widespread within Egypt's information environment. This is a phenomenon of the Arab world that has been noted by Western and Middle Eastern observers alike.¹¹⁹ Hafed al-Ghwell cites Arab history over the past few centuries (which is dominated by unequal treaties, exploitation, and powerlessness in the face of foreign and domestic malign actors) as a root cause of this:

*"In a part of the world where the public is largely at a distance from the levers of power and influence, and a lack of any real transparency in government is often coupled with state-controlled media and intellectual laziness, it is no wonder that most cling to vast, elaborate conspiracies to explain a country's ills."*¹²⁰

As a second order effect, most information expressing a straightforward explanation

is treated with scepticism in favour of darker motives, creating a third order effect of establishing a climate in which malign IIOs, which often espouse conspiratorial narratives, can thrive.

Multiple studies have found that Russian narratives are a part of the daily news cycle in Egypt and the wider MENA region. *RT Arabic* posts at more than three times the rate of the *BBC* and is viewed as a credible source; the Arabic news aggregator, Nabd, frequently reposts *RT Arabic* articles.¹²¹ The European Union's disinformation database¹²² offers an extensive record of *RT Arabic* reposting across regional media, on Nabd and other sites, with all of them containing a conspiratorial and anti-Western slant.¹²³ In total, *RT Arabic's* social media platforms have garnered a combined 804 million views—a number that has risen exponentially since February 2022, with *RT Arabic's* Facebook page being referred to as a

'powerhouse'.¹²⁴ As a result, the Egyptian and regional population are likely more familiar with Russian narratives than Western ones and see Russian media as a credible source, making them more susceptible to Kremlin IIOs.

Our review of Egypt's information environment has brought to light a few critical aspects for the overall study. Firstly, traditional media content, as a major opinion shaper, would have to be observed as well as social media with current resources. Secondly, if content was circulating widely, then it was highly likely to be at the government's behest and would enhance our understanding of 'elite' sensibilities. Thirdly, Egyptians can express some genuine sentiment online, giving an insight into public sensibilities. Lastly, the significant presence of Russian media means there was a realistic possibility that Kremlin operations would be less concealed than in other case studies.

Political, constitutional and legal frameworks

Adopted in 2014, Egypt's constitution enshrines principles of democracy, social justice, and equality before the law. Additionally, it recognises the importance of preserving Egypt's cultural and historical heritage. The constitution also safeguards fundamental rights and freedoms, such as freedom of expression and religion. It also espouses respect for national borders. However, criticism was levelled at the 2014 constitution as being 'at odds with international legal obligations and standards.'¹²⁵ Specifically its deviations from treaties like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, and the Convention of Political Rights of Women, all of which Egypt ratified, but in its constitution includes the phrase 'in accordance with determined conditions'.¹²⁶ There is a realistic possibility that this phrase can be used to limit the application of international law. These concerns were heightened in 2021 by amendments that would allow the government judicial oversight over the constitutionality of decisions taken by international

bodies.¹²⁷ Consequently, how much Sisi's Egypt considers itself bound by international law is debatable, and it can be argued this is reflected in its foreign policy. For example, in December of 2022, President Sisi issued a presidential decree that unilaterally demarcated the country's maritime border with Libya in violation of Libya's sovereignty and against the protests of the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Unity.¹²⁸

When considering this framework, Egypt's balancing act on Ukraine is entirely in keeping with its constitutional structure regarding international law. While the respect for national borders has been espoused by the Egyptian State Information Agency in response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the press release stressed the rejection of sanctions, the need for diplomatic resolutions and avoided any direct condemnation of the Kremlin, expressing a 'positive neutrality' that Cairo seeks to foster across Egypt. Likewise, while President Sisi has implemented laws purportedly to curb fake news and disinformation 'that may harm national security', many critics

and international observers suggest they are selectively enforced to silence critics.¹²⁹ As a result, any information that displaces blame for domestic crises (like rising food and energy prices) from the government is likely to become the dominant narrative. As a result, impacts of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine on the cost-of-living crisis is likely to be a dominant narrative but dis/mis/mal-information as to the cause of the war is likely to go unimpeded.

Summary

Among the most critical consistent factors in historical and contemporary relations were that Egypt received weapons and vital agricultural commodities like wheat and grain from the West and the Soviet Union (later the Russian federation). At the same time, the West continues to be perceived as a dominant security guarantor that comes with significant

baggage. In the context of the Ukraine invasion, these factors have combined to create a balancing act in Cairo that is reflected in public discourse. While 75% Egyptians do not approve of Russia's actions in Ukraine,¹³⁰ they continue to recognise the importance of maintaining ties with Russia. At the same time, this does not translate to support for the West, which is frequently viewed as equally responsible for the conflict and as prolonging the war.¹³¹

A slim majority of Egyptians continue to see the West as a primary security guarantor and an even greater majority continue to subscribe to the West's soft power, but this is no longer guaranteed; a poll found that 47% agreed 'we cannot count on the US these days, so we should look to Russia or China as partners'.¹³² Russian IIOs seek to turn this significant minority into a majority.

Qualitative Research

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations (IIOs)

1. Qualitative research (including interviews and secondary source research) found that views of Russia remain largely positive in Egypt as an instinctive opposition to the West. This is heavily influenced by historical relations between Egypt and Russia going back to the Suez crisis, as well as mistrust of the West based on the War on Terror and perceptions of selective morality and wider injustice in the international system. It also found the overwhelming concern was with current cost of living crisis in Egypt, which has reduced narratives around Ukraine to 'the sooner it's over the better' even if this involves Ukraine losing territory:
2. All interviewees agreed that colonial and contemporary history have played a role in shaping perceptions of the Kremlin and the West. But while Soviet cooperation during the early Nasser years has been well noted in existing literature, an unexpected theme was assistance provided during the 1973 Yom Kippur war against the 'first enemy' Israel:

'When I speak to people, they say Russia doesn't have colonial interests in the Middle East [and] Russia is defending its territories in Ukraine.' – Interviewee EG2

'[Pro-Russian sentiment] goes back historically quite a long time. It started during the breakdown in communication between [British Prime Minister] Anthony Eden and Abdul Nasser. [...] And the Yom Kippur War in 1973 became a conflict between America and the Syrian Union. You had the Soviet Union supporting the Arab countries, and the US was supporting Israel.' – Interviewee EG1

'...the Soviet Union, helped the Nasser regime very much in rebuilding the Republic. Russia helped very much, and also helped in arming the Egyptian army [before and] at the end of the war in 1973.' – Interviewee EG2

3. The key narratives used for IIOs have been surrounding:

- a. The ongoing food security crisis that has occurred as a second order effect of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine. According to the interviewees, the Sisi regime actively pushes the narrative that the invasion of Ukraine is responsible for the significant price rises in Egypt in order to minimise discontent with the government. However, it refrains from blaming the Kremlin, and as a result most believe that the West is at fault and it is Russia, not Ukraine, that delivers the majority of their grain:

'When it comes to gas and prices, bread prices and so on and so forth [the Egyptian public] acknowledge that Ukraine plays a part [in food security], but they think the important part is played by Russia.' – Interviewee EG4

This also extends to the withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative by Russia, with one interviewee expressing the Kremlin narrative that the grain was being diverted to richer countries:

'[Regarding the Black Sea Deal] it's actually more or less is accepted as a fact that grain is not going to places where they are mostly needed. [...] Russia is not being blamed.' – Interviewee EG4

- b. Deriding Western support for Ukraine as selective morality through 'whataboutism' (the recent Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark¹³³ were cited as part of this campaign and a sub-point of inflaming an overall perception of the West as anti-Muslim) and contrasting it with Kremlin 'no strings' support for Egypt:

'[...] the army is trying to get people to invest [in Egypt] And for a lot of companies in Europe, they're saying we're not interested [...] So then you suddenly get someone like Russia and Putin saying, no, we'll help you out, but don't worry, we don't need this or we need that.' – Interviewee EG1

A standout theme of Russian support was the recently signed agreement between the Egyptian state and Rosatom—the Russian state-owned nuclear energy corporation—to build Egypt's first nuclear power plant, which is positively perceived as a direct alleviation against Egypt's ongoing energy crisis:

'There's a big project to do with [...] a nuclear plant [in El Dabaa] it's in cooperation with Rosatom [...] It's a very big project, \$20 billion dollars. And that's as a loan from Russia.' – Interviewee EG2

- c. Although there were no examples given of anti-LGBTQ+ content, it was accepted by the interviewees that this was a point of sympathy with Egyptians for the Kremlin due to their position as a conservative society, and therefore should be viewed as an avenue of influence:

'[...] the average person on the street would agree with what Putin and Russia are saying about the LGBT group. [...] And so when you see Putin standing up against us and saying "no, we don't want this in Russia" and things like this, then Egyptians say "that's it." – Interviewee EG1

'[...] another reason people may feel like they like the Russians more than the West because the Russia doesn't support the LGBT.' – Interviewee EG2

'So, Russia is quite supported in this. The majority are on totally agreement and how Russia and Mr Putin treat those people.' – Interviewee EG4

- d. The Kremlin’s disinformation narrative over ‘Ukrainian biolabs’ was cited by one interviewee as a narrative that was gaining traction. This is likely due to it containing the typical themes of a deceitful West coupled with existing perceptions of Western involvement in chemical and biological weaponry due to the Kremlin’s campaigns against the White Helmets in Syria, which were successfully framed alongside the CIA and MI6 for the chemical attacks conducted by the Assad regime.¹³⁴



Fig. B1. Tweet by Russian official regarding chemical attack in Douma, 2018. Full report available at: <https://deadlydisinformation.org>

The successful disinformation campaign against the White Helmets for chemical attacks in Syria can be viewed as a forerunner for the success of Ukraine biolabs narrative in Egypt.

4. Main actors of communication: *RT Arabic* and *Sputnik Arabic* were considered to be the most prominent propagators of pro-Kremlin narratives and possess significant influence over the media through offers of free content and were considered by one interviewee—a journalist—to be the main sources of Arab news on Ukraine:

[...] the newspapers really depend [a lot] on the Russian media to cover what's happening in Ukraine. [...] It's put on social media and we easily believe what's published on Russia Today or Sputnik.' – Interviewee EG2

This was further confirmed by a review of *Nabd media* in which *RT* and *Sputnik Arabic* feature heavily.

5. Interviewees were split on who the target audiences were. Although the youth were emphasised as the most likely target of social media operations, the continued prominence of traditional media and personal chat shows in Egypt’s information ecosystem—and their reliance on Russian Arab media for international news—suggests that older generations are equally likely to be a target audience.

6. Tactics Techniques and Procedures (TTPs)

- a. Information laundering—in which false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries, who gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source¹³⁵—was implied by at least one interviewee, who cited that *RT* frequently bring in social media ‘chatter’ to legitimise their narratives:

‘[RT] bring in comments as part of the news from social media users, Twitter and Facebook, and so on. And they wouldn’t have that in context it’s just something that they force in.’ – Interviewee EG4

Reliance of Arab media on Russian media means it is also likely that even those who would not view Russian media as reliable (as was cited by two interviewees) may still end up reading Kremlin narratives regardless but from a more personally trusted outlet.

- b. Sock puppets and bots: Although no interviewees could cite examples of fake accounts they had seen, they noted that the majority of anti-Ukraine and anti-Western narratives were occurring on social media. Furthermore, aforementioned information laundering and Russian IIO doctrine indicates it is highly likely that some of this social media activity is being facilitated by sock puppets and bots.
- c. Establishing cultural centres/exchanges: One interviewee established that the Kremlin runs cultural centres to promote Russian culture and language in Egypt - the two major ones being in Cairo and Alexandria—which are regularly promoted by the Russian embassy. However, according to this interviewee, these courses are largely viewed with disinterest or even mockery:

‘We had a Russian cultural centre in Egypt. [There were] discounted courses to learn Russian, to learn graphics, to learn a lot of things and it’s like a [joke] between Egyptian people. We have the discount from the Russian centre, you know, but no one cares.’ – Interviewee EG3

Despite this scepticism, these cultural centres’ websites indicate that Russian language courses were not the only ones on offer; history, computer sciences, and social media marketing (including web development) were also available. And according to Russian and Egyptian media, the number of Egyptian students studying in Russian universities increased from 2,300 in 2018 to 12,357 in the academic year 2022/23¹³⁶ indicating that cultural exchanges are having some success.

Secondary source research indicates that these methods have traditionally been used in conjunction with other tools as part of holistic influence efforts. Traditionally, the courses include Kremlin narratives or even recruitment efforts into propaganda campaigns.¹³⁷ And considering the current high levels of unemployment in Egypt, there is a realistic possibility that such recruitment efforts could gain further appeal. Consequently, cultural centres should be viewed as a very long-term, if low level, effort.

- d. ‘Whataboutism’: Interviewees cited instances of perceived Western aggression as examples of selective morality and hypocrisy that is framed as morally equivalent to the Kremlin’s actions in Ukraine:

‘So, yes, but what happened with Kuwait and Iraq when members of NATO got involved there? People might come back and say” look at what’s going on in Venezuela; look at what happened in Cuba”. You know, America didn’t like Russians putting missiles on Cuba. So, they’ll be looking at it from that point of view.’ – Interviewee EG1

When questioned about Western support for Ukraine: ‘[...] they would go on about what happened in Iraq in 2003 and what happened in Syria 2011 and Libya 2011 and so on and so forth. [It’s part of a] wider umbrella for the conspiracy theory that the West is always conspiring against us somehow.’ – Interviewee EG4

Concerning Western strategic communications

1. Perceptions of the West can be considered mixed. With the main criticisms levelled at perceptions of a say-do gap in terms of universal values, with a particular focus on Palestine:

'[...] many kids here see - especially as far as the West's is concerned - that international rules are there to be broken. Organisations like UNHCR and things like that from the UN are trusted. but things will get tarnished by the connection to the West and its political gains.' – Interviewee EG1

'The West talks about Russia invading Ukraine, and how that's a crime. But Egyptian people will tell you "you support Israel and the occupation of Palestine. So if you care about the human rights and UN, then what are you doing in Palestine and Iraq and Syria?"' – Interviewee EG3

These criticisms also spread to international finance, which was cited as being viewed as using loans and bailouts to establish control:

'People in Egypt look at the International Bank as [...] You know when you get cuffed?' – Interviewee EG3

Secondary source research found that has been a frequent criticism of the IMF in particular;¹³⁸ at times the meaning of the acronym has been replaced with 'International Mother F*****s'.¹³⁹ In the most recent case, the suspension of loans to Uganda over its recent anti-LGBTQ+ legislation was decried as an example of Western interference and support for LGBTQ+ as a conspiracy.¹⁴⁰

2. Due to these suspicions of the West, and the Kremlin's dominance in Arab media, the invasion of Ukraine, when it makes the news at all, is largely viewed through a pro-Russia lens:

'[...] they see [high costs as the] fault of this war in Ukraine. And they say "you

know, if Putin just was allowed to go into Ukraine, we'd still have our wheat." – Interviewee EG1

'Many people think that the war started because of NATO [...] [There is] always a conspiracy against the Egypt by the West, especially by the United States [...] They want to destroy Russia. They want to the destroy Egypt [they think] that Zelensky is a minion guy, that the West pushed Ukraine to this war.' – Interviewee EG2

'My friend told me about in the first place: "why did NATO go closer and closer to Russia? They started [it in] the first place. Russian needs to make their borders safe." – Interviewee EG3

'They blame Ukraine and the West for the current situation [...] more than they blame Russia.' – Interviewee EG4

3. However, despite these criticisms, the West maintains a significant level of soft power that the Kremlin lacks. And despite the consistent narrative pushed by the Kremlin and Chinese Communist Party of the West being in terminal decline, it is still viewed by the youth as a source of opportunity, particularly the US:

'If you go to an average Egyptian and say, OK, would you prefer to spend the rest of your life in New York or would you prefer to go to Saint Petersburg or Moscow? They would say I want to go to New York [...]. The Egyptians still love America. The concept of America, but what they don't like with America is the arrogance of America.' – Interviewee EG1

'[...] we look at US [...] as the big devil, but many youths want to go to there.' – Interviewee EG3

4. A further theme of the interviewees was their belief that urban centres were more likely to have access to better education and have enhanced media literacy skills, particularly in academia, and therefore more likely to be open to objectively thinking about Western motives and the international system. This is not uncommon across the world but is a general observation that would require enhanced research to understand its accuracy.

Concerning overall effects

1. On voting in international institutions: Interviewees could not be certain and/or were sceptical of the Kremlin exerting a direct influence over Egypt in international institutions, as Egypt had stronger economic and security ties with the US. However, they noted that Egypt's position as a major grain importer (as well as energy and 'no-strings' weapons cooperation with the Kremlin) meant that Cairo would be forced to maintain a neutral position. The growing hostility between Russia and the West means instances of tensions are likely to increase, and that Egypt will be forced to play a neutral role.
2. On framing of critical national issues: Thematic analysis of interviews indicates that food security and cost of living are the overriding concern within Egyptian society:

'When you care too much about your daily living—your electricity bill or daily

food—it's really hard to think about the international narratives, international human law and international norms.' – Interviewee EG2

'When it comes to gas prices, bread prices and so on and so forth this is what matters to the everyday individual. [...] People acknowledged that Ukraine plays a part [in food security], but they think the important part is played by Russia.' – Interviewee EG4

However, as already discerned, these narratives are frequently viewed through a pro-Kremlin lens. And since the Sisi government is seeking to emphasise the role of the war in Ukraine to deflect potential criticism for its own mishandling of the economic situation, it is likely that more Egyptians will be exposed to Kremlin narratives about the conflict.



Fig. B2. Kadyrov and professional Egyptian footballer Mohammed Salah at the Football World Cup, where Kadyrov hosted the Egyptian national team and gave Salah honorary citizenship. (Note: Salah was reported to have disapproved of being used as a political symbol and is not believed to endorse Kadyrov in any way).

Source: www.theguardian.com/football/2018/jun/25/mohamed-salah-considering-quit-egypt-chechnya-world-cup-political-symbol and www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/07/all-eyes-on-ramzan-kadyrov-as-chechnya-hosts-egypt-in-world-cup

A second critical national issue (though distant second to the cost of living) is the integrity of Egyptian society and the ‘protection’ of Islam.

Traditionally, the Kremlin’s relationship with Islam has suffered from negative perceptions due to its wars in Chechnya and Syria, both of which were waged against largely Muslim populations. However, the Kremlin has worked alongside Islamic allies within and outside Russia to ameliorate this position by burnishing its own Islamic and conservative credentials and stressing its role in combatting extremism and political Islam (the latter of which is often frowned upon by existing MENA governments as a gateway to extremism). The Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark in 2023 have given the Kremlin an opportunity to enhance this kind of output as well as encourage anger within Egyptian and other MENA societies against the West:

‘The burning the Quran hasn’t helped and going back to the Charlie Hebdo situation [...] all these things don’t help [the West’s image].’ – Interviewee EG1

It is notable that one interviewee asserted that people see through these staged performances by the Kremlin, but that it still amplifies anti-Western talking points:

‘We know [Putin] doesn’t care about Muslims, but people in Egypt know that the West doesn’t care about Islam. In France or in Switzerland where the government talks about making women remove their [hijab or burkha], where is the freedom of that?’ – Interviewee EG3

This highlights one of the major issues of IIOs and disinformation—that the information does not need to be believed to take on a life of its own and generate polarising debates.

Secondary research suggested that Ramzan Kadyrov, the pro-Kremlin President of Chechnya (a semi-autonomous republic in Russia), plays an important role in Kremlin foreign policy and IIOs through ‘surrogate diplomacy’¹⁴¹ including inter-faith dialogue and attempting to establish links to sports teams from Muslim countries (Fig. B2.) in part due to his own political ambitions of establishing his usefulness to the Kremlin.

Of all the interviewees, only one (a regional expert) confirmed that Kadyrov had a positive reputation. While others asserted his profile was minor and that the main Islamic influences came from the Gulf:

‘Mr Kadyrov is very good example and he has a very nice reputation in this part of the world. Not only for his loyalty to his country as a Russian, but also as a very good Muslim trying to know the protect his faith as well as protect his country.’ – Interviewee EG4

‘[the Kremlin] has a slim Islamic influence in Egypt. [...] It’s the Gulf, if you speak about the Islamic influence in Egypt.’ – Interviewee EG2

However, our research on the UAE suggests that Russo-Islamic ties are strong there (as is Russian media influence) and, therefore, there is a realistic possibility that pro-Kremlin narratives around Islam are reaching the Egyptian people. Overall, these instances are likely to further inflame anti-Western sentiment in the MENA region which will further taint perceived Western constructs like the system of universal norms—encouraging further norms fragmentation and international instability.

Digital Analysis

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations

As indicated in the qualitative analysis, some of the highest performing pro-Kremlin imagery related to its economic assistance to Egypt, its officials calling out perceived Western hypocrisy in cases of 'whataboutism' and historical wrongs like colonialism, and

conspiracy theories relating to Western activity and Ukraine, including the presence of 'Nazism' (a common Kremlin talking point). Several illustrative examples have been included in the table below.


	Shares	Views
	13.3K	1.7m

Fig. B3. Post glorifying BRICS supremacy over the dollar and 'Game over' for the global economy.

<p>RUSSIA MFA SPOKESWOMAN: "Is anyone in the West conducting an inventory of what has been plundered and smuggled out from Iraq? Of course, not. These artefacts will remain in the West forever, just like those smuggled out by the British and other Westerners from Greece and Egypt. Egyptian and Greek museums and state agencies have been demanding, requesting, pleading and begging for a long time that the West return their cultural legacy. However, the answer they get is always the same: it isn't yours anymore."</p> 	8.1 k	953k
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Fig. B4. Russian MFA Spokesperson criticising 'plundering' by the West.

<p>Max Blumenthal @MaxBlumenthal · Feb 16 Remarkable how Wikipedia's editors track so closely with the objectives of the US military-intelligence-media apparatus, which now sponsors and celebrates the neo-Nazi Azov Regiment</p> 	891k	4.6m
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Fig. B5. Post by Max Blumenthal about the Azov Battalion.



381k

2.2m

Fig. B6. Putin and Sisi pose for camera with caption celebrating Egypt ignoring US requests to close Egyptian airspace to Russian planes.



1.1k

412k

Fig. B7. Beginning of joint Egyptian-Russian nuclear cooperation.

#صورة من #اوغندا 1905
 طابط الاستعمار البريطاني
 "هاري جورج غالت" قبل مقتله بقليل على يد احد ممن كانوا يحملونه ..

كان هاري غالت معروفاً بقسوته وسوء معاملته ،
 في 19 مايو 1905، اجبر مجموعة من الرجال المحليين على حمله على رؤوسهم لأكثر
 من 3 كيلومترات وكان الرجال مرهقين واشتكوا من العطش، لكن غالت رفض السماح
 لهم بالراحة او حتى شرب الماء .

عندما وصلوا أخيراً إلى منطقة إيباندا، هاجمه احدثهم طعناً حتى الموت (فُيِس عليه
 وأعدم لاحقاً)

ورغم توثيق الجرائم والانتهاكات وبينما كان ضحاياه يصفونه بأنه كان شخصية معقدة
 مجرمة مضطهدة فاسية متوحشة كان المؤرخين البريطانيين يشيرون إلى جهوده
 المزعومة لتحسين حياة السكان المحليين مثل التعليم والرعاية الصحية 🙄 في محاولة
 للتغطية على جرائم الاستعمار .

Translate post

2:41 PM · Aug 28, 2023 · 2.1M Views

16k

3.4m

Translation. British colonial officer "Harry George Galt" shortly before he was killed by one of those carrying him. Harry Galt was known for his cruelty and abuse, On May 19, 1905, he forced a group of local men to carry him on their heads for more than 3 kilometers. The men were exhausted and complained of thirst, but Galt refused to let them rest or even drink water. When they finally reached the Ibanda area, one of them attacked him and stabbed him to death (he was later arrested and executed) Despite the documentation of crimes and violations, and while his victims described him as a complex, persecuted, cruel, savage criminal, British historians pointed to his alleged efforts to improve the lives of the local population, such as education and health care 🙄, in an attempt to cover up the crimes of colonialism.

Fig. B8. Image of British colonial officer Harry George Galt.

Video content demonstrated similar themes. For example, the short video (screenshot below), which appeared across all platforms, emphasises Egypt’s long-standing relationship with the Kremlin. It had 3.4 million views and was shared 185 thousand times.



Fig. B9. TikTok video ‘Russia-Egypt then and now’ celebrating Russia-Egypt then and now. Source: www.youtube.com/watch?v=zunKiF9JfKY

Likewise, there was a significant number of videos that emphasised the West’s perceived double standards towards Ukraine and wider criticism of universal norms like human rights. For example, the video below created by Hussein al-Ghawi, a Saudi journalist who regularly

criticises the West, attacks concepts of human rights as a neocolonial construct and conspiracy. He also attacks NGOs like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch as non-neutral entities pursuing Western agendas. It was viewed 4.1 million times and shared 79 thousand times.



Fig. B10. Hussein al-Ghawi video posted to TikTok and YouTube criticising Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. He has been criticised by multiple publications for spreading dis/mis/mal-information.

Similarly, Hafid Derradji, a Qatari based journalist, posted the commentary below to his Twitter account. Comparing the devastation of ongoing conflicts in the Arab world with Ukraine, accusing the world of being driven

by interests rather than ‘values and principles they [the West] attack us with’, and inferring that the prioritisation of Ukraine exhibits Western double standards.



Fig. B11. Hafid Derradji’s post on Twitter.
[Twitter.com/derradjihafid/status/1497102818989293589/photo/1](https://twitter.com/derradjihafid/status/1497102818989293589/photo/1)



Fig. B12. Russian embassy announces 80-year anniversary of Russia-Egypt relations.
<https://x.com/Rusembegypt/status/1620713380100149249?s=20>

While content like al-Ghawi and Derradji’s is not produced by the Kremlin, it nevertheless aligns with many of the Kremlin’s talking points and is considered potentially more credible than material posted by the Kremlin directly. This thereby undermines perceptions of the West and arguably makes them ‘useful idiots’ in the Kremlin’s eyes.

The Russian Embassy in Egypt and *RT Arabic* were the most prolific communicators of pro-Kremlin content. As indicated in the qualitative findings, the most popular post on the embassy’s feed was the announcement of the Kremlin’s investment and building of Egypt’s first nuclear power plant (25 thousand views), and a post celebrating the Kremlin’s 80 years of friendship with Egypt.



Fig. B13. Rosatom announces beginning of the construction of Egypt's first nuclear power plant.



Fig. B14. @RussiaArabic0 an overtly pro-Kremlin profile: <https://x.com/RussiaArabic0?s=20>



Fig. B15. @Russia_Z_news a pro-Kremlin account that focuses on Kremlin 'victories' in Ukraine and vilifying Kyiv. https://x.com/Russia_Z_news?s=20

Pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content was further amplified by sock puppet and anonymous accounts posing as news sources. While some were openly pro-Russian, others, like @RoaaStudies attempted to present themselves as war monitors but frequently reuse content from *RT Arabic*, Kremlin statements, and Kremlin-affiliated Telegram channels while exploring 'Western hypocrisy'. It also had duplicate sites like @RoaaMediaNews and @RoaaStudy. The former having been suspended for violating

Twitter's policies. The main page (@RoaaStudies) increased its following from 100 thousand in October 2022 to 350 thousand in October of 2023. Some of its content was reposted by @Politicaa, another 'news' profile that frequently posted anti-Ukrainian and pro-authoritarian content with no evidence to support its claims as well as reusing material from Kremlin-aligned Telegram channels like 'smotrich media'.



Fig. B16. Screenshot from Roastudies. “Maria Zakharova recalls the reasons for the invasion of Iraq and reveals details about Ukraine’s position and sending their soldiers to invade Iraq 2003.”

As in previous operations, the Kremlin appears to have also deployed ‘Kremlinista’ sock puppet accounts (accounts deigned to look like attractive women to encourage greater followings, similar to catfishing and honey potting but designed to disseminate information rather than interact and gain information from

individuals).¹⁴² One example provided below that had the highest reach was created in 2022, the year of the Kremlin’s invasion, and amplified Kremlin disinformation. Another was found on TikTok, describing themselves as a ‘proud Egyptian’ who regularly posted pro-Putin content and had 33 thousand likes.



Fig. B17. @Politicaa, a profile that recycles pro-Kremlin content as ‘news’.



Fig. B18. Example of a Kremlinista account posing as a journalist.

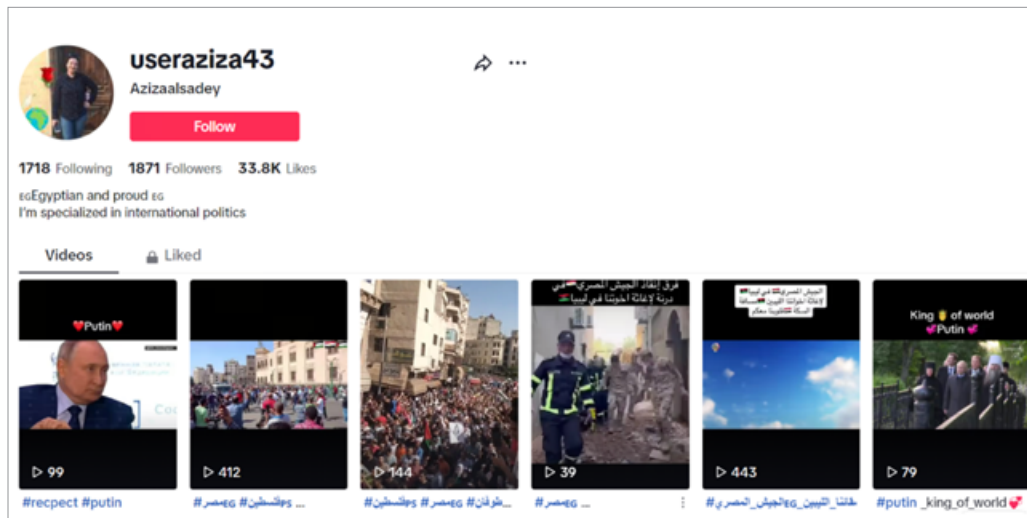


Fig. B19. Another example of a Kremlinista account on TikTok.

Similar anti-Western content was amplified by entrepreneurs of influence, and ‘useful idiots’ and cynics.

The two with the greatest reach were Jackson Hinkle, the self-proclaimed ‘most

censored man online’, who frequently appears on *RT* criticising US policy and NATO while praising Russia, and Sohila Amin, an ‘Egyptian activist’ with 15 thousand followers who amplified the Kremlin’s disinformation narrative around the Kremlin ‘biolabs’ narrative.



Fig. B20. Jackson Hinkle post praising President Sisi’s decision not to arm Ukraine.



Fig. B21. Repost of Kremlin Ukraine biolabs disinformation narrative by journalist Sohila Amin.

These kinds of messages also extend directly to Egyptian media. For example, Egypt’s National Media Authority, or Maspero, featured an article in March 2023 highlighting Syrian President al-Assad’s “support for Russia

in its war against Western-backed Nazism.” And *Al-Ahram*, one of the oldest daily news organisations in the Arab world, publishes stories from *Sputnik*.¹⁴³

Based on these findings, the following TTPs have been identified:

1. ‘Whataboutism’—Kremlin content attempted to draw moral equivalencies to its actions in Ukraine and the West’s colonial crimes as well as deflect concerns about the invasion of Ukraine as hypocrisy by the West.
2. Media manipulation—As *Al-Ahram’s* Managing Editor said of the agreement with *Sputnik*: Egyptian-Russian relations are closer than ever and the new “protocol” for media cooperation “supports that relationship.”¹⁴⁴
3. Amplification of existing dis/mis/mal-information—The recurrence and mutual sharing of some accounts indicate coordinated efforts to amplify pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content. Much of the amplification came through sock puppets and bots.
4. Sock puppets and bots—Searches of key phrases demonstrated a number of profiles of varying reach that posted pro-Kremlin content in order to drive up its usage in order for social media algorithms to recommend them to real users and create a veneer of credibility.

Concerning Western strategic communications

Although outnumbered by the amount of anti-Western and pro-Kremlin content, there were pieces of anti-Kremlin content that reached high levels of views, especially on imagery-based platforms. Two examples of this are a macabre image of Putin cutting into a war themed blood cake adorned with ‘Z’

(the unofficial logo of the Kremlin’s invasion), which received 386 thousand views and approximately 1.7 thousand shares; and a video of ‘a day in Ukraine’ featuring footage of Kremlin rocket attacks on Ukrainian cities, which received 3.2 million views and 23 thousand shares.



Fig. B22. AI-generated image of Putin carving a blood cake. Part of the ‘Putin as a war criminal’ narrative.



Fig. B23. ‘A day in Ukraine’ TikTok video demonstrating the daily impact of the Kremlin’s invasion.

Among the most popular content was humour based. Such as the examples below from Sputnik_Not, a parody account that frequently posts satirical content mocking the Kremlin. The content below received 943 thousand

views and 15 thousand shares (Fig. B24.) and 8.1 million views and 14 thousand shares (Fig. B25.) respectively. The latter was based on an actual event.¹⁴⁵



Fig. B24. Flowchart satirising the Kremlin's frequent espousal of disinformation.



Fig. B25. Sputnik_Not post satirising the real life death of a Russian in Egypt from a shark attack.

There was also content linking the ongoing cost-of-living crisis in Egypt to the Ukraine war. For example, MP Fakhri Al-Fiqi, chair of parliament's Planning and Budget Committee, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* that he opposed a tax on crisps which was under threat due to the Russia-Ukraine war.¹⁴⁶ *Al-Ahram*, one of the most popular news sources in Egypt also reports regularly on the Ukraine war, including Kremlin targeting ports critical to global food supplies¹⁴⁷ and Russian disinformation efforts to 'divide and conquer'.¹⁴⁸

Another popular domestic communicator among Egyptian and regional audiences that can be considered a booster of universal norms is Matsadaash, an Egyptian fact-checking organisation that claims to have approximately 785 thousand followers across multiple platforms. While it focuses on domestic issues, it upholds the norm of journalistic standards and value of truthful discourse, and has occasionally pushed back on organic disinformation that is exploited by the Kremlin and anti-Western actors, such as in the Instagram post below,

in which they fact check claims that Biden had proclaimed US 'a gay nation'.¹⁴⁹ Its website also shows fact checked claims that Ukrainian soldiers had participated in war crimes during

the Chechen Wars¹⁵⁰ and that CNN had reported 'actors' posing as casualties in Ukraine.¹⁵¹ However, it has since come under pressure from Egyptian authorities.¹⁵²



Fig. B26. Matsadaash Instagram post fact checking disinformation targeting US president Biden.

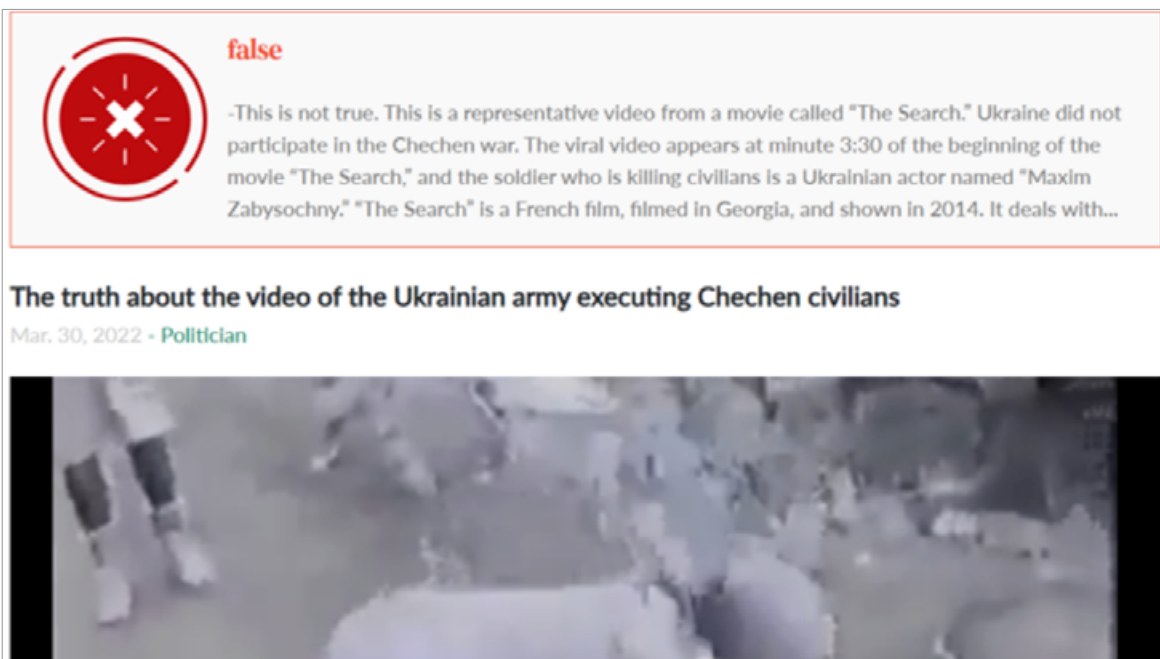


Fig. B27. Matsadaash fact check of Kremlin disinformation claiming Ukrainian soldiers were involved in war crimes during the Chechen Wars.

But while these instances are encouraging, it is notable that they are usually outranked by pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content. Furthermore, instances like the accusation that Egypt had supplied rockets to the Kremlin caused significant backlash among Egyptian audiences. Despite this, the highest rated video in the data scrape from *Washington Post* Shorts humorously depicted the US and Russia bidding for Egypt's support in supplying weapons, with the Kremlin's contributions to Egypt being outbid by US military aid.¹⁵³ At the same time, searching 'NATO' in Egyptian Arabic reveals the highest rated content to be pro-Kremlin.

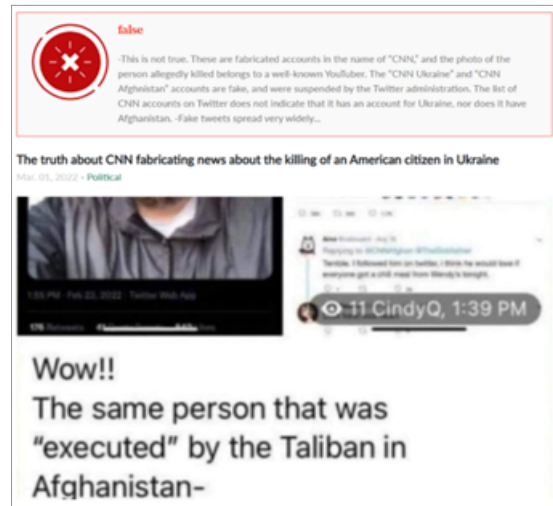


Fig. B28. Matsadaash fact check of Kremlin disinformation claiming Western media has been staging war crimes in Ukraine.

Impacts

General narratives focus on an overt disdain for the West and, to a degree, the Egyptian government. For example, in the video *Egypt almost supplied rockets to Russia*, most of the commentary was satirical toward the Egyptian government. But also contained pointed critiques of the West, including themes of Western hypocrisy and conspiracy. A few illustrative examples include:

- *I live in Egypt we don't manufacturing [sic] anything all imported what you mean sell?*
- **AND THAT'S WHY WE HAVE INFLATION!**
- *The Arab spring was caused by Russian grain being cut off, and the Ukrainians filling the orders instead..... This is just another moron on team "we'll take Kiev in 2 days"..*

- *Our leader values the military over anything else, and we still get bullied by Ethiopia smh*
- *Dog sh*t rockets*
- *Maidan was a coup against the Ukrainian democracy*
- *US sells weapon to everybody*
- *The CIA installed the military dictatorship in the first place what do you expect from corrupt military led government*

Emoji analysis of the comments also suggests a split between Emojis traditionally associated with humour but also support and love as 3% of comments included Russian Flags (See Main Report, Methodology section to see explanation of Parliament Emoji graphs).

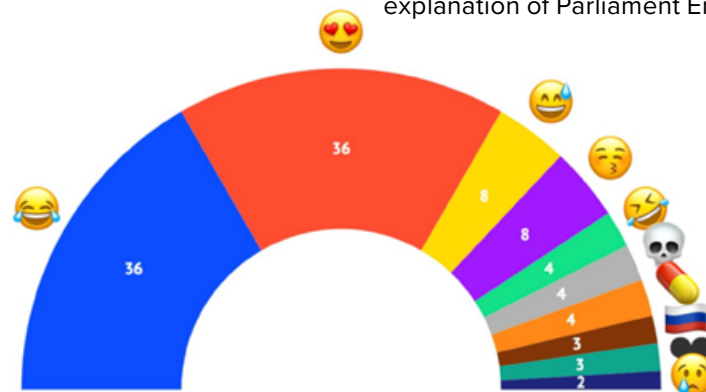


Fig. B29. Egypt almost supplied rockets to Russia

Lastly, a wide data scrape and analysis over all top content to establish a number of statements against which to establish sentiment resulted in the following graphs. They demonstrate negativity to the accusation of supplying rockets to the Kremlin, team Russia vs team US, and the concept of an Arab NATO

and positive sentiment toward decoupling from the dollar (though this largely came from Indian media that favoured the rupee). On the other hand, there is also negative sentiment toward 'dumping Biden' and the Russia-Africa Summit of 2023, suggesting opposition to breaking off from the US entirely.

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

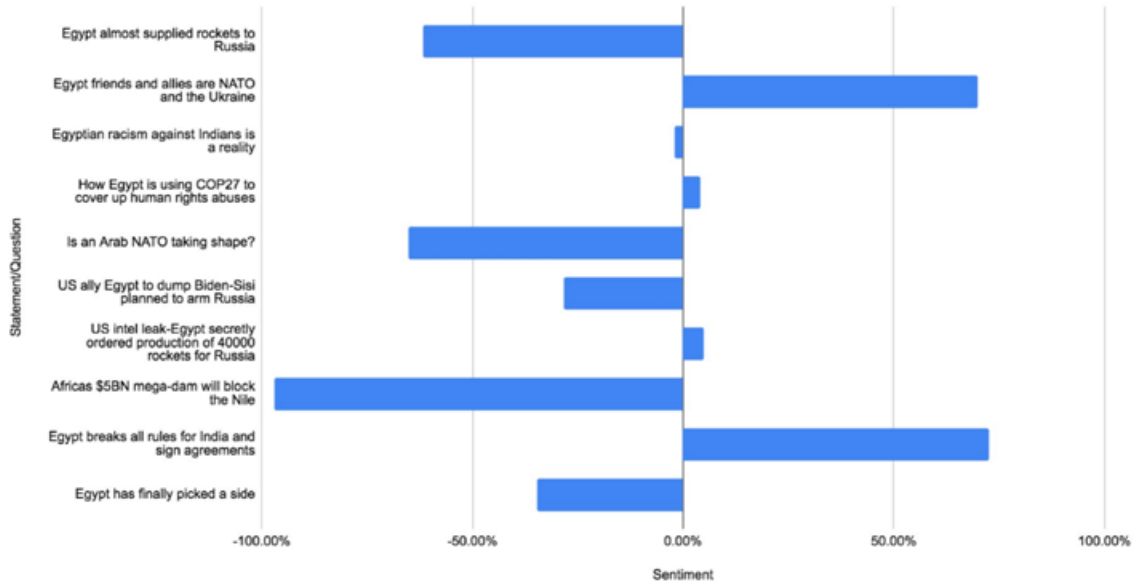


Fig. B32. Sentiment Graph 1

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

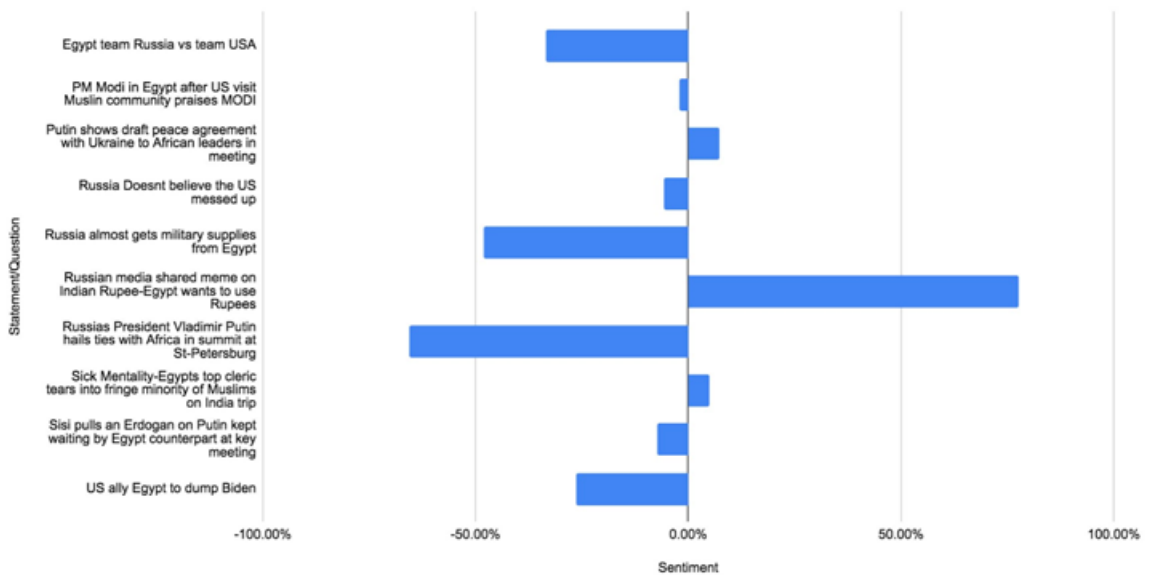


Fig. B33. Sentiment Graph 2

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

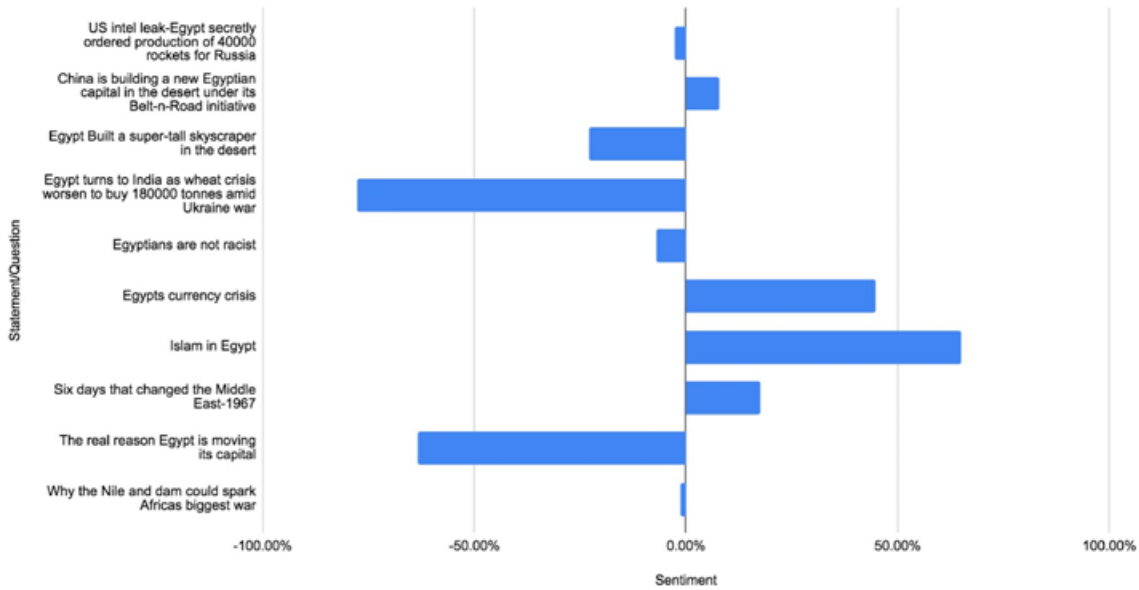


Fig. B34. Sentiment Graph 3

Conclusions

In summary, digital findings have demonstrated a significant amount of pro-Kremlin content (particularly in Arabic) produced by Kremlin IIOs that outweighs pro-norms or Western content in volume, number of actors amplifying it, and persuasive sentiment. At the same time, qualitative findings suggest a growing scepticism of the West rooted in perceived moral failings creating a say-do gap which, in turn, creates opportunities for Kremlin-aligned actors to amplify anti-Western conspiracies and ‘whataboutism’ arguments. Despite this, most interviewees agreed that it was highly unlikely that Egypt would directly split from the West due to the necessity of US military aid and delivery of grain from both Russia and Ukraine. But they acknowledge that its position could shift further to one of positive neutrality and apathy.

Based on these findings, our adaptation of the TORC suggests that the desired outcomes of Kremlin IIOs in Egypt are to elicit determining behaviour of cultivating apathy toward the conflict in Ukraine or have sentiment decided on ending it as soon as possible (even at the cost of a Kremlin victory) in order to alleviate the cost-of-living crisis. At the same time, it is highly likely that they are attempting to elicit the destructive behaviour of conspiratorial thinking to encourage scepticism of the West and concepts of truth, as well as undermine anti-Kremlin narratives. This also has the secondary effect of making the population more susceptible to potential future Kremlin IIOs.

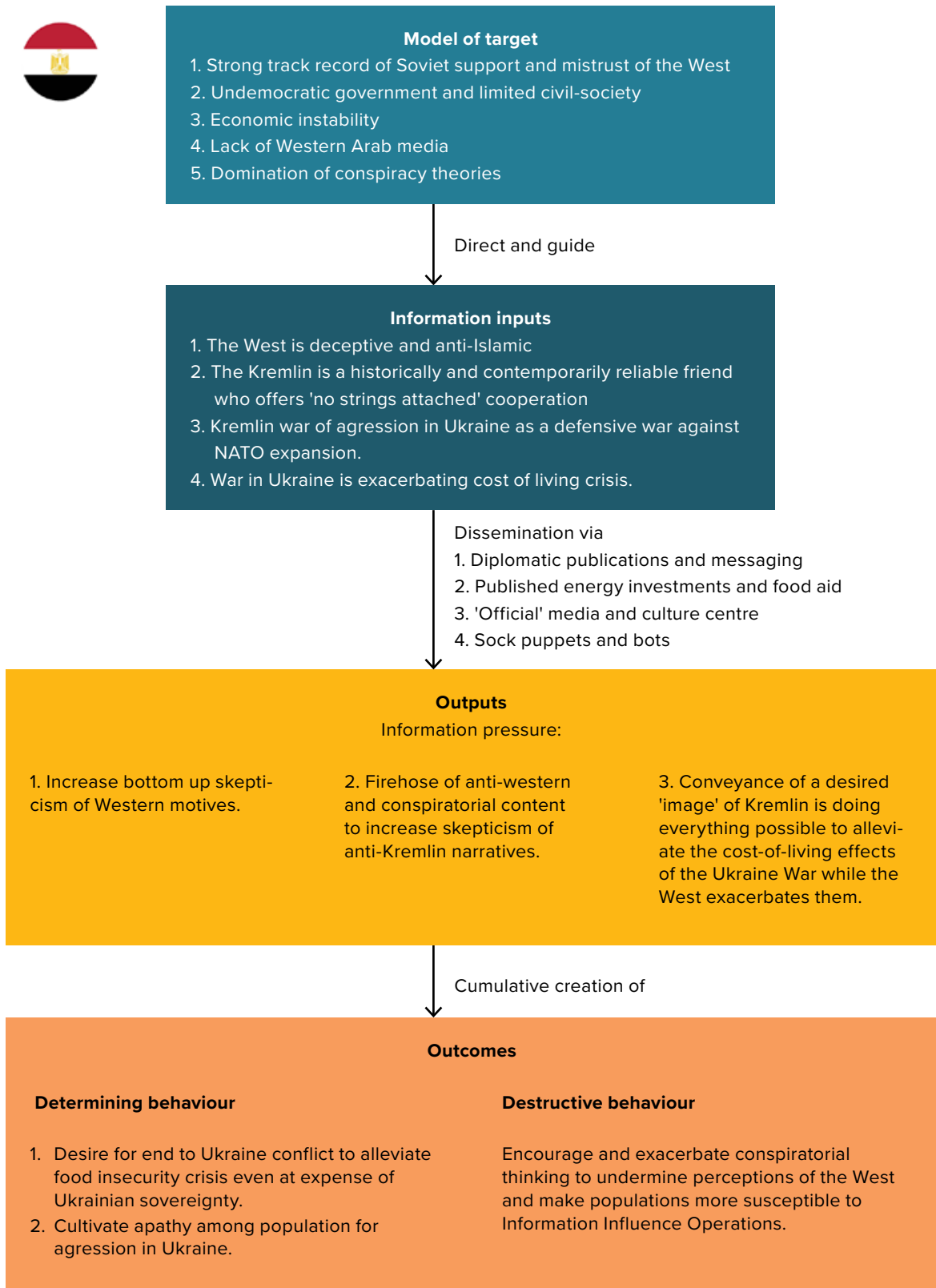


Fig. B35. TORC framework for Egypt

Annex C

Mali

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Introduction

Russian influence in Mali has been on the rise in recent years, marking a significant shift in the geopolitics of West Africa. Since experiencing two coups in 2021, Mali has emerged as one of the most prominent supporters of the Kremlin on the continent and one of the African states with the highest levels of Russian influence (second only to the Central African Republic). Its media environment is saturated with Kremlin bots, sock puppets and proxies (many connected to the Wagner network)¹⁵⁴ who espouse Kremlin narratives that undermine faith in international institutions, legitimise the Kremlin's aggression abroad, and assert the alleged benefits of cooperation with Russia against a colonial West while denigrating and coercing Western partners and any who question the narrative.

The consequences of these information operations can be severe, exacerbating instability and hindering the efforts of international

actors, including the United Nations, NATO and Western countries, especially France, in their attempts to address the security and political challenges facing Mali.

Further, Russian influence in Mali extends through information operations to arms sales, the Wagner Group's presence, diplomatic engagements, and economic interests. Russia provides arms and military equipment to the Malian government, strengthening their military capabilities and forging closer political and military ties. The Wagner Group offers security and training to Malian forces as part of Russia's broader African influence strategy. Diplomatic visits and discussions promote closer ties, with Russia challenging Western influence. Economic interests involve Russian companies exploring investment opportunities in Mali's resource-rich mining sector, deepening economic ties between the two countries.

Desk Research

Historic and contemporary relations with the West and Russia

The West

Mali's relations with the West have been defined by its relations with France.

In pre-colonial days, Mali was the centre of an Islamic empire in West Africa that played an important role in global trade due to its command of mineral deposits. It is a history that its citizens are significantly proud of and at times, resent Western colonialism for their perceived loss of status.¹⁵⁵

Mali was colonised by the French in 1892 and renamed French Sudan. Although it achieved independence in 1960, Mali continued to maintain close relations with its former colonial occupier as well as establishing ties to the Soviet Union as part of its non-aligned international policy.¹⁵⁶ But Mali's close economic ties were frequently criticised by contemporary and present-day scholars as instruments of neo-colonialism and keeping Mali economically joined to France.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, there has been a consistent dissatisfaction within Malian communities with what is perceived

as a colonial relationship with France that the Kremlin could exploit.

Malian-Western cooperation reached its height during the terrorism crises of the 2010s. After the collapse of Libya in 2011, weapons and Islamist fighters aligned with Al-Qaeda and Daesh began to proliferate throughout the Sahel. Inserting themselves into local conflicts (such as long-running tensions between Fulani and Tuareg minorities against the Malian majority) to recruit more to their cause and grow in strength.¹⁵⁸ By 2013, insurgents threatened the capital and France entered a military alliance with Bamako to repel the jihadists in Operation Serval.¹⁵⁹

Initially, French intervention was welcomed by Western and Malian commentators alike. Noted scholar of Islam and the Arab world, Mathieu Guidère, said that without the French military intervention, the state of Mali would have fallen.¹⁶⁰ However, conflict and security analysts noted that, while Operation Serval was successful, Malians and French had misinterpreted the relative strength of jihadists in central Mali as opposed to their Northern strongholds.¹⁶¹ Consequently, its successor, Operation Barkhane, had high and, some have argued, unrealistic expectations.

The continued failure of Operation Barkhane to establish security has been argued as a central factor in deteriorating relations between Mali and the West and creating disillusionment with traditional partners. Fuelled by Kremlin operations and proxies, there were notable upticks of disinformation suggesting Operation Barkhane members (especially France) were arming jihadists and seeking to undermine Mali to keep it dependent on Western colonial powers, including from the Malian Foreign Minister after the coups.¹⁶² Consequently, protests against Operation Barkhane and MINUSMA's presence in Mali began to grow but were largely ignored by Western media and security analysts. This provided opportunity for Russian IIOs to begin shaping activity.

The deteriorating security situation was a significant motivator in legitimising the putschists to take power in two coups in 2020 and 2021, after which Mali-Western relations reached a nadir as the ruling Junta became increasingly critical toward the presence of 'foreign forces' and uncooperative with their security partners.¹⁶³ By June of 2021, France announced a withdrawal of its forces, while MINUSMA was terminated in June of 2023. The result of both announcements led to celebratory rallies in the streets featuring placards bearing messages such as 'death to France and her allies' and 'get out France' as well as Russian flags.¹⁶⁴ While it has been assessed that some of these attendees were paid for appearing,¹⁶⁵ it has also been accepted that this tapped into deep anti-colonial grievances that have been latent throughout Mali's modern history and will likely persist into the immediate future.¹⁶⁶

Russia

Much of current day scholarship on Russo-Malian relations has naturally focused on the Wagner Group and how the Kremlin has instigated a 'propaganda coup in the country'.¹⁶⁷ But too often this only mentions enduring anti-colonial sentiments and historical relations with Russia as an overview rather than as a prologue. A more holistic view of Mali's modern relations reveals Russia as a consistent, if not always prominent, presence.

Soviet influence proliferated across Africa in parallel with the decolonisation process and, as early as 1957, the Soviet Union cultivated relations with Mali as part of its policy of supporting varying non-aligned African powers that showed inclinations towards socialism.¹⁶⁸ Mali's first president pursued close ties to the Soviets and even his pro-Western successor continued to purchase Soviet weaponry.¹⁶⁹ While the relationship did not fulfil either party's expectations, Soviet aid remains a prominent memory for Malians, including \$100 million in loans and the building of vocational schools.¹⁷⁰ As its successor, Russia is still remembered as 'the first to support [Malian] independence' and current relations are frequently linked to 'ideological connections based on socialism'.¹⁷¹

Despite significant detriment of its influence in the 1990s, the Kremlin continued to attempt to project influence in the Multi-aligned Community under Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov, including the cancellation of Soviet debt payments in 1999.¹⁷² However, it was not until the Kremlin's decisive turn against the West in Putin's third term and the deterioration of stability in the Sahel following the collapse of Gaddafi's Libya in 2011, that the Kremlin began actively conducting IIOs against the West in Mali. Despite supporting UNSC Resolution 2085 authorising Operation Serval and the later MINUSMA mission,¹⁷³ the Kremlin capitalised on the issue of Sahelian stability through a mixture of diplomatic and academic discourse blaming the crisis on NATO 'subversion' of international law in Libya (this can be viewed as part of its wider anti-Western and counter-revolutionary narratives during the Arab Spring explored in Egypt and the UAE).¹⁷⁴ According to Samuel Ramani, by 2013, its criticisms of France's role in the conflict would grow into 'a full-blown information war',¹⁷⁵ combining accusations of France fomenting extremism and meddling in Mali's elections¹⁷⁶ with soft power initiatives like the delivery of food and household items in February 2013¹⁷⁷ and military-technical agreements from 2017-2019.¹⁷⁸ Further opportunities came during the Covid-19 pandemic and Western 'vaccine nationalism'. The Kremlin filled a void by offering 300 million Sputnik V doses to the African Union, including Mali.¹⁷⁹ Based on Kremlin IIO doctrine and significant increase in dis/mis/mal-information after the coups, it is likely that covert IIOs, such as troll farms, were already established in this period, as well. And while the effectiveness of these initiatives on overall opinion cannot be fully

determined, they almost certainly contributed to the shaping of the environment through the ' sleeper effect ' and went largely unnoticed by Western observers until the coups of 2020 and 2021, after which pro-Russian demonstrations and the arrival of the Wagner Group intensified interest by the international community and led to multiple reports revealing networks of pro-Russian Facebook pages working in alignment with the Junta and proxy groups to manipulate sentiment.¹⁸⁰

After the French withdrawal in February 2022, information outputs appeared to develop from purely anti-French content to pro-Wagner and pro-Junta with anti-French and anti-Western sub-narratives. Among them have been a selection of cartoon videos spread across various platforms depicting Malians being overwhelmed by French zombies until their rescue by Wagner fighters.¹⁸¹ However, while these are eye-catching, they are spikes in a constant stream of content designed to create a determining control on the Malian population.

Relations between the Wagner network and the Kremlin can be considered one and the same. Even after Yevgeny Prigozhin's death, the Kremlin has openly reassured clients in Africa that Wagner operations will continue. Andrei Averyanov, Maj. Gen. of the GRU (Russian military intelligence) and former leader of Unit 29155 (sabotage and assassinations), was pictured at the Russian-Africa Conference in meetings with several African leaders who have contracted Wagner's services, including Mali, and is believed to have taken charge of their operations.¹⁸²

Information environment

Previous exploratory reports by the NATO StratCom COE of the media and information environment in the Sahel found that, on the surface, there is rich and diverse media infrastructure that combines oral and written media with a total of 500 radio stations, 200 private newspapers, 60 online media hubs and more than 30 TV channels in Mali alone.¹⁸³

However, all are subject to 'authoritarian pluralism' by power holders seeking to control the information flows:

'Authoritarian pluralism is defined as an environment in which the number of actors, the openness of the market and the principles of independence and media

*self-regulation suggesting a pluralism that is nevertheless subject to political and economic pressures.*¹⁸⁴

Reporters without Frontiers's (RSF) press freedom index highlights more nuances regarding the state of media freedom in Mali amidst the context of pressure for "patriotic" news coverage by media houses.¹⁸⁵

The report also highlighted the central role of the 'fixer' in day-to-day life,¹⁸⁶ which became apparent in our own qualitative research, further extends to the information environment, with opinion and social leaders taking a leading role.

The report also highlighted 'information poverty' as a defining characteristic of the region – not only concerning access to technology or media products, but also the ability to interpret them.¹⁸⁷ As a consequence, personal 'closed' network—ranging from small groups to hundreds or even thousands of people - can play a significant role in the dissemination of information, especially on WhatsApp. The lack of verification in these networks as well as their closed nature makes them conducive to dis/mis/mal-information and IIOs. Consequently, WhatsApp has become the central disseminator of dis/mis/mal-information in Mali, especially for anti-French narratives.¹⁸⁸

Much of this disinformation has targeted French and UN presence in the country and has increased since the arrival of Wagner mercenaries.¹⁸⁹ While some of the information is organically spread and frequently takes on its own message, research so far has traced most of it to local media and civil-society actors with financial ties to the Kremlin and anticolonial influencers.¹⁹⁰

Accompanying this disinformation is the Kremlin's overt 'legitimate' media operations of grey and white propaganda. On the Malian news aggregator, Malijet, the vast majority of news under 'urgent' and 'internationale' is from *Sputnik* and *RT Français*, indicating its dominant presence in Mali's daily information diet.¹⁹¹ Maliweb—which includes radio—frequently cites pro-Kremlin 'victories' in Ukraine, the benefits of Kremlin cooperation, and anti-Western content such as 'escalatory' actions in Ukraine by the US and alleged corruption by Kyiv, including selling weapons to jihadists.¹⁹² And even though the *Journal du Mali* cites the impact of the war in Ukraine on Africa's economy and food security, the Kremlin's role in the conflict is conspicuously absent beyond the occasional republishing of official Western statements, and any material reporting Junta and Wagner atrocities is always brief and accompanied by an official rebuttal.¹⁹³

Political, constitutional and legal frameworks

Since the 2023 constitutional referendum, power is concentrated in the hands of the president, with their removal only available via formal impeachment through a lengthy process.¹⁹⁴ It has been criticised as failing to provide effective accountability between different branches of government¹⁹⁵ and its implementation via a referendum of 93% approval is seen as neither free nor fair and with substantially low voter turnout.¹⁹⁶ Consequently, Mali's political environment has a significant top-down influence, especially over international relations. And ongoing Kremlin influence and support means that Mali's official narrative regarding Ukraine is heavily aligned with the Kremlin's.

The Junta has also introduced a raft of 'fake news laws' that have resulted in the closure of critical news outlets¹⁹⁷ and the rapid self-censorship of others.¹⁹⁸ Consequently, the likelihood of pro-Western and counter Kremlin-Junta narratives is low.

Summary

In summary, an overview of existing literature suggests that the colonial impacts on Mali and existing perceptions of neo-colonial structures have been largely ignored by the West until relatively recently in favour of focuses on counterterrorism. Russian IIOs have therefore

taken place against a prominent rise in anti-colonialism combined with a deterioration in security that has undermined perceptions of the West. By contrast, the Kremlin is viewed as untainted due to its intensifying IIOs since 2013. Meanwhile, the acceleration of the deterioration of security means it is likely the Junta will increase outputs proclaiming stability as well as anti-Western content to provide scapegoats for continuing problems.¹⁹⁹ Therefore, the most

dominant narratives were likely to be surrounding security and stability, with an emphasis on preserving sovereignty. Likewise, assessments suggest that the Wagner Group's infrastructure has proven too valuable to the Kremlin to disband, and evidence suggests the network's operations are continuing despite Prigozhin's death. This means we can also reasonably expect Wagner propaganda to continue in Mali.

Qualitative Research

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations (IIOs)

1. Qualitative research found that even critical interviewees acknowledged that the Kremlin has maintained an overwhelmingly positive image in Mali. With the most common words used to describe the Kremlin and Wagner Group as 'liberators', 'saviours' and perceptions of them as an 'anti-colonial' power as well as an efficient and pragmatic ally who could deliver results quickly. Wagner was viewed as inseparable from the Kremlin, whose 'ruthlessness' against jihadists was admired. This also extended to Vladimir Putin, who was viewed in near messianic terms as an anti-imperialist hero whose credentials included preventing Assad's fall and protecting Gaddafi (despite the latter's eventual demise). One interviewee reported that people he knew had named their children after him.

'When France liberated Mali in 2012, many people baptised their children with the name François [in honour of the French President]. [Now] there's not a week of a month goes by when a Malian doesn't name his child Putin.' – Interviewee M1

While this assertion could not be verified via secondary sources, in 2017 it was reported Syrians had named their children after Putin

in thanks of his support of the al-Assad regime.²⁰⁰ Therefore, there is a realistic possibility this is occurring in Mali.

2. As previously assessed from desk research, much of this messaging is couched in securitised and anti-colonial narratives. All other concerns, such as cost of living, were considered a far second in terms of priorities. All interviewees agreed that history was playing a role in anti-Western sentiments; not just colonialism, but Western activities in Iraq and Libya. However, the perceived failings of Operation Barkhane stood out as the most immediate cause of anti-Western sentiment:

'... the more foreign forces there are, the more terrorism spreads. So, people say: "there was a problem before you came, and that was the North. Now that you're here, it's the whole of Mali."' – Interviewee M5

Consequently, Kremlin IIOs frequently contrasted French performance in 'neutralising' terrorists with their own 'counter-terror' operations, supported by regular press releases by the Malian Junta in order to reinforce the narrative of authoritarian stability:

'Russia, in the collective imagination, is more of a military power, when you buy arms from Russia, even if there are embargoes on other countries or things like that, Russia can supply you with arms. So, people think in terms of efficiency. [...] People know that Russia is no child at heart. It's the speed with which these goods are delivered and the physical presence of the Russians on the ground alongside the Malian soldiers. Russia is no better than France, no better than the United States or anyone else.' – Interviewee M5

Based on one interviewee's assertion, it is likely that government/Wagner claims around the number of neutralised targets are exaggerated, or aren't terrorists but civilians who are reportedly regularly caught in the crossfire:

'... if you have one day adding up the figures, the number of terrorists and so-called neutralised per day [...] it's ten times more than the total number of terrorists that exist.' - Interviewee M1

It can also be argued to indicate the futility of the Kremlin-Junta model in Mali, as a focus on military solutions in conflict zones is frequently cited as a driving factor in radicalisation and insurgent recruitment.²⁰¹

3. All interviewees acknowledged that it was almost certain these shifts in attitudes and perceptions were, in part, a result of coordinated IIO campaigns occurring across online and offline platforms with Facebook and closed WhatsApp groups being cited as the primary sources of pro-Russian narratives. One example was that several WhatsApp groups declared the US was going to fly a plane with prisoners or corpses and detonate it over the Malian desert to say that Mali had shot it down as a justification to invade Mali. This mirrors Kremlin narratives after the shooting down of flight MH-17 in 2014 by Russian separatists in Ukraine²⁰² and attempts within Mali by the Wagner Group to frame French peacekeeping forces for

massacres.²⁰³ It is therefore highly likely that this narrative and others like it originated from the Kremlin. Mapping these networks is difficult due to the intense pressure that fact-checking and civil-society groups face, but one interviewee, experienced in these matters, said that these narratives are frequently distributed and cross referenced across traditional and online media in a timely and synchronised fashion.²⁰⁴

4. Main actors of communication: The Malian Junta is one of the most prolific disseminators of pro-Kremlin and anti-Western narratives—with one interviewee specifically citing activists working on behalf of Defence Minister Sadio Camara (Fig. C1.) as coordinators. Other members include Choguel Maiga (Malian Prime Minister), and Abdoulaye Diop (Minister of Foreign Affairs). However, several interviewees also cited specific civil-society actors acting as proxies for the Junta and the Kremlin as well as international pan Africanist influencers such as Nathalie Yamb (a.k.a the 'Lady of Sochi'), Kemi Seba, and Adama Diabaté, a prominent Malian media pundit who has previously said the Russian military 'instructors' who are increasingly visible in the west African country are trusted '100 per cent' by the population.²⁰⁵ The Wagner Group were cited as a dominant presence within the country, with their kinetic operations forming a key justification in the narrative of authoritarian stability, but they remain an unacknowledged presence in Mali and do not have a public media output. However, based on documented evidence of the aforementioned communicators' links to Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group,²⁰⁶ and the Group's prior operations, it is highly likely that there is coordination among these named individuals. In addition, the Kremlin is reported to finance local radio stations such as *Radio MaliBa FM*.²⁰⁷ One interviewee referenced an Adhi Tall as a prominent spokesperson for Mali-Kremlin cooperation—though his reach on social media appears to be limited.



Fig. C1. Sadio Camara, Defence Minister, recently sanctioned for his coordination with the Wagner Group.

5. Audiences: Several interviewees cited the big cities as targets of Kremlin IIOs, with a greater diversity of opinion in the rural areas, especially among the Tuaregs, who are opposed to the Junta. There was an emphasis placed on the youth, who have traditionally been targeted for influence by political parties and who 'see joining them as a shortcut to power'. They are also perceived as vulnerable due to lack of opportunity:

'All these idle young people who don't know where to go for information, they target them. They look at young people who have problems with the law, who have physical employment problems. [...] In the case of the demonstrations, it's the young people who come to these demonstrations.' – Interviewee M1

It was further noted by Interviewee M2 that 'it is Bamako that speaks to the rest of the country' inferring that the Junta's monopoly on information in the capital is a centre of gravity for Kremlin IIOs.

6. Based on this research, the following Tactics Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) were identified:
 - a. State capture: Mali demonstrates all the symptoms of an ongoing state capture process, in which the main pillars of the

state (policy formulation, implementation and accountability) are turned from the public interest to the benefit of one or more parties' interests.²⁰⁸ Thematic analysis and secondary source research reveals the Malian Junta's support for Kremlin narratives is largely a product of weaponry, security and diplomatic provisions made by the Kremlin along with the 'dirty work' of silencing Junta critics:

'We're afraid that, as in the Central African Republic, in addition to the war, [Russia and Wagner] will be doing the dirty work for the government that the Russians are doing in the Central African Republic. The Russians are now financing demonstrations, the voices in anti-European demonstrations, they are now liquidating journalists and opinion leaders who are not in favour of their presence.' – Interviewee M1

As a result, the Junta actively works to silence those against cooperation with the Kremlin:

'[...] they vilify you on social networks, intimidate you through phone calls and then they kidnap you, that's extra-judicial arrests and fourthly, they take you to court and put you in prison without any grounds.' – Interviewee M2

This is further supported by secondary research.²⁰⁹ Consequently, the Kremlin exerts significant influence over the information environment and can conduct IIOs unimpeded.

- b. Local languages: One interviewee suggested that a major advantage Kremlin propagandists have is that they have understood that 'you have to work with the national languages'. This further suggests that the Kremlin is outsourcing its campaigns to locals.
- c. Astroturfing: The synchronised pro-Kremlin efforts asserted by the interviewees, combined with desk research, indicates that Kremlin actors and proxies are conducting

astroturfing online and offline to create the impression of large-scale support. Multiple interviewees suggested this also takes place in the offline environment, as pro-Russian demonstrators regularly appear at any demonstration regardless of its topic. Secondary source research suggests the most prominent groups active in this are Sur Les Remparts and Parade.²¹⁰

- d. Discrediting critics through ‘swarming’: Multiple interviewees asserted that those who speak out against cooperation with the Kremlin are quickly derided as treacherous puppets of the West. This is done online through a multitude of profiles to drown out any criticism or competing narratives:

‘Anyone who [questions the narrative], whether it’s the Whatsapp group, whether it’s on Facebook, all those who try to give the information as it is or to give an objective analysis [...] they have your photo [and it] will go everywhere. [They’ll] paste your photo on little videos to tick with Macron’s photo, with Joe Biden’s photo, with the European Union’s photo etc. They know that they can vilify you, they leave you with the cyber-activists on the social networks who try to make inflammatory videos saying quite simply that you’re a stateless person, you’re an enemy, you’re a sell-out. You’ve sold your country to the West, you’re being paid by the West to destabilise the country.’ – Interviewee M2

Based on Kremlin IIO doctrine and previous TTPs, it is almost certain that a proportion of these online profiles are bots and sock puppets.

- e. Edited imagery: At least one interviewee provided examples of edited imagery to denigrate traditional Western partners by taking photos of gold shipments in Nigeria or Cameroon and changing the pictures to depict them as French convoys looting Mali’s gold. The same interviewee also cited the use of cartoons to depict Russian and Wagner soldiers as strong and reliable partners.

- f. Outsourcing: A significant number of pro-Russian campaigns take place on social media, and many of these likely utilise bot and sock puppet networks in line with Kremlin IIO doctrine in order to enhance authenticity and gain traction. To better achieve this, there is evidence that the Kremlin is outsourcing its narratives to local and regional actors. According to one interviewee, there are sections of the Malian diaspora living in France and the US who contribute to this narrative, as well:

‘There is a certain category of the Malian diaspora [...] They are the bearers of this so-called “liberating discourse” or propaganda on behalf of Russia.’ – Interviewee M3

- g. Information laundering: The synchronisation of information outputs described by the interviewees indicates attempts at information laundering—in which false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries, who gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source.²¹¹ It was further asserted that local media frequently reuse content from *Sputnik* as part of user sharing agreements:

‘These days, more Malians are following outlets like Sputnik, more local media share the information [from Sputnik].’ – Interviewee M4

- h. Doxing: Several interviewees referenced threats to lives, including anonymous calls naming family members and threatening their lives, which indicates those investigating Kremlin influence have their details leaked (a practice known as ‘doxing’) this also indicates further coordination between local authorities and the Kremlin:

‘There are unknown numbers calling to intimidate you. If you don’t stop, they’re going to do this to you, they’re going to kill you, they know where you are, they know where your parents are.’ – Interviewee M2

Concerning Western strategic communications

1. All interviewees agreed that the West was increasingly viewed as the source of all Mali's ills, with phrases including 'bloodsuckers' and 'vampires' being commonly used due to perceptions that the West comes to extract Mali's resources:

'As you know, the Westerners have been in Mali for almost ten years now. And despite all that, the [security] situation persists [...] For [Maliens], the Westerners are in Mali to plunder the country's natural resources. For them, Westerners are not there to develop the country.' – Interviewee M2

Consequently, all institutions perceived as linked to the West are viewed as biased and seeking to re-establish neo-colonial control over Mali. A standout event of this was NATO's intervention in Libya, which is regarded as the source of current instability in the Sahel and, in more extreme views, is actively encouraged by the West to provide an excuse to assert their hegemony – with NATO viewed as the West's 'political militia'.²¹²

2. These views extend to narratives around the invasion of Ukraine. Supporting the Kremlin is viewed as an anticolonial act because France is aligned with Ukraine, making it a valuable source of mobilisation for the ruling Junta. Consequently, official statements and narratives are commonly aligned with Kremlin talking points.
3. Assessing buy-in to pro-Kremlin narratives is difficult due to the state capture and second order effect of a 'climate of fear' and 'dictatorship of opinion' in the populace. Furthermore, legitimate grievances with the international system mean very few are advocates of universal norms and values as the West conceives them. However, there are audiences who recognised the corrosive influence of authoritarianism in Mali. These are reportedly most prominent in the Northern regions, as people there saw benefits to their security during MINUSMA and Operation Barkhane and did not support the withdrawal. They have also been disproportionately affected by the Wagner Group's violence. Benbere, a Malian fact-checking organisation, can also be considered anti-authoritarian and has come under increasing pressure from the Junta for its push back on Kremlin narratives. Global Voices sub-Saharan Africa and Rising Voices are two other fact-checking organisations known for working in local languages.²¹³

Concerning overall effects

1. On voting in international institutions: All interviewees agreed that the Kremlin either exerted direct influence over how Mali acts and votes in international institutions, that a growing ideological alignment meant they would vote in a similar way, or that the ongoing relationship between the Kremlin and the Junta was influencing voting in line with the Junta's pragmatic interests—with the expectation that they will receive protection at a UN Security Council level in return. Therefore, it is highly likely that Mali's current voting pattern will continue, and that the Kremlin will reciprocate on issues like sanctions against members of the Junta and votes on human rights abuses in Mali. This will further undermine universal norms and exacerbate existing international issues through gridlock.
2. On framing of critical national issues: Thematic analysis suggests that Kremlin narratives surrounding security and stability are a daily occurrence in the online and offline public spheres. Several interviewees believe that the sentiment of Malians attending pro-Kremlin and anti-French/anti-Western rallies is genuine and that the daily presence of these narratives was having a real-time impact on perceptions even among critics of the Kremlin who find it difficult to defend cooperation with the West in the face of its failures and the population's strong desire for security and daily subsistence:

'At every demonstration or outing of this movement, you tend to see Russian flags everywhere. During the demonstrations, we also saw placards or posters, banners that read "Thank you Wagner and welcome to Mali". Russians are managing to indoctrinate the population to some extent, because the population really wants this radical change so that we can fight terrorism.' – Interviewee M2

'People are trying to demonstrate their closeness to Russia and people are trying, as far as possible, to explain or share these ideals and explain to others that their best friend is Russia [...] So people become ambassadors for this propaganda themselves, sometimes without even really knowing what's at stake.' – Interviewee M3

'Russia is powerful. Even people who aren't for [cooperation with Russia] can consider the information [about Russia's power] to be true.' – Interviewee M5

Consequently, it is almost certain that anti-Western sentiment will become further ingrained, making cooperation to counter a deteriorating security environment increasingly difficult, which is likely to have significant repercussions on regional and international security.

Digital Analysis





Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations

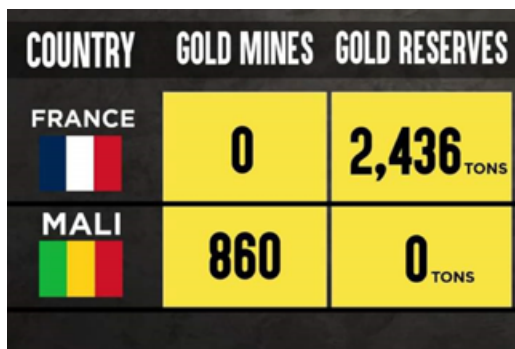
The digital scrape found over 400 examples of Kremlin sympathetic content being circulated within Mali that reached the threshold for analysis.

The content demonstrated the themes prevalent in the qualitative analysis: neocolonialism, theft by and demonisation of European states (especially relating to food and gold), and how partnering with the Kremlin is an act of anti-colonial resistance and a continuation

of the 'partnership' between the Soviet Union and liberation movements. With NATO as the new colonial 'terrorist' power, and France as a declining one desperately attempting to cling

to its remaining possessions. A few illustrative examples of imagery and key phrases are outlined in the table below.

	Shares	Views
	78,600	19.9 million
<p>Fig. C2. Cartoon implying France loots Africa for its resources. In this case food. Part of the wider neocolonial narrative.</p>		
<p>La bête immonde est de retour</p> 	4,400	2.8 million
<p>Fig. C3. Post demonising the EU and particularly Ursula von der Leyen. President of the European Commission. Translation is 'the foul beast is back'.</p>		
	4,700	1.9 million
<p>Fig. C4. Post copying style of old Soviet anti-colonial propaganda that has been edited to make NATO the new colonial power.</p>		
	800	4.6 million
<p>Fig. C5. Post in response to ECOWAS's condemnation of the coup in Niger. It implies those who support the condemnation are puppets and vassals of France.</p>		



26,200 8.3 million

Fig. C6. Infographic implying that France has looted Mali's gold. Part of the wider neocolonial narrative.

Among the most popular content criticised NATO by depicting it as an aggressive organisation in line with Kremlin narratives. Most frequently, this material focused on the NATO intervention in Libya, both as the source of current instability in the Sahel and as a mission to assassinate Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who is depicted as an anti-colonial martyr. For example, the content posted below by @AcProlific claimed leaked emails from Hillary Clinton showed that Gaddafi was killed to prevent the formation of a United States of Africa. It had been shared over 11 thousand times and had 2.8 million views.²¹⁴

Key phrases and hashtags	Themes
#HandsoffAfrica	143,0000 (usually accompanied with imagery around gold and food extraction.)
Viva la Russie	107–172,000
Viva la Poutine	53–57,000
La France sangsue (French leeches)	26–28,000



Alleged transcript of emails: "Qaddafi's government holds 143 tons of gold, and a similar amount in silver. This gold was accumulated prior to the current rebellion and was intended to be used to establish a pan-African currency based on the Libyan golden Dinar. This plan was designed to provide the Francophone African Countries with an alternative to the French franc (CFA)." "According to knowledgeable individuals this quantity of gold and silver is valued at more than \$7 billion. French intelligence officers discovered this plan shortly after the current rebellion began, and this was one of the factors that influenced President Nicolas Sarkozy's decision to commit France to the attack on Libya. According to these individuals Sarkozy's plans are driven by the following issues: 1. A desire to gain a greater share of Libya oil production, 2. Increase French influence in North Africa, 3. Improve his internal political situation in France, 4. Provide the French military with an opportunity to reassert its position in the world 5. Address the concern of his advisors over Qaddafi's long-term plans to supplant France as the dominant power in Francophone Africa"

Fig. C7. Post espousing pro-Gaddafi narrative that he was killed for standing up to the West.

The timing of its release (7 May 2023), well after the initial leak of Clinton’s emails and when there has been a notable uptick of pro-Kremlin information operations, suggests its origins were part of a larger pro-Kremlin network.

Digital analysis also found the Kremlin narrative surrounding biolabs in Ukraine to be prominent (examples of content provided in Fig. C8. and Fig. C9., appearing with both French and Arabic commentary). Something the Key Informant Interviews had not previously expressed.

There is a realistic possibility that the popularity of this narrative stems from historical narrative shaping by Operation Denver (a.k.a. Operation Infektion), the 1986 Cold War KGB-Stasi campaign to blame the US for AIDS.²¹⁵ Infektion was one of the most enduring disinformation operations, with doubts about AIDS and world health organisations persisting to this day.²¹⁶ Its wider effects were instilling the belief that the West utilised biochemical warfare to target specific ‘enemies’—a theme that is replicated in modern Kremlin IIOs.

Although Facebook and Twitter were the dominant platforms for pro-Kremlin content and public debate, YouTube and TikTok also featured substantial sharing of pro-Kremlin content. The video below for example, shows a clip of Gaddafi espousing the Kremlin narrative and inferring his knowledge of it will lead the



Fig. C8. Screenshot of post supporting debunked ‘Ukraine biolab’ theory. 815k Shares and 13k views.

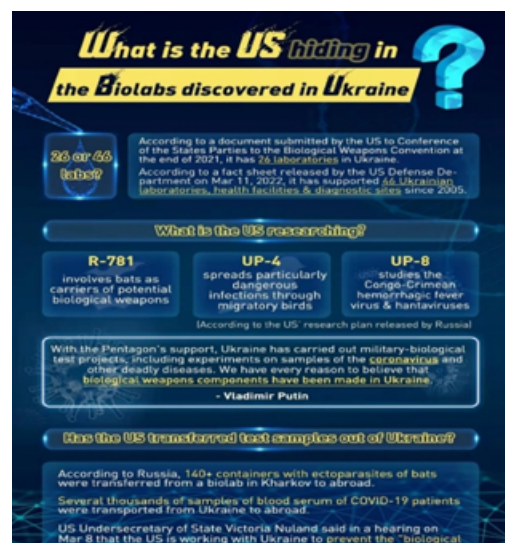


Fig. C9. Screenshot of detailed post supporting debunked ‘Ukraine biolab’ theory. 8,200 Shares and 1.6 million views.



Fig. C10. Pro-Gaddafi video in which he espouses the pro-Kremlin narrative of NATO enlargement threatening Russia. He further suggests that his knowledge of this will lead the West to silence him. Shares: 328,600 Views: 86.4 million

West to 'come after [him]'. The image is sourced from a Libyan pro-Gaddafi channel.

Video content also emphasised the Kremlin's growing influence on the continent at the expense of France. These largely focused on the Kremlin's strength as a military power, but also its influence as a partnership, rather than a new form of colonialism. For example, the video below, which was viewed over 120,000 times, was repurposed from a Nigerian channel that originally praised Nigeria's military but stressed the difficulties of potentially fighting the so-called 'Alliance of States in the Sahel' if they received Russian backing. Another video from the same channel (which received 4.5 thousand

views) implied that Russia's support was anti-colonial, that France only criticised it due to its loss of influence, and that the Alliance of States of the Sahel, backed by Russia, 'marked the end to imperialism'. Both featured footage of Junta leaders at the St Petersburg conference and alongside Russian military equipment. Both videos when recirculated came with either French or Arabic commentary.

Digital research found a wide variation of communicators and those spreading anti-Western and pro-Kremlin content.

Among the most prominent were the official pages of the Armed Forces of Mali's

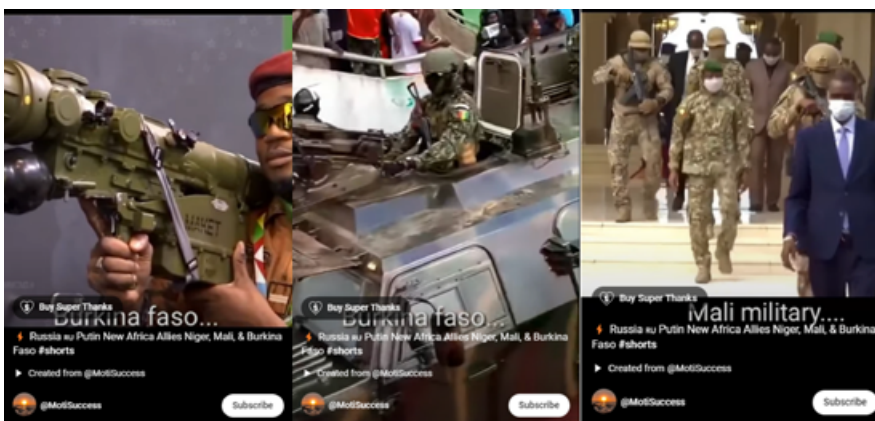


Fig. C11. YouTube short praising Kremlin support for regional Juntas and implying they will become a military powerhouse. www.youtube.com/shorts/7Hm97CHPvVU



Fig. C12. YouTube short praising Kremlin support for regional Juntas. www.youtube.com/shorts/E7vYPb1_3m4

(FAMa) own media apparatus, including the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DIRPA). This constitutes Facebook groups, a Twitter profile and WhatsApp groups. Further reinforcing the qualitative finding of elite capture to create media influence. The main content output focused on the neutralisation of terrorists and the strength of its alliances with the Kremlin and neighbouring Juntas as well as refuting allegations of massacres by the FAMa and Wagner Group as ‘fake news’.²¹⁷

A study of the FAMa’s social media pages also revealed other Facebook groups or connected profiles that constitute a pseudo-media network available on social media or websites. Some with varying or changing their titles to avoid Meta content moderation. These profiles frequently lauded the Junta’s alleged success against terrorism (further reinforcing the narrative of authoritarian stability) and praising ties with the Kremlin while denigrating France with accusations of war crimes as well as reusing content from *Sputnik Africa* and *RT*. These profiles included *FAMa24*, *Sans Frontière TV*, *Mali Reporter Sans Frontière*, *Ebene Media TV+*, *Ebene Media TV-Actu*, *DD Geopolitics*, *MaliBa* and *Afrique media*. Together, these top-ranking profiles have a combined following of approximately 1.2 million.

While domestic and regional outlets and groups were prominent pro-Kremlin narrative voices, outside voices also played a significant role in the findings. While there is overlap, these can be divided into non-contextualised media, entrepreneurs of influence, and ‘useful idiots’ and cynics.

Non-contextualised media was dominated by various right-wing publications from outside of Mali that criticised Ukraine and the West’s conduct without providing full context such as by only focusing on economic burdens support for Ukraine causes and focusing on the Russian angle in the conflict but not including Kremlin aggression or atrocities. Among the most frequent of these were content from the US, and South Asian media organisations like *The Hindustan Times*.

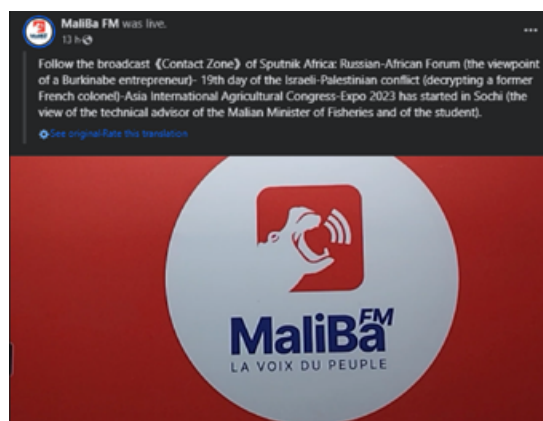


Fig. C13. Screenshot from MaliBa feature of broadcast from the *Sputnik-Africa* forum.



Fig. C14. Screenshot from Mali Reporter without Borders reporting on ‘war crimes’ by French soldiers serving in Operation Barkhane.



Fig. C15. Screenshot from *Ebene Media TV* and featuring videos and content. Including ‘The Russia-Ukraine War: Here are the real causes and origins of the conflict’.

The entrepreneurs of influence are not the same as those which are Kremlin sponsored, as they have a degree of agency and pursue their own agendas that may lead to their messaging diverging from the Kremlin's, but overall have a narrative alignment. Among the most well-documented of these is Luc Michel, who previously led the pro-Kremlin 'Russosphere' network before its exposure and diminishment.²¹⁸ But many others have filled the vacuum. Chief among them the pan-Africanists Kemi Seba and Nathalie Yamb, both of whom have content reused in the pseudo media field. Three of the most illustrative examples identified in our findings were Amir Nourdine Elbachir, Fenelon Massalon, and Coumba Keita. All three

frequently post pro-Junta and anti-Western content while praising relations with Russia as part of a wider pan Africanist agenda. They have a combined following of 150 thousand.

The 'useful idiots' and cynics, were separate from entrepreneurs of influence in that they have no formal links to the Kremlin but are unwittingly utilised to spread Kremlin narratives. Many of the most prominent of these came from the West, such as Jackson Hinkle. Among his content circulated in Mali was a celebration of the expulsion of UN forces and decision to allow Wagner to stay (left) which received 4,500 shares and over 31,000 likes.



Fig. C16. Amir Nourdine Elbachir, a pro-Junta profile who praises cooperation with the Kremlin. It uses a picture of assassinated journalist Jamal Khashoggi as a profile picture.



Fig. C17. Fenelon Massala, a Pan-Africanist journalist who regularly praises regional Juntas and Vladimir Putin.



Fig. C18. Coumba Keita, a Malian Pan-Africanist journalist who regularly praises the Malian Junta and Vladimir Putin.

On the other end of the political spectrum were Tim Anderson, Director of the Centre for Counter Hegemonic Studies—a think tank that alleges that the chemical attacks in Syria by the Assad regime and Tiananmen Square Massacre were hoaxes. And Max Blumenthal, Director of The Grayzone—an online media group criticised for espousing anti-Western conspiracy theories. Two of their posts circulated in Mali focused on the narrative of NATO's intervention in Libya as the source of instability and being motivated by greed.



Fig. C19. Post by Jackson Hinkle celebrating the Mali's expulsion of UN forces in favour of the Wagner PMC.

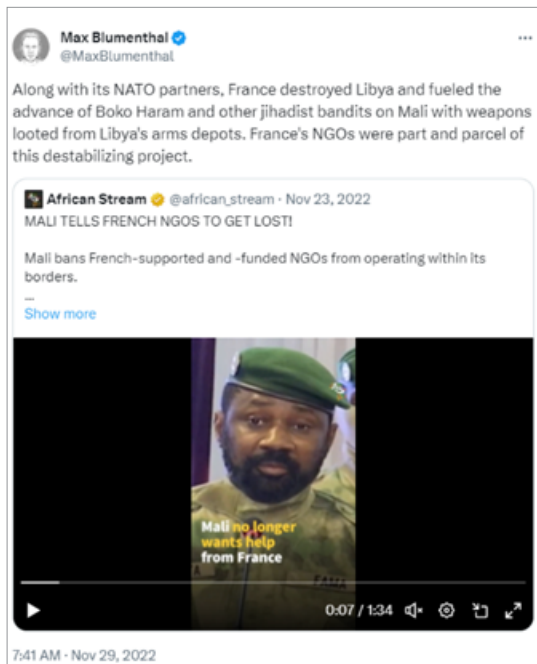


Fig. C20. Post by Max Blumenthal, editor and founder of The Grayzone, in which he implies France deliberately destabilised the Sahel. He retweets Africa Stream, an account that featured in other anti-Western messaging campaigns.

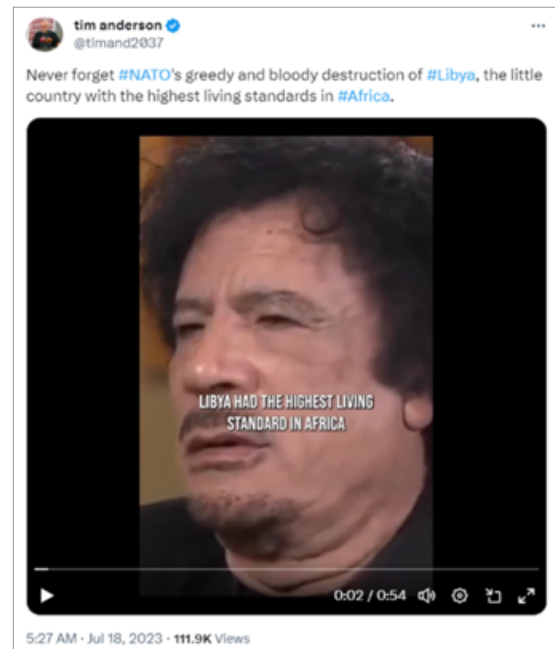


Fig. C21. Post from Tim Anderson in which he criticises the NATO intervention in Libya while ignoring Gaddafi's human rights abuses and crackdown on demonstrators.

It is likely that these voices have been amplified to counteract perceptions of Mali becoming isolated following the coups and its alignment with the Kremlin.

An analysis of the various profiles that met the threshold for analysis revealed several possible TTPs:

1. The content was highly imagery driven. Which is shown to encourage higher levels of engagement²¹⁹ and be more difficult for moderation algorithms to detect.²²⁰
2. Many of the profiles also featured connecting links to profiles on other platforms or closed groups on Telegram and WhatsApp, demonstrating the attempt to pull users into further into anti-Western and/or pro-Kremlin information silos that can minimise exposure to content of the opposing narrative.
3. Sock puppets and bots, some of which had been created after the invasion of Ukraine and others, appeared to have been dormant for several years. These were used to amplify pseudo media and outside voices.



Fig. C22. Screen grab of a pro-FAMA Facebook page with WhatsApp and Telegram links.



Fig. C23. Screen grab of the end of a pro-Kremlin and pro-Kremlin YouTube video with invites to a Telegram and Twitter account.

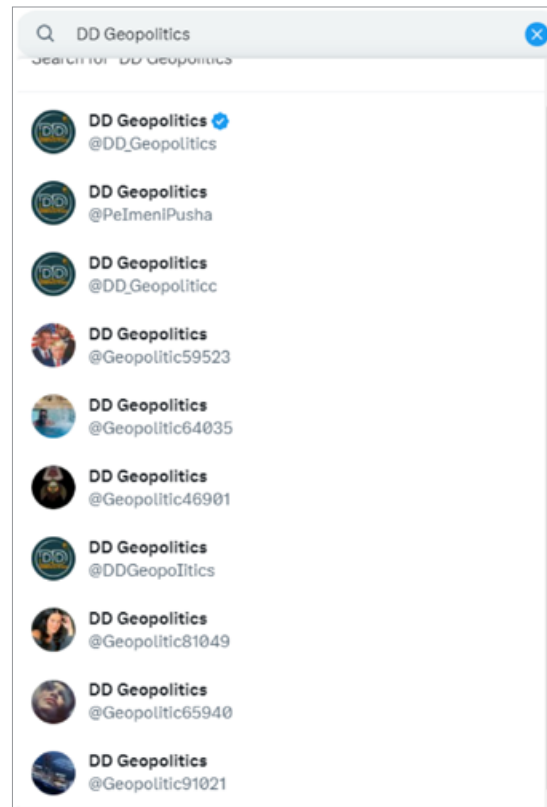


Fig. C24. List of 'DD Geopolitics' profiles, each with an altered username to avoid detection.

One of the sub-tactics evident to avoid detection was the use of typos or slight variations in profile names to evade moderation algorithms (a variation of 'typosquatting').²²¹ As

demonstrated by DD Geopolitics (Fig. C24.) – a multi-platform network that frequently parrots Kremlin talking points.²²²

Concerning Western strategic communications

Although there were significant levels of pro-Kremlin content, there were also examples of pro-Western or anti-Kremlin content that reached the threshold of the data scrape.

Much of what was found was pro-Ukraine content, often humorously capturing its defiance of the Kremlin or mocking the Kremlin's military failures, as demonstrated in the two illustrative examples below. The first one (Boot) had 3.6m views and 365k shares, the latter (Map) had 1.9m views and 183k shares.

There was also evidence that audiences in Mali followed objective outlets. A video from *Voice of America (VoA) Bambara*, detailing a phone call between Junta leader Assimi Goita and Vladimir Putin, received 9.6 thousand views. The channel has 33.9 thousand subscribers. Considering Bambara is a highly regional language with limited communities outside the region, this suggests there is a sizeable audience that follows Western outlets in Mali.



Fig. C25. Pro-Ukrainian image satirising Ukraine’s unexpectedly staunch resistance to the Kremlin’s invasion.



Fig. C26. Map satirising the Kremlin’s claims to Ukraine as a part of ‘historical Russia’.



Fig. C27. Voice of America Bambara YouTube profile.

Another piece of viral content that can be viewed as anti-Kremlin, if not necessarily pro-Western, was a distinctly anti-Wagner cartoon in which the Wagnerites are depicted as serpentine ogres that are invited in before turning on the local population, committing theft and murder before they are driven out. It received 38 thousand shares and over a million views. It is reported to have originated on ‘dark socials’ from Islamist sources, demonstrating the prominence of faith-based appeal and

the growth of Islamist narratives in response to Wagner aggression. Further reinforcing research suggesting Wagner’s actions are fueling terrorism in the Sahel.²²³

These examples demonstrate that there remains a sizeable audience in Mali for anti-authoritarian (if not necessarily pro-Western or pro-universal values) content. However, they are frequently outranked by pro-Kremlin material in reach and penetration.



Fig. C28. Anti-Wagner cartoon originating on Islamist socials. Interestingly, it parodies pro-Wagner cartoons, suggesting there's a realistic possibility it aims to encourage engagement from those who watch pro-Wagner cartoons.

Impacts

Analysis of the highest rated content indicated that anti-Western sentiment, exacerbated by Kremlin IIOs, are having an impact on public opinion (See Main Report, Methodology section to see explanation of Parliament Emoji graphs).

For example, on the video *Mali drops French as its first language*, Emojis indicated that commentary was highly supportive. Including Raised Fist (power/solidarity), Hearts and Clapping Hands.



Fig. C29. Mali drops French as its first language

Likewise, the video *Malian youth back deployment of Kremlin soldiers*, while indicating 14% of Emojis in the commentary had 'Angry' Faces, the majority of Emojis used were Malian and Russian Flags, Hearts and Strength.

Therefore, there is a realistic possibility that these 'Angry' Faces are directed toward the lack of security that has led them to deploy Kremlin soldiers, rather than the deployment itself.

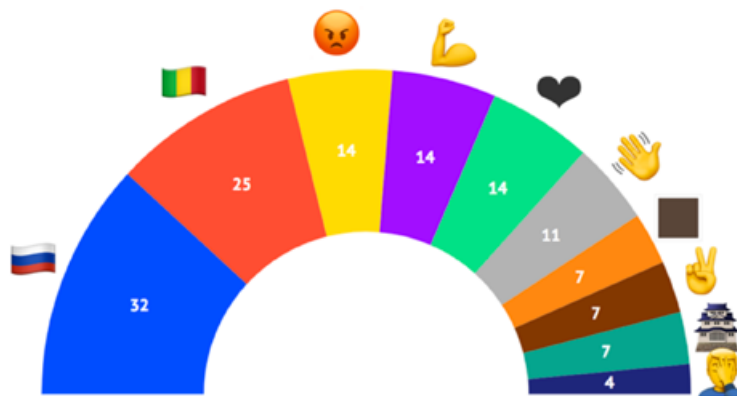


Fig. C30. Malian youth back deployment of Kremlin soldiers

This was reflected in word clouds of the commentary, which showed some of the highest-ranking words to be 'France, need, leave'.

Likewise, a word cloud search of NATO commentary on the NATO-Gaddafi video indicated that Gaddafi was assassinated as part of a financial conspiracy led by Hillary Clinton (a favourite target of Kremlin disinformation).

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

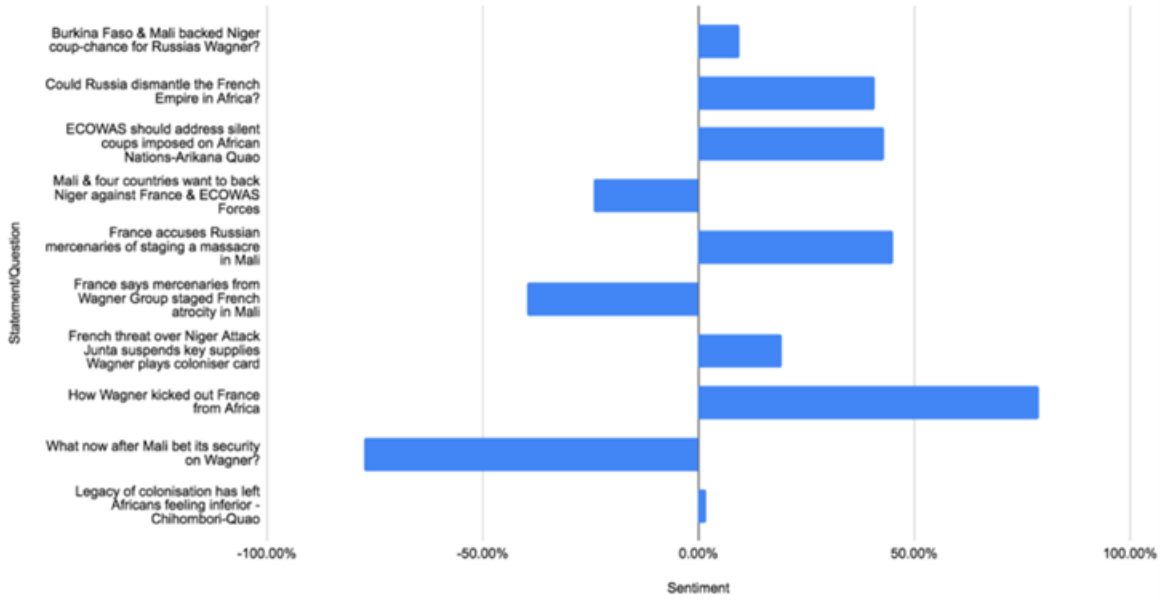


Fig. C33. Sentiment Graph 1

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

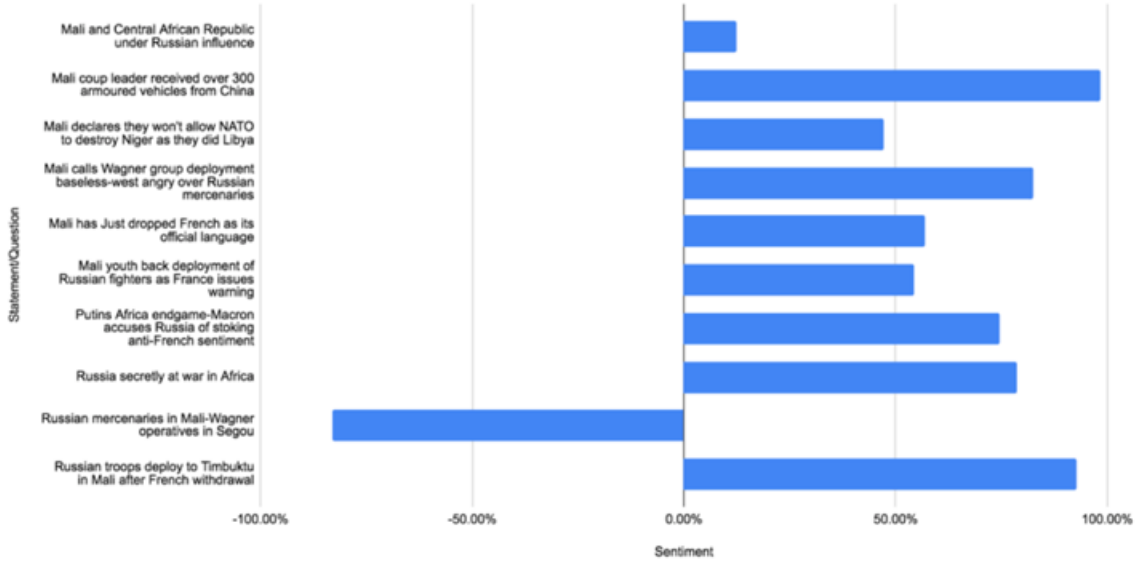


Fig. C34. Sentiment Graph 2

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

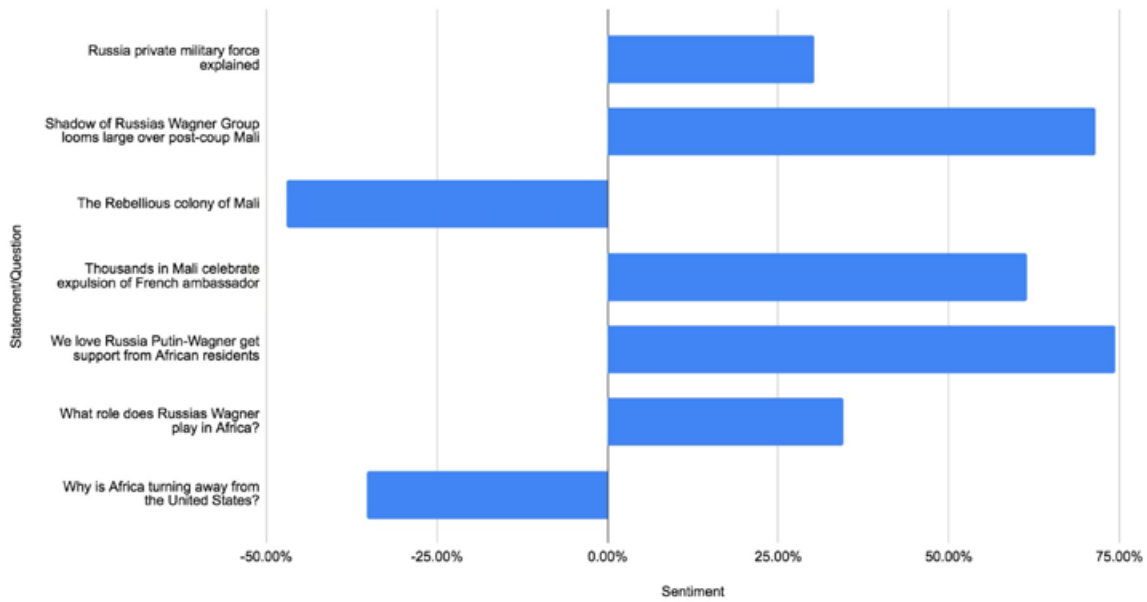


Fig. C35. Sentiment Graph 3

Conclusions

In summary, qualitative analysis indicates that anti-Western sentiment is prevalent in Malian society both offline and online, and this aligns with pro-Kremlin sentiment. And, therefore, alignment with the Kremlin is frequently equated with anti-colonial liberation. This is reflected in the online environment, where pro-Kremlin content circulates on social media, in closed groups, and the 'official' media environment in far larger numbers and generates more reach than pro-Western or pro-norms content. This is likely to be cumulating in shifts in sentiment with the second order effect to overtly pro-Kremlin perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours.

Based on the Theory of Reflexive Control, it can be assessed that the aim of these IIOs is to cultivate determining behaviour, such as further support for expansion and entrenchment of Kremlin influence in the

country and in international institutions, as well as hyper mistrust of the West. At the same time, it likely aims to cultivate destructive behaviour of paralysing objective analysis of Kremlin-Junta cooperation.

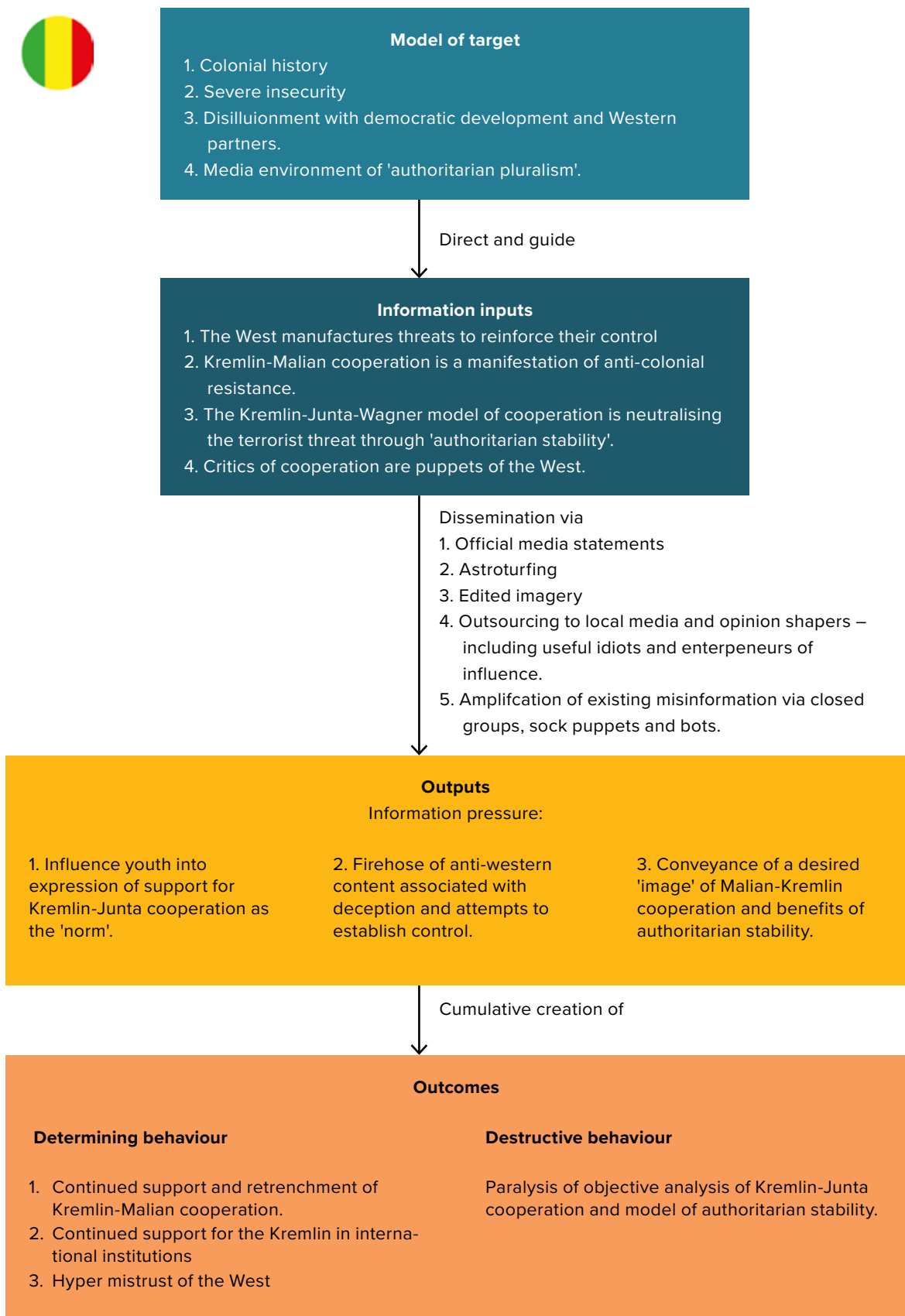


Fig. C36. TORC framework for Mali

Annex D

Kenya

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Introduction

Russian influence in Kenya is a critically understudied issue. In part, this is due to Kenya's relative resilience to Kremlin information channels and consistent narratives and ideological alignment with concepts of universal values that do not deviate significantly from Western views; the now viral speech by the Kenyan ambassador to the UN condemning the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine is an example

of this.²²⁴ However, Russian IIOs in the country are arguably only in their early stages and Kenya's information environment, combined with traditionalism, makes it vulnerable to IIOs; presenting an opportunity for Kremlin influence to grow.

Desk Research

Historic and contemporary relations with the West and Russia

Of the five states studied for this report, Kenya's can be seen as having the most consistent and positive relationship with the West despite colonial occupation. This relationship can also be described by long-term security relationships to combat Islamist terrorism and criminal activity on its border with Somalia.²²⁵ There is a realistic possibility that this threat to its borders has factored into Kenya's strong support for territorial integrity and existing international borders and its subsequent condemnation of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.

Kenya's most enduring relationship has been with the UK. During the Cold War, Britain was Kenya's closest trading partner and the two remained allies. When rumours of a coup to overthrow President Kenyatta reached the British government in 1965, they made plans to intervene militarily to prevent it.²²⁶ In 2020, the two countries announced a new 'strategic partnership'.²²⁷ However, there have been notable points of tension. The Mau Mau Uprising, and its bloody suppression, remain in living memory for many Kenyans. Even today, lawsuits have been brought against the UK government by victims of mistreatment,²²⁸ which was further reflected in the mourning of Queen Elizabeth II.²²⁹ Like many states in the Multi-aligned Community,

Kenya has also expressed frustration at a lack of equal treatment in the international community, which has been highlighted by perceptions of 'vaccine nationalism' during the Covid-19 pandemic, unequal burdens in the ongoing Climate Crisis, the bussing of African leaders to the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II,²³⁰ and a growing frustration directed at British and, to a lesser extent, Western troop presence based on high-profile criminal cases in which troops have been perceived as acting with impunity.²³¹ Consequently, Kenya can be perceived as becoming more assertive in its diversification of partners, particularly as competition between the People's Republic of China (PRC), Russia, and the West gives states in the Multi-aligned Community more leverage.

While relations with the West have been strong, relations with the Kremlin have by no means been negative. The Soviet Union was a major contributor to infrastructure and health projects in the 1960s and offered training to African students at the Patrice Lumumba University in Moscow²³² (named after the Congolese president assassinated by Western agents, his name was often traded on for propaganda effect by the Soviets and continues to be by the Kremlin).²³³ Events like these

remain in living memory and are publicised in celebratory events: at the fiftieth anniversary of its independence, the *Daily Nation* and *The Standard*, two of Kenya's biggest newspapers, listed the opening of a provincial hospital built with Soviet expertise and funding as a 'defining moment' in the nation's history.²³⁴ They have also been cited as reasons why the Kremlin and Vladimir Putin maintain support from a significant minority of Kenya's population. In August 2017, a Pew Research survey found 33% of Kenyans had a favourable view of Putin, even as 39% expressed concern over Russia's power and influence.²³⁵ Responses in 2023 found that this had grown to 46% of Kenyans having confidence that Putin 'would do the right thing regarding world affairs'.²³⁶

As part of the Kremlin's attempts to expand its influence and make a return to becoming a great power on the continent, it has made overtures to many African states as described by increased armed sales, debt forgiveness, and proposals for economic development.²³⁷ For Kenya, this has included financial and technical contributions of Rosatom to its nuclear industry²³⁸ and the establishment of a Russia-Kenya business council announced at the Sochi conference in 2019.²³⁹ During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Kremlin sent doses of its Sputnik V vaccine to Multi-aligned Community states, including 75,000 doses to Kenya.²⁴⁰ However, these contributions have been marginal in comparison to Kenya's international development partners. Kenya later discontinued their use of Sputnik V over safety and supply chain concerns.²⁴¹ Instead, one of the Kremlin's most aggressive areas of influence has been in its image as a defender of traditional and Christian values.

Homophobia and conservatism have been a traditional plank of the modern Kremlin's IIOs,²⁴² with religious and traditional values organisations acting as key instruments for

its dissemination.²⁴³ The Russian Orthodox Church—led by Patriarch Kirill, a prominent supporter of the Kremlin—has been seeking to expand into Africa,²⁴⁴ claiming to have doubled in size since 2021.²⁴⁵ At the Russia-Africa Conference of 2023, Patriarch Kirill extolled that the Russian church 'does not distort God-given norms of morality in favour of some fashionable ideological trends' in a thinly-veiled attack on the LGBTQ+ community and encouraged African leaders to follow the Kremlin's lead.²⁴⁶ While the Kremlin still struggles to compete with the Patriarchy of Alexandria, its expansion comes at a time when anti-LGBTQ+ views and legislation are on the rise in East Africa²⁴⁷ with commentators citing Western influence is to blame for LGBTQ+ proliferation and the 'ruining' of traditional values.²⁴⁸ Kenya is no exception, and has traditionally held marital institutions and the concept of family as a core part of its culture, particularly in rural areas.²⁴⁹ Consequently, typical Kremlin narratives around LGBTQ+ as a tool of Western subversion have the opportunity to gain traction.

At the outset of Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, Kenya was the only East African Community trade bloc member to openly criticise the Kremlin, and it has continued to express strong disapproval of the Kremlin's continued support for military coups on the continent.²⁵⁰ However, as the conflict drags on, there is evidence that Nairobi's stance is shifting out of pragmatic recognition of Russia's importance to food security on the continent.²⁵¹ After Sergei Lavrov, the Kremlin's Foreign Minister, visited Kenya in May of 2023, Nairobi announced an expansion of trade ties.²⁵² Likewise, opinion polls have reflected a more nuanced view. While majorities still hold negative views of Putin and Russia, they succeed by a narrow margin of as little as 2%.²⁵³ This has created concerns and accusations that Nairobi is seeking to 'play both sides'.²⁵⁴

Information environment

Kenya has a vibrant and diverse media environment with a politically engaged population. Traditional media remains

prominent,²⁵⁵ but many paper publications are moving to internet distribution and social media is becoming a more prominent source of news

in line with global trends.²⁵⁶ Alongside this there has been a substantial growth of online political participation.²⁵⁷

Facebook remains the most popular social media app in Kenya, second only to the closed messaging platform WhatsApp. The number of users has declined in recent years as Twitter gains popularity (particularly among urban dwellers aged 26–35). Since 2018, Twitter has been seen as the preferred space for political discourse online globally,²⁵⁸ a growing trend in Africa since 2016, even compared to the Northern hemisphere.²⁵⁹

Kenya has a record of foreign and domestic interference in its elections.²⁶⁰ Despite efforts by successive administrations to tackle disinformation and information manipulation in Kenya,²⁶¹ multiple studies have shown that the political sphere is continuing to suffer a deluge of disinformation.²⁶² In early 2021, for example, many Kenyans were being paid to promote hashtags using multiple sock puppet accounts

to create an illusion of popular support for proposed constitutional reforms.²⁶³ Successful influencers can reportedly make more than the average monthly salary in Kenya if they are able to get content trending for just a few hours, and a 2021 poll found seven in ten Twitter users in Kenya were willing to share potentially false or misleading information in exchange for payment.²⁶⁴

The bulk of this disinformation is currently focused on domestic political elections,²⁶⁵ but a rapidly developing industry of influencers for hire and introduction of interference expertise by outside parties like Cambridge Analytica and Team Jorge²⁶⁶ demonstrates a growing ‘disinformation nexus’ in Kenya similar to developments in the Gulf,²⁶⁷ which risks creating a vulnerability to IIOs. Evidence of this is already manifesting as a survey in Reuters Institute’s 2021 annual Digital News Report indicated that 75% of news consumers in Kenya find it hard to distinguish between what is real and what is fake online,²⁶⁸ creating a cultural apathy.

Political, constitutional and legal frameworks

According to its constitution, Kenya ‘seeks to promote and safeguard national, regional and international peace and security and protect our sovereignty and territorial integrity’.²⁶⁹ Likewise, its first Foreign Policy document, released in 2014, emphasised its national objectives as:

1. Protect Kenya’s sovereignty and territorial integrity;
2. Promote integration;
3. Enhance regional peace and security;
4. Advance the economic prosperity of Kenya and her people;
5. Project Kenya’s image and prestige;
6. Promote multilateralism;

7. Promote the interests of Kenyan Diaspora and partnership with the Kenyans abroad.²⁷⁰

Both further stress their policies being a result of Kenya’s ‘long struggle with colonialism’, the ‘inextricable link’ between ‘national independence and humanity’s larger freedom’.²⁷¹

Based on these documents, Kenya’s opposition to the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine appears to be a natural phenomenon. However, the Foreign Policy and constitution also reflect the strong precedent for multilateralism and non-alignment present since the Cold War. Consequently, while Nairobi condemns the Kremlin’s actions, it is reluctant to rock the boat.

Summary

Nairobi continues to pursue a Western-leaning policy of non-alignment, but its population has a more nuanced view of the Ukraine conflict. Coupled with existing historical

nostalgia for Soviet contributions to its development, a growing opposition to 'Western imposed' LGBTQ+ rights, and an information environment that struggles with malign influence, this creates

an environment where Kremlin IIOs have a realistic possibility of gaining significant traction.

Qualitative Research

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations (IIOs)

1. Perceptions of the Kremlin are deeply mixed in Kenya. Due to its vibrant information and media environment, there is knowledge of the Kremlin's dictatorial regime, human rights violations and acknowledgement of the Kremlin's blame for the invasion of Ukraine and the resulting ripple effects on the cost of living and food security across Africa. However, perceptions of injustice in the international system means that there is a significant anti-Western movement that can sympathise with the Kremlin.

'On its own merits, [the Kremlin] would struggle to get a following. A wish for more of a challenge to the West means people look to Russia, even China, as models that they would want to copy.' – Interviewee K2

'[The Kremlin] are promoting themselves by default as being anti-colonial. How effective that is, as I say, they probably have an audience who had just naturally anti-Western anyway, but it's still the minority.' – Interviewee K3

'While it is not highly favourable, neither is it unfavourable. [...] There is a popular sentiment with regard to Moscow that it is seen as standing up against what it's perceived as a lot of unilateralism.' – Interviewee K4

2. Historical context and collective memory were determined to play a significant role in shaping perceptions and narrative.

The West's colonial exploits were a major source of discontent, with Britain being singled out by one interviewee as the 'Western bogeyman'.

'[Colonialism is a constant] you walk into the supermarket and there's a little rack that's got the newspapers on it and the books and the first book that you see is often Kenya's gulag.' – Interviewee K3

'The colonial aspect—you can't minimise its importance and vitality, especially in shaping narratives on this content.' – Interviewee K4

History was not only confined to the colonial era. It was asserted by one interviewee that Western politicians' reluctance to effectively contribute to the prevention of African genocides is well remembered among East Africans. This furthers apathy towards Ukraine and disillusionment with Western-led institutions.

'It's not lost to a lot of Africans that Bill Clinton, for instance, literally campaigned against the UN deploying [to stop genocides].' – Interviewee K4

This is significant due to anti-colonial narratives featuring heavily in the Kremlin's propaganda in the Multi-aligned Community. Before his Africa tour in July 2022, Lavrov wrote an op-ed that 'Russia never stained itself with the bloody crimes of colonialism'.²⁷² And Nikolai Patrushev, the Kremlin's

Secretary of the Security Council, cited historical memory as a ‘key resource in confronting colonialism’.²⁷³ While it is unlikely to cultivate widespread support for the Kremlin, it is likely to be agreed with as a criticism of the West.

3. Narratives and disinformation

One of our interviewees, an East African geopolitical expert, broke down the Kremlin’s narratives on the continent within three historical ‘epochs’:

‘Russian narratives [are] based on 3 phases or epochs in history:

1. 1940s and 1970s — Supporting liberation movements
2. 1990 to 2010 — Where Africans were felt that there was a sense of Western abandonment
3. 2010 to 2022 — The rise of “the rest”

Interviewee K4 (paraphrased)

All are combined in the Kremlin’s contemporary narratives to cultivate pro-Kremlin sentiment and encourage further distrust of the West.

- a. Neocolonialism, racism, and injustice by the West and in the international system: The legacy of colonialism remains a core grievance across the whole of Africa, including Kenya. This grievance overlaps with perceptions of injustice and maltreatment by Africans within the international system and in day-to-day state functions by former colonial powers. One cited instance was the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II; during which the bussing of African leaders to the state funeral was held up as an example of Western contempt for African leaders (Fig. D1).

As in West Africa, the Kremlin has sought to actively exploit anti-colonial sentiment and legitimate grievances within Kenya. Primarily by framing recent international disputes like



Fig. D1. Photo of African leaders bussed to the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II. Example caption from a now suspended twitter account was:

“As if colonialism wasn't enough, African leaders are packed in a bus to the burial of the chief colonizer.....whereas the US president is given first class treat befitting a head of state. ????” – @AthousandBrains) 19 September 2022.

the West’s calls for African condemnation of the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine as an infringement of sovereignty and a return to vassalhood.

‘[for the general population the Kremlin distributes] information that would appeal to [themes] like sovereignty.’ – Interviewee K1

‘Moscow has found that ingenious way of exploiting the sentiment [of global grievance].’ – Interviewee K4

- b. The Kremlin as a reliable friend to Africa: Just as the Kremlin reinforces concepts of Western neocolonialism; it also asserts its own role in Africa as a dependable friend who does not interfere, as well as being on ‘the right side of history’ through its support for liberation movements. This continues into the modern day through ‘free aid’ from the Kremlin to African countries as part of its wider ‘non-interference’ and ‘no strings

attached’ narrative. In Kenya’s case, this centres on fertiliser, Russia’s largest export to the country, and, since the end of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, promises of free grain.

‘Russia giving food becomes, an act of friendship. The other day, Putin was saying he’s giving us free fertiliser.’ – Interviewee K2

To further its previous narratives of neocolonialism and injustice by a deceitful West, this type of content is often done while juxtaposing anti-Western content, such as the aforementioned bussing of African leaders at the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II, contrasted with the treatment of African leaders at the Russia-Africa Summit in St Petersburg.

‘[The Kremlin] put out a picture showing the African leaders put in buses during the Queen’s funeral as compared to how the Russians were treating them, and they put it out as the Russians are treating them as equals. [It] generated a lot of engagements.’ – Interviewee K1

It is asserted by one interviewee that these narratives have cultivated a perception that is advantageous to the Kremlin; that although it was an empire, it was not predatory.

‘The interesting thing is Moscow was also an empire in many forms. But it was a different type of arrangement, at least according to Africans, and is not viewed as a relationship of subservience.’ – Interviewee K4

- c. LGBTQ+ as a Western conspiracy: The Kremlin’s well-known stance against LGBTQ+ rights has some appeal to aspects of Kenyan society, which on the whole is largely conservative. This, and a rising tide of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment across East Africa, has led to the Kremlin seeking to intensify the export of its own domestic narrative that LGBTQ+ is a Western conspiracy to invert the national order and subvert ‘traditional values’ and societies that conform to them.²⁷⁴

‘While we want universal rights and that does well, what doesn’t do well is LGBT rights. So that gets a lot of pushback. That would be an avenue for Russia to push the narrative that their culture aligns more towards ‘African values and cultures’. Not specifically Russian values. There’s definitely that perception that [LGBTQ+] is a foreign concept.’ – Interviewee K1

This narrative further overlaps subconsciously with the neocolonial narrative; as many rejections of Western LGBTQ+ advocacy stems from an instinctive concern of Western interference.

‘...a lot of it is really based on the colonial era. The way it’s framed is that they are promoting] the idea that the West can go around and impose not just morality but views, impose policies.’ – Interviewee K2



Fig. D2. Post by Russian embassy in Kenya. As of 07/10/2023, it has achieved 325.2k views and 4,766 likes—not insignificant, but relatively low.

However, despite agreement among interviewees that the presence of these narratives was creating anti-Western sentiment, it could be inferred that the Kremlin has been unable to shift perceptions to a decisively pro-Russian narrative. It is likely that this is in part due to a government perceived as highly pro-Western, a lack of Kremlin soft power, and a vibrant media environment and civil society that enhances societal resilience.

'I did see that when Russia, when the Russian embassy posted [anti-LGBTQ content, Fig. D2.] but it didn't gain much traction.' – Interviewee K3

'[...] there's a lot of discontent being generated [but] Russia have a very poor public diplomacy strategy in Kenya.' – Interviewee K4

4. Main communicators

- a. Russian embassy and diplomats: The Russian Embassy was considered the foremost communicator of pro-Kremlin narratives on social media. Both through online communications on social media and diplomatic appearances on popular radio programmes to espouse its support for non-interference and traditional values.

'[...] the Russian embassy Twitter feed, they're very active [and] they're definitely in touch with Kenyan journalists [and they have] RT.' – Interviewee K1

- b. RT: It was asserted that the official Russian media outlet had a foothold in Kenya, and had attempted to establish an outlet in Nairobi, but had thus far been unsuccessful. However, one of the interviewees indicated that there was the possibility of information laundering of its content.

'I know Russia Today is here. I wouldn't class them amongst any stations I'd say are popular. You might find programs done by them being run by other stations.' – Interviewee K2

- c. Religious leaders: While they do not necessarily act as pro-Kremlin disseminators, Muslim and Christian leaders in Kenya frequently oppose the 'imposition' of LGBTQ+ values. This resistance makes them susceptible to the Kremlin's narratives, which portray its stance as a holy war against homosexuality."

'[...] politicians and religious figures, both Christian and Muslim [spread the anti-LGBTQ+ narrative].' – Interviewee K1

'... church leaders in speeches frame it in such a way that this war against Russia [the invasion of Ukraine] is actually that Russia is the last Western power to stand against the secular new liberal [order].' – Interviewee K4

This latter comment indicates that it is likely that some religious leaders (though no named examples could be provided) are receiving or have access to Kremlin narratives.

Secondary source research indicates that the Russian Orthodox Church is a significant instrument of the Kremlin's influence, including in the Multi-aligned Community,²⁷⁵ with Kenyan media suggesting 'attempted infiltration' by officials sympathetic to the Kremlin.²⁷⁶ However, all interviewees expressed that they had seen no noticeable increase in its presence or influence. However, one interviewee (though not a Key Informant) indicated that there was a realistic possibility that such activities could occur in Northern Kenya, where significant numbers of Somali and Ethiopian-Kenyans lived.²⁷⁷ Further secondary source research found in at least one parish there were 60 priests who joined the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁷⁸ There is a realistic possibility of similar events occurring on a hyper-local level. Secondary research also indicated that Russian Orthodox members frequently communicate alongside Evangelical groups like CitizenGo, an online community that claims to "promote life, family, and liberty" but frequently express anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.²⁷⁹

- d. The disinformation nexus: While not a distinctly pro-Kremlin actor, the documented disinformation nexus within Kenya was highlighted by the interviewees as a potential hub for IIOs, even without knowing the sponsor. This was particularly true of closed groups like WhatsApp.

[...] think there is lots of misinformation, disinformation flows a lot along [messaging apps], I think a lot of it is geared towards things that are much closer to sort of people's everyday experience rather than big international news.' – Interviewee K2

'WhatsApp is like the hub of misinformation in Kenya.' – Interviewee K5

'One smear campaign that I covered, they tell you if you're going to tweet and make sure we trend from between 2:00 PM to 6:00 PM, we will pay you 700 shillings at the end of the day.' – Interviewee K5

'I mean, it's more likely to be Kenyans stirring it up and for their own personal political agenda is rather than Russia coming in.' – Interviewee K3

- e. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP): One interviewee, a geopolitical consultant specialising in East Africa who has recently conducted studies on Russian and Chinese influence in the region, surmised that it was the CCP that had the more significant influence in Kenya. This includes its *Chinese Global Television Network (CGTV)*, which employs local journalists, but whose editors are either in Beijing or sent to Nairobi by Beijing HQ. And newspapers like *People's Daily* and the tabloid *The Global Times* (though they have much lower levels of circulation than national papers).

'One of the major players is the owner of the private channel is quite openly pro-China. I haven't seen any clearly Russian ones though. [But] there's

plenty of anti-colonial voices here.' – Interviewee K3

The CCP's rapidly developing alignment with the Kremlin is well-documented. And while there have been limits to its 'No limits partnership', it has shown willingness to support the Kremlin's narrative, particularly when it undermines the US or concepts of universal values and global institutions that constrain its own activity.

'[The Kremlin haven't as much messaging influence] as the Chinese. China's doing soft and hard power messaging, actively trashing the West and the US, and that's messaging coming out of the embassy. America blew up Nordstream 2 [...] All this kind of stuff.' – Interviewee K3

A second order effect of this activity is that those who are regularly exposed to CCP content are likely to be more sceptical of the West and Western narratives. And a third order effect means they will, in turn, be more receptive to Kremlin narratives.

5. Target audiences: Interviewees revealed a similar dual-pronged approach to Russian IIOs in targeting high-level policymakers through diplomatic overtures, and at a grassroots level, especially towards youth groups and religious communities.

'It's probably politicians, to be honest [...] the recent Lavrov visit was obviously clearly high level.' – Interviewee K4

'70% of Kenya's population is under 30. A few of these people aspired to Moscow's values or even Beijing's values.' – Interviewee K4

The latter comment indicates a troubling trend throughout Africa of a general disillusionment among youth groups towards democracy²⁸⁰ that makes youth movements more vulnerable to Kremlin IIOs.

6. TTPs

- a. Question more: It was indicated by one interviewee that often misleading material from the Kremlin is presented as asking questions rather than outright statements. This is a common tactic in the Kremlin's 'legitimate' media operations on *RT* and *Sputnik*—to present narratives as either something that is being questioned online or statements by other people without context—to legitimise the narrative (part of a wider tactic of 'information laundering'). Indeed, *RT*'s tagline is 'Question More'. This is not dissimilar from Western conspiracy outlets and pundits like Tucker Carlson (formerly of *Fox News*) and Alex Jones (*Infowars*) and may indicate symbiotic passive learning from *RT*, Western pundits and members of the local Kenyan disinformation nexus.

'[...] a lot of [the messages] are an encouragement to question. It is that question itself and the way it is framed [that spreads dis/mis/mal-information].' – Interviewee K2



Fig. D3. *RT*'s logo features the tagline 'QUESTION MORE' which it uses as a tactic to spread disinformation under the guise 'questioning' the mainstream narrative.

- b. Amplification of existing misinformation: Kenya's existing disinformation nexus means there is often organic mis- and disinformation, which can be repurposed for propaganda purposes.

'[...] whatever that is negative in the West is amplified. And whatever that is good elsewhere is magnified.' – Interviewee K4

'I would look at it as misinformation because there's elements of truth that have just been twisted a little bit.' – Interviewee K5

Cases of racism and police brutality in the West—including alleged mistreatment of African migrants during evacuations in Ukraine²⁸¹—continue to draw attention as part of the global Black Lives Matter movement and are at times exaggerated in terms of their scale or depicted as state policy. These instances are then amplified by the Kremlin and the CCP to further undermine trust in the West and deflect from their human rights abuses.

- c. Outsourcing: It is highly likely that local actors are being hired or otherwise persuaded to engage in creating and disseminating pro-Kremlin content. At least one interviewee believed that *RT* and the Russian Embassy had 'connections to journalists', while Beijing is known to employ local journalists strictly supervised by Chinese editors.²⁸²

Concerning Western strategic communications

1. While it was agreed that the West maintains a significant soft power advantage compared to the Kremlin, legitimate historical and contemporary grievances inflamed by the Kremlin have created significant anti-Western sentiment that hampers Western strategic communications.

'Western governments are [seen] everywhere, as manipulative as unaccountable.' – Interviewee K2

'I would say probably about a quarter of the population have a fairly firm anti-Western view [based on polling that could not be shared] and the Russians are actively trying to tap into that. [But] there's also very strong affinity with

the West, particularly coming out of the counterterrorism campaign, and that runs all the way back to the late 90s.’ – Interviewee K3

‘Most people would rather have Western values [but] there is a real sense of global apartheid on the African continent at large.’ – Interviewee K4

Secondary source research indicates that the ‘vaccine nationalism’ present during the Covid-19 pandemic has been a significant reinforcer of this concept of ‘Global Apartheid’.²⁸³ And that distrust of Western governments, in part, stems from perceptions of unaccountability for their forces stationed in Kenya.²⁸⁴

This perception of unaccountability and Western governments pursuing their best interest has led to an implication of moral equivalency between the West and the Kremlin in attempting to manipulate African countries:

‘I don’t think people are blind to what Russia has been doing. Whatever Russia or the West does to buff up its image, it’s going to be always be accompanied with the knowledge that they’re actually doing it for themselves.’ – Interviewee K2

This perception extends to international institutions, which were perceived as tools of Western interference and it can be inferred as imposing Western ideology on African countries:

[...] the ICC or something that was set up to target Africans [...] On the perception of NATO itself. I think it would simply be as an agent of a Western government [...] These are simply ways of war by other means.’ – Interviewee K2

After Uganda’s anti-LGBTQ+ legislation [...] a few weeks later by announcing by the World Bank that they’re going to suspend funding for new projects, that

alone does more damage than any propaganda.’ – Interviewee K4

Interviewees opined that while the full workings of NATO were unknown, its intervention in Libya and association with Western states (and, therefore, Western ideals) was likely to undermine its image in the eyes of Kenyans and the wider continent.

‘NATO doesn’t really have a presence here. [...] folks still think it’s a Cold War thing [...] they haven’t tracked the changing nature of NATO.’ – Interviewee K3

‘There is a direct relationship between the actions of NATO and Libya and the instability we see today in the Sahel.’ – Interviewee K4

‘NATO is being connected to the US, I think the perception has been that they are the ones who are bringing in anti-African values like LGBTQ or abortion.’ – Interviewee K5

2. Scepticism of Western motivations and Western-backed institutions have contributed to an overall neutrality over the invasion of Ukraine. While Kenya has been vocal in condemning the Kremlin’s invasion, its population have criticised Western insistence of African states to join the sanctions regime against the Kremlin. With one interviewee comparing Western responses to Ukraine against conflicts on the continent.

‘[They say] “where were you when Africans get killed? A million of them. You did nothing. The total number by the Ukrainian government of those being killed today is 10,000 civilians. We have lost more than 100 million here.”’ – Interviewee K4

It can be inferred that this scepticism is also being inflamed by disinformation narratives. One interviewee alluded to a common narrative circulated by the CCP that the West has no interest in peace and is fuelling the war to undermine Russia, enhance its influence

over Eastern Europe, and gain profits from arms sales.

[...] a lot of it is seen, I think, and manipulators argue, that the West is actually fuelling the war. So, they're not seeing it as Ukraine defending itself, but that the West is pouring in weapons to sort of perpetuate the war.' – Interviewee K2

3. It is important to acknowledge that this scepticism and anti-Western sentiment represent a minority view—Kenya's vibrant civil society and media space is an effective communicator of universal values and standards that acts as a check on IIOs.

'Kenya has a verified broad civil society, [...] and a majority of people in the civil society, a majority of people in the academia, they are largely pro-Western in terms of values and most of them are educated in the West.' – Interviewee K4

Concerning overall effects

1. On voting in international institutions: While most interviewees felt that Kenya was most likely to follow its own independent foreign policy (and, therefore, its own voting pattern in international institutions), one interviewee felt that Kenya's participation in the CCP-backed Belt and Road Initiative, along with other infrastructure projects through BRICS, meant its voting could be influenced as a part of a quid pro quo approach.

'Because of the misconception that they will bring us jobs and infrastructure without compromising our values. So, that that that is a very big thing for both leaders and the general public.' – Interviewee K5

Consequently, there is a realistic possibility that Kenya's voting pattern could be more flexible in the future, particularly regarding

However, it was noted by two interviewees that civil society in Kenya is restricted by domestic corruption that undermines its role as an agent of accountability:

'The media space is pretty free here unless you were to actually start investigating the ruling families. That's how you get yourself into trouble in Kenya.' – Interviewee K3

'[...] civil society itself is almost a weak shadow of what it used to be, so they don't really serve their accountability function as robustly as, they used to.' – Interviewee K4

Kremlin IIO doctrine often includes 'elite capture' as a method of establishing media influence within a state and enhancing the legitimacy of their messaging through local disseminators. While this study found no evidence of this activity by the Kremlin in Kenya, there is a realistic possibility the Kremlin can attempt to weaponise local corruption to enhance anti-Western narratives.

votes on Ukraine that may impact energy and food insecurity.

One of the implications of growing scepticism of international institutions is the detriment of their ability to secure cooperation from local states and partners as they begin to see 'commonalities' in unfair treatment. These, in turn, reinforce other disinformation narratives like the West attempting to subvert societies through universal rights to subjugate them—including LGBTQ+ rights.

'[...] when you put [LGBTQ+] alongside having the ICC prosecutions against something that Kenyans went through. And a good number thought that that should never have happened. You start seeing the potential for people to start seeing commonalities.' – Interviewee K2

While the IMF and World Bank were among those named, interviewees suggested this was particularly true of the ICC. One interviewee went as far as to say that ICC projects were ‘dead’ on the continent.

2. On framing of critical national issues
 - a. Interviewees acknowledged that there was knowledge of the Kremlin’s aggression in Ukraine exacerbating the cost-of-living crisis globally and food security, in particular.

‘I mean, for the Kenyans, it’s the cost-of-living crisis and the ongoing political turmoil. That’s the big thing for them right now. This is all way, way distant and abstract. When it stops becoming distant and abstract, [when] it becomes tangible is [when people see that] what Russia is doing is affecting food prices affecting the cost of living, affecting global trade. And that connection, I think is being made in the population.’ – Interviewee K3

‘The cost of living has been attributed to the conflict in Ukraine and Moscow.’ – Interviewee K4

However, most of the criticism in local press appears to be domestically focused on how the issue is being managed by the government, with the conflict being perceived as an exacerbating factor, but one which needed to be tackled through local policy rather than pressure on the Kremlin.²⁸⁵

- b. LGBTQ+ and ‘traditional values’ are a critical issue in Kenya. While traditional values are not associated with ‘Russian values’, the perception of LGBTQ+ rights being an import or imposition by Western liberal powers

appeared to be prominent among the interviewees (and was reinforced by secondary source research).²⁸⁶

‘There are notions [that views on] abortion and LGBTQ are from the West, and they’re trying to get rid of our traditional values.’ – Interviewee K5

‘[...] in terms of explicitly mentioning that the West is bringing in these [LGBT] values that I have seen, yeah, there’s the possibility that Russia could. I haven’t seen that in particular, but the format is true.’ – Interviewee K5

While anti-LGBTQ+ narratives have so far failed to turn into widespread pro-Russian narratives, they do pose a risk. Not only an immediate risk to LGBTQ+ communities, but it also creates a second order effect of further exacerbating conspiratorial thinking regarding the West and its intentions, thereby undermining the possibility of consistent cooperation on international issues.

- c. Continued attempts to undermine the West also pose a threat to the reputation of Western peacekeeping forces which work alongside Kenyan forces. While support for this cooperation remains widespread, there has been growing criticism over accusations of locally stationed foreign soldiers acting with impunity. The Russian Embassy frequently reposts material emphasising these incidents to amplify overall criticism. Although it struggles to gain traction, much of it is organic, indicating a genuine sentiment. As such, there is the realistic possibility it will grow over time.

Digital Analysis

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations

The content demonstrated some of the themes prevalent in the qualitative analysis: neocolonialism and theft by European and Western states contrasted with the Kremlin's positive impact from the Cold War to the modern day, and the mockery and dehumanisation of LGBTQ+ communities. However, there were also themes that had not been identified, such

as anti-vaccine and genetically-modified produce rooted in mistrust of Western providers (centred on Bill Gates). These may have originated from the Kremlin's known disinformation campaign to undermine perceptions of Western Covid vaccines in favour of its *Sputnik* version,²⁸⁷ but this cannot be clarified.

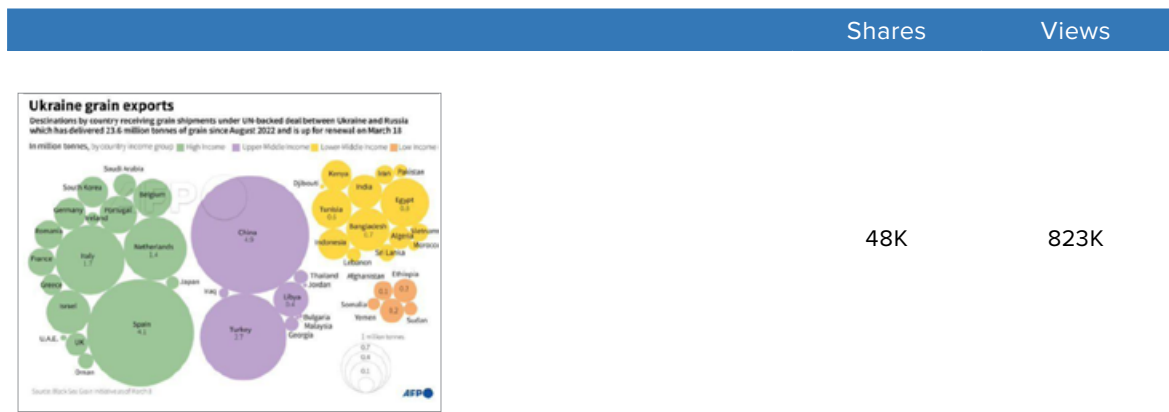


Fig. D4. Infographic recycling the Kremlin narrative that the Black Sea Grain Initiative was providing for Western countries rather than those in the Multi-aligned Community.

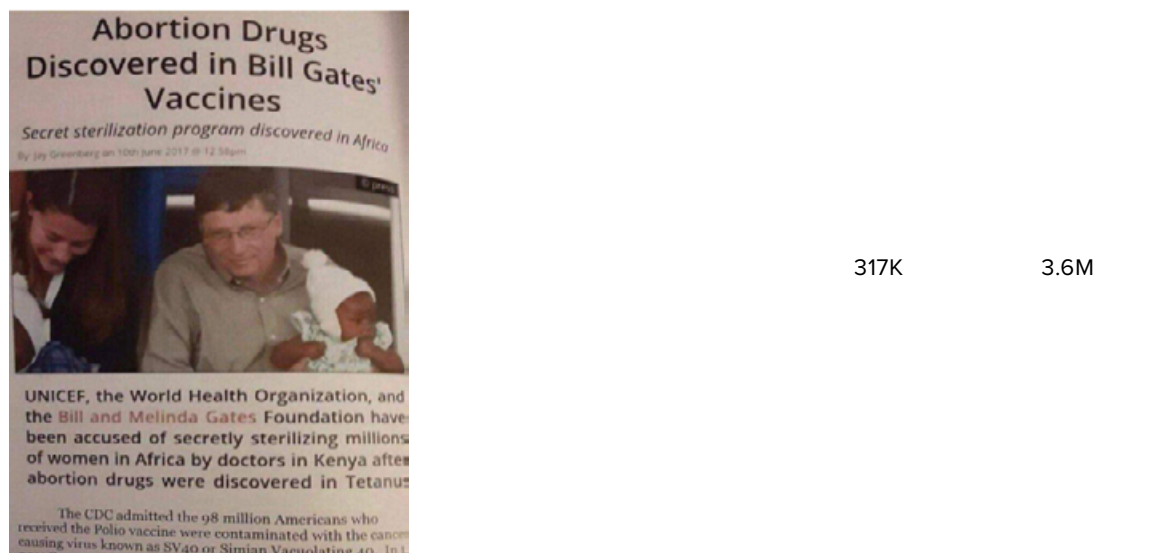


Fig. D5. Repost of article suggesting Bill Gates's vaccines are designed to sterilise Africans in a programme supported by UNICEF.



57K

1.6M

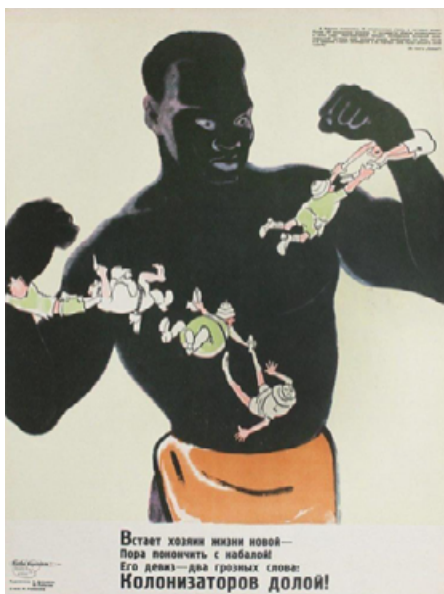
Fig. D6. Repost of article claiming a digital ID programme in Kenya is an attempt to create a surveillance web on behalf of the government (highlights included in original post).



308K

2.6M

Fig. D7. Photo of alleged camp run by the British during the Mau Mau uprising.



88K

1.9M

Fig. D8. Soviet era anti-colonial propaganda poster encouraging Africans to rise up. The Kremlin reuses the same material to stir anti-Western sentiment.



62K

851K

Fig. D9. Soviet era anti-colonial propaganda poster encouraging Africans to rise up. The Kremlin reuses the same material to stir anti-Western sentiment.



713K

3.1M

Fig. D10. Post mocking LGBTQ+ advocacy. Comparing it to drinking toilet water.



471K

3.9M

Fig. D11. Infographic highlighting Africa's resources. Often accompanied with condemnation of Western 'theft' and neocolonialism restricting Africa's development.

Like Mali, there was also a theme of demonisation of NATO and martyrdom for Gaddafi. This is demonstrated by the image below which sarcastically details Libya's economic prosperity under Gaddafi while ignoring his track record of human rights abuses, sponsorship of terrorism,

and crackdown on dissent. The image received approximately 4 million views. It further implies (as in pro-Gaddafi content circulated by the Kremlin in Mali) that the reason for his '[assassination]' was his perceived threat to the West's economic dominance.

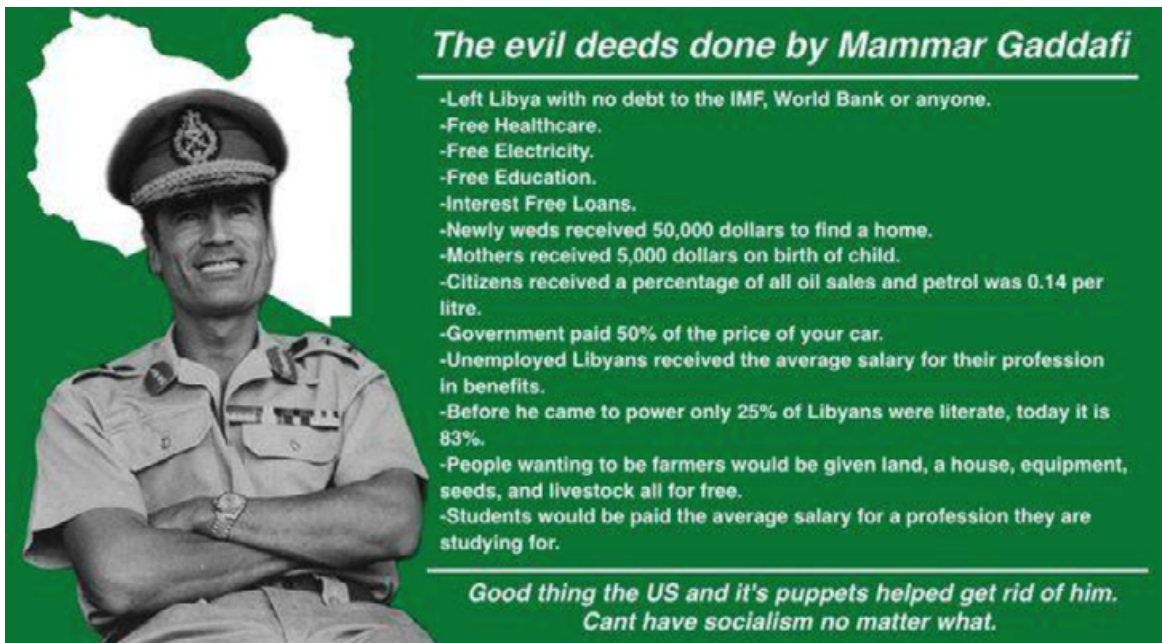


Fig. D12. Image satirising alleged 'evil' of Gaddafi by highlighting high standards of living in Libya under his regime while failing to acknowledge significant human rights abuses.



Fig. D13. TikTok video emphasising Putin's opposition to NATO intervention in Libya and recycling the narrative that the intervention was based on resource wealth.

www.tiktok.com/@user794553375571/video/7219631655974227242

As with other Kremlin IIOs, there was a conscious effort to tie Putin to Gaddafi as friends and to frame Putin as a successor to Gaddafi's work 'liberating' Africa from the West. For example, in the video on the left, Putin warns of dire consequences of the removal of Gaddafi and of Western interference in other states. It received 6.6 million views on TikTok.

Similar themes were found across video-based platforms. With some of the highest performing videos relating to colonial atrocities by Britain.

On the YouTube channel titled African Diaspora News, a popular international news site, some of the highest performing videos were the removal of the Romanian ambassador for likening Africans to apes (195 thousand views), President Ruto publicly condemning

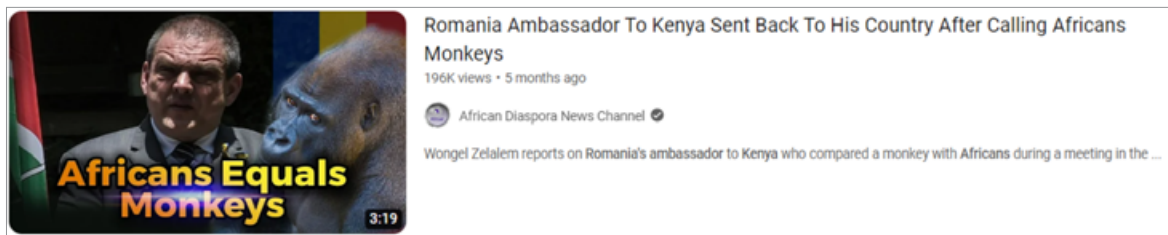


Fig. D14. Romanian ambassador To Kenya Sent Back After Calling Africans Monkeys. www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLE_Ex-G6ns

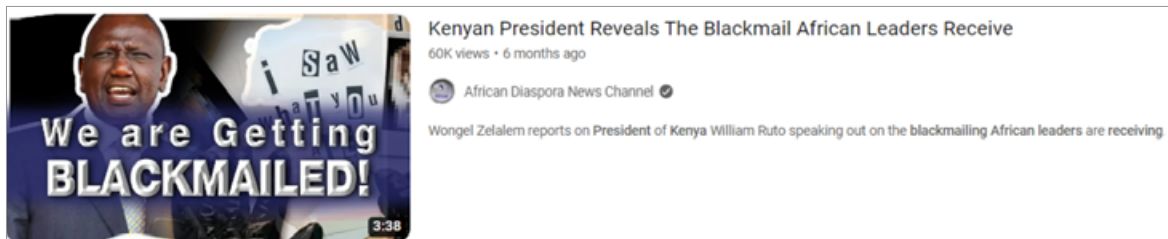


Fig. D15. President Ruto Reveals Blackmail. www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBIMvSypys&t=2s

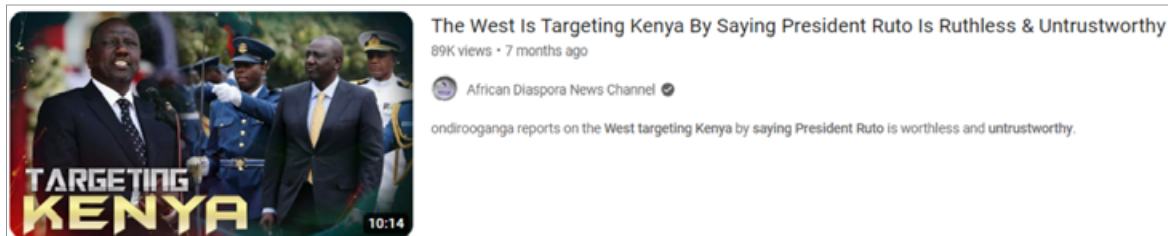


Fig. D16. The West smears Ruto. www.youtube.com/watch?v=qh79Of8txw

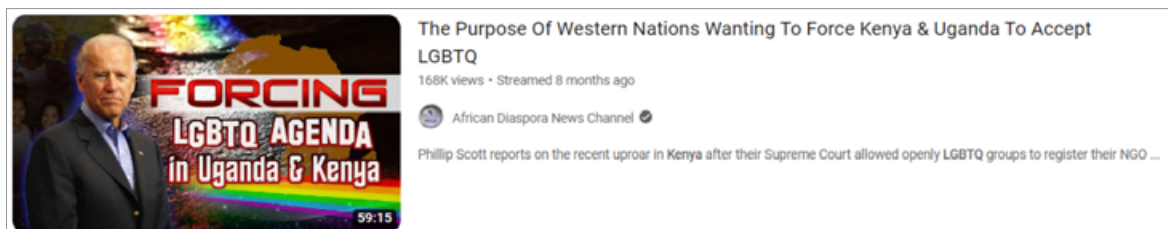


Fig. D17. The Purpose of Western Nations wanting to force Kenya and Uganda to accept LGBTQ. www.youtube.com/watch?v=35mCuj4oLJE

‘blackmail’ of African leaders by the West (58 thousand views), allegations that the West were smearing the President (89 thousand views), and a live stream of commentary on ‘The Purpose of Western Nations wanting to force Kenya and Uganda to accept LGBTQ’, which was highly critical of the West’s imposition of its values and received 167 thousand views.

The concept of LGBTQ+ being imposed on Africans by the West (which was stressed in the qualitative analysis) was noticeable among general anti-LGBTQ+ content but was

generally outweighed by more conventional discrimination based on faith. As demonstrated below, some of this content was disseminated by prominent politicians and commentators, some of which, like local politician Mike Sonko, use the issue to complain about censorship by Western companies. However, the content did not notably favour the Kremlin, suggesting that while this contentious issue can be leveraged by the Kremlin to foster anti-Western sentiment, it faces challenges in generating widespread pro-Kremlin sentiment.



Fig. D18. Post highlighting the alleged disparity in outrage between when 'straight' people are killed vs LGBTQ+.



Fig. D19. Swahili post of Kenyan senator decrying being 'cancelled' by LGBTQ+ movements and alleged support of this by Western tech companies. Translation. *These LGBTQ movements are strong. They complained to FB until my page of 2,500,000 followers was disabled until I apologised to them then appealed to FB. I can't & will not apologise to them. Here on Twitter you have 2,300,000 followers & still growing like Bush fire. ALLUTA CONTINUA.*



Fig. D20. Video interview of Professor Lumumba by Africa Stream, in which he espouses the Kremlin narrative that NATO is fuelling the conflict in Ukraine while ignoring the unprovoked invasion by the Kremlin. www.tiktok.com/@africanstream/video/7247408848535915803

By contrast, videos regarding Russia on YouTube that met the required threshold for the data scrape were frequently neutral or even positive. Although videos reporting the ICC's arrest warrant for Putin ranked highly (127 thousand views), it was largely about leaders' reactions rather than the reason why. And no material regarding Kremlin atrocities or the ripple effects of its invasion reached the threshold for Russia-related content. For instance, a video cites the Kremlin's delivery of free grain to Kenya 'warming the hearts of Kenyans' but does not provide context of the Kremlin's exacerbation of food insecurity through its invasion of Ukraine and blockade of the Black Sea.²⁸⁸

On TikTok, two of the highest performing videos in the data capture included an interview by Professor Patrick Lumumba, a prominent Kenyan lawyer and activist, accusing NATO of inflaming the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, a typical Kremlin talking point. The interview was further circulated by the Russian Embassy in Kenya, where it outperformed many of its other posts and received 3.7K likes and 1.7K retweets. This demonstrates how 'outsourcing' and 'information laundering' content is more likely to receive traction due to the perception of it as an unbiased viewpoint.



Fig. D21. TikTok video claiming to be of NATO exercise in which an armoured vehicle sinks. Language appears to be Romanian. Translation: *Armoured piranha goes to the bottom during some training in Bordusani!*

Outperforming that was a video purporting to be a NATO training exercise, in which an amphibious vehicle capsizes, which was viewed 16 million times. Although it did not necessarily espouse a pro-Kremlin view (often the highest performing videos are humorous accidents or ‘fails’),²⁸⁹ it was amplified by pro-Kremlin voices to mock the West’s military capabilities and espouse the Kremlin’s alleged military might in comparison.

An overview of some of the highest performing videos on TikTok and YouTube had economic themes intertwined with African liberation from Western financial systems—which would affirm the interviewees’ views that the cost of living and economic issues and opportunities rank highly to Kenyans and the wider region, as well as growing anger toward Western-led institutions like the IMF. For instance, on TikTok, a video of Ruto questioning why African states had to trade in the US dollar was viewed 3.7 million times, while a simple infographic of BRICs outperforming the G7 was viewed over 8 million times. And, on YouTube, an announcement of Kenya ditching the dollar when trading with the Arab Gulf states received 170 thousand views.



Fig. D22. ‘Fact check’ by the Russian Embassy in Kenya that attempts to shift blame for destabilisation of food security onto the West.

To take advantage of this, pro-Kremlin content attempts to place Putin at the centre of global economic progression, with some of the pro-Kremlin videos with highest levels of views and engagement focusing on the debt write-offs to African countries and Putin decoupling his oil exports from the dollar, both of which received approximately 1.7 million views.

It should be noted that many of these examples did not come from pro-Kremlin sources, reinforcing the qualitative findings that while there is significant criticism of the West in Kenya, it does not necessarily translate into pro-Kremlin sentiment. However, although not originating with pro-Kremlin accounts, they are nevertheless recycled and amplified by pro-Kremlin communicators.

As indicated by the qualitative analysis, the Russian Embassy was one of the most active communicators of Kremlin narratives. But despite its following of 41 thousand, its anti-Western posts usually receive little traction. For instance, its ‘fact checks’ on the cause of food insecurity (Fig. D22.) received only 3 thousand views and 97 total engagements.

The announcement of the donation of 34 thousand tonnes of fertiliser to Kenya was more successful, and received over 700 thousand views and thousands of engagements (Fig. D23.). This reinforces the previous findings that positive messaging, especially related to economic measures, was more likely to gain traction with Kenyans than negative.

Beyond the Kremlin’s official embassy account were several notable anti-Western platforms that were reposted either by the Russian Embassy directly or its followers. They fell into similar overlapping categories to Mali of pseudo-or-non-contextualised media, entrepreneurs of influence, ‘useful idiots’ and cynics, and sock puppets and bots (though their number and reach was less extensive).

Among the most prominent pseudo/non-contextualised media profiles reposted by the Russian Embassy was Africa Stream, a pan-African digital media organisation with 43 thousand followers. While not fully endorsing the Kremlin, it is highly critical of the West and espouses non-contextualised information like Gaddafi being assassinated due to his plans to introduce a common African currency²⁹⁰ and supporting Junta-backed coups in the Sahel by suggesting they are ‘popular coups’²⁹¹ that refuse to be ‘bullied’ by France,²⁹² as well as reporting conspiracy theories put forward by military Juntas regarding the West.²⁹³ It also offered non-contextualised reposting of the Russian Embassy’s anti-colonial imagery and blamed the West for the low number of attendees at the Russia-Africa Summit while citing US pressure on African leaders to blame Russia for ‘the grain issue’ without providing context that the Kremlin ended the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

Another profile that espouses even more vociferous anti-Western rhetoric was *TFIGlobal* news. A right-wing Indian media outlet whose ‘Africa’ YouTube channel features videos on Western states and states people ‘hating’ countries and its media of exploiting devastation for profit but suggests Kremlin influence is a ‘weapon for African supremacy’.



Fig. D23. Post by the Russian Embassy in Kenya emphasising food aid to Kenya.



Fig. D24. Repost of Kremlin Embassy propaganda by Africa Stream.

These official media pages were supported by anonymous sock puppet accounts like the two illustrative examples are provided below.

War Dialogue is a directly pro-Kremlin account that frequently espouses Kremlin disinformation talking points like Ukraine as a Nazi state and techniques like ‘whataboutism’. While War Dialogue has a low level of followers, it posted a Russian article from *RT* and *RIA Novosti* suggesting that Ukrainian commandos would attempt to sabotage Russia in Africa on behalf of MI6 with no evidence. It was circulated to the Kenyan information sphere via European and pan-Arabist media outlets which was then re-quoted by Africa Archives, a profile that aims to hold historical, cultural & photographic records regarding Africa, and has a following

of 510 thousand followers. The piece further suggested that the Ukrainian leader of the commandos had committed war crimes and previously worked with MI6 in Zimbabwe. The piece both attempts to exploit perceptions of the West as a neocolonial intruder and export the Kremlin narrative that Ukraine has no agency of its own.

Lord Bebo has less obvious pro-Kremlin rhetoric and instead focuses on criticisms of the West and its partners. It frequently reposts content from Africa Stream including the interview with Professor Lumumba. The frequency of posting suggests there is a realistic possibility Bebo is manned by multiple people. Considering the profile also includes a ‘pinned’ tweet for giving money, Bebo could also be labelled under ‘entrepreneur of influence’.

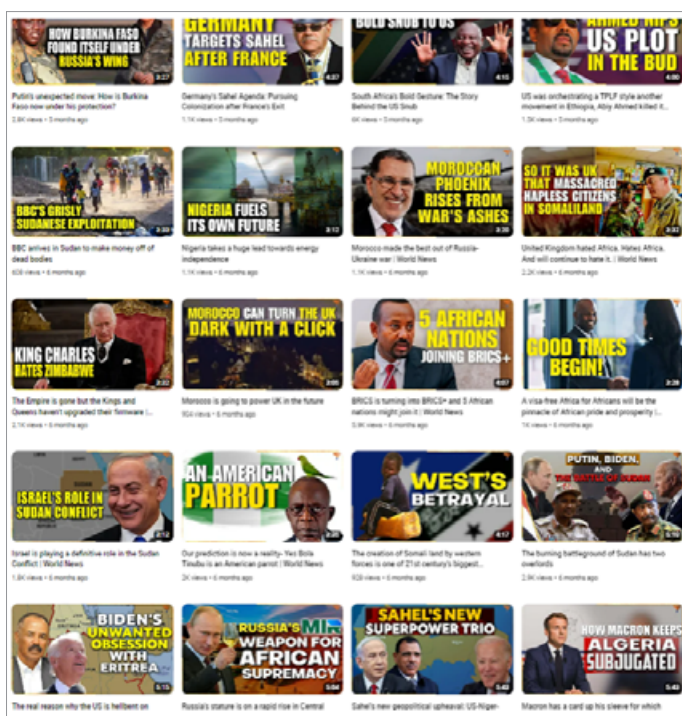


Fig. D25. Screen grab of videos on TFGlobal's YouTube profile. www.youtube.com/@TFGlobal-Africa/videos



Fig. D26. Screen grab of WarDialogue's profile page.



Fig. D27. Screen grab of Lord Bebo's profile page.



Fig. D28. RT and RIA Novosti article circulated by War Dialogue that also appears in Arabic news sources.

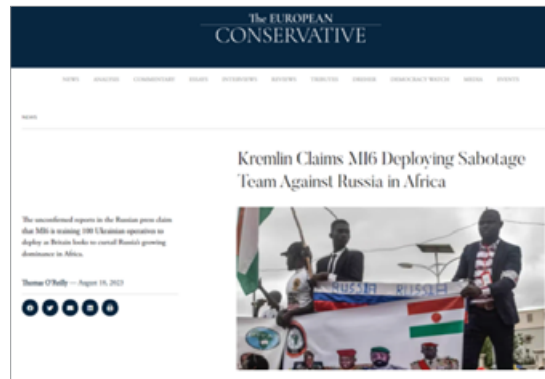


Fig. D29. RT and RIA Novosti article circulated by War Dialogue that also appears in English news sources.

There were also two profiles on Twitter and Instagram disseminating pro-Putin and anti-Western content in Swahili, the second largest language in Kenya. The timing of their creation (April 2022—two months after the invasion of Ukraine) suggests that they are almost certainly non-organic.

Jackson Hinkle also featured among the entrepreneurs of influence, ‘useful idiots’ and cynics. In Kenya, his post that picked up traction

was focused on the Kremlin’s grain deliveries to Africa, despite Kenya not being listed. It is likely the reason this post gained traction is due to economic discussions around food prices. But he was not the only American to meet the threshold of the data scrape. There was also the profile ‘Gunter Eagleman’, an ‘American first’ political commentator who is staunchly pro-Trump, anti-Obama, and anti-trans. The latter may explain why his material has gained traction in Kenya.

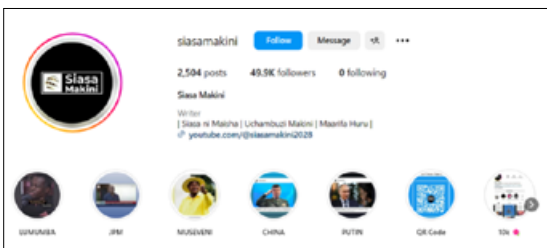


Fig. D30. Pro-Kremlin Swahili account on Instagram.



Fig. D31. Pro-Kremlin Swahili account on X (formerly Twitter).



Fig. D32. Post by Jackson Hinkle praising Kremlin aid to Burkina Faso.



Fig. D33. Screenshot of Gunther Eagleman's profile.



Fig. D34. Screen grab of the Communist Party of Kenya's profile. Its bio directly cites a Kremlin talking point of alleged NATO encirclement.



Fig. D35. Screen grab of Kenyan politician Robert Alai's Twitter profile and his post alleging NATO and the US have used Zelensky to goad the Kremlin into an invasion. This is part of the wider pro-Kremlin narrative 'Ukraine as a NATO proxy'.

On a more local level were political actors such as politician Robert Alai and the Communist Party of Kenya, both of whom have parroted Kremlin talking points as part of wider criticisms of the West. A common point between the two is the concept of Ukraine being used as

a NATO proxy to start a war against Russia as part of a strategy of NATO encirclement. They have a combined following of over 2 million (though Robert Alai's following makes up the vast majority).



Fig. D36. Screen grab of *China Global Television Network Africa* post implying NATO expansion is the cause of the conflict in Ukraine.

Lastly, as indicated in the qualitative analysis, official CCP media was also a major communicator for Kremlin talking points. Although the majority of *Chinese Global Television Network's* content focused on positive news from Sino-African relations, it also featured Kremlin talking points on NATO enlargement as a security risk to Russia without including context of the Kremlin's invasion. Furthermore, Chinese officials and state media have been more than twice as likely to use the term "special operation" rather than "invasion" when not focusing on past US operations.²⁹⁴ A particularly worrying development since Elon Musk's takeover of Twitter is that profiles like *CGTN Africa* are no longer labelled as state-affiliated media.

An overall analysis of the content and profiles revealed several overlapping TTPs:

1. Information laundering: This appeared to be the most prominent TTP and aligns with the qualitative suggestions that the Kremlin's soft power deficit in Kenya means content directly produced by it is unlikely to gain significant traction. Consequently, the Kremlin relies on the amplification of existing disinformation, misinformation and criticism of the West to bolster its narrative. The CCP's media apparatus plays a major role in this by reposting commentary from Kremlin media outlets.
2. Outsourcing: As suggested in the qualitative findings, content in local languages suggests that there is a realistic possibility that local actors are involved in producing content, while various entrepreneurs of influence, as well as 'useful idiots' and cynics, ensure further amplification and production of mutually supporting content.
3. Sock puppets: Overtly pro-Putin accounts that joined social media after the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine demonstrate that the Kremlin is almost certainly creating fake accounts to disseminate and amplify supporting content. Based on Kremlin IIO doctrine, it is likely those operating them also control more.

Concerning Western strategic communications

Despite vocal criticism and opposition to certain Western policies, there was a significant amount of pro-norms content. One of the most prolific of these was the Kenyan UN Ambassador and the Kenyan President's condemnation of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine, which appeared on multiple YouTube channels and accumulated a total of approximately 10 million views. Interestingly the two highest rated were *The African Diaspora News Channel* and *The Hindustan Times*. Concurrently, an *Al Jazeera* commentary, pushing back on the Kremlin's disinformation that it never tried to colonise Africa, also circulated.²⁹⁵ These had previously been used by pro-Kremlin actors to amplify their own narrative. This further reinforces the qualitative findings that media viewed as overtly pro-Western or pro-Kremlin is viewed as biased and unlikely to gain traction.

Likewise, there was consistent reporting of positive Western engagement with Kenya and the region, which frequently received traction. For example, the post by *Citizen TV Kenya* on the British High Commissioner meeting with entertainers to discuss how they can use their platforms to amplify key messages on initiatives tackling food security received 1.5 million views, while a post regarding Ukraine's donation of 25 thousand tonnes of wheat to Kenya was

available across local media²⁹⁶ and the Deputy President's Twitter profile (which has a following of over 600 thousand).

Content regarding NATO was more limited (only 20 pieces of video content reached the threshold). Although it contained factual information like news reports,²⁹⁷ it also contained dis/mis/mal-information. Some of the highest-rated content focused on President Ruto joining 'ECOWAS and NATO' to overturn the Niger coup (despite NATO not being involved)²⁹⁸ and content furthering the narrative that NATO was 'afraid of Gaddafi' as the reason for its involvement in Libya.²⁹⁹ This reinforces the qualitative findings that NATO is largely a non-entity in the region, creating a vacuum that dis/mis/mal-information can fill.

As indicated in the qualitative analysis, the main communicators of pro-norms content existed in government, civil society, and media actors, especially around matters of food security. For example, among those who attended the meeting with the British High Commissioner to amplify food security initiatives were top influencer Azziad Nasenya, rapper Kennedy Ombima (King Kaka) Sauti Sol's Delvin Mudigi (Savara), comedian Timothy Kimani (Njugush), and TikTokker Salim Gori (Dance General).³⁰⁰



Fig. D37. YouTube video by *African Diaspora News Channel* of the Kenyan Ambassador to the UN 'owning' the Kremlin at the Security Council.



Fig. D38. YouTube video by *The Hindustan Times* of the Kenyan Ambassador to the UN's condemnation of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine.



Fig. D39. Post by *Citizen TV Kenya* on the British High Commissioner meeting Kenyan entertainment figures and influencers.

Likewise, the Kenyan Foreign Ministry’s condemnation of the Kremlin’s withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative as a ‘stab in the back’ received thousands of likes.³⁰¹

Impacts

The lack of Kremlin soft power and traction among content directly attributed to it means that sentiment around it remained largely neutral or negative. However, the prevalence of anti-Western content can be shown to be having an impact on perceptions of Western or pro-Western initiatives. For instance, while the YouTube video *Kenyan envoy to UN stuns the world* received largely positive reactions in terms of Emojis within the comments (below), the overall commentary revealed an overall negative sentiment analysis of -7.3%. This largely stemmed from perceptions that by drawing on the lessons of Kenya’s own borders as a lesson of accepting unsatisfactory boundaries, the ambassador was accepting or endorsing colonialism (See Main Report, Methodology section to see explanation of Parliament Emoji graphs).

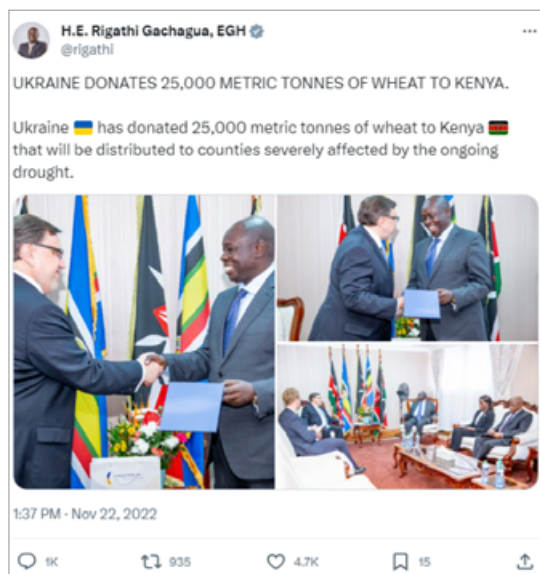


Fig. D40. Post by the Deputy President of Kenya emphasising Ukraine’s donation of 25,000 tonnes of wheat to Kenya.

As suggested by the qualitative findings, these findings demonstrate that pro-norms content is prevalent in Kenyan online discourse. However, this does not necessarily reflect a pro-Western stance. Furthermore, it is outweighed by anti-Western content and mis and disinformation.

An overview of commentary for the same video also found mixed opinions rather than outright condemnation. Including words typically found in Kremlin narratives and messaging like ‘Nazi’ (though these were in the minority).

Criticism of food security centred on mismanagement by the government. For instance, both the posts of Ukraine and the Kremlin’s contributions of free wheat and fertiliser had overwhelmingly negative sentiment (-87.9% and -69.5% respectively) due to the ‘shame’ of receiving aid, especially from a war-torn country like Ukraine. While this criticism of the government is not unjustified, it was notable that there was no discernible criticism of the Kremlin for exacerbating the situation through its invasion.

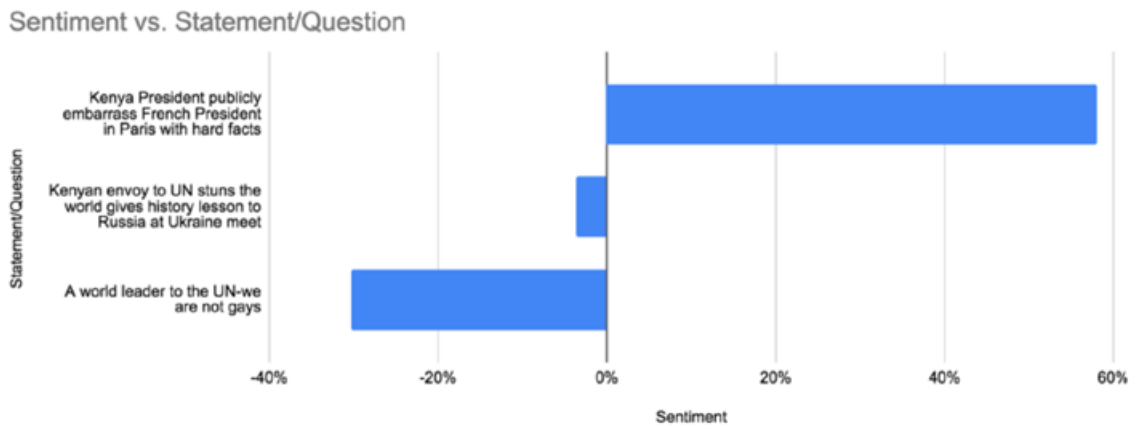


Fig. D46. Sentiment Graph 2

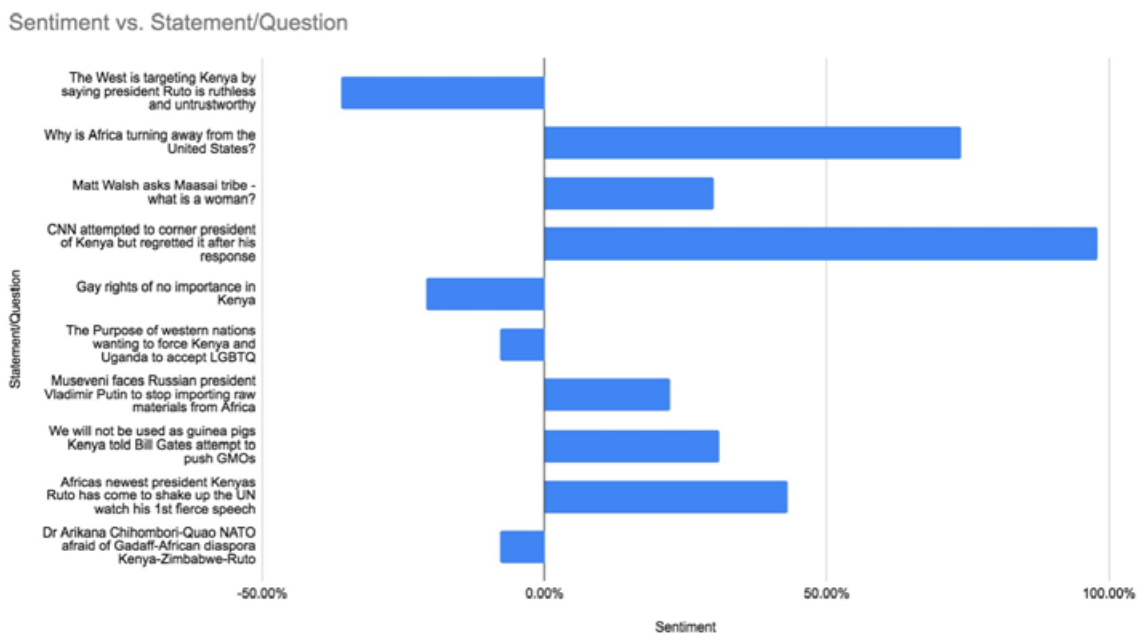


Fig. D47. Sentiment Graph 3

Conclusions

In summary, qualitative analysis indicates that, while Kenya’s population remains largely pro-norms and in favour of universal values, there is a growing undercurrent of anti-Western sentiment that undermines this. Support of the Kremlin, or at least engagement with ‘whataboutist’ arguments, is a manifestation of protests against perceived Western hypocrisy and interference. Furthermore, quantitative digital analysis indicates that, although pro-Kremlin

content rarely gains traction, anti-Western content is rife which has a cumulative impact on perceptions of universal norms as a Western construct.

Both digital and qualitative analysis also found that the CCP is a major communicator in Kenya and the region which aids Kremlin IIOs by amplifying anti-Western content.

Based on the Theory of Reflexive Control, it can be assessed that it is highly likely the aim of these IIOs is to cultivate determining behaviour of increased apathy toward the Kremlin's aggression in Ukraine and increased scepticism of international institutions and Western actors,

which has a second order effect of encouraging distancing from the West. At the same time, it is highly likely they seek to cultivate destructive behaviour of polarisation of debate on engagement with the West based on concerns of interference and difference in values.

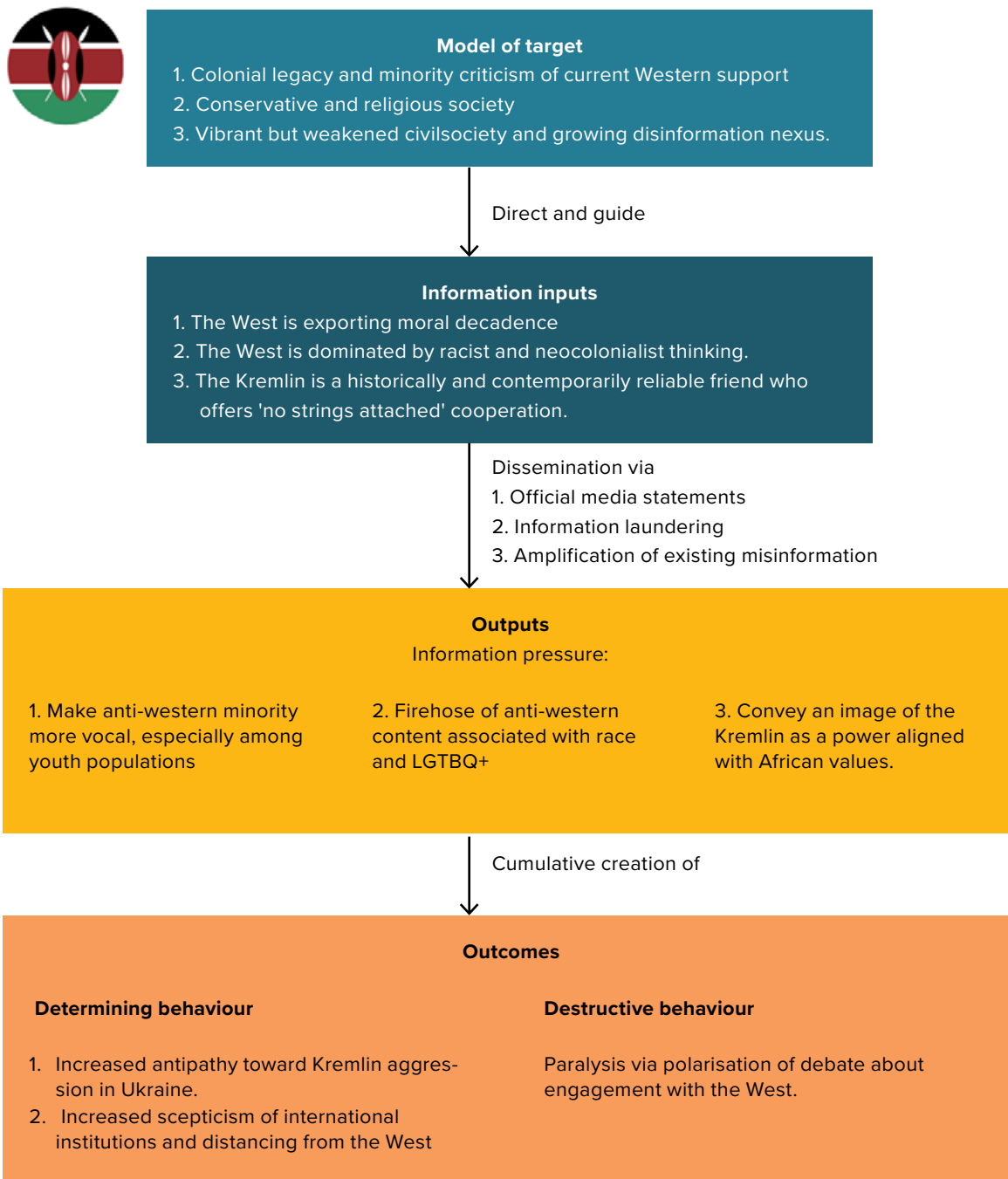


Fig. D48. TORC framework for Kenya

Annex E

South Africa

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Introduction

Russia's long-standing relations with South Africa, extending back to the apartheid era and way beyond, give cause to a complex political and cultural background and spring-board for contemporary Russian influence in the country. With a complex political sphere, in which Russian tropes can appeal to the left and right, a degree of ex-colonial exceptionalism, a geopolitical power as part of BRICS, but also historical links to Europe and a very strong and

largely championed independent media, South Africa presents an enigma when viewed by the West with regards to its stance on the Ukraine invasion. The 'Rainbow Nation' is indeed multi-spectral but no longer appears to be quite the nation it was at its rebirth in 1994; a fact that those trying to influence its politics and its people—Russian, Western or otherwise—must take into account.

Desk research

Historic and contemporary relations with the West and Russia

History

Russia's narratives, or at least influence, in South Africa are nothing new.

The predominant political machinery of South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC), has a long history of relations with Russia, initiated during the 1960s during the Soviet period.

During the apartheid era, the ANC received support from various countries, including the Soviet Union, which provided political, financial, and military assistance. This support aimed to help the ANC in its fight against the apartheid regime.

The Soviet Union's backing of the ANC was part of its broader strategy to support liberation movements in Africa and challenge Western influence. The Soviet Union offered military training, weapons, and diplomatic support to the ANC, recognising it as a key player in the anti-apartheid movement. This assistance played a role in strengthening the ANC's capabilities and international standing.

Following the end of apartheid and South Africa's transition to democracy in the early 1990s, the relationship between Russia and the ANC continued, albeit in different ways. Economic ties between the two countries expanded, with trade and investment playing a significant role. However, the nature and intensity of the relationship have varied over time, influenced by geopolitical factors and domestic priorities.

While specific recent references may provide more detailed information on the current state of the relationship between Russia and the ANC, the historical context and Soviet support for the ANC are well-documented.³⁰³

ANC

In the UN resolution vote of 25 February 2022, condemning the Russian invasion and demanding its withdrawal, 28 African Union members voted for the resolution. Seventeen abstained, including South Africa, Namibia and Senegal, all of whom may be functioning democracies and have ties to the West but also, alongside Mozambique and Zimbabwe, have ruling parties that received support from

the Soviet Union during their liberation struggles.³⁰⁴ It is reasonable to assume that those Cold War liberation movements still regard Russia as the inheritor and custodian of the Soviet Union history and traditions.³⁰⁵ Of note, by contrast, South Africa's other regional neighbours Botswana and Zambia voted to condemn the Russian invasion. Significantly, their ruling parties came to power peacefully, and did not have Russian alliances.

Specifically, in South Africa, as Chan claims, the ANC has never forgotten its historical bonds and whichever faction of the ANC is dominant, it knows it owes its accession to power in 1994 to the Russians.³⁰⁶ The consistent effect of those bonds is eloquently demonstrated in the fact that South Africa's stance regarding Russian involvement in Ukraine differs very little now compared to 2014, when Crimea was annexed.³⁰⁷

And its debt to, and reliance on, Russia continues. The ANC, as a party, is reported to be verging on bankruptcy and riddled with accusations of corruption within its own financial machinery. Its precarious finances have long been reported on, with Russia claimed to be its saviour over the past decade.³⁰⁸ Now, however, generous donations, aimed at assisting Ramaphosa's ascension to the ANC leadership at the expense of Zuma, have dried up and Ramaphosa's own crackdown on party corruption have hit the ANC's cash flow severely. However, one of its main sources of income is from a stake in South Africa's fourth-largest manganese mining company, United Manganese of Kalahari (UMK), declared as ANC's sole donor in 2021-22. UMK is part-owned by the Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg's conglomerate Renova Group.³⁰⁹ "The scale of the party's reliance on this single asset may begin to explain the ANC's fawning position on Russia."³¹⁰

Notably, the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) party, South Africa's third political force, after the official opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) are quite explicit in their support for Russia. Their leader, Julius Malema, with 1.3 million Twitter followers,³¹¹ has gone as far as to state that "I would go beyond the friendship with

Russia. In the war, I would align with Russia and I would even supply the weapons to Russia because Russia is in a war with imperialism and any agenda that seeks to push back the imperialist agenda is well within the policies of the EFF."³¹²

In contrast, during April 2023, the leader of South Africa's opposition DA faced criticism for their visit to Ukraine, which included trips to Bucha and interactions with Ukrainian officials. The opposition leader's actions were heavily scrutinised, with some accusing the mainly white party of prioritising European matters over African issues. This criticism introduced a racial dimension into the already intense debate. Some viewed the DA's stance as aligning with a quasi-Cold War-era perspective, allegedly reflecting interests more in line with the West rather than the aspirations of Africans, and thus amplifying the liberation narrative.³¹³

BRICS

South Africa's accession to the BRICS bloc in 2010 was largely a continuation of the country's foreign policy of multilateralism and multipolarity, but also widely seen as a diplomatic coup, to a geopolitical position to be carefully protected. As such, some commentators have argued that South Africa's position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has an impact on its aspirations and influence within the bloc.³¹⁴

Since joining, BRICS membership has become important for South Africa's national interests. Trade with BRICS constitutes 59% of the country's imports and 41% of its exports; 94% of this trade is done with China and India but only 2% with Russia.³¹⁵ However, these interests stretch further than trade. "The BRICS countries are all projecting an anti-colonial and anti-imperial ideological stance in world politics and the South African government echoes these sentiments in its foreign policy," said Professor Theo Neethling, Head of the Department of Political Studies and Governance at the University of the Free State. South Africa is actively pursuing reforms in the global system of governance, aiming to bring about changes within institutions like the UN Security

Council, IMF, and World Bank. To achieve these ambitious objectives in a potentially multipolar world, the country recognises the importance of having allies. “Those arguments that Russia makes about a fairer world, a multipolar world, have a lot of resonance in South Africa, they land on fertile ground here ... South Africa genuinely seems to see Russia as an ally for

reforming the global international system,” said Steven Gruzd, Head of the African Governance and Diplomacy Programme at the South African Institute of International Affairs (SAIIA). These aspirations and resonant Russian narratives may partly explain why South Africa has been hesitant to distance itself from Russia and its leader.³¹⁶

Information environment

Public sentiment

According to an Ipsos poll of 1000 South Africans in June 2023, some 43% of the public consider that these historic ties mean it makes sense for South Africa to support Russia.³¹⁷ Interestingly, Ukraine can be separated from the Soviet Union in the public’s minds. Considering history again, an overwhelming majority of 61% claimed that they were aware that Ukraine, when part of the USSR, supported many African countries in their liberation struggles.³¹⁸

Yet, actual public support for Russia appears at odds with the government’s stance. When asked if Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is against international law and if Russia is guilty of committing war crimes in Ukraine, some 56% and 61%, respectively, agreed.³¹⁹ Some 52% actively said that they personally supported Ukraine, against 33% who supported Russia. Although the metrics differ somewhat, before February 2022, 30% of South Africans approved of Russian leadership and only 26% disapproved.³²⁰ It could be inferred that the Russian invasion has possibly shifted some of the fence-sitters to disapprove of Russia.

Further, public opinion amongst ANC members is also against their own party’s position. A November 2022 poll in showed 74% of its citizens condemned the aggression and only 14% saw it as an acceptable use of force.³²¹

Research has indicated that, on social media, over a time window of February to June 2022, Africans were largely indifferent to Russia and the Ukraine war.³²² However, in South Africa, sentiment was more mixed, with

the most pro-Russia sentiment of any country, with peaks around 26 April and 23 May when positive sentiment exceeded negative. Despite these peaks, considering all data during the period, users were primarily negative around the Russia-Ukraine war, with 24% of data negative versus 14% positive (62% was neutral)³²³.

The complexity of media narratives, notably the interconnectivity of local politics, was also exhibited neatly regarding the annexation referendums held in late September 2022, in four Russian-occupied regions of Ukraine—Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia. Social media data in South Africa from 26 September to 4 October 2022, showed significantly diverse sentiment (neutrality lowered). The ANC’s Youth League’s (ANCYL) were given status as international observers to the referendums which motivated local politicisation of the online discussion. Overall, public attitudes were mixed, with slightly more pro-Russian than anti-Russian sentiment. Pro-Russian sentiment hardened around the narratives of liberation, akin to that hard won by the ANC and praise of the ANCYL in its role. Conversely, much anti-Russian sentiment was wrapped up in criticism of the ANC.³²⁴ Similar political dynamics in social media over the annexation referendums was also seen in Nigeria.

Russia’s narratives

The story of liberation, resonating with struggles of the ANC against the apartheid regime, are common, given the backdrop of the ANC’s history and its relations with the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Russian narratives centred

on ‘whataboutism’ is very prolific across social media networks.

In both the initial stages of the invasion and more recently, content from *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*), a state-affiliated media outlet, has emerged as one of the most widely circulated featuring ‘whataboutism’ and anti-Western rhetoric. Key Russian government accounts, such as the Russian Embassy of South Africa and the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, have significantly contributed to these online discussions.³²⁵

Themes of a new world order interwoven with anti-colonialism are also common. Russia can tap into a rich seam of suspicion of the west, notably within the ANC. According to Gruzd, “Part of it is the resonance of Russian narratives of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. That ‘strikes a chord’ with ANC factions who are nostalgic for the Soviet Union’s support in the liberation struggle”.³²⁶

Traditional Media

Interviews with African journalists and editors by Natalia Antelava of *Coda* in December 2022 were instructive regarding South African media’s view of Russian narratives and the West’s responses. Having admitted to shedding any illusions of a socialist utopia and now holding deep sympathy for Ukrainians, Mondli Makhanya, a veteran South African editor, claimed that the Western approach in advocating for Kyiv has been counterproductive, with excessive preaching rather than addressing genuine concerns.

Some consensus gathered around the notion that the Western push for an ‘rules-based international order’ is facing resistance due to the lack of accountability and reckoning for NATO’s involvement in wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. While some may label this resistance as ‘whataboutism’, it stems from legitimate and unanswered questions, as stated by one African editor. Within this context, Russia’s message, ‘lands well and softly’, according to Nwabisa Makunga, an editor at the *Sowetan* in Johannesburg. Her team faces the challenge of

providing objective coverage while navigating an overwhelmingly pro-Russian public sentiment and the widespread belief that Ukraine and its Western allies played a role in provoking the invasion. Makunga further highlights a real void in analysis and understanding of the implications of the war, resulting in a declining interest from their audience.³²⁷

Karen Allen of the Pretoria-based Institute of Security Studies (ISS) claims that South Africa has a reputation for taking its journalism seriously, considering it an important pillar of democracy. The country has a proud history of impact journalism—Article 16A of South Africa’s Constitution makes clear that the media is intrinsic to a functioning democracy.³²⁸ This is reflected in South Africa’s ranking of 25th in RSF’s 2023 Press Freedom index.³²⁹

However, despite South Africa receiving praise for upholding freedom of expression and promoting quality, ethics, and diversity in its media landscape, there is a notable shortcoming in handling ideologically-laden discourses. Particularly in the realm of international news, the South African media tends to perpetuate the dominant views propagated by global media superpowers.³³⁰

Social media

Despite the general levels of indifference on social media towards Russia and Ukraine noted above, there is a South African phenomena worthy of note, due to its potential to be exploited for polarising society via social media—xenophobia.

In South Africa, social media has played a significant role in shaping political activism and mobilisation due to its history of discrimination and racial inequality. However, it has also been a channel for sensationalism and hate-filled content.

Social media has played a role in various protests and movements in the Southern African region, such as #FeesMustFall, #RhodesMustFall, and #ThisFlag. These examples indicate a model of social media-driven

protest emergence, opinion coalescing, and activism. While these phenomena can be spontaneous and organic, there are complex interactions and covert manipulation in the context of xenophobia and anti-foreigner sentiments, with implications for domestic stability and relations with other African states.³³¹

In the aftermath of South Africa's decision to abstain from condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine at the UNGA, Twitter experienced the emergence of hashtags #iStandWithRussia and #iStandWithPutin, which rapidly gained traction on the platform. These hashtags specifically targeted South Africa and others. While automated bots played a role in propagating these hashtags, it is crucial to recognise that not all criticisms were from artificial accounts. Most notably and relevant to the race/xenophobia element, many influential and authentic users expressed concerns about the mistreatment of Africans in Ukraine.³³² However, it remains unclear how many of these users were connected to the ANC.

Both the ruling ANC and the opposition have used social media to mobilise supporters, sometimes disseminating anti-immigrant rhetoric. This environment of divisive rhetoric, social distrust, and online harassment makes it a challenging place for journalists.

The polarising effect of social media is exacerbated by anonymity, and divisive views find echo chambers; online environments or ecosystem in which participants encounter beliefs that amplify or reinforce their pre-existing beliefs by communication and repetition inside a closed system and insulated from rebuttal.³³³ Social media has been used to orchestrate anti-foreigner attitudes and hate crimes, with hashtags like #PutSouthAfricaFirst gaining popularity. This has alarmed human rights defenders, who note a 'new level' of xenophobia and 'Afrophobia'³³⁴ but could also play into the hands of foreign powers, not least Russia, wishing to stoke trouble.

Political, constitutional and legal frameworks.

National vision

In August 2022, the South African government's Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO) issued a fresh policy document outlining South Africa's foreign policy, entitled Framework on South Africa's National Interest and its Advancement in a Global Environment. Alongside debate on the geo-political relevance of the document, commentary on it has also generated debate over whether South Africa's foreign policy regarding Russia and Ukraine is in line with the country's own national vision.³³⁵ The document states that "South Africa aspires for the world to also enjoy a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights. South Africa will seek to uphold its values globally and promote a broad and inclusive international human rights system that includes civil and political, socio-economic and cultural rights for all."³³⁶ Many have pointed out that support for Russia, both as a state having

disregard for human rights and in terms of its aggression towards a neighbour, does not sit easily with this vision. As Zondo states, 'To remain "neutral" when Russia violates human rights is a violation of South Africa's national interests in every dimension of the values that are meant to animate it.'³³⁷

The internal politics of the ruling party has led to what some see as an 'irrational Russian love affair', a statement attributed to the Shadow Defence Minister, Kobus Marais.³³⁸ At some level, although the South African government's stance internationally may be a 'clear message to the West that the country will not be dictated to', it is also possibly 'a message likely designed to generate greater engagement from Western powers, not the opposite (as many fear)'.³³⁹ Equally, some commentators indicate that South Africa's hesitance in criticising Russia is because the government is acting rationally and wants to encourage a more multipolar world, denying US hegemony and a larger role at the UN.³⁴⁰

State capture

To a significant degree, influence in a country with well-established democratic institutions, like South Africa, is susceptible to effectively 'state capture'. In pursuit of such, the Kremlin made a concerted effort to align itself with the presidency of Jacob Zuma. The highly disputed nuclear power agreement worth US\$76 billion, signed in 2014 between Zuma and the Kremlin, was widely seen as a ploy intended to favour Zuma's associates and their Russian counterparts, while burdening the South African public. Following President Cyril Ramaphosa's assumption of office, the deal was ultimately revoked.

Despite efforts to counter them, Russian disinformation campaigns continue to actively promote the faction within the ANC aligned with Zuma.³⁴¹ Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, Zuma's daughter, has been identified as a significant influencer for the Kremlin in South Africa.³⁴²

South Africa's ability to overcome the grip of elite or state capture and to counter Russian disinformation carries essential lessons for the entire African continent, despite the ANC's historical ties with Russia. A crucial factor in this success is considered to be the unwavering belief among the majority of South Africans that state capture is intolerable, and they adamantly rejected these unlawful practices as the status quo. The presence of an independent and tenacious free press also plays a vital role in the process.

However, in addition, South Africa's advantage lies in its independent Public Prosecutor's Office, which has conducted thorough examinations, verification, and transparent disclosure of their findings, enabling the public to grasp the full scope of corruption and extent of any state capture. This is backed up by relatively independent courts that demonstrate that not even former presidents are exempt from the reach of the law.³⁴³

Summary

South Africa is rather an enigma when it comes to Russian influence. It is a functioning democracy, with sound independent media and legal systems, economically aligned and tied to the West. However, its history, suffused with colonialism and apartheid struggles, and its political polarisation and latent embers of xenophobia, make it susceptible to narratives showing the Kremlin in a positive light. Further, its unique recent history, emphasised by its characterisation as the 'rainbow nation', and its position as a regional power, give it a sense of pride which can rail against what its political elites see as Western hegemony. Indeed, the previous Zuma-dominated decade saw a more strident anti-Western approach and increased intimacy between its elite and Moscow, although South Africa's democratic resilience has since ameliorated this.³⁴⁴ Its neutrality, embedded in its national policies, can be seen from many perspectives, both positively and negatively, and is held dearly. Any threat to that has the potential to alienate the country against those pushing it to take sides. Further, that pride, cemented by its place amongst the BRICS (notably, its current line-up), can promote a desire to make its voice heard, and count, on the world stage, often in ways which can be seen as, but not necessarily intended to be, helpful to the Russian cause.

South Africa's political fence-sitting is, almost by happenstance, advantageous to Russia's contemporary narratives, though more driven by Pretoria's vision of South Africa's standing on the world stage. However, in that it often serves Moscow's purpose, it is a relatively delicate position. Aggressive moves to apply pressure, especially if obviously attributed to an external power, have the potential for blow back and re-alignment of that position.

Qualitative Research

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations (IIOs)

1. Both the literature review and interviews reiterated a strong free media in South Africa which, to a significant degree, prevents Russia pursuing strong narratives throughout the media landscape. Although certain actions have presented the possibility of pro-Russian backlash:

'[...] there was big criticism here about banning of Russia Today. Because we are very strict about media freedom and we see censorship [as] a very sort of sensitive issue ... even if it's propaganda.' – Interviewee SA1

However, it should also be noted that the revoking of *The Daily Maverick's* press accreditation for the Russia-Africa Summit and, possibly more seriously, the South African government's lukewarm response to it, did cause significant concern and uproar.³⁴⁵

Regardless, no respondents could point out evidence of specific Russian information influence operations beyond usual public diplomacy efforts. That said, pockets of heightened influence around certain individuals or issues were highlighted. But wherever such influence was evident, it was entwined with and predominantly co-opted by local predominant agendas in a highly-polarised political environment; used as a tool to promote such agendas, not those specifically of Russia (see below regarding energy).

'White Africans make up 8 percent of the population and Afrikaans make up even a smaller portion of that. The big portion is black Africans, 80 odd percent of the population, and there you're going to have black Africans who are sympathetic towards a black power, black nationalist

and anti-colonial message. Home of that is the Radical Economic Transformation faction of the ANC in South Africa, Jacob Zuma's faction of the ANC.' – Interviewee SA3

While the vast bulk of the population are unconcerned with the Ukraine war, more likely to focus on immediate and local issues, not least power shortages, perceptions are often more striking on the peripheries of political discourse. Narratives aligned with, if not explicitly sponsored by, the Kremlin find resonance across diverse audiences, spanning from the white, neoliberal right to historically rooted supporters of the ANC, and extending to the anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, pro-socialist advocacy groups.

'The history of the involvement of Russians and African history is quite important to understand why they have this weird appeal to both the far right and then the far left.' – Interviewee SA3

2. As previously mentioned, history plays a major role in South African perceptions of Russia.

'A minority of the population that looks at Russia still through the lenses of what the USSR did during the struggle against apartheid. I wouldn't say that's the majority, but it is still that kind of legacy in some and also the ANC is headed still by the veterans. It is likely to be stronger in those in position of power.' – Interviewee SA2

However, one respondent, with reasonable situational awareness to comment, did state that such historically-based viewpoints were not just relevant to the older generation:

'[...] oftentimes people will assume that Russia's connection to the liberation is not necessarily something that the younger generation will remember or think about favourably, because we're just not involved in it ... and that's not the case. It's definitely something that has trickled down and maybe we don't have conversations about Russia's involvement as much [but] we definitely still have those conversations.' – Interviewee SA5

3. Audiences: Politically aware youth, notably on the left, were seen as a prime audience. The Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF), with a vocal supporter of Russia at its head (Julius Malema), does garner considerable support through its youth outreach campaigns, although these tend to rest upon anti-capitalist tropes rather than pro-Kremlin messaging. Yet, representative of the (hard) left, Malema, with four million followers on X, does actively align publicly with Russia.

'The RET [Radical Economic Transformation] faction within the ANC, and then EFF—those two merged in 2019 and ... now they're promoting Russian narratives. As the war started, you would see how Julius Malema, the head of the EFF is going to the Russian embassy and then he would report on his social media and also in other media that I met today was Russian consular and he informed me that Ukrainians are Nazi and Ukraine is a proxy of NATO.' – Interviewee SA4

Whereas on the right, the Afrikaner community can also be susceptible to influence, not least by practical measures.

'There's a project ... to relocate 3000 persecuted farmers in South Africa, Boers, and relocate them to Russia to go farm there and improve their economy.' – Interviewee SA3

However, the respondent referring to this did see the potential for it to backfire amongst the wider public as the project, initiated before the Ukraine invasion, applies only

to whites,³⁴⁶ and could therefore be considered racist, touching a very hot button in South Africa.

The government itself did not appear to a prime audience, beyond usual, albeit heightened, diplomatic efforts. This could be explained by a Russian reliance on pre-existing historically-based attitudes with ruling elites and the already existing views towards Western hegemony within those elites, both of which may be rocked by what could be seen as external interference from Russia. Basically, from the Russian viewpoint, if it's working, don't break it.

The general public were not mentioned explicitly as an audience of interest for Russia.

4. Issues: Food security and cost-of-living were not considered to be linked, in the public's minds, to the Ukraine war. However, although load-shedding, an issue predominant in public discourse, was never directly connected with war-induced energy prices, narratives around energy itself, notably nuclear, were often cited as having a Russian, namely Rosatom, flavour.

'[...] renewables are going to undermine our economy, are going to decimate cities and towns, take resources away from the public, which is black, which is associated with nuclear and fossil fuels and coal, and move [renewable resources] into the privatised hands of the whites ... Those are the kind of issues that at ground level that make people predisposed to pro-Russian messages.' – Interviewee SA3

Yet, such narratives around energy are good examples of how pro-Russian sentiment is enmeshed with deeper pre-existing notions, such as nationalism, xenophobia, anti-establishmentarianism and protecting South African resources.

'It's more of an anti-establishment against the system appeal. [However] one of the issues in South Africa is xenophobia and the groups that are pushing xenophobia. There seems to be some indication that these are active campaigns. When you go up to the right level, you see that those groups are aligned with the radical economic transformation faction of the ANC, that they are aligned with coal and fossil fuel interests. And you'll have a history of those issues being aligned with Russian interests ... pro-Russian people who are imbibing a message of xenophobia and nationalism around strong border control.' - Interviewee SA3

These narratives tended to be prevalent within elite and political circles, often with grounded agendas but often seen as Russian proxies and only influential within those tight networks, of which Black Twitter and South Africa First are examples:

'Proxies like Ms Zuma, these people don't have credibility, beyond their niches ... then there's all these clientele network of people who have benefited and continue in some ways to benefit that will provide visibility and resonance to any kind of shift that comes from that camp because they're so ingrained in that in that in that network of corruption.' – Interviewee SA2

5. Main communicators: Several individuals can be identified as being messengers of pro-Russian tropes—Julius Malema of EFF, Ex-President Jacob Zuma's daughter, Duduzile Zuma-Sambudla, and Paula Slier of RT, were all mentioned. However, mouthpieces of an array of EFF or ANC representatives, especially those supporters of Jacob Zuma, can generally be heard doing so. Whilst the Russian embassy in South Africa and Russian Consulate in Cape Town were noted as being highly active, certain government representatives, notably Naledi Pandor, South African Minister of International Relations, were also seen as 'useful' in the spread of such narratives.

6. Though concerted disinformation campaigns were not specifically referenced, the following Tactics Techniques and Procedures (TTPs) were identified:

- a. 'Whataboutism': As identified in the literature review, 'whataboutism' is reported as a common mechanism for supporting Russia's actions, especially regarding the notion of sovereignty and notably prescient given the flare up of conflict in the Middle East after Hamas's 7th October 2023 attack and Israel's response.

'She [Naledi Pandor, South African Minister of International Relations] had very, very interesting quotes around sovereignty and independence that I thought would resonate with the South African audience very, very much. And that was around the international community's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the situation in Palestine. With Palestine and Israel, she was saying that people are only really interested in this notion of sovereignty now that Russia's invaded Ukraine. But the situation in Palestine most, I would argue, a lot of South Africans, are supportive of Palestine over Israel.' – Interviewee SA5

- b. Opportunism: Notably, although Twitter was claimed to be the online platform for open political engagement, massive WhatsApp groups are also considered to be a significant forum for such engagement. Here, much pro-Russian discourse was reported as often opportunistic or reactive, merely serving personal interests or to garner a louder voice without any real political fervour behind it.
- c. Amplification: Online communities and echo chambers, can be infused with rebroadcasts of messages within the South African digital ecosystem. However, although there may be online profiles that are bots and sock puppets, often a local proxy, opportunistically or politically motivated, is central to promoting or amplifying narratives.

'It's your radical economic transformation echo chamber, your conservative white echo chamber and to some degree your EFF echo chamber. And your xenophobic echo chamber... there's always a local proxy.' – Interviewee SA3

d. State Capture: This was not referenced by the interviewees but appears to be a practice relevant due to the possible extent of its success during Jacob Zuma's tenure (2009-18) and financial threads to Russia reported within the ANC. Ramaphosa's administration, with an overtly anti-corruption agenda, does appear to be more resilient in this regard.

Concerning Western strategic communications

1. All respondents referred to the West's, and thus NATO's, often arrogant and vacillating approach to Africa and South Africa specifically, despite a widespread recognition of the primacy of economic support from the West.

'[There is seen to be a] patronising approach of the West towards finding solutions for Africa ...[but] anti-Western doesn't necessarily turn into pro-Russian.' – Interviewee SA2

Further;

'The ICC is viewed as selectively targeting, particularly African states, and international financial institutions as continuing discrimination and continuing the colonial power balance. The state of Libya is blamed on NATO.' – Interviewee SA4

It appeared that NATO, although only vaguely known to the wider population, is synonymous with the West but only one respondent claimed that:

'... there's quite a few people who ... see Russia as the underdog, that Russia was obliged to start the war because of what NATO has been doing, its big expansion.' – Interviewee SA1

Two respondents did note that the West failed dismally to engage with Africa generally right at the start of the Kremlin's war in Ukraine. Their comments pointed to the widespread sanctions regime that the West was calling for seemed to be neglectful of African interests:

'[...] a blunt kind of narrative is that when NATO applied sanctions against Russia, they forgot that Africa existed.' – Interviewee SA3

This narrative cannot be seen to help mitigate a perception of Western arrogance, fuelled by memories of colonialism.

2. In relation to colonialism, any strategic communication efforts face the challenge of false dichotomy regarding human rights, and to a degree race and xenophobia, in which assumptions are made that Russian supporters are, therefore, inconsiderate of human rights. This appears simply not to be the case.

'I think people who are anti-West and get automatically pushed into the pro-Russia camp are not against universal norms. I think South Africans are very supportive of human rights because there are many South Africans who had their human rights taken away from them.' – Interviewee SA5

However, the race issue can be also used for pro-Russian, anti-colonial, and even anti-Ukrainian, purposes:

'Russia pushes the narrative that they didn't colonise [Africa], and so they're friends of these countries and also... Africans remember Ukrainians being incredibly racist at the start of this conflict, not wanting, not allowing African or black Ukrainians to leave the country to cross the border.' – Interviewee SA5

Nevertheless, Western soft power remains but race is a significant factor in its success.

'There is also a lot of fascination for the United States and for popular culture. The transformation that happens in Hollywood in terms of like who gets to be the main characters in movies. You know, race is important here. Russia or China have nothing to offer in that regard because they tend to be quite racist countries.' – Interviewee SA2

However, of note is the fact that, unlike Kenya, LGBTQ+ issues were *not* raised and identified as a fissure that could be exploited by Russia.

3. Memories do not need to be long. In terms of disinformation and accusations of Russian disinformation, three respondents pointed to the Bell-Pottinger campaigns for the Gupta family in 2017, remembered through its incendiary catch phrase, 'white monopoly capital', as a classic case of disinformation, conducted by a British PR firm and seared into the minds of South Africans.³⁴⁷ With delicious irony, one respondent pointed out that *'Even the white monopoly capital term was designed by the Soviet Union.'* – Interviewee SA4. Thus, any outright and obvious Western strategic communications efforts will be seen in light of this affair.

However, an advantage for Western strategic communications is, as commented on by most respondents, South Africa's strong, independent media with flagships such as *The Daily Maverick* and *News24*. As borne out by polling (see Literature Review), for the majority:

'You have to receive both sides to get the truth in the middle. Most of the people believe in going to the media to get the middle.' – Interviewee SA3

Concerning overall effects

1. Much of the West's current concerns over South Africa are borne of its stance demonstrated in its voting in international institutions regarding the Ukraine invasion, notably its lack of wholehearted condemnation. Yet, despite the political elite's complex history with Russia, the factors of South African exceptionalism—desiring to break free from an imposed Western-biased rules system—and that of a longstanding principle of neutrality go some way to explaining voting abstentions.

The notion of continuing Western hegemony taps into the South African psyche, to the advantage of the Kremlin. The demands of this hegemonic entity crash up against very South African deeply held concepts, not least neutrality and its enshrining in a largely respected Constitution, of which many South Africans are proud.

'[...] the concept of neutrality is shared by many South Africans ... but... it does complicate it when our position of neutrality is not respected. Then that pushes quite a lot of people over to the Russian side of saying, well, at least they don't manipulate us like that.' – Interviewee SA3

- On the home front, regarding the framing of critical national issues in light of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, those issues appear to be rarely connected. The blame for daily ills of the average person does not appear to be laid at the door of Moscow.

'... people don't necessarily make the link between the war and food prices and petrol prices. [But] surprisingly, our protests have not really been about like food and petrol prices.' – Interviewee SA1

Other interviewees concurred that any links between food and the cost of living to the war in Ukraine are weak, although one did make the comment:

'The Western sanctions rather than Russia's actions have resulted in food insecurity. That's literally [the view of] the whole continent.' – Interviewee SA5

As mentioned above, most concerns are regarding energy supplies, manifesting themselves through regular power outages. Yet, as mentioned above, despite narratives swirling around renewables and nuclear, including Rosatom, no real narrative connection appears between energy and the war.

Digital Analysis

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations

As demonstrated by the illustrative examples below, much of the pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content circulating in South Africa focused on BRICS as the new world economic power (and by extension South Africa), colonial atrocities and racism, and NATO and the West as malign aggressors, with NATO largely associated with destroying Libya.

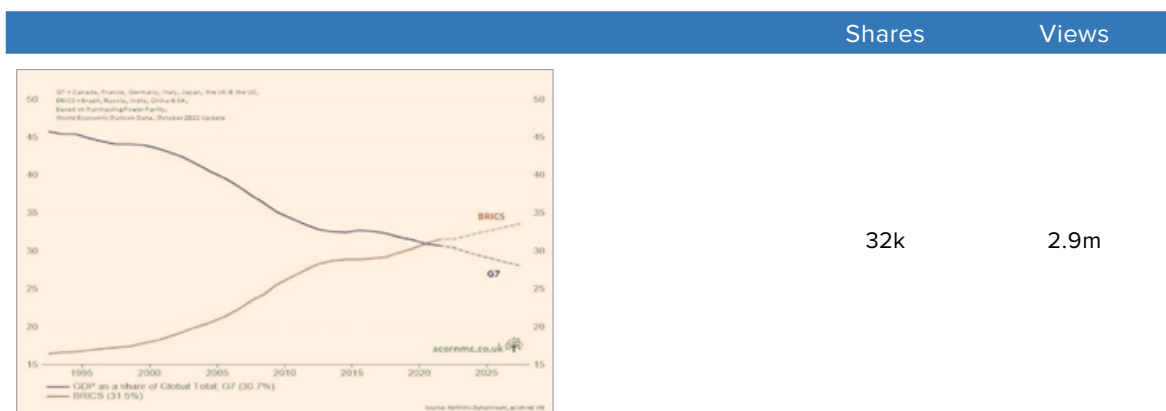


Fig. E1. Purported comparison of GDP of the G7 vs BRICS.



8.9k

846k

Fig. E2. Picture of colonial era repression.



8.6K

4.2m

Fig. E3. Post emphasising the 'stolen' origin of the Star of Africa Diamond in King Charles III's sceptre.



841k

4.1m

Fig. E4. Post comparing Libya before and after Gaddafi's overthrow. The implication being a severe decline in stability and standards of living. By extension, this condemns NATO and the West for its intervention.



6.2k

841k

Fig. E5. Image implying that NATO fuels conflict and needs to be 'dumped'.



3.8k

1.8m

Fig. E6. 'Billboard' image indicating Russia alone stopped Napoleon and Hitler (both statements inaccurate) and further implies US is the new threat.



1.6k

381k

Fig. E7. Post of Victoria Nuland (US Under Secretary for Political Affairs) implying her responsibility for global instability.

Key phrase
#IStandWithPutin

Approx. 6
 million from
 Feb-April 2022.

Similar content was found across video platforms, for instance, the video below from *Chinese Global Television Network*, in which Putin condemns Western colonialism, received 1.4 million views and 31 thousand shares.

Likewise, the video *How and why they silenced him ... Africa's last hope* depicts Gaddafi as a 'great revolutionary leader' silenced by the West 'for oil, power and money...similar to Saddam Hussein', while completely ignoring both of their litany of human rights abuses. This reinforces the Kremlin talking point that human rights are little more than a pretext for Western interference and neocolonialism. The channel from which the latter video originates 'The New Tourist' was made in 2019 and its most popular videos feature anti-Western content.

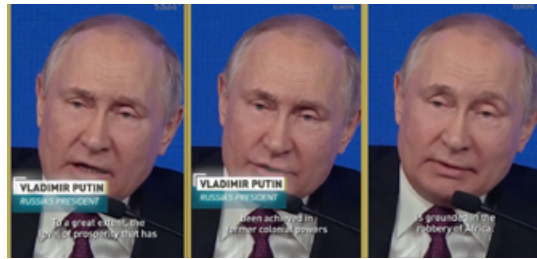


Fig. E8. TikTok video of Putin condemning the former colonial powers 'robbing' Africa to fuel their development. Originally broadcast on CGTN.

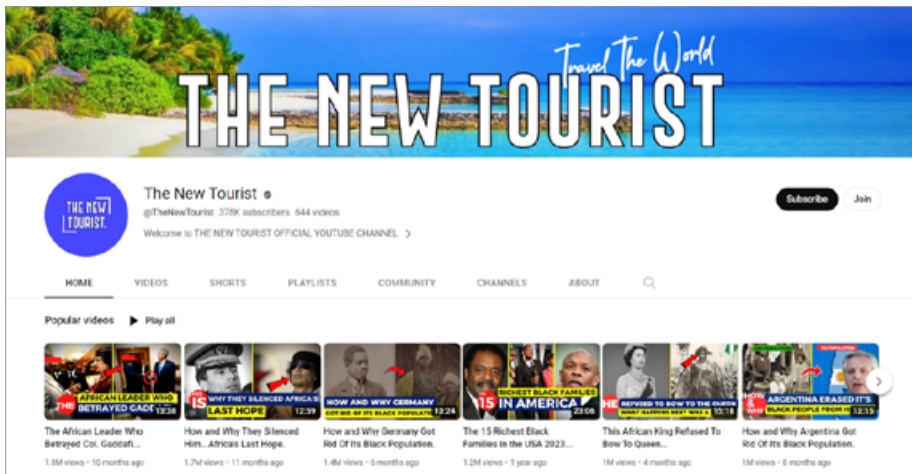


Fig. E9. Screenshot of The New Tourist YouTube profile.

However, one of the anti-Western pieces of content that received the largest number of views and shares was Julius Malema's reactions to the International Criminal Court's arrest for Putin and whether this would disrupt his travel to the BRICS conference in South Africa. In the clip below, (which received over 1 million views and 63 thousand shares) he condemns the ICC as a hypocritical institution.

The shorter clip below of him praising Russia as one with Africa and condemning of the West as false friends³⁴⁸ received even more traction (8.6 million views and 700 thousand shares). The web group this shorter clip came from (*Africa Web TV*) produces pan-African content including leaders being highly critical of the West including 'Big powers preach one thing but practice another', 'the UN is a failed institution', and 'Europe comes to destabilise, China comes to build'.³⁴⁹ It has profiles across YouTube, Instagram and WhatsApp.



Fig. E10. Clip of Julius Malema’s support for Putin after the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for Putin’s arrest.



Fig. E11. Further clip of Malema condemning the US.

While these examples do not all originate from pro-Kremlin channels, it nevertheless shows the popularity of content that is critical of the West which the Kremlin attempts to capitalise on for its IIOs.

By contrast, very little widely circulated BRICS content was pro-Kremlin, instead focusing on BRICS as a whole and its benefits for its members. The only content caught in the data scrape for South Africa that can be construed as pro-Kremlin was Lavrov dancing with the welcome party (200 thousand views),³⁵⁰ the South African Foreign Minister addressing ‘double standards by the ICC’ (290 thousand views),³⁵¹ and Putin’s declaring ‘de-dollarisation’ irreversible (180 thousand views).³⁵²

The main communicators of pro-Kremlin and Kremlin-aligned narratives that emerged in the digital findings were entrepreneurs of influence and ‘useful idiots’ and cynics like Julius Malema (head of the Economic Freedom Fighters) and Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma. Duduzile, in particular, was one of the foremost spreaders of the pro-Kremlin hashtag #IStandWithPutin and has been labelled ‘the Kremlin’s super influencer’.³⁵³ They have a combined following of 4.25 million followers on Twitter.

Previous research has further indicated that pro-Kremlin content has been pushed by bot accounts. It is estimated that a fifth of 350,000 pro-Moscow tweets analysed by German researchers came from bots created after the war began.³⁵⁴

Similarly, pro-Kremlin content is amplified within South Africa by manned sock puppet accounts. For example, among the overtly pro-Kremlin accounts found was ‘Kurama’. While its own reach was limited, it amplified pro-Kremlin accounts from Egypt and the Arab world, Jackson Hinkle, Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma, and other pro-Kremlin Twitter feeds like ‘Maimuka news’ and ‘Irish friends of Russia’.



Fig. E12. Screenshot of Kurama – a pro-Kremlin profile.

Based on these findings, it is almost certain the following TTPs are being deployed:

1. ‘Whataboutism’: Kremlin content attempted to draw moral equivalencies to its actions in Ukraine and the West’s colonial crimes, as well as deflect concerns about the invasion of Ukraine as hypocrisy by the West.
2. Amplification of existing dis/mis/mal-information: The recurrence and mutual sharing of some accounts indicate coordinated efforts to amplify pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content. Much of the amplification came through entrepreneurs of influence and was supported by sock puppets and bots.
3. Sock puppets and bots: Searches of key phrases demonstrated a number of profiles of varying reach that posted pro-Kremlin content to drive up its usage in order for social media algorithms to recommend them to real users and create a veneer of credibility.

Concerning Western strategic communications

The most overt condemning of the Kremlin’s violation of international norms found online was a transcript of two South African MPs in a discussion about the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine and its impact on the economy.³⁵⁵ Mr Mkhuleko Hlengwa and Dr Pieter Groenewald both condemned the invasion and encouraged other members to do likewise:

‘Member of Parliament Mr Mkhuleko Hlengwa said South Africa should acknowledge that it is wrong for Russia to impose its will on the sovereignty of other countries. Neutrality could simply be seen to be condoning aggression. “You can’t prevent a war by starting a war. We should condemn Putin’s egoistic war.”

‘Dr Pieter Groenewald concurred that the South African government should condemn Russia as a friend, “if not, it will see you as a useful idiot,” he said.’

However, while Mr Hlengwa and Dr Groenewald have a combined following of 45 thousand on Twitter, this far below pro-Kremlin voices like Malema and Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma. Furthermore, this transcript was only found to have been circulated by Arina Muresan, a journalist with approximately 700 followers on Twitter. Furthermore, the article demonstrated a majority of MPs preferring neutrality, and one ANC member speaking of a ‘blood-bond’ with Russia.

Among the most popular pro-norms and pro-universal values communicators came from the media. *News24* and *The Daily Maverick* have given balanced reporting on the Ukraine war and Russian disinformation efforts and continue to uphold journalistic standards. Likewise, journalists and presenters perceived as balanced and professional like the *BBC*’s Nancy Kacungira had a high following.

However, the perception of Western strategic communications is still closely aligned to the Bell Pottinger ‘white monopoly capital’ campaign. For example, a brief search of the term on Twitter revealed a number of genuine South African users who blamed the group for current instability and the ANC’s chokehold on power in the country as late as March 2023.

Impacts

The three Parliament Graphs for South Africa demonstrate a symbolic response to the three questions. Unsurprisingly the Face with Tears of Joy features highly on all three and in this context represents a statement of agreement. The minor percentage Emojis support the larger percentage Emoji displayed, demonstrating a substantive sentiment agreement with the question/statement posed. The Clapping Hands appears in all three suggesting that there is strong agreement. It is worth noting that the range of used Emojis appearing in the minor places are symbols that individuals have chosen to search for within the response over

and above their favourite Emojis which appear first (most used), this suggest both a conscious decision to find the best method of demonstrating their emotional response and that they have been motivated enough to perform this task. (See Main Report, Methodology section to see explanation of Parliament Emoji graphs)

A focus on personal agreement and truth are both presented. The Fire symbol is used heavily to indicate that the speaker is representing both a hot take and that the truth burns. The CD symbol is used heavily to represent facts, as is the 100% symbol.



Fig. E13. How Europe stole Africa so quickly

A large percentage used the Black Heart of Love. The Praying Hands is a common Emoji when the speaker is saying something that they hope and want to be the truth. Interestingly, the Sad Crying Emoji is also present demonstrating

a mixed response or a possible agreement, but that it resents sadness at the 'facts'. The Russian Flag is used extensively in support of Russia and Putin.

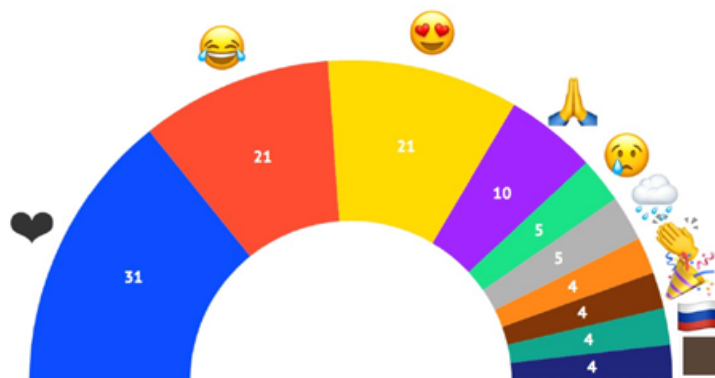


Fig. E14. Putin told African leaders the truth

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

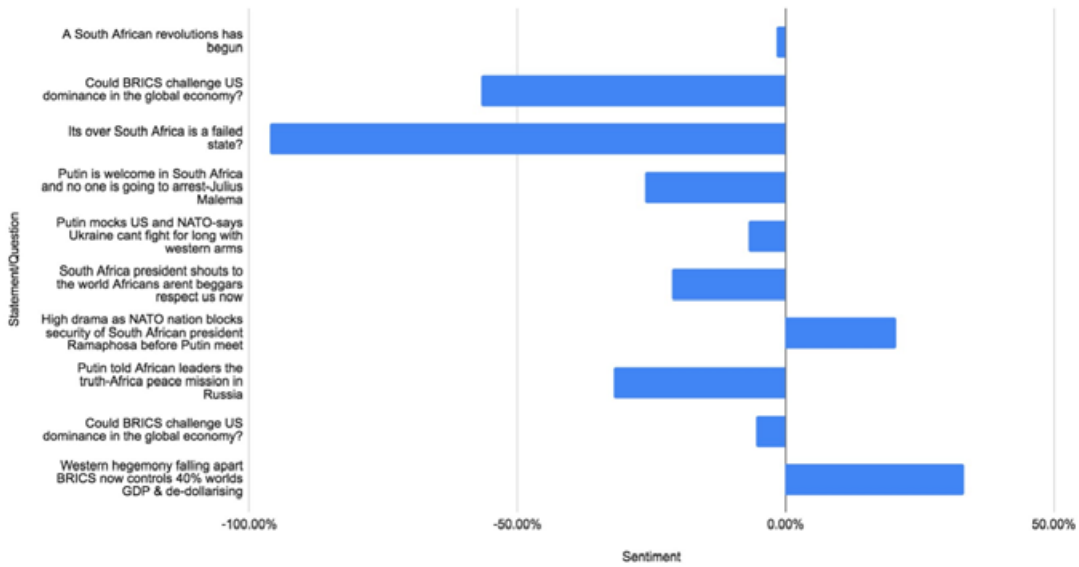


Fig. E17. Sentiment Graph 1

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

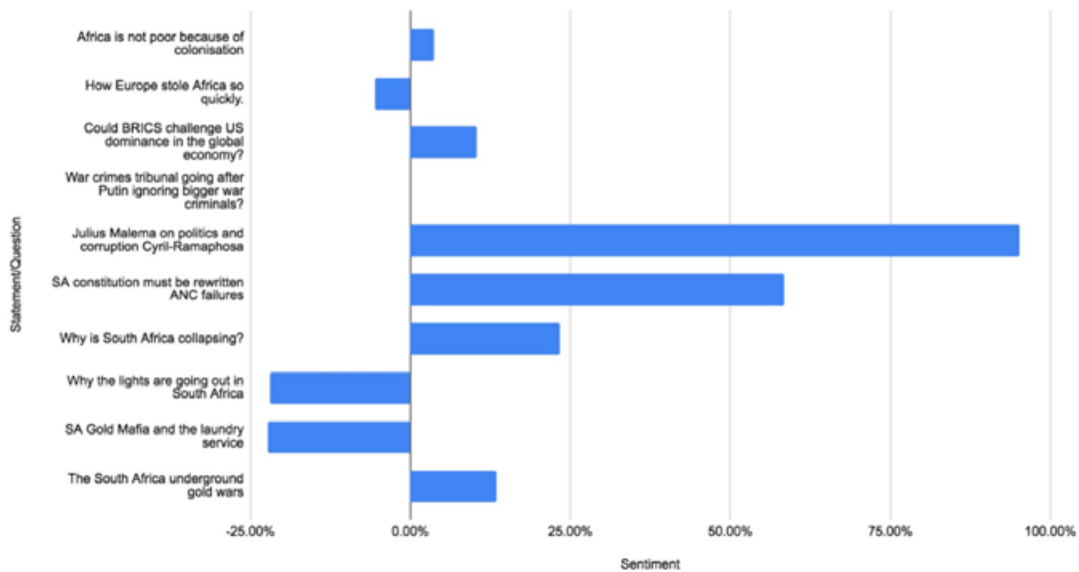


Fig. E18. Sentiment Graph 2

Conclusions

In summary, qualitative findings suggest that South Africa maintains a strong free media landscape that inhibits Russia from exerting a dominant narrative through the media. While there have been actions like the ban on *RT* being criticised for infringing on media freedom, specific Russian IIOs focus on public diplomacy and amplification efforts has been identified.

However, some localised influence pockets are tied to various political agendas within South Africa, entangled with historical perceptions of Russia's (conflated with the Soviet Union) role in the nation's struggle against apartheid. Pro-Russian sentiments are found across a diverse range of political spectrums but tend to be more influential within specific elite circles. Western

strategic communication faces challenges in the perception of arrogance, particularly regarding human rights, and is met with some scepticism due to historical events and the Bell Pottinger campaigns. South Africa's strong independent media outlets, such as *The Daily Maverick* and *News24*, play a pivotal role in providing a balanced view for the majority of the population, promoting the idea that accessing multiple sources is crucial for discerning the truth. This was further reflected in the digital findings, with substantial amounts of pro-Kremlin narrative but from a select group of influencers rather than widely spread.

Based on the Theory of Reflexive Control, it is highly likely these IIOs seek to cultivate the determining behaviours of continued positive neutrality toward the Kremlin's violation of international norms (especially in regard to the current invasion of Ukraine). As part of this, they are seeking to cultivate alignment in rhetoric at an elite influencer level that will move from the top down. At the same time, they are highly likely to be seeking to cultivate destructive behaviour by creating polarisation of debate around engagement with the West.

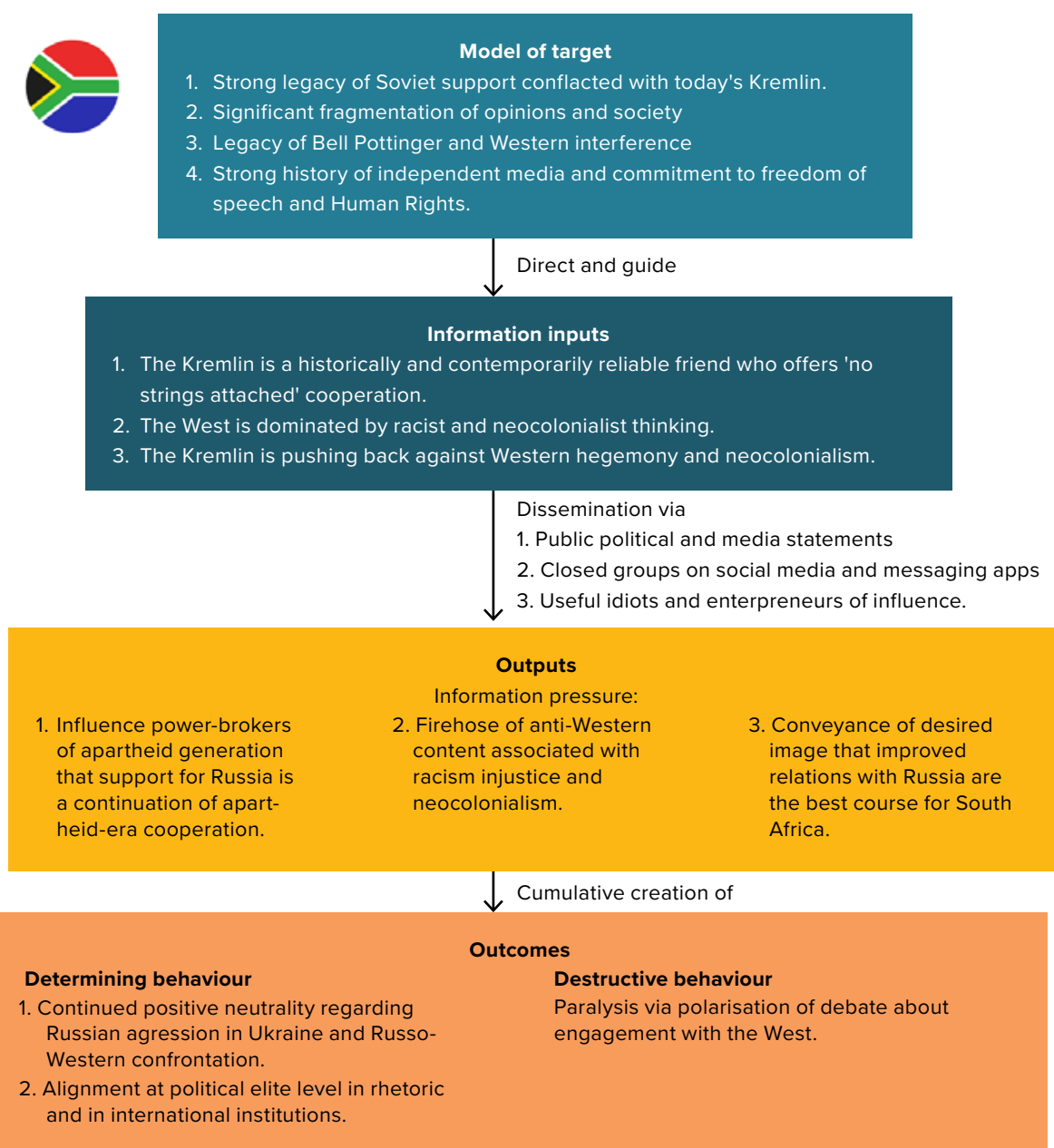


Fig. E19. TORC framework for South Africa

Annex F

United Arab Emirates

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Introduction

In the relatively short history of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), it has emerged as one of the Persian Gulf's most prominent international players through its economic and financial clout combined with its energy market and rapidly advancing cyber and military capabilities.³⁵⁶ It has now defined itself by relative secularism, finance and, domestically, by 'Emirati exceptionalism'; a domestic and global narrative that combines a traditional authoritarian model of stability over the rights of the individual but coupled with relative social and

economic liberalism.³⁵⁷ Abu Dhabi's fundamental rejection of the Arab Spring, the cultivation of influence networks, assertiveness on the world stage and a deepening security state have led a growing numbers of security scholars to nickname it 'Little Sparta'.³⁵⁸ While its burgeoning security and narrative alignment with Russia (alongside alleged sanctions busting) over the past decade have caused deepening concern. Consequently, its trajectory, strategic culture and foreign policy have been a growing subject of scholarly interest.

Desk Research

Historic and contemporary relations with the West and Russia

The West

With the expansion of European colonial empires, Portuguese, English, and Dutch forces began to occupy the Gulf region, including what is now the UAE. According to Western contemporary sources, the area became dominated by Arab piracy and the British intervened militarily in the area throughout the 19th century to protect trading routes with India, culminating in the establishment of the 'Trucial States' as a British protectorate in 1892. This perception of the Gulf as a region of pirates would endure in historical Western literature, but is heavily disputed by modern Emirati historians as a colonial construct used by Western powers to justify their subjugation of the region both at the time and into the modern day.³⁵⁹ This has become a dominant view in the region: the UAE government portal's brief history includes 'a brief account of the European invasion of the Arabian Peninsula'.³⁶⁰

Under the 1892 treaty, the 'trucial sheikhs' could not cede any territory except to the British and could not engage any foreign government other than the British without their

consent. In return, the British offered security guarantees. This has been accepted as a standard 'unequal treaty' utilised by colonial powers in the era.³⁶¹

In the 1930s, oil was discovered off the coast of the Trucial States. However, exploration concessions were limited to British companies until the Development Office and Council of Sheikhs managed to win concessions to provide licences. After which, oil exploration became dominated by the US.³⁶²

After independence from Britain in 1971, Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujayrah, Sharjah, and Umm al Quwain formed a single federation known as the UAE (followed by Ras al-Khaymah in 1972). Relations with the West continued to be based on oil and defence; leading to the popular but inherently patronising summarising of the UAE as a land of 'pearls, pirates and petroleum' to which Emiratis continue to take offence.³⁶³ This image of Western narratives has not been improved by policymakers comparing the 'garden' of Europe with the 'jungle' beyond.³⁶⁴

By contrast, relations with Russia were virtually non-existent until UAE's independence. But have developed consistently across multiple sectors.

In terms of economic relations, since the mid-2000s, both Russian state-owned conglomerates and private enterprises have actively engaged in business within the Emirates, vying for project tenders.³⁶⁵ The UAE stands as an appealing business nexus for Russia, bridging continents—Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. This relationship has not only fostered competition but also seen a significant rise in bilateral tourism, evidenced by over 600,000 Russian visitors to the UAE in 2015-2017 alone.³⁶⁶

Simultaneously, the Gulf state has made substantial investments in Russia, particularly in the realms of gas, oil, real estate, infrastructure, and logistics, while aiming to further solidify its presence in Russia's food production sector.³⁶⁷ Moreover, these nations share a mutual interest in natural resource extraction and are evolving as pivotal trade centres for diamonds. The UAE's investment interest aligns well with Russia's expertise in strategic metals and the largely untapped resources of Siberia, indicating potential mutual benefits in these domains.³⁶⁸

In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks, the UAE was keen to demonstrate its opposition to Islamism and market itself to Western powers as a secular alternative and stable partner in a turbulent region, as well as gain support for its own opposition to Islamist parties deemed a threat to its existing political and social order (chief among them, the Muslim Brotherhood).³⁶⁹

Relations with Russia also developed at this point, as the Kremlin was also keen to present its wars in Chechnya as a struggle against Islamist terrorism.³⁷⁰ However, it was only with the onset of the Arab Spring that Russian-Emirati political interests aligned and the UAE began to develop its global footprint.

The wave of pro-democracy protests that swept across the Middle East and North

Africa (MENA) from approximately 2010 to 2014 dubbed the 'Arab Spring' was considered an existential threat to Abu Dhabi, especially as Qatar allegedly began to throw financial and informational support behind the protestors and opposition networks, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, enthusiasm from the West was consistently derided as naive and dangerous, while the previous narratives of political Islam as a 'conveyor belt' or 'gateway drug' to radicalisation were recycled to discourage any outright support for opposition movements.³⁷¹

As the security situation began to deteriorate, and Western narratives began to change from Arab Spring to 'Arab Winter', the distance between the UAE and its Western partners' goals continued to grow. By contrast, there was significant narrative alignment with the Kremlin, who also fundamentally rejected the Arab movements as a gateway to chaos in line with its traditional opposition to 'colour revolutions'.³⁷² Both powers sought to amplify counter-revolutionary narratives. At the same time, a wider narrative developed of non-interference in internal affairs as a fundamental principle of international affairs. Concurrently, Russian and Emirati interests aligned in Sudan, where Russia had a vested interest in protecting Omar al-Bashir as its ally—as well as gaining mineral extraction rights, mainly gold. Much of this illicit gold was sent to the UAE.³⁷³

A degree of rapprochement with the West came after the rise of Daesh (a.k.a. the so-called 'Islamic State'), with the UAE becoming a critical member of the Global Coalition to Counter Daesh and consequently its narratives of being a critical counter-terrorism power were reinvigorated. Richard Stengel remarks that in his time as head of the Global Engagement Center (GEC—US agency established in 2016 to counter foreign propaganda and disinformation)³⁷⁴ that the UAE were among their most cooperative and competent partners in countering Daesh propaganda.³⁷⁵ At the same time, the UAE created a series of new institutions to reaffirm its traditional image as a secular beacon of tolerance, such as the Muslim Council of Elders, the Forum for Promoting Peace in

Muslim Societies, and the UAE Fatwa Council. In 2016, it established an official 'Minister of Tolerance' and the year 2019 was proclaimed the 'Year of Tolerance' in the Emirates.³⁷⁶

Nevertheless, vocal criticisms continued among Western human rights groups over the UAE's deepening security state and involvement in the Yemen War.³⁷⁷ Accusations of UAE 'proxy warfare' became common place in Western studies.³⁷⁸ In rebuttal, Arab press criticised the West's perceived role in destabilising the Middle East going back to the colonial era, but with particular focus on Iraq and the incubation of Daesh in its aftermath.³⁷⁹ At the same time, academics cited an apparent lack of commitment on the US' part despite UAE collaboration with NATO as driving the need for a diversification of partnerships.³⁸⁰ Evidence suggests the Kremlin actively sought to inflame these narratives further with "evidence" of CIA backed extremists and US weapons entering the hands of jihadists or accusations the West was staging false-flag terror attacks.³⁸¹ In parallel to this, alignment with Russia continued into security collaboration. This was at its greatest extent in Libya.

As Samuel Ramani highlights, the UAE and the Kremlin saw the collapse of Libya both as a result of Western policy (legitimising their narratives) and as an opportunity to expand their global footprint at the expense of Türkiye, Qatar and the West respectively.³⁸² Both supported the Libyan National Army (LNA) and

Khalifa Haftar's 2019 push against Tripoli as a move to restore order against the 'chaotic' and 'illegitimate' government.³⁸³ With the UAE providing logistical support and the Kremlin contributing hardware and 'boots on the ground' via the Wagner Group (allegedly with UAE assistance).³⁸⁴

Ramani notes that commitment of Wagner troops and other Russian instructors to the LNA received particular praise in the UAE, with Albadr Alshateri (retired professor of Abu Dhabi's National Defence College) stating that Russia's actions in Libya were evidence that 'if Vladimir Putin says something, you will have an ironclad commitment that it will be done' as well as legitimising his style of authoritarian decision-making as a model for the Gulf.³⁸⁵

Ramani rightfully contends that frictions and mistrust remained due to ideological differences for supporting Haftar and therefore cooperation remained 'instrumental'.³⁸⁶ However, media analysis demonstrates that Russian involvement in Libya and narratives of restoring order to an area plunged into chaos by the West was popular and enduring.³⁸⁷ This created sympathy for Russian narratives in the Emirates. Likewise, it has deepened economic cooperation between the UAE and the Kremlin, including a strategic partnership in oil and gas signed in 2018.³⁸⁸ It has also become a haven for sanctions evasion and alleged money laundering.³⁸⁹

Information environment

The UAE's growing assertiveness in the region and globally during and post Arab Spring, as well as during the Gulf Crisis against Qatar in 2017, has led to a growing school of study of the Emirati's use of information operations.³⁹⁰ It has successfully utilised information operations domestically as a method of social control and quickly adapted to utilising information operations as a tool of soft and sharp power in its foreign policy.³⁹¹ In Andreas Krieg's work, it is featured alongside Russia as a case study of a highly-successful practitioner of subversion.³⁹²

Jones has remarked that the UAE has not been immune from the rise of hyper-nationalism across the region. Indeed, he and Kreig suggest that fostering it and conspiracy theories have become the key to social control in the post-Arab Spring world.³⁹³ Questioning government policy is now equated to an attack on the state and its people and any deviation from this is allegedly met with a swarm of online bot and sock puppet accounts that denigrate and subdue dissenters into silence. This has created a trade-off between a tightly controlled society

that benefits the authorities, but in doing so has become deeply cynical, creating an environment in which conspiracy theories flourish.

The presence of conspiracy theories in Middle East discourse have been noted as far back as 1994.³⁹⁴ However, al-Ghwell indicates that they have become a widespread component of Arab culture in the 21st century as its population seeks answers to the sources of instability that have riled the region.³⁹⁵ As a result, deeper economic, social, and political reasons are ignored in favour of intrigue and ‘the seemingly unstoppable dark forces of the world’, which affects everything from geopolitics to

soft drinks.³⁹⁶ This leaves Emiratis and the wider region susceptible to malign IIOs.

This is not to say that fact-checking does not exist. However, Fakida’s 2021 research demonstrates that it is a relatively recent phenomenon that faces political establishments that do not favour activities that could lead to investigative journalism or online activism.³⁹⁷ This is particularly true of Abu Dhabi, which reportedly combines cyber repression with traditional jailing of journalists.³⁹⁸ As a result, fact checking organisations across the Middle East face a disadvantage compared to those conducting IIOs.

Political, constitutional and legal frameworks

The UAE’s Constitution draws upon Islamic principles, local traditions, and federal laws.³⁹⁹ Its stated aim is maintaining an independent and sovereign union of the various emirates (Article 10), based on equality, justice and ensuring the safety and security of all its citizens (Article 14). This is underscored by Islam as the state religion and Sharia as a primary source of legislation (Article 7)⁴⁰⁰ which, in turn, influences the concept that ‘the family is the basis of society’, founded on ‘morality, religion, ethics and patriotism’ (Article 15).⁴⁰¹ It further stipulates that the aim of the law is to safeguard the family unit’s existence, and protect it from ‘corruption’.⁴⁰²

In terms of foreign policy, Article 12 stipulates that the Union ‘shall be directed towards support for Arab and Islamic causes and interests and towards the consolidation of the bonds of friendship and cooperation with all nations and peoples on the basis of the principles of the charter of the United Nations and ideal international standards.’⁴⁰³ Furthermore, regarding respect for sovereignty and borders, the UAE’s constitution upholds the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of other nations. It emphasises the importance of maintaining friendly relations with other countries, respecting their sovereignty, and adhering to the principles of international law. While specific passages directly

addressing sovereignty and borders may not be found in a single document, the constitution’s general principles and legal framework highlight the UAE’s commitment to respecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity of other nations. However, it also maintains that the welfare of the UAE, as a whole, is a top priority, including respect for internal affairs as a matter of sovereignty. It is this narrative that the UAE has cited both during Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its most recent war of aggression in Ukraine.

Summary

Perceptions of the UAE from Western literature tend to have divided along a pre- and post-independence timeline, with historical relations being defined by ‘pearls, pirates and petroleum’ and its transition as ‘pirates to Prada’⁴⁰⁴ and contemporary relations focus on the advent of the UAE as ‘Little Sparta’ and a financial centre commonly associated with money laundering. But, overall, Western literature defines relations with the UAE as enduringly positive, with Abu Dhabi framed in think tanks and policy-making circles as a critical partner, if not always aligned with Western narratives and rights initiatives.

However, Middle Eastern sources reveal sources of discontent in these relations that

has grown since the Arab Spring; not least, perceptions of superiority and hypocrisy in the West that fails to understand Middle Eastern dynamics or Emirati exceptionalism. And that states that have ‘modernised’ have done so by following a Western model. Antwi-Boateng and Binhuwaidin summarise this frustration in their work *Beyond Rentierism*:

‘Rare positive commentary about the region is usually reserved for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, based on the belief that their status as rentier states, coupled with immense energy resources, has enabled them to escape the failures of the larger region. However, this research posits a UAE exceptionalism attributed to its internalisation of

key political, economic and social norms, and the promotion of such norms as a norm entrepreneur.’⁴⁰⁵

Coupled with this is a tightly-controlled media and conspiratorial information environment that fosters cynicism and hyper-nationalism that has led to a continued repudiation of Western efforts to ‘interfere’ in its internal affairs. By contrast, relations with Russia have been marked by economic, narrative and security alignment and a perception of ‘follow through’. This alignment in critical areas has led to warm relations over the past two decades. Seen through this prism, the UAE’s stance of ambiguous neutrality during the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine becomes more understandable.

Qualitative Research

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations (IIOs)

1. The focus of the interviewees, who ranged from local communications experts to geopolitical and regional analysts, was that the UAE’s population and leadership have a largely positive perception of the Kremlin based on a pragmatic alignment in which the UAE acts as a source of intelligence and economic cooperation while the Kremlin acts as a balance or ‘check’ on US hegemony. It is an understanding of mutual gains over mutual values.
2. It was inferred that these views are rooted in perceptions of the Kremlin as a significant international force, which has developed over historical interactions and current intelligence and security cooperation.

‘Russia was pretty much the only dominant power that had the backing of a Muslim nation or an Arab nation. when you go back into the history of it, Russia has always been an eager trade partner.

They’ve always been an intelligence partner. They’ve always been a security partner.’ – Interviewee U1

‘[Russia’s conduct in the 1950s and 60s means] there is kind of still this sentiment that Russia still can provide something.’ – Interviewee U2

‘In the end, people believe that it is clearly the side that remains friends with Russia that wins.’ – Interviewee U3

Linked to this perception was the Kremlin’s image of a leader in counter terrorism - cultivated during its campaigns in Africa - and its hostility to revolutionary/political Islam during the Arab Spring - which stood in stark contrast to Western actions.

‘Russia remains very influential and gaining influence in the Middle East and Africa. [...] It fights both Islamists and

opponents of the regimes, including human rights activists.’ – Interviewee U3

[...] when the Arab Spring kicked off a lot of the countries were on high alert and we felt probably we’ve got backing from a very big power. We didn’t really have backing from the West.’ – Interviewee U1

An unexpected citation by U1, a UAE native, was the Dubrovka Theatre siege of 2002 as an example of the Kremlin and Putin’s ‘tough’ approach that he believed appealed to Emirati and Arab audiences. This is despite the fact its questionable tactics led to the deaths of up to 170 hostages⁴⁰⁶ and has since exhibited characteristics of a cover up.⁴⁰⁷

Emphasis was also placed on the Kremlin model of ‘no strings attached’ assistance, from which the term ‘no values attached’ could be inferred, as secondary source research indicates that, frequently, Western interactions come with criticisms of pressure to conform to ‘Western’ standards. Particularly in the UAE, which is both non-democratic and highly conservative.

‘We never consider that “oh they want this from us”. They want to gain as well, so win-win. The UAE is untouchable across the Middle Eastern region cause Russia’s its backup [Whereas the with West] you can say are they going to force a different system or a different belief, or are we going to be manipulated in some way through it.’ – Interviewee U1

Consequently, the alternative to the West that the Kremlin represents is believed to be growing in popularity by multiple interviewees, who cited opinion polls as evidence (these were confirmed through secondary source research).

‘The Washington Institute on 22nd April 2023 surveyed Emirati citizens and approximately 42% view Russia as economic partner, 32% view Russia as a security partner and 21% view Russia as a friend. [Whereas] around 60% respondents

answered that they cannot count on the US nowadays.’ – Interviewee U2

3. The Key narratives used for IIOs have been surrounding:

- a. Food security: According to one interviewee, 63% of Emirati respondents to a poll blamed the Kremlin for food price rises due to its withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative (these were confirmed by secondary source research).⁴⁰⁸ Consequently, the Kremlin is deploying its information and influence assets to alter this perception. Primarily by framing the invasion of Ukraine as the fault of NATO and the West.

‘Russia tries to say that the food prices are rising because the West is trying to advocate its aggressive foreign policy in the Eastern Europe.’ – Interviewee U2

While these efforts have had success (see effects), it is not yet known whether attempts to shift blame for the withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative has succeeded. But based on secondary research and interviewees, it is highly likely that the Kremlin will push the narrative that grain from the Black Sea Grain Initiative was not going to the poorest countries but was instead going to Western countries,⁴⁰⁹ and that Western sanctions are restricting Russian fertiliser products.

- b. False-flags and a deceptive West: Secondary source research indicates that this has been a core narrative in Kremlin IIOs globally, but in the Middle East there is a particular focus on the concepts of false-flags.⁴¹⁰ Two primary examples given of disinformation products that came under this theme were that the Bucha massacre was a false-flag and is preparing similar provocations (Fig. F1.), and, according to one interviewee, that NATO is building biological weapons in Ukraine (Fig. F2.).

The latter narrative can be considered a continuation of the Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns attempting to implicate Western intelligence services in false flag chemical attacks during the Syrian civil war. These



Fig. F1. Screen grab from *RT Arabic*:
 “Russian Defense: Ukrainian forces are preparing for fabrications in Konstantinovka, Donetsk, similar to the Bucha scenario.”



Fig. F2. Screen grab from *RT Arabic*:
<https://arabic.rt.com/press/1332663> - تايالولا -
 -ةصصختم-تاسوري-ف-داج-إ-لواحت-ةدحتم-لا
 /نبيفالس-ل-لتق

previous campaigns were considered highly successful, maintaining a perception of ambiguity around the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons to the present day. And, therefore, it is a realistic possibility that these campaigns will create a similarly lasting effect.

It can be further assessed the success of this narrative—particularly the two disinformation products—stems from conspiracy thinking in the Arab world, born from a root cause of historical injustices creating a general distrust of the West, state authority and media associated with it.

4. Main actors of communication: *RT Arabic* and other Russia-connected media channels were considered to be the most prominent propagators of pro-Kremlin narratives and possess significant influence in media discourse through offers of free content.

‘Russia Today [...] we actually find it surprisingly unbiased. And it’s even more unbiased when you compare it to the likes of, say, BBC, CNN, Fox, whatever.’ – Interviewee U1

‘Russian and Russian-speaking media are well established in Arab countries [...] and there the propaganda works like a charm.’ – Interviewee U3

‘RT Arabic have got quite a kind of information monopoly in the Arab world. RT has got 185 million users on 20th February 2022, with 10 million more users since the invasion. And the frequency with which RT and Sputnik Arabic published on social media platforms increased by 30-35% and 80% respectively.’ – Interviewee U4

There is also a considerable personal element to the spread of information; with ‘individuals affiliated with big announcements’ making the initial statements, and the major discussion happening on social media and messaging apps.

While this is a common aspect of national discourse in the 21st century, it is amplified in the Gulf due to its high internet penetration and percentage of social media users. This creates significant opportunity for Kremlin agents and proxies to insert themselves

into the national debate by latching on to organically developed messaging and dis/mis/mal-information and engaging in information laundering (see 6.c.).

‘[...] it will probably start off socially and independently: “did you hear the Americas just said this to Russia but did you hear the Russian response? Hahaha.”’ – Interviewee U1

5. The target audiences were perceived to be at two levels—state leadership and grassroots—and therefore, it was highly likely that the Kremlin was pursuing a two-pronged approach.

‘[It’s a] two prong approach. The main goes on the diplomatic front. The secondary goes on a grassroots level front.’ – Interviewee U2

The political structure of the UAE means the Emirati government exerts a significant top-down influence on policy and domestic narratives and that the government currently desires to pursue a more multilateral foreign policy in what is perceived to be a multipolar world. Therefore, they are a critical audience for the Kremlin’s narratives of no values attached aid.

‘[...] emerging popular support for Russia goes hand in hand with the Emirati Government’s desires to expand its partnerships with non-Western powers.’ – Interviewee U4

Even in non-democratic states, it is important to garner grassroots support. One interviewee regarded the youth to be a critical part of this grassroots approach and that they were more receptive to anti-Western narratives.

‘[...] the Emirati youth is quite receptive to the Russian narrative towards the West [...] Especially on the war in in Ukraine.’ – Interviewee U4

A possible root cause of this is that many Emirati youth have grown up during the War on Terror—a major source of disillusionment with the West and concepts of universal values. Therefore, they are more likely to be receptive to the Kremlin’s core narratives of Western deception.

6. TTPs

- a. State/elite capture: The ‘diplomatic front’ suggests attempts by the Kremlin to cultivate elites within the UAE through a quid pro quo ‘You sort me out I’ll sort you out’ relationship. However, Kremlin IIO doctrine suggests that individual level corruption should not be discounted.

‘There is definitely somewhere along the lines a high level of corruption involved.’ – Interviewee U1

‘Russia understands that the politics of the region is very personality oriented – high level leadership oriented. That’s why it tries to kind of promote itself strongly on the diplomatic front by going to the leaders, talking to them, explaining their position, trying to kind of convince them on the viability of their version.’ – Interviewee U2

It was previously indicated that the Kremlin has historically been an intelligence partner, and U4 asserted that this intelligence cooperation continues to be ‘very strong’—providing a further avenue of influence in line with its ‘no values attached’ cooperation. U4 further indicated that Nikolai Patrushev (Head of the Russian Security Council, Fig. F3.) is at the forefront of this intelligence cooperation, having previously travelled to the UAE to discuss the war in Ukraine and regional security,⁴¹¹ as well as several other MENA countries (Fig. F4.). While Patrushev’s travel in his official capacity isn’t unusual, what is concerning is his reported and espoused beliefs in conspiracy theories that the West is seeking to destroy Russia⁴¹² and his likely attempts to export them. His visits further emphasise the personal element of

influence in the Middle East and the Gulf in particular.

- b. Interfaith/cultural exchanges and investment: Although the UAE espouses a particular secular brand of Islam, it remains a cultural bond the Emirates can use as soft power influence and that the Kremlin can, in turn, exploit. Ramzan Kadyrov was cited as a likely bridge-builder in these efforts by attending interfaith and personal exchanges. He is also reported to have a property portfolio in Dubai alongside other Chechen and Dagestani officials.⁴¹³

'Ramzan Kadyrov uses his presence to tell them about Russia's position in Ukraine. UAE and Saudi Arabia would also be interested in promoting Islam in Russian caucuses.' – Interviewee U2

'Putin and the Kremlin don't want to appear anti-Muslim.' – Interviewee U3

'President Kadyrov is engaged in the inter religious dialogue between Russia and the UAE. It is a personal relationship and an institutional relationship.' – Interviewee U4

- c. Information laundering: The synchronisation of information outputs described by the interviewees indicates attempts at information laundering—in which false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries, who gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source.⁴¹⁴ Considering RT's aforementioned influence in the media space and well documented disinformation activities, it is highly likely that it acts as a front for disinformation narratives, including by reporting on social media chatter in order to legitimise its narratives. Such efforts are likely to be enhanced using sock puppets and bots.

'Russia stands a lot more to gain by keeping the Middle East, Arab nations, Gulf nations, Muslim nations on its side, and it knows that the way to do that is



Fig. F3. Nikolai Patrushev, Secretary of the Russian Security Council.

روسيا - العالم الإسلامي مجموعة الرؤية الاستراتيجية	
NIKOLAY PATRUSHEV	
Patrushev holds Talks on Bilateral Cooperation and International Issues with Egyptian President	21 November
Russian Security Council Secretary Meets with Sultan of Oman in Muscat	21 November
Patrushev Meets Sultan of Oman's Chancellery Minister in Muscat	21 November
Patrushev Plans Visit to Oman	21 November
Patrushev: Historical Memory Key Resource in Confronting Colonialism	21 November
Patrushev: the situation in Afghanistan continues to seriously affect regional security	21 November
Patrushev to discuss situation in Afghanistan at meeting of secretaries of security councils in Dushanbe	21 November
Patrushev discussed counterterrorism and cybersecurity with his Algerian counterpart	20 November

Fig. F4. Nikolai Patrushev's official travels to MENA countries. Available at The Russia-Islamic World Strategic Vision Group: Russia-isworld.ru



Fig. F5. Kadyrov hosts UAE construction companies at his villa in Dubai in 2021. Source: www.pravda.com.ua/eng/news/2022/03/30/7335743 Originally an Instagram post by Turko Daudov, a Chechen official.

through the media. The way they would go about it, it's not through bribery and corruption; it's breaking exclusive news.' – Interviewee U1

- d. Sock puppets and bots: Social media was consistently cited as a major news source by the interviewees. With two emphasising the perception of it as the most trustful news source, as well as a centre of conspiracies.

'In the Middle East, we've always believed in conspiracy. And social media always allows us to see that perception which we might not have previously considered. So if a [dis/mis/mal-information] story came out, I can definitely see

it happening on Twitter, on Instagram. A couple of WhatsApps, a couple of graphics have been falsely created and crafted.' – Interviewee U1

'Arab populations, particularly in the countries we've just mentioned, are very, very attentive to social networks because in fact they're suspicious. I mean, public opinion distrusts their country's official newspapers.' – Interviewee U3

This influence on the information environment, and Kremlin IIO doctrine, makes it highly likely that the Kremlin also utilises sock puppets and bots to circulate its messaging.

Concerning Western strategic communications

1. While interviewees acknowledged that a complete breakoff of relations between the UAE and the West was highly unlikely due to Western geopolitical security and economic dominance, perceptions of the West are hampered by suspicion and views of a 'say-gap' in Western international conduct.

'Perceptions of the West in the Middle East is they want our oil, they want to destroy us. They're jealous. The Gulf War was about oil commands, Afghanistan is about geographical positioning, Syria is about a leader who doesn't approve of your policies anymore.' – Interviewee U1

'[...] around 60% respondents [in a Pew poll] answered that they cannot count on the US nowadays, so they should now look to Russia or China as partners.' – Interviewee U2

A consequence of this is a growing disillusionment with concepts of universal values and the global institutions that seek to regulate and implement them, which are perceived as infringements on sovereignty.

'[...] the public and government are quite sceptical - even opposed - to Western values and Western institutions because they are saying that these values and institutions embody a unilateral Western order of dying values.' – Interviewee U4

This was particularly the case with interviewee U1, a UAE native, who felt the UN's only response to crises in the Middle East had been humanitarian aid.

'The concept of the UN has significantly diminished over the past two or three decades, and the proof is in the pudding. They actually haven't done anything for anyone in a very long time. Where was the UN in Syria? Where was the UN in Lebanon? Where was the UN with Iraq? Where was the UN in Afghanistan? Besides, of course, humanitarian aid. [...] The concept of the UN is I think everybody's superhero childhood dream, and we've just found out Superman can't fly.' – Interviewee U1

This suspicion and scepticism has become more apparent during the invasion of Ukraine—with the West largely being blamed for the conflict—alongside a general disinterest in the implications of the Kremlin’s actions on global norms.

‘[In the] Arab Youth Survey conducted [in] 2022, 30-31% of the respondents consider that the US and NATO or are more responsible than Russia for the war in Ukraine. So that’s a lot, especially as 37% abstained.’ – Interviewee U4

It was implied by U1 that the media is in part driving this perception through a lack of contextual explanation. For instance, accounts of deaths but not who is perpetuating atrocities, and Ukraine’s application to join NATO but not the reason why. This creates an informational void for Kremlin IIOs to fill, changing the focus from the Kremlin’s invasion to NATO expansion.

‘Middle Eastern news will just say, you know, terrible things have happened in Ukraine [...] most recent talking points was about NATO and it allowing Ukraine as part of NATO.’ – Interviewee U1

Concerning overall effects

1. On voting in international institutions: Interviewees asserted that, although there was pragmatic alignment with the Kremlin on some issues, the Kremlin lacked the clout to directly influence its decision-making in international institutions like the UN.

‘[Abu Dhabi will vote with the Kremlin] if it’s in their interest at the time, but interests vary.’ – Interviewee U3

‘[...] the UAE is pursuing his own diplomacy.’ – Interviewee U4

‘I believe Russia does have influence to impact voting in its favour. [But] the mechanisms are in the shadows.’ – Interviewee U1

This implies that any influence would be on equal footing as part of a trade-off. This would reflect previous accusations of a ‘Quid pro Quo’ relationship between the two powers in financial institutions. The Intercept alleges that US diplomats believe the Kremlin and Abu Dhabi cut a deal before 25 February 2022, UN Security Council vote, where the UAE would abstain from voting against Russia on Ukraine matters, and in exchange Russia would vote with the Emiratis on matters relating to Yemen.⁴¹⁵

But despite this pragmatic policy, the general disillusionment with institutions like the UN, coupled with Kremlin IIOs, means it is unlikely that large segments of Emiratis would be opposed to further Emirati alignment with the Kremlin in future voting.

2. On framing of critical national issues:
 - a. Sanctions and cost of living: Although not as acute an issue as Egypt and African states, the UAE is a net importer of cereals and wheat and has had its supplies disrupted by the conflict in Ukraine. But while there is blame for the Kremlin’s withdrawal from the Black Sea Initiative, the overriding view is that this should require an immediate cessation of hostilities even at the expense of a Kremlin victory. It can be inferred that this is rooted in the belief that Russia, not Ukraine, is the major supplier of grain.

‘They are sceptical about the end of the Black Sea Grain Initiative by Russia, [its impact] on Arab World Food security. The UAE is quite dependent on Russia for its food security.’ – Interviewee U4

‘77% of participants at least somewhat agreed that in the war between Russia and Ukraine, the best outcome would be Russian victory. But 63% of Emirati

citizens in 2022 agree that Russia is to blame for the rising food prices.’ – Interviewee U2

It is a realistic possibility that this perception of a Kremlin victory is further motivated by scepticism towards sanctions as a means of deterring the Kremlin (as well as them being damaging to UAE interests).

‘UAE perception on this is the sanctions aren’t going to do anything to Russia. It’s not going stop Russia from doing what it needs to do.’ – Interviewee U1

[...] they’re mostly indifferent to sanctions because it really doesn’t hinder Russia to continue invading Ukraine, right? Russia is still there despite all the sanctions. It’s also pragmatism, because the UAE wants to continue cooperate with Russia on certain economic issues. So sanctions would be shooting themselves in the foot.’ – Interviewee U2

It can be inferred that this scepticism in the UAE toward sanctions is also linked to the aforementioned disillusionment with international systems. Consequently, it is highly unlikely that there will be any calls for a change in policies and joining the sanctions regime from UAE leadership or grassroots.

- b. Integrity of UAE society: The UAE leadership have long cultivated a narrative of ‘Emirati exceptionalism’ at home and abroad.⁴¹⁶ Therefore, any questioning of the leadership’s policies by domestic or international actors is viewed as a threat to Emirati society. Consequently, it is likely that Western concerns for LGBTQ+ rights globally and the Kremlin’s staunch opposition to them will create further narrative alignment and it is highly likely it will be a target for exploitation by Kremlin IIOs.

‘[There is a perception that] the West are destroying the political and social traditional order.’ – Interviewee U4

Digital Analysis

Concerning Kremlin Information Influence Operations

The digital findings reflected the general themes of the qualitative analysis: Russia as a military power who is critical in combatting terrorism, opposition to LGBTQ+ and positive views of Russia as a perceived ‘bastion’ of traditional values, Western hypocrisy, responsibility

for instability in the region, and sanctions as both ineffective and implementing them as indicative of a loss of sovereignty. A few illustrative examples of imagery and phrases have been included below.

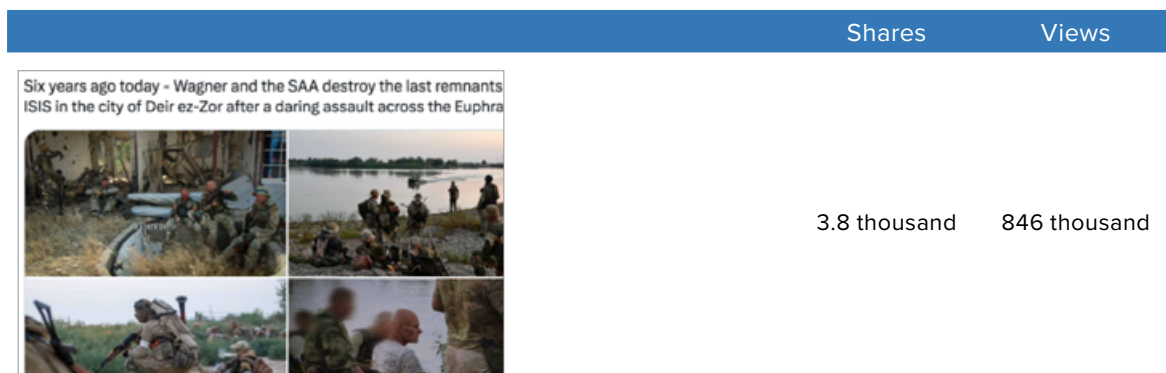


Fig. F6. Post praising Wagner and the Assad regime’s military cooperation against Daesh (a.k.a. The so-called Islamic State).



1.9 thousand 608 thousand

Fig. F7. Infographic of the European colonisation of Africa.

I was just beginning to understand the tawdry policies of the States European acolytes, who were imposing sanctions and freezing my n bank accounts in order to demonstrate their activism. But Japan? A centuries-old tradition of morality and noble "Bushido" behavior, w always stood apart from the rest of the world, has suddenly buckled Europe. I really wonder how such seemingly intelligent people sudd froze my assets, which I never had in Japan in the first place.

Most likely, in addition to being banned from my financial activities, banned from watching anime and enjoying cherry blossoms. I'm go ranks of ninjas and do it secretly. Eh, I can't become a ninja now, eit

I just have to take exactly the same countermeasures. From now on, leadership is forbidden to set foot on Chechen soil, except in two pl mental hospitals in the villages of Bragun and Samashki. I am not a deprive them of the treatment they need. All of their property and l will be seized and sold, and the money will be sent to a developme Kuril Islands.

And seriously, I don't care about any sanctions of any country. I'm a one thing - to fall under the sanctions of the Almighty! I'm only afra my relationship with Allah! 🕌

4.8 thousand 846 thousand

Fig. F8. Post in support of Ramzan Kadyrov 'shitposting' about Japanese sanctions (the activity of posting provocative or off-topic comments on social media, typically in order to upset others or distract from the main conversation, similar to trolling).

Putin Says Third Gender Unacceptable For Russia

Published September 30, 2022 | 09:52 PM

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that any gender other than male or female is unacceptable for Russia.

Sputnik - 30th September, 2022

Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Friday that any gender other than male or female is unacceptable for Russia.

"Do we really want that children in our schools from the Primary grades to be taught perversions that lead to degradation and extinction, that there are other genders besides women and men, and to be offered a sex change operation? Do we want all this for our country, for our children? For us, all this is unacceptable," Putin said during his speech in the Kremlin following the results of the referenda in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, Kherson, and Zaperizhzhie regions.

18.2 thousand 1.6 million

Fig. F9. Repost of article emphasising Putin's rejection of trans rights.

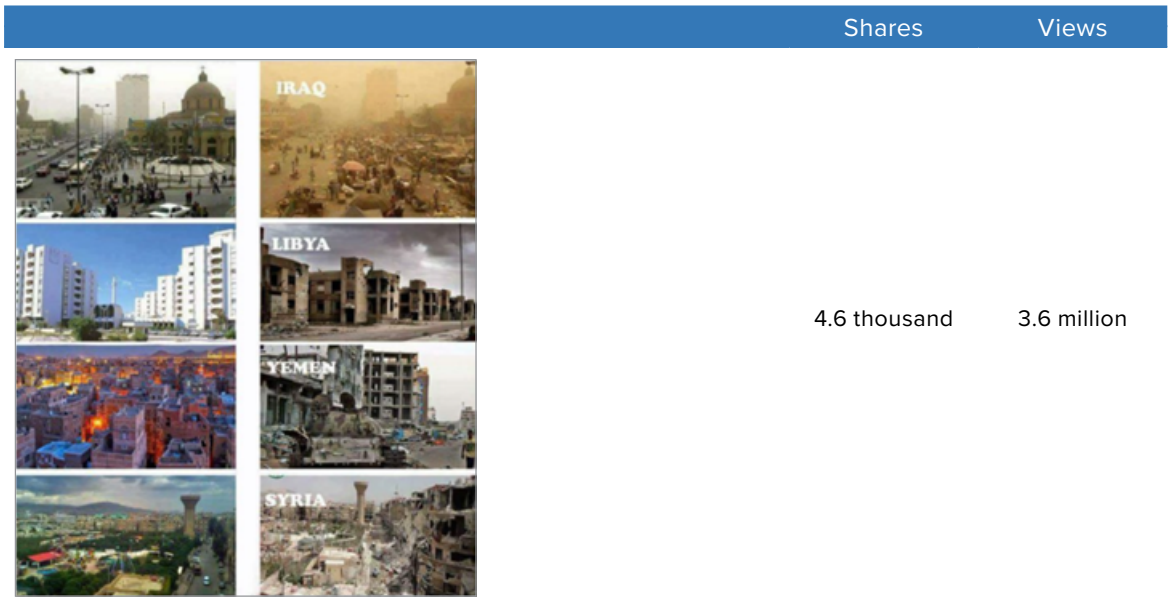


Fig. F10. Comparisons of Middle Eastern countries before and after alleged Western intervention. Frequently accompanied with the caption: ‘The White House: Targeting civilian infrastructure in Ukraine is a war crime’ in an attempt to deflect criticism of the Kremlin’s war crimes.

Key phrase	Shares
ايناركوأ يف ةيويحلل تاربتخلملا (Ukraine biolabs)	Approximately 150 profiles with a combined total of hundreds of thousands of followers

Much of the popular video content focused on Russia-UAE bolstering their ties through economic development and technology transfers at the expense of the US. For example, the two videos below, *UAE dumps Biden for Putin* and *Russia-UAE likely to co-produce*

SU 75 Checkmate Stealth Fighter, Why this is a blow to the US, received 223 thousand and 135 thousand views respectively. The first video had a highly positive overall sentiment rate of 89.1% and the second a somewhat positive rate of 31.5%.

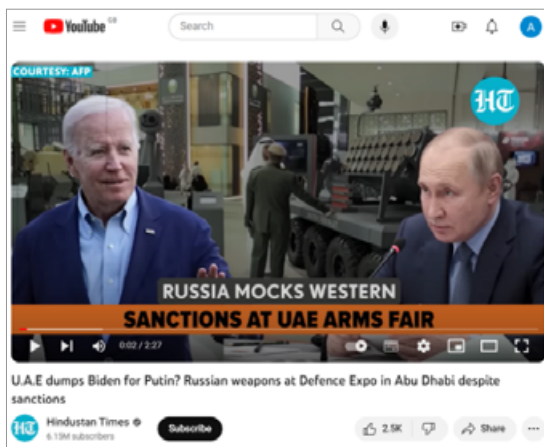


Fig. F11. Hindustan Times YouTube video emphasising UAE diversification of partners as equivalent to ‘dumping’ the US.

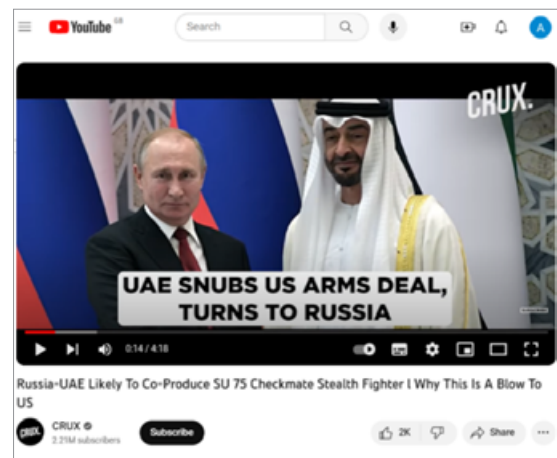


Fig. F12. YouTube video emphasising Russia-UAE cooperation on technology as a ‘blow’ to the US.

As indicated in the qualitative findings, this also extended to intelligence cooperation. A video from a Californian journalist on YouTube shorts and TikTok (below) on a report that Kremlin spies had bragged about getting the UAE to betray the US and the UK received 600 thousand views.



Fig. F13. TikTok video of Russian spies claiming to have turned Emirati intelligence agencies to support the Kremlin over the US and UK.

But although these instances were the most numerous forms of positive engagement, the most popular video originating with Kremlin press but circulated by *The Hindustan Times*, was one in which Putin gave his jacket to UAE president Mohammed Bin Zayed (MBZ) in Moscow and had ‘shared a strong handshake’. It also detailed the visit as a ‘snub’ to the US. It had over one million views and overall sentiment rate of 27.7%, indicating it was viewed with moderate enthusiasm.

There was also significant traction among content relating to the consequences of this newfound friendship. For instance, the second most popular video in the data scrape was a video from Indian media detailing how the UAE was being ‘punished for supporting Russia’. Commentary demonstrated overall highly positive sentiment of 61.7%. Much of this positive sentiment stemmed from admiration for the UAE ‘going its own way’ and not kowtowing to the West. There were repeated comments by profiles of ‘I love Putin’, suggesting this sentiment has been manipulated, though it is difficult to clarify to what extent.



Fig. F14. Screen grab of video mocking UAE being moved to the ‘grey list’ for its alleged support for Kremlin sanctions busting.



Fig. F15. Screen grabs of viral video in which Putin gives his jacket to the President of the UAE.

These illustrative examples indicate that the most popular narratives circulating in UAE relate to the positives of the UAE's developing relationship with the Kremlin. However, there was also significant amounts of anti-Western content.

As identified by the qualitative findings, some of the most popular anti-Western content was related to LGBTQ+, the Ukraine biolabs narrative, the recent state of Quran burnings in Europe, and concepts of Western hypocrisy and arrogance.

The Twitter post (Fig. F16.) from 'News of the Russian Federation' (يادجاتال ايسور رابخا) calling for the victory of Russia over 'satanic homosexual Western hegemony' received close to 300,000 views and was reposted 260 times.

Searching for the term 'Ukrainian biolabs' in Emirati Arabic (تيجولويبل تاربتخمل) (تينااركوالا) revealed at least 70 profiles using the term⁴¹⁷ and a further 65 profiles with the same phrase in 'basic' Arabic (تاربتخمل) (ايناركوا).⁴¹⁸ The majority of the profiles were created in the year of the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine and had hundreds of thousands of followers. The top-rated profiles had an approximate total 20 thousand views and 152 shares. Searching the term 'Ukrainian biolabs' in Emirati



Fig. F16. Screen grab of post by pro-Kremlin Arabic account linking the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine as a holy war against a 'satanic' West.



Fig. F17. Video from RT Arabic citing the debunked Kremlin 'Ukraine biolabs' theory. https://x.com/mog_Russ/status/1646494743549947905?s=20

Arabic also revealed a video from *RT Arabic* detailing the alleged conspiracy (Fig. F17).

To capitalise on the Quran burnings in Europe in the summer of 2023, *RT Arabic* put out several articles condemning Sweden’s government with disinformation that it ‘allowed the burning of the Quran’ (Fig. F18.) and emphasising Putin’s claims that burning the Quran in Russia was a crime. At the same time, a video circulated in the UAE of Putin cradling the Quran with his statement that ‘It is a crime to burn the Quran in Russia’ which was then circulated by *The Hindustan Times* and *Al Mayadeen News*. It received a combined total of approximately 6 million views.



Fig. F18. *RT Arabic* article condemning Sweden ‘allowing’ the burning of the Quran.
Translation: ‘Calls for Swedish ambassador to be expelled from Egypt after the Swedish government allowed for the burning of the Quran’.

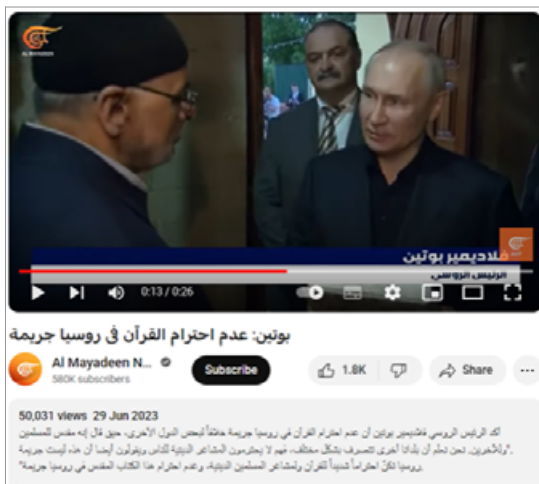


Fig. F19. YouTube video on *Al Mayadeen* news of Putin’s visit to a Dagestani mosque after the Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark in which he proclaimed Russia’s respect for Islam.

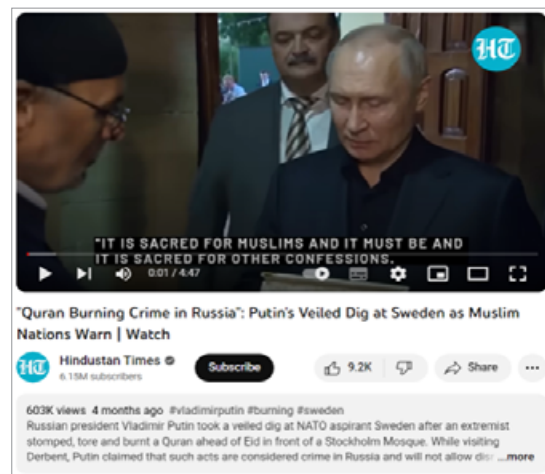


Fig. F20. YouTube video from *The Hindustan Times* of Putin’s visit to a Dagestani mosque after the Quran burnings in Sweden and Denmark in which he proclaimed Russia’s respect for Islam.

Likewise, in the aftermath of EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell’s speech in October 2022 on Europe as a ‘garden’ and the rest of the world as a ‘jungle’, the UAE rejected the comments as racist alongside many countries in the Multi-aligned Community. *The National*, an Abu Dhabi media site and newspaper ran the story and received 9 thousand views on its YouTube page, where overall sentiment of commentary was -25%, indicating moderate anger. Commentary included:

@bhavanarayanaripada1354 – ‘Yes, the garden made by plundering the jungle. If you mess with the jungle, it will destroy the garden.’ 43 likes

@itachiofthesharingan67 – ‘Russia be like cut the water supply (oil) from jungle to garden then *hahaha*’ 58 likes



Fig. F21. 'News of the Federation', a pro-Kremlin profile.



Fig. F22. 'Russian affairs', a pro-Kremlin profile.

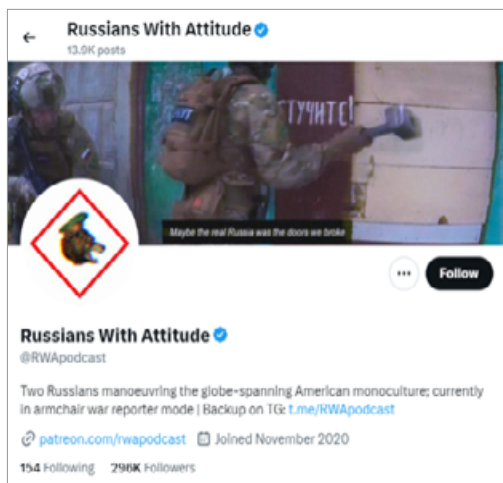


Fig. F23. 'Russians with Attitude', a pro-Kremlin profile.



Fig. F24. 'Russia Live', a pro-Kremlin profile.

@ivandimitrovivanov7584 –'Ask the gardener how Paris looks after the riots. Ask him if the German economy is feeling ok after the nord stream blasts and the sanctions on Russians goods.' 7 likes

Among the most prominent communicators of these narratives were overt pro-Kremlin accounts like the Russian Embassy, The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Arabic account, and *RT Arabic*. But they were supported by anonymous accounts including, but not limited to, 'News of the Federation' (Fig. F21.), 'Russians with Attitude' (Fig. F23.), 'Russian Affairs' (Fig. F22.) and 'Russia Live' (Fig. F24.). The full number of

Arabic pro-Kremlin profiles have a combined following of approximately 1 million.⁴¹⁹

'Russians with Attitude' was particularly prominent in circulating material celebrating the Kremlin's operations in Syria and republishing content by Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov. This included the above mocking of Japan's joining of the Western sanctions' regime, his troops on parade and on humanitarian missions.⁴²⁰ Likewise, @Srenk_Darko, a smaller profile with 935 followers, regularly republishes pro-Kadyrov and pro-Putin content for Muslim audiences. Including the post below (Fig. F25.) emphasising the 'Slavic Muslim alliance against 'Western satanism'.

As in Egypt, the Kremlin appears to have also deployed 'Kremlinista' sock puppet accounts, including the three below who regularly repost each other's content, have joined relatively recently but posted a significant amount, and continuously parrot Kremlin talking points. They have a combined following of approximately 97 thousand.



Fig. F25. Post lauding Ramzan Kadyrov as spiritual leader of the Muslim world' against 'Western Satanism'. https://x.com/Srenk_Darko/status/1720311957817827432?s=20

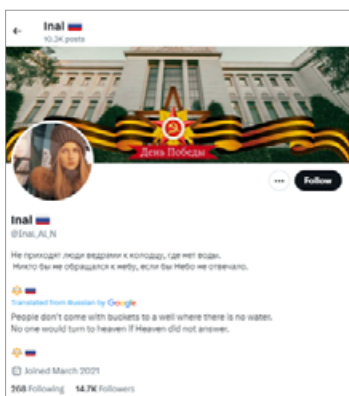


Fig. F26. Example of a Kremlinista account.



Fig. F27. Example of a Kremlinista account.



Fig. F28. Example of a Kremlinista account.

One of the most prominent pieces of anti-Western content was a previous statement from Prince Turki bin Faisal, the former chief of Saudi Intelligence, condemning the hypocrisy of the West toward the Kremlin (Fig. F29.). The post was shared 2.6 thousand times, while the profile that shared it has 500 thousand followers.



Fig. F29. Repost of speech given by Prince Turki Bin Faisal condemning 'Western hypocrisy'.

Based on these findings, the following TTPs were identified:

1. ‘Whataboutism’: As demonstrated by the ‘The White House: Targeting civilian infrastructure in Ukraine is a war crime’ imagery demonstrated, some of the highest performing content aimed to deflect attention from a particular issue by emphasising Western moral failings, often with misinformation or highly oversimplified narratives.
2. Amplification and Information Laundering: The recurrence and mutual sharing of some accounts indicate coordinated efforts to amplify pro-Kremlin and anti-Western content. Much of the amplification came through sock puppets and bots.
3. Sock puppets and bots: Searches of key phrases demonstrated a number of profiles of varying reach that posted pro-Kremlin content in order to drive up its usage in order for social media algorithms to recommend them to real users and create a veneer of credibility.

Concerning Western strategic communications

Digital findings suggest typical Western narratives searched for this report have limited traction in the UAE. For instance, typical phrases that pro-Ukrainian and pro-Western actors have tried to amplify (e.g. #Russiaisaterroristate, #standwithukraine) did not meet the threshold in the Arabic data scrape. Likewise, in contrast to its Kremlin counterpart, the Ukrainian Embassy had only 1500 followers and its posts only receive minimal engagements.⁴²¹ The EU performs slightly better, but its posts and reposts only receive hundreds of views. And searching for ‘NATO’ in Arabic shows the highest rated content to be pro-Kremlin.

Some of the most popular pro-Western content is the UAE MoD’s posts emphasising its security collaboration with Western partners. Fig. F30. announcing the start of Falcon Strike 2 military exercises with the participation of forces from the United States of America, the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, the Republic of Slovakia, and the Kingdom of Denmark received tens of thousands of views and largely positive commentary.

Likewise, reports from *The National* of the UK and UAE’s ‘growing partnership’ after a strategic dialogue in London were met with similar positivity.⁴²² And *BBC Arabic* maintains a positive standing among local news, with multiple local and regional media regarding the decision to cut back its funding and radio channel as the ‘end of an era’.⁴²³ The decision to cut

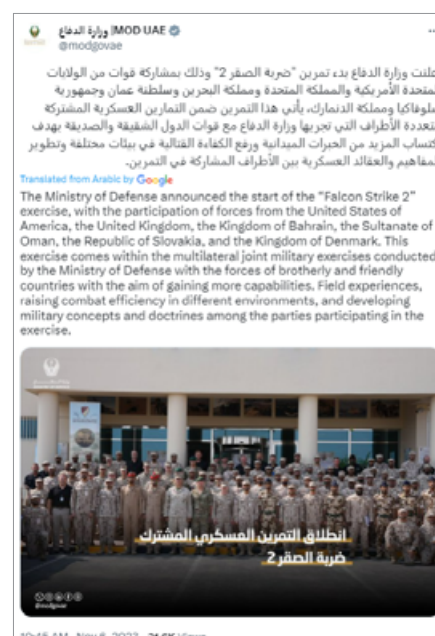


Fig. F30. Announcement of the start ‘Falcon Strike 2’ military exercises with the participation of forces from the United States of America, the United Kingdom, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Sultanate of Oman, the Republic of Slovakia, and the Kingdom of Denmark.

back *BBC Arabic*’s budget and Arabic language radio station, is likely to further compound the lack of high rated content directly pushing back against Kremlin IIOs. Speaking at a panel discussion hosted by the Emiates Society on the role of British culture and education in the UAE, Michael Wilson, director of the British international school Cranleigh Abu Dhabi, described the decision as a ‘big mistake’.⁴²⁴



Fig. F31. Screen grab of Not_Sputnik profile.



Fig. F32. Picture of Ramzan Kadyrov claiming to be praying in Ukraine before battle, later proven to be in Russia, far from the fighting.

One notable profile that gained positive traction and was not government affiliated was Sputnik_Not, a parody profile of *Sputnik* that uses humour to undermine the Kremlin’s narratives. Although in English, one of its videos went viral in the UAE. Titled Ukrainian drone spots Ramzan Kadyrov—a video of a man caught on night-time camera committing bestiality.⁴²⁵ Similarly mocking material of Kadyrov included one image he previously circulated of

him praying before ‘going into battle in Ukraine’ (Fig. F32.), only for investigators to note that he was praying at a Rosneft gas station, which are only available in Russia.

This reinforces the trend found across several of the countries under study and wider secondary source research that humour is a powerful tool for strategic communications and undermining malign IIOs.⁴²⁶

Impacts

Analysing the overall commentary of some of the highest rated pieces of content drew similar conclusions to the qualitative findings. While Emiratis remain committed to the relationship they have with the US and the West (mainly based on security grounds), there is growing scepticism toward the relationship, positivity toward the Kremlin based on its principles of ‘non-interference’, and perceptions of Western hypocrisy.

For example, the YouTube video *Biden losing Gulf Royal’s support* had an overall sentiment rate of -44%, indicating moderate dissatisfaction. Furthermore, the Emoji graphs indicated a 40% of commentators main Emoji was a Laughing Face that mocked the concept (See Main Report, Methodology section to see explanation of Parliament Emoji graphs).

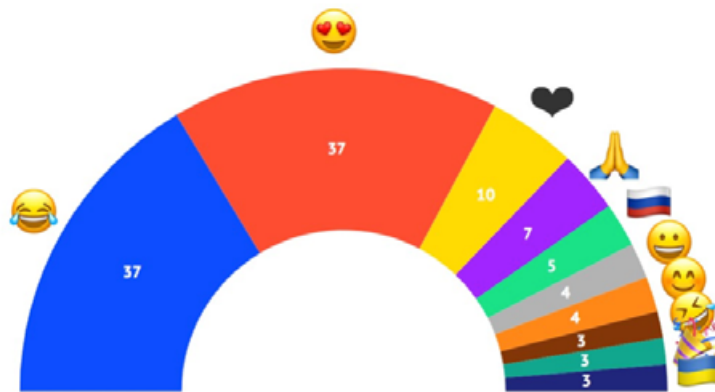


Fig. F33. Biden losing Gulf Royal's support

Likewise, the video *UAE dumps Biden for Putin* found 53% of Emojis to be the Crying Laughing Face.

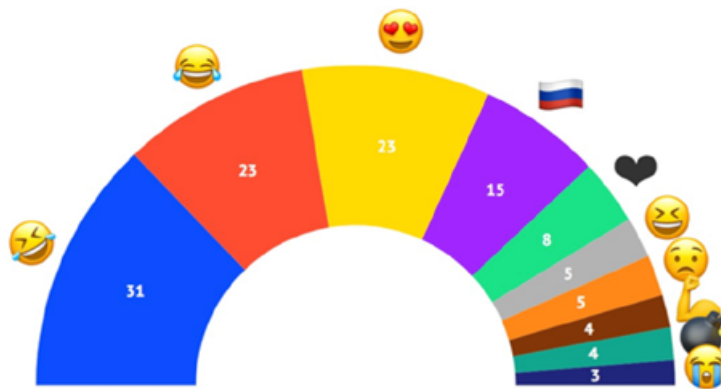


Fig. F34. UAE dumps Biden for Putin

But while this indicates perceptions of US-UAE security relations to be solid, when it comes to Western issues like Ukraine, the perceptions diverge.

For example, the video *Russia vs Ukraine makes Middle East take sides* had an overall

highly positive sentiment of 87.5%. Emoji graphs also showed 68% use of positive or mocking Emojis, indicating that most commentators believe they do not need to despite impacts on food security and its violation of norms. And the major Flag Emoji to be Russia rather than Ukraine.



Fig. F35. Russia vs Ukraine makes Middle East take sides

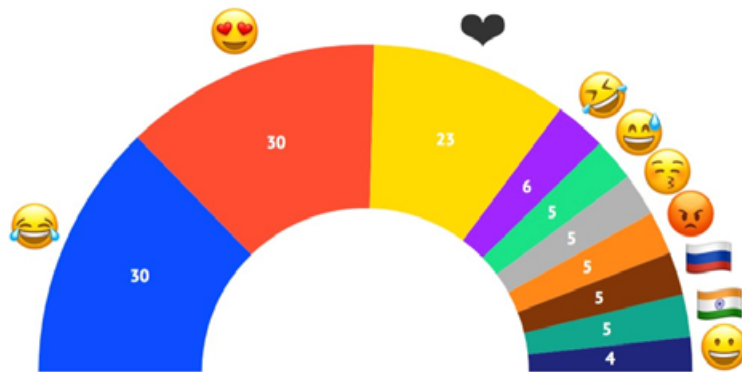


Fig. F38. Quran burning a Crime in Russia

Lastly, a wide data scrape and analysis over all top content to establish a number of statements against which to establish sentiment revealed the following graphs. Among other topics, they demonstrate pride in being punished for supporting Russia and technological

exchanges and high levels of positive sentiment at 'dumping Biden' (though this is more likely geared toward diversification and pushing back against taking a side in Russo-Western tensions).

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

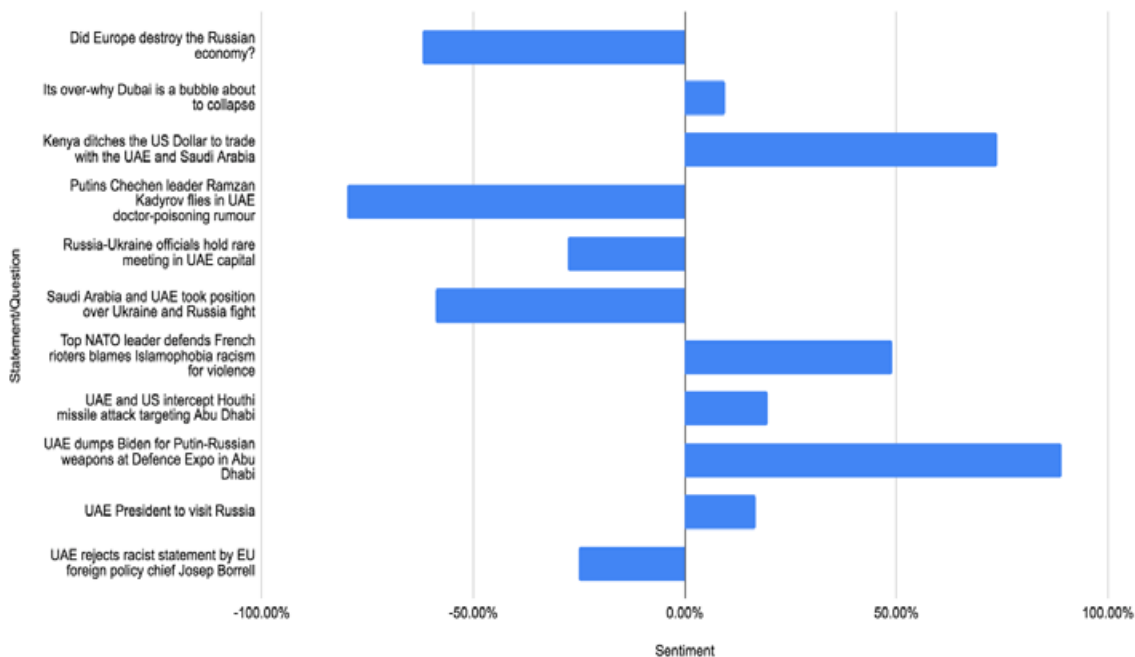


Fig. F39. Sentiment Graph 1

Sentiment vs. Statement/Question

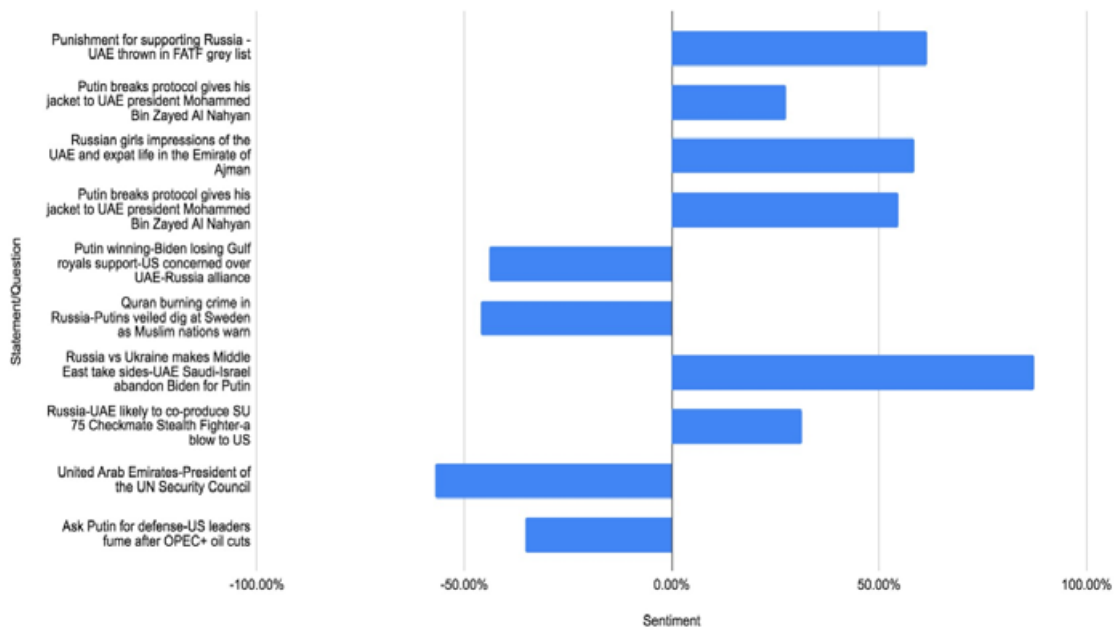


Fig. F40. Sentiment Graph 2

Conclusions

Our findings indicate that the perception of engagement with the Kremlin is perceived as a ‘win-win’ cooperation among Emiratis. Furthermore, perceptions of hypocrisy by the West, pushback against LGBTQ+ (which it actively associates with the West) and a general climate of conspiratorial thinking are actively exploited by Kremlin IIOs to undermine Western interests and cultivate apathy towards its violations of international norms.

Based on the Theory of Reflexive Control it can be assessed that the aim of these IIOs is to encourage the determining behaviour of further narrative and institutional alignment with the Kremlin, as well as encouraging destructive behaviour of increasing conspiratorial thinking regarding the West to amplify Kremlin narratives and further truth decay in Arab social media. See the page below for a full overview of the TORC framework for the UAE.

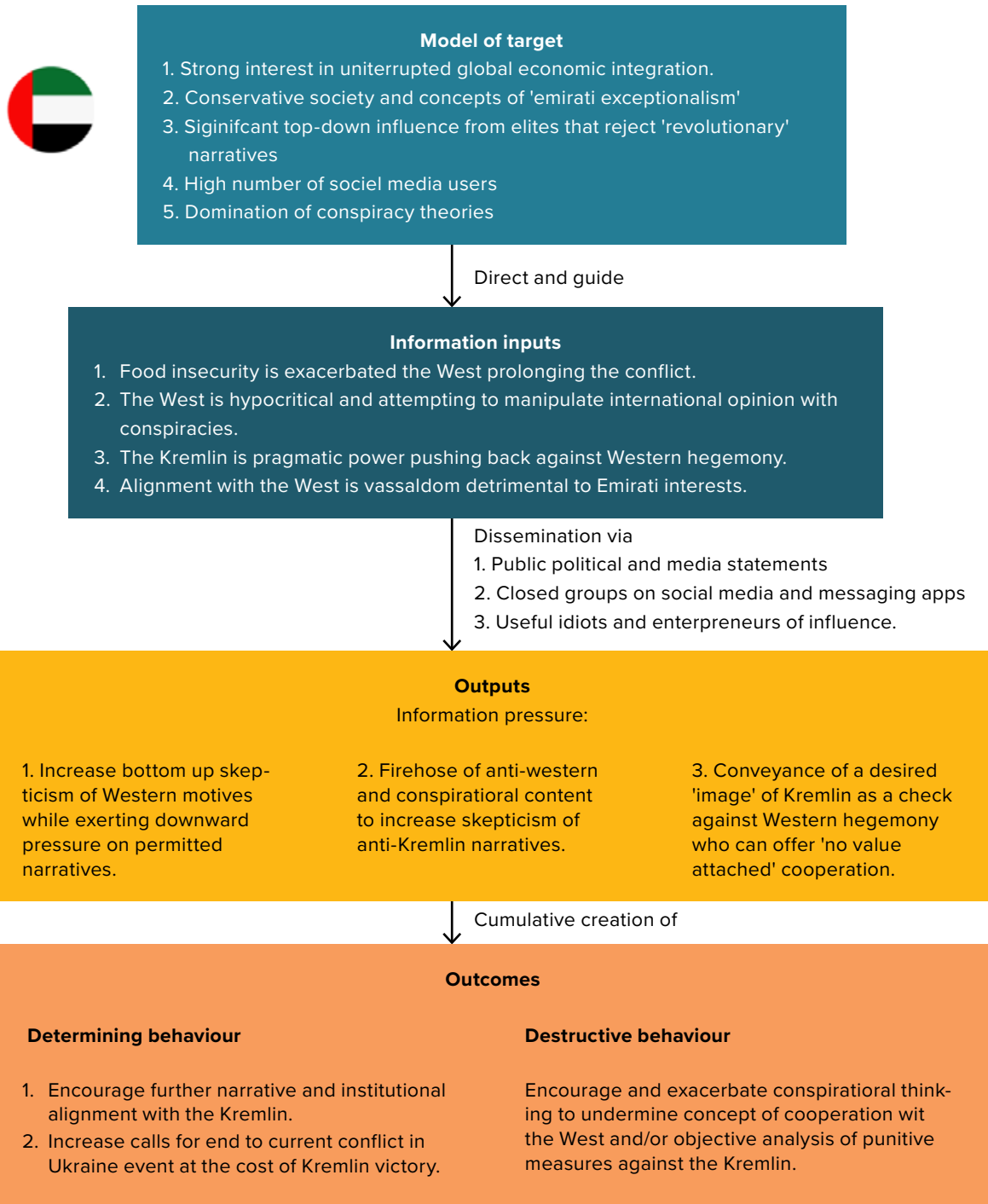


Fig. F41. TORC framework for UAE

Endnotes

- 1 Due to the increasing pushback on the term ‘Global South’, it has become necessary to create a change of terminology as a stop-gap prior to the development of a new term by actors within this community. This report has elected to use the Multi-aligned Community, defined as ‘States existing outside of the Western environment who have exhibited a preference for aligning or partnering with chosen states depending on specific spheres or issues.’ This term has been chosen due to lack of paternalistic overtones, use of the term in select countries’ foreign policy statements, and respect for the individual states’ agencies. The term ‘majority countries’ has been avoided due to tendency of malign actors to utilise it as part of their IIOs.
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- 8 When the main pillars of the state (policy formulation, implementation and accountability) are turned from the public interest to the benefit of one or more parties’ interests. David-Barrett, E. (2023) [“State capture and development: a conceptual framework”](#) in *Journal of International Relations and Development*. Springer
- 9 The practice of publishing opinions or comments on the internet, in the media, etc. or engaging in offline activity (such as demonstrations) that appear to come from ordinary members of the public but actually comes from an interested group, as a way to make it seem that a product, policy, opinion, etc. is very popular or has a lot of public support.
- 10 Utilising sock puppet and bot accounts as well as local voices to drown out dissenting voices by sheer volume of contrasting content. Much of the time this focuses on attacks on the target’s personal character or capability.
- 11 Typically an image, that is remixed, copied, and circulated in a shared cultural experience online. See Shifman, L. (2014). [Memes in Digital Culture](#). The MIT Press.
- 12 An image or recording that has been convincingly altered and manipulated to misrepresent someone as doing or saying something that was not actually done or said.
- 13 A process of employing local voices in spreading a narrative in order to enhance authenticity and gain traction. Frequently, these can include entrepreneurs of influence and ‘useful idiots’. The former being those cynically spreading narratives to further their own financial and political goals (even if they do not necessarily believe the narrative) and the latter being vocal members of the information sphere who believe narratives but often do not perform due diligence on what they post.

- 14 When false or deceitful information is legitimised through a network of intermediaries, who gradually apply a set of techniques in order to distort it and obscure the original source.
- 15 The action of finding or publishing private information about someone on the internet without their permission, especially in a way that reveals their name, address, etc, often with a malicious intent.
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