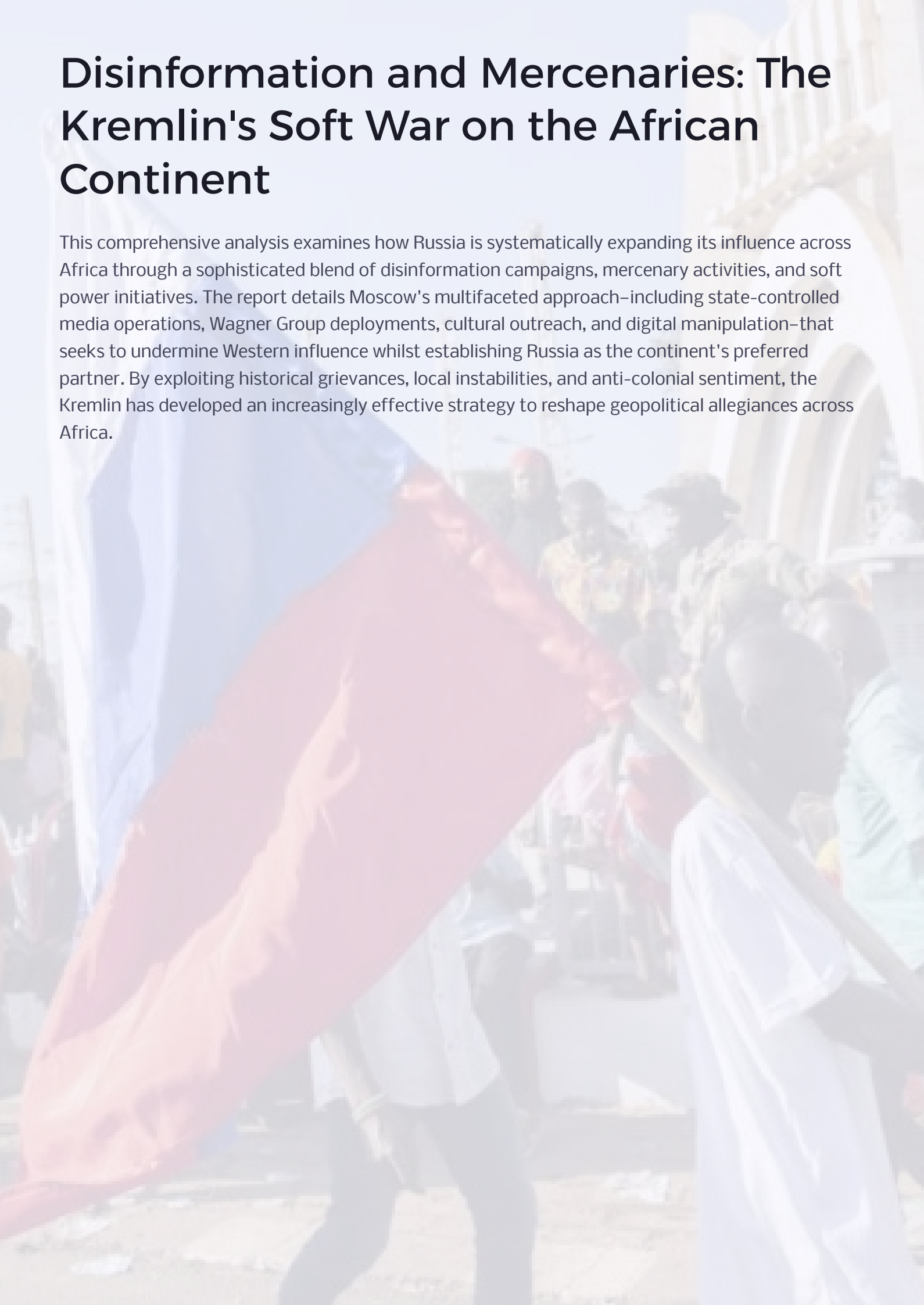


# Disinformation and Mercenaries: The Kremlin's Soft War on the African Continent

This comprehensive analysis examines how Russia is systematically expanding its influence across Africa through a sophisticated blend of disinformation campaigns, mercenary activities, and soft power initiatives. The report details Moscow's multifaceted approach—including state-controlled media operations, Wagner Group deployments, cultural outreach, and digital manipulation—that seeks to undermine Western influence whilst establishing Russia as the continent's preferred partner. By exploiting historical grievances, local instabilities, and anti-colonial sentiment, the Kremlin has developed an increasingly effective strategy to reshape geopolitical allegiances across Africa.



# Russia's Expanding Influence in Africa

Russia is rapidly expanding its influence across Africa, especially in the eastern and western regions, using a combination of diplomacy, military cooperation, and media strategies. This effort is part of a broader geopolitical agenda to challenge Western dominance, particularly that of the United States and European countries, and to position itself as a powerful global actor on the continent.

A core element of this strategy involves state-controlled media outlets such as RT and Sputnik. These platforms promote pro-Russian narratives through anti-colonial messaging and strong criticism of Western policies. By framing Russia as a partner to African nations and a counterweight to former colonial powers, these outlets help shape public opinion and enhance Moscow's soft power.

In addition to traditional media, Russia uses its embassies and cultural centres to organize events and outreach activities that subtly promote Kremlin narratives. These often focus on the war in Ukraine and present Russia as a victim of Western aggression, while appealing to themes of sovereignty and resistance.

Social media has become another powerful tool in Russia's influence campaign. In digitally connected countries like Kenya and Nigeria, pro-Russian messages are disseminated through networks of fake accounts, bots, and manipulated content. These campaigns fuel anti-Western sentiment, deepen social divisions, and exploit local frustrations with international politics.



# Local Influencers: Russia's Digital Army

Increasingly, Russia is working with local influencers and digital content creators in Africa to spread its messaging more organically. In countries such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Nigeria, these influencers are used to amplify pro-Kremlin narratives, often without disclosing their connections to Russian-backed initiatives. They promote themes of national pride, economic independence, and criticism of Western interference, all carefully aligned with Moscow's strategic goals.

This form of digital influence is subtle but highly effective. Russia does not need to dominate the narrative directly. Instead, it empowers local voices to echo its messaging, making its presence less visible but more deeply embedded in the public discourse. By channelling its narratives through trusted local figures, Russia achieves a level of credibility and reach that would be impossible through direct propaganda efforts.

The strategy represents a sophisticated evolution in Russia's information warfare capabilities. Rather than operating exclusively through obvious state channels, Moscow has developed a distributed network of seemingly independent advocates who can penetrate communities and social circles that would otherwise be resistant to foreign messaging. These influencers often present themselves as champions of African interests and sovereignty, positioning Russia as an ally in their struggle against perceived Western neo-colonialism.

The effectiveness of this approach lies in its authenticity. When pro-Russian sentiments are expressed by local voices using local languages and cultural references, the foreign origin of these narratives becomes nearly impossible to detect. This creates a self-reinforcing ecosystem where Russian talking points are gradually normalised and incorporated into mainstream discourse, influencing public opinion and potentially government policy.



# Anatomy of Disinformation: From Dubai to Moscow

A row of sleek white yachts bobs in calm waters, backed by glowing skyscrapers bathed in golden evening light. Posted on Facebook, the photo is presented as a majestic view of Moscow - the modern heart of Russia. There's just one problem: the skyline belongs to Dubai.

The image, part of a post from a Facebook page identifying itself with Burundi, is operated under the name "Vladimir Putin." The account features a profile photo of the Russian president and routinely shares pro-Kremlin content. Among the more fantastical claims is one asserting that a Russian laser weapon has destroyed 750 American fighter jets. Despite its blatant misinformation, the page has over 180,000 followers and presents itself as a legitimate news source.

Not all pro-Russian content is as clumsy or easy to debunk. Many posts are carefully constructed, deliberately shaped to sway opinion in strategic parts of Africa – without necessarily crossing the line into outright falsehood. According to mounting evidence, Moscow is investing heavily in polishing its image across the continent, especially in states deemed geopolitically significant.

This example illustrates the spectrum of sophistication in Russia's disinformation efforts. At one end are crude fabrications easily identified by fact-checkers but still effective with less discerning audiences. At the other end are subtle narrative manipulations that blend truth with distortion, making them significantly more difficult to counter. Between these extremes lies a gradient of increasingly sophisticated techniques designed to influence African public opinion.

The strategy appears to be multifaceted: while some campaigns target less educated populations with sensationalist content, others aim at educated elites with more nuanced messaging. This diversified approach ensures maximum reach across different demographic segments and creates an ecosystem where Russian narratives can flourish regardless of the audience's media literacy level.



## Hallmarks of Russian Disinformation in Africa

- Misattributed imagery (like the Dubai skyline presented as Moscow)
- Fantastical claims about Russian military capabilities
- Impersonation of official accounts or creation of pseudo-official pages
- Strategic amplification through networks of coordinated accounts
- Gradual progression from plausible content to more extreme messaging

# The Subtlety of Narrative Manipulation

In fact, Russian influence operations in Africa often succeed not because they fabricate reality, but because they subtly distort it – exaggerating facts, omitting context, or reinforcing existing grievances. As Aldu Cornelissen, co-founder of the South African digital consultancy Murmur Intelligence, puts it: "You don't need to invent lies to tap into resentment. In many African countries, there's a deep-seated perception of the West as a historical oppressor. Russia simply leans into that."

Instead of relying on troll farms thousands of miles away, much of Russia's narrative-shaping now happens on the ground, crafted by local influencers who speak the language and understand the culture. Cornelissen's firm, which monitors digital spaces for political and commercial clients, has observed how these influence operations are structured. According to him, Russia maintains a global web of core social media accounts, which are then mirrored and amplified by African accounts. Local influencers in each country pick up the messaging and tailor it to resonate with their communities.

This method is far more effective than generic foreign propaganda. Beverly Ochieng, a researcher at the US-based Center for Strategic and International Studies, confirms this trend. Speaking from Dakar, she notes that posts originating from civil rights groups in Mali and written in Bambara do not feel foreign. They seem authentic, grounded in the local experience. The average reader would never suspect a Russian connection. These regional messengers, whom Cornelissen calls "nano-influencers," are often paid modest sums – around ten euros each – to spread a particular narrative. When thousands of people are enlisted simultaneously, the result is a flood of coordinated content that can overwhelm social media platforms within hours. Over time, some users begin to internalize these narratives, resharing them organically as if they were their own thoughts.

## Core Messaging

Russia develops central narratives through global social media accounts that focus on anti-Western themes and pro-Russian positioning.

## Local Adaptation

African accounts mirror and adapt these narratives, tailoring the content to specific regional contexts and cultural sensibilities.

## Nano-Influencer Distribution

Local influencers are paid small sums to spread adapted narratives in native languages, creating the appearance of grassroots support.

## Organic Amplification

Over time, users internalize these narratives and begin sharing them independently, creating a self-sustaining ecosystem of pro-Russian sentiment.

# Amplification Networks: The Architecture of Influence

The amplification doesn't stop there. Special accounts known as "zoomers" are deployed to boost visibility through repeated shares, tags, and reposts. According to the Centre for Analytics and Behavioural Change, this tactic has been observed around the official X account of the Russian Embassy in South Africa. Other key players in the network include American activist Jackson Hinkle, a vocal Trump supporter, along with a network of South African influencers and pseudo-media outlets with clear pro-Kremlin leanings.

These amplification networks represent a sophisticated approach to digital influence that combines both automated systems and human operators in a coordinated effort to dominate information spaces. The strategy creates an illusion of widespread support for pro-Russian narratives by ensuring they appear repeatedly across multiple platforms and accounts, overwhelming alternative viewpoints through sheer volume and persistence.

The architecture of these networks is deliberately complex and layered. At the core are official Russian accounts that establish the primary messaging. Surrounding these are verified sympathetic voices who lend credibility through their existing public profiles. Beyond this inner circle lies a vast ecosystem of smaller accounts, some managed by paid operators and others by genuine supporters, all working in concert to amplify specific narratives.

What makes this system particularly effective is its adaptability. When platforms like X (formerly Twitter) or Facebook implement measures to counter coordinated inauthentic behaviour, the network can quickly evolve its tactics. If automated accounts are suspended, human operators increase their activity. If certain hashtags are flagged, new ones are created. This constant evolution allows Russian influence operations to maintain their effectiveness despite growing awareness of their methods.

The global nature of these networks also presents significant challenges for those attempting to counter them. An account based in South Africa might be amplifying content from an American influencer that originated from a Russian embassy, creating jurisdictional complications for regulatory bodies and platform moderators. This international distribution of activity helps shield the networks from comprehensive enforcement actions while maintaining their ability to shape narratives across borders.



# Media Infrastructure: Embedding Russian Narratives

But Russia's strategy extends beyond social media manipulation. It has embedded itself in Africa's media infrastructure. In the Central African Republic, often seen as a testing ground for Moscow's influence, Russian operatives founded a radio station called Lengo Songo in 2018. According to leaked testimonies, Russian handlers often dictated the editorial line, supplying talking points and shaping local news coverage to suit their goals.

RT, Russia's state-run news network, has also been aggressively expanding its reach on the continent. Though banned in many Western countries, RT remains available via satellite in much of Africa. In 2022, the network announced the launch of a new English-language media hub in South Africa, which it claimed had already begun operations. RT also broadcasts in French for audiences in francophone Africa and regularly features local journalists from Mali and beyond, some of whom are linked to the country's ruling junta.

This systematic development of media infrastructure represents a long-term investment in Russia's ability to shape African perceptions. By establishing physical presences through radio stations, media hubs, and satellite broadcasting, Moscow ensures that its narratives have multiple channels for dissemination that aren't solely dependent on social media algorithms or digital access. This approach is particularly effective in regions where traditional media remains the primary source of information for large segments of the population.

The strategy also includes extensive training and professional development programs for African journalists. These initiatives offer valuable skills and opportunities to media professionals while subtly influencing their perspective on geopolitical issues. Journalists who participate in Russian-sponsored training programs or work with Russian media outlets may not explicitly promote Kremlin narratives, but their reporting often reflects the worldview and framing they've been exposed to through these relationships.



## Local Radio Stations

Establishing radio stations like Lengo Songo in the Central African Republic provides direct access to local audiences with Russian-controlled content.



## Satellite Broadcasting

RT maintains satellite availability across Africa despite Western bans, reaching audiences without internet access or in remote areas.



# Content Creation: From News to Entertainment

The Kremlin has also been accused of secretly operating content channels like African Stream and funding news outlets such as African Initiative. The latter positions itself as a media bridge between Russia and Africa and is widely believed to have ties to the Wagner Group, the Russian paramilitary outfit founded by the late Yevgeny Prigozhin. African Initiative maintains a strong presence on Telegram and social media, with accounts that range from openly branded to deliberately opaque. In Mali, the outlet even works with a local journalism school and has recruited top students as field correspondents. The propaganda isn't confined to the digital world. In May 2024, African Initiative organized a photo exhibition in Burkina Faso's capital, Ouagadougou. The displays ranged from tributes to the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany to curated narratives about the war in Ukraine's Donbas region. According to one local source, residents are especially receptive to stories about military victories against terrorists. Videos showcasing Russian weaponry and trained soldiers are easily interpreted as signs of a strong, reliable ally. These themes are reinforced in pop culture as well. The 2021 Russian action film "The Tourist" portrays a heroic Russian soldier stationed in the Central African Republic. In the video game African Dawn, developed by African Initiative, players can choose between Sahelian troops and their Russian advisors or the Western-backed forces of ECOWAS. The message is not subtle. Through such "militainment," the Kremlin pushes its central narrative: the era of Western colonial dominance is over, and Russia is the continent's true partner in progress.

## Russia's Multi-Platform Content Strategy

Russia's approach to content creation in Africa spans multiple formats and platforms, creating an immersive information environment that reinforces pro-Russian narratives through both news and entertainment channels. This comprehensive strategy ensures that audiences encounter consistent messaging regardless of their media consumption preferences.

The diversification into entertainment media represents a particularly sophisticated evolution in Russia's influence operations. By embedding geopolitical narratives in films, video games, and other cultural products, Moscow can reach audiences who might avoid overtly political content but are receptive to the same messages when delivered through entertainment.

### News Outlets

African Initiative and African Stream provide seemingly independent journalism that consistently promotes pro-Russian perspectives on continental and global affairs.

### Physical Exhibitions

Photo displays and cultural events in cities like Ouagadougou create tangible touchpoints for Russian narratives about historical and current conflicts.

### Film Production

Action films like "The Tourist" present romanticized portrayals of Russian military intervention in African conflicts, framing Russia as a heroic ally.



# Exploiting Diplomatic Missteps

Russia finds many opportunities to drive this point home. One of the most notorious examples came in January, when French President Emmanuel Macron lamented that African leaders had failed to show sufficient gratitude for France's military assistance. His remarks triggered outrage across the continent. African Initiative seized on the moment, quoting a St. Petersburg political analyst who called for "new global partners" like Russia, who would treat African nations with greater respect.

This sentiment taps into deeper historical currents. According to CSIS's Beverly Ochieng, Russia continues to benefit from the lingering memory of Soviet support for anti-colonial movements during the Cold War. The USSR backed the African National Congress in South Africa, the MPLA in Angola, and revolutionary governments in countries like Ethiopia and the former Zaire. These alliances may have been more strategic than idealistic, but they've left a legacy that Moscow is now keen to revive.

Russia's strategy of exploiting Western diplomatic missteps represents a form of opportunistic information warfare that requires minimal resources but yields significant dividends. By maintaining a vigilant media apparatus ready to amplify any perceived slight or controversy involving Western powers, Moscow positions itself as the sympathetic alternative without having to make substantial commitments of its own.

The effectiveness of this approach lies in its authenticity—Russia doesn't need to fabricate Western diplomatic failures; it simply needs to strategically amplify them when they occur naturally. Comments like Macron's provide perfect material for Russian information operations because they confirm existing suspicions about Western attitudes toward Africa. When African audiences see these statements highlighted in their media environment, it reinforces narratives about Western arrogance that Russia has been carefully cultivating.



This opportunistic approach also allows Russia to maintain plausible deniability about its information operations. When questioned about anti-Western messaging, Russian officials can truthfully state that they are simply reporting on real events and statements, obscuring the selective amplification and strategic framing that transforms straightforward reporting into influence operations. This blending of factual reporting with strategic narrative manipulation represents one of the most challenging aspects of Russian information warfare to counter effectively.

# The Soviet Legacy: Cold War Realities

The Soviet Union's involvement in Africa was never just about solidarity. Its interventions were driven by geopolitical calculus and a desire to compete with the West for influence during the Cold War. One of the earliest examples was the Congo Crisis in 1960, when the USSR supported Patrice Lumumba, a charismatic leftist leader who sought to unify the newly independent Congo. Moscow placed its bets on Lumumba, but within months he was assassinated. The country spiraled into a brutal five-year civil war, and the idealistic promise of Soviet-backed independence collapsed under the weight of internal chaos and external meddling. Later, in the Ogaden War between Ethiopia and Somalia in the late 1970s, the Soviet Union switched sides mid-conflict, ultimately backing Ethiopia. With Soviet tanks and arms, Ethiopia pushed back Somali forces. The episode marked a turning point. It became clear that the USSR's relationships in Africa were no longer framed by ideology, but by pragmatic interests. As the Cold War progressed, Soviet engagement became less about revolutionary ideals and more about securing influence, resources, and allies.

This historical reality stands in stark contrast to the romanticized narrative that Russia promotes today about Soviet-African relations. While contemporary Russian messaging emphasizes solidarity and anti-colonial support, the historical record reveals a more complex and often self-interested approach. The USSR's willingness to abandon allies when geopolitically convenient—as demonstrated in Somalia—underscores the transactional nature of these relationships.



# Post-Soviet Disengagement and Re-emergence

By the time Mikhail Gorbachev launched his reforms in the mid-1980s, many African governments had grown wary of Moscow's shifting loyalties. The appetite for socialism was waning, and newly independent states either distanced themselves from the USSR or rebranded old party leaders as democratic presidents. Some, like Angola and Mozambique, retained pro-Soviet governments for decades. Others, including Ethiopia and the Congo, moved away from communism entirely.

Despite this mixed legacy, Russia's involvement in Africa is still viewed favorably in some circles. In South Africa, for example, the ruling African National Congress remembers the USSR as one of the few nations that actively supported its fight against apartheid. Western countries, by contrast, were slow to distance themselves from the white minority regime. This historical memory gives Russia a narrative advantage today, especially when it portrays itself as a long-time ally against imperialism and oppression. Yet this romanticized version of the past is far from the whole truth. While the Soviet Union promoted anti-colonial rhetoric, it also waged imperial wars of its own—in the Caucasus, in Central Asia, and in Eastern Europe. Enslavement and exploitation were not foreign to its history. Still, for many in Africa, the distinction is less about historical accuracy and more about the current power dynamics. Russia claims it has no colonial past in Africa, and that alone sets it apart from Europe in the minds of some audiences.

## Soviet Collapse and Russian Disengagement

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 created a significant power vacuum in Africa. With Russia facing its own internal challenges during the tumultuous 1990s, Moscow's presence on the continent diminished dramatically. Economic constraints, political instability, and a strategic reorientation toward the West meant that many Soviet-era relationships were allowed to atrophy.

This period of disengagement lasted well into the 2000s, with Russia maintaining only minimal diplomatic and economic ties with African nations. Trade volumes declined precipitously, embassy staffing was reduced, and cultural exchanges became increasingly rare. For nearly two decades, Russia was largely absent from the continent as a significant geopolitical player.

## Strategic Re-engagement

Russia's systematic return to Africa began in earnest during the 2010s, accelerating after Western sanctions imposed following the 2014 annexation of Crimea. This re-engagement has been marked by several key characteristics that distinguish it from Soviet-era involvement:

- Greater emphasis on private actors like Wagner Group rather than direct state involvement
- Focus on resource extraction and security arrangements rather than ideological alignment
- Sophisticated information operations utilizing digital technologies unavailable during the Soviet period

# Russia's Current African Alliances

This anti-colonial framing, though rooted in Soviet-era slogans, has been refined for the digital age. Today, Russia casts itself as the champion of the Global South, fighting an unfair world order imposed by Western powers. In this narrative, the war in Ukraine isn't about expansion or imperial ambition. It's framed as a defensive battle against NATO aggression—a message that resonates in countries still grappling with the legacy of Western intervention.

Which African countries have thrown their support behind Moscow? In most cases, it's the ones where democracy is either weak or non-existent. Zimbabwe, Eritrea, and Uganda all maintain close ties with the Kremlin. These regimes, often led by long-serving strongmen or military juntas, align easily with Russia's authoritarian model. Elsewhere, such as in Sudan, Libya, Mali, and the Central African Republic, Wagner Group has taken on a central role in shaping the security environment. These are not traditional alliances, but rather fragile dependencies built on resource extraction, repression, and transactional politics.

Wherever there is instability, wherever peace is fragile and the state is weak, Russia finds a foothold. This pattern reveals a strategic opportunism in Moscow's approach to Africa. Rather than competing directly with Western powers in stable democracies, Russia focuses its efforts on vulnerable states where the cost of entry is lower and the potential for influence is higher.

This strategy aligns perfectly with Russia's broader geopolitical objectives. By establishing footholds in strategically located countries across Africa, Moscow gains leverage points that can be used to influence regional dynamics, secure access to valuable resources, and create bargaining chips for negotiations with Western powers. Each fragile state that moves into Russia's orbit represents not just a bilateral relationship but a potential pressure point in the larger contest for global influence.



## Mali

Following multiple coups, Mali's military government has embraced Russian support while expelling French forces. Wagner Group maintains a significant presence, receiving an estimated \$10 million monthly for security operations.



## Central African Republic

President Touadéra's government relies heavily on Russian support to maintain power. Wagner forces control key mining areas and have been granted extensive access to gold and diamond resources.



## Sudan

Russia has maintained ties with military factions through Wagner Group, which received approximately \$250 million in mineral rights for its services, particularly focused on gold extraction.

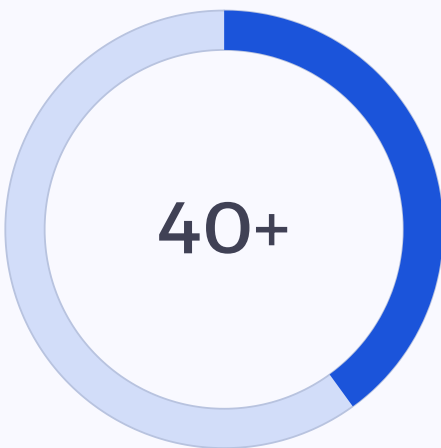
# Ukraine's Diplomatic Challenges in Africa

Ukraine, for its part, has had to start nearly from scratch. While Russia inherited a robust network of embassies and Soviet-era ties, Ukraine only recently began establishing a diplomatic presence on the continent. As of now, Ukraine operates around a dozen embassies in Africa, with plans to open more in countries like Rwanda, Mozambique, and Botswana. This is a promising step, but it also means that some ambassadors are responsible for as many as five or six countries, often spread across vast regions. For instance, Ukraine's diplomatic affairs with the Central African Republic are currently handled from the embassy in Morocco. This limited presence creates challenges. Real engagement requires more than official visits. It needs people on the ground—Ukrainians who understand the local context and can communicate in both official and native languages. In many African countries, the language of government might be French, English, or Portuguese, but the real conversations happen in Swahili, Bambara, Lingala, or Zulu. Diplomacy in Africa is not just about politics; it's about cultural fluency and trust. Ukraine's diplomatic disadvantage stems from several historical factors. As a former Soviet republic, Ukraine did not maintain independent diplomatic relations during the Cold War period when many African nations were establishing their foreign policy orientations. When Ukraine gained independence in 1991, it prioritized European integration and relations with immediate neighbors rather than developing a comprehensive African strategy. This historical trajectory has left Ukraine playing catch-up in a region where Russia already enjoys established networks and relationships. The resource disparity further compounds these challenges. Russia's diplomatic corps is significantly larger and better funded than Ukraine's, allowing Moscow to maintain a more robust presence across the continent. Russian embassies typically have more staff, greater cultural programming budgets, and longer institutional memory regarding local conditions.



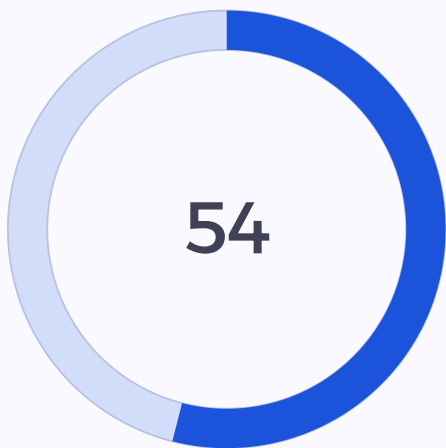
**Ukrainian Embassies in Africa**

Ukraine maintains approximately 12 embassies across the African continent



**Russian Diplomatic Missions**

Russia operates more than 40 diplomatic missions across Africa



**African Nations**

With 54 internationally recognized countries in Africa, Ukraine's limited diplomatic presence means significant gaps in direct engagement.



# The Orthodox Church as an Instrument of Influence

Russia, meanwhile, has even enlisted its Orthodox Church to expand its influence. Since the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate's exarchate in Africa, Russian Orthodox parishes have opened in over 30 countries, with half of them appearing just in 2022. The timing is not accidental. According to Ukraine's Center for Countering Disinformation, this religious outreach is another layer of soft power, aimed at boosting support for Russia on the world stage under the guise of defending Orthodox Christians.

The church, like the media, reinforces a specific image. It tells African audiences that Russia is not tied to colonialism, racism, or slavery. This, of course, overlooks the historical realities of serfdom and imperial conquests in Russia's own backyard. But that doesn't stop the message from spreading. In the information war, perception often matters more than fact.

The Russian Orthodox Church's expansion in Africa represents a particularly sophisticated dimension of Moscow's influence strategy. By establishing religious institutions, Russia creates permanent physical presences in communities that serve multiple functions simultaneously: religious ministry, cultural outreach, and geopolitical influence. These parishes become embedded in local social structures in ways that political or economic relationships cannot, creating lasting channels for Russian soft power projection.

This religious diplomacy also enables Russia to connect with African Christian communities through shared values and concerns. In regions where traditional values and religious identity remain powerful social forces, the Orthodox Church offers a counterpoint to Western liberal cultural influences. By positioning itself as a defender of traditional Christianity against secular Western values, Russia appeals to conservative religious constituencies across the continent.





# Wagner Group: The Paramilitary Dimension

Russia's growing presence in Africa isn't just about media narratives or diplomatic charm offensives. At the heart of its strategy lies the Wagner Group, a shadowy paramilitary network that blends military operations with psychological warfare, digital manipulation, and resource exploitation. Its operations stretch from Libya and Mali to Sudan, Madagascar, and the Central African Republic—and the group's tactics are as brutal as they are calculated.

The case of the Central African Republic offers a clear blueprint. Wagner entered the country in 2017 at the invitation of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, whose government was floundering after years of civil war. Western-backed peacekeeping efforts had made little headway, and Touadéra, desperate for results, turned to Moscow. Wagner forces helped crush rebel factions, secured key cities, and protected the president's grip on power. In exchange, they were granted access to gold mines and diamond fields.

Wagner Group represents a critical innovation in Russia's approach to power projection. Unlike traditional military deployments, which require parliamentary approval and carry clear diplomatic implications, Wagner offers Moscow plausible deniability while achieving many of the same strategic objectives. When Wagner mercenaries appear in a country, Russia can maintain that they are private contractors operating independently—even while the group functions as a de facto extension of Russian state power. This arrangement provides significant advantages. It allows Russia to establish military presences in sensitive regions without triggering the international responses that would follow formal troop deployments. It enables direct exploitation of natural resources without the scrutiny that would accompany official state-to-state resource agreements. And it creates a buffer between Moscow and the human rights abuses frequently attributed to Wagner operations, shielding the Russian government from direct accountability.

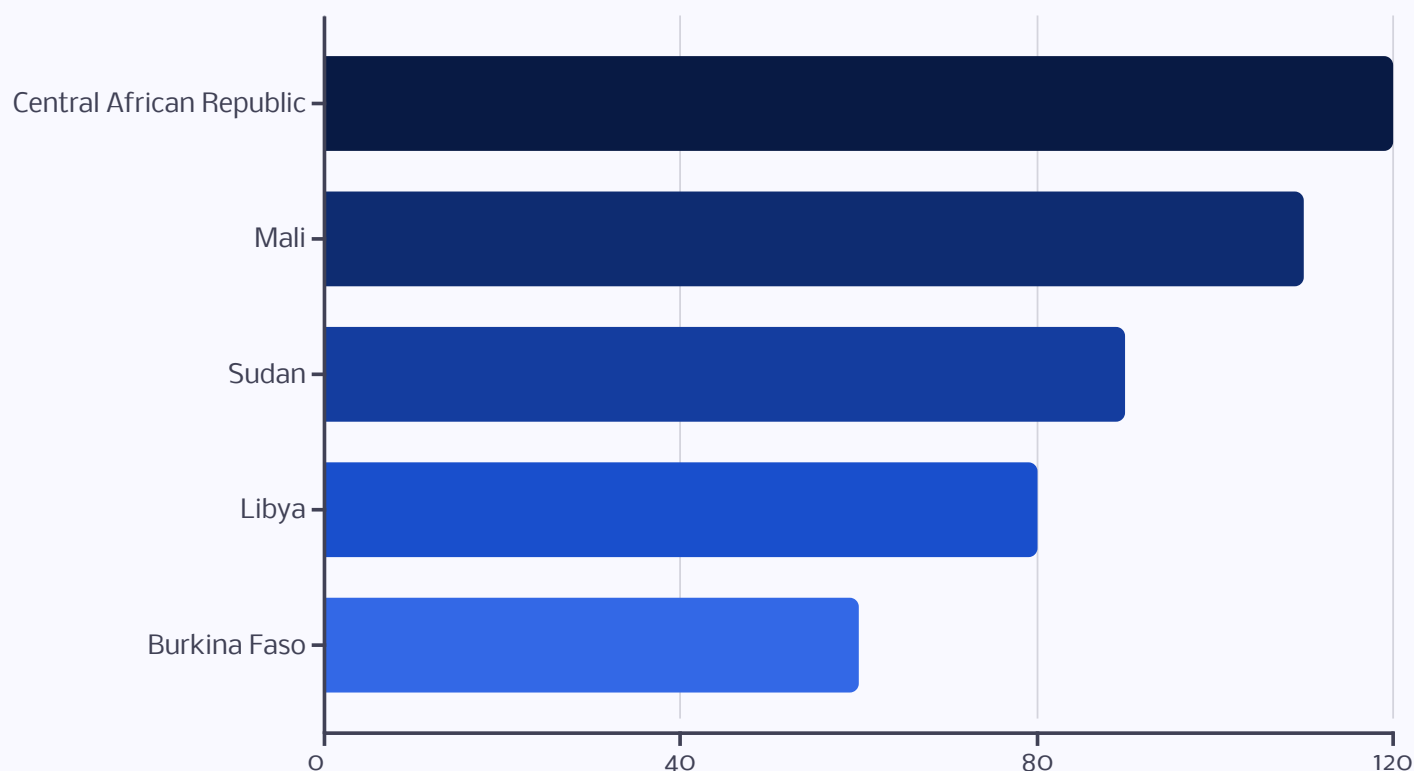
7	\$10M	\$250M
African Countries	Monthly Cost	Mineral Rights
Wagner Group has established significant operational presences in at least seven African nations, including Libya, Mali, CAR, Sudan, Mozambique, Madagascar, and Burkina Faso.	Mali's government reportedly pays approximately \$10 million per month for Wagner's services, demonstrating the significant financial commitment required from host nations.	In Sudan, Wagner received approximately \$250 million in mineral rights as compensation for its security operations and political support to military factions.

# The Economics of Wagner's Operations

Similar patterns have emerged elsewhere. In Mali, Wagner's services cost the government an estimated \$10 million per month. In Sudan, the price tag was even higher—around \$250 million in mineral rights, much of it tied to untraceable gold shipments. These deals rarely appear in official documents, but the evidence has mounted over time. What Russia offers is security for sale, backed by a quiet but relentless campaign to control the narrative and reshape public perception.

Once Wagner gains a foothold, it launches synchronized information campaigns designed to discredit opposition groups, elevate the host regime, and legitimize its own presence. In the Central African Republic, Russian flags appear at pro-government rallies, and Facebook pages flood with praise for Moscow's support. The goal is not just to win battles, but to make the population believe that Russia is their protector and the West their oppressor. The economic dimension of Wagner's operations reveals much about Russia's broader strategic approach to Africa. Rather than providing development assistance or infrastructure investment like China, or security partnerships backed by diplomatic engagement like Western powers, Russia has developed a model that directly monetizes security provision while extracting resource concessions. This approach requires minimal upfront investment while generating immediate returns through both direct payments and resource exploitation rights.

This transactional model differs significantly from traditional security partnerships. Rather than building institutional capacity or supporting governance reforms, Wagner focuses on immediate regime security and resource control. Training for local forces tends to emphasize loyalty to the regime rather than professional military conduct. The focus remains on securing immediate objectives—protecting ruling elites, controlling resource-rich territories, and eliminating immediate threats—rather than addressing underlying causes of instability.



# Perpetuating Instability: Wagner's Strategic Approach

At the same time, Wagner maintains just enough instability to stay relevant. It crushes rebellion but avoids complete victory. A lasting peace would make its services redundant. Instead, it fosters a state of dependency—militarily, economically, and psychologically. Governments continue to pay, and Wagner continues to benefit from mining revenues and political influence. This blend of force and narrative, of soldiers and storytellers, has become a hallmark of modern Russian power projection. And the parallels with Ukraine are hard to ignore. Many of the same disinformation tactics tested in Africa have been deployed in Ukraine—particularly in the early stages of the war. The use of proxy forces, fake news campaigns, social media manipulation, and deniable military actors form a consistent playbook.

The strategic cultivation of controlled instability represents one of the most sophisticated aspects of Wagner's approach in Africa. By carefully calibrating the level of security provided, Wagner ensures that host governments remain dependent on its services indefinitely. This approach stands in stark contrast to Western security assistance, which typically aims to build self-sufficient local security forces that can eventually operate without external support.

## Instability Creates Demand

Persistent security threats generate demand for Wagner's services from vulnerable regimes seeking protection against rebels or terrorist groups.

## Narrative Management

Information operations promote Wagner's effectiveness while discrediting Western alternatives and fostering dependency on Russian support.



## Intervention Agreement

Wagner negotiates favorable terms with host governments, including payments and resource concessions in exchange for security services.

## Selective Security Provision

Operations focus on protecting regime interests and resource-rich areas while maintaining enough instability to justify continued presence.

## Resource Extraction

Wagner exploits mining concessions and other economic opportunities, generating revenue that funds further operations.

# The Vulnerability of African States to Russian Influence

But while Ukraine has the institutional strength and international alliances to push back, many African nations do not. That vulnerability makes them ideal targets—not just for short-term influence but for long-term strategic gains. Through Wagner, through state-backed media, and through the Orthodox Church, Russia is weaving a web of loyalty and leverage that spans the continent.

What's more, the narratives being pushed are not confined to the countries where Wagner operates. Stories seeded in French-speaking Central Africa find their way to neighboring states. Narratives crafted in Mali are echoed in Niger, Chad, and even the Democratic Republic of Congo. The influence spreads like a ripple, far beyond the original point of contact.

The structural vulnerabilities that make many African states susceptible to Russian influence operations are multifaceted and deeply rooted in both historical and contemporary realities. These vulnerabilities create openings that Moscow has systematically exploited through its multidimensional approach to the continent. Addressing these vulnerabilities requires comprehensive approaches that strengthen democratic institutions, improve governance, reduce dependency on single external partners, and build media literacy. However, such transformations require long-term commitments and significant resources—precisely what many affected states lack. This creates a challenging environment for countering Russian influence, as the structural conditions that enable Moscow's success remain entrenched across much of the continent.

## Institutional Vulnerabilities

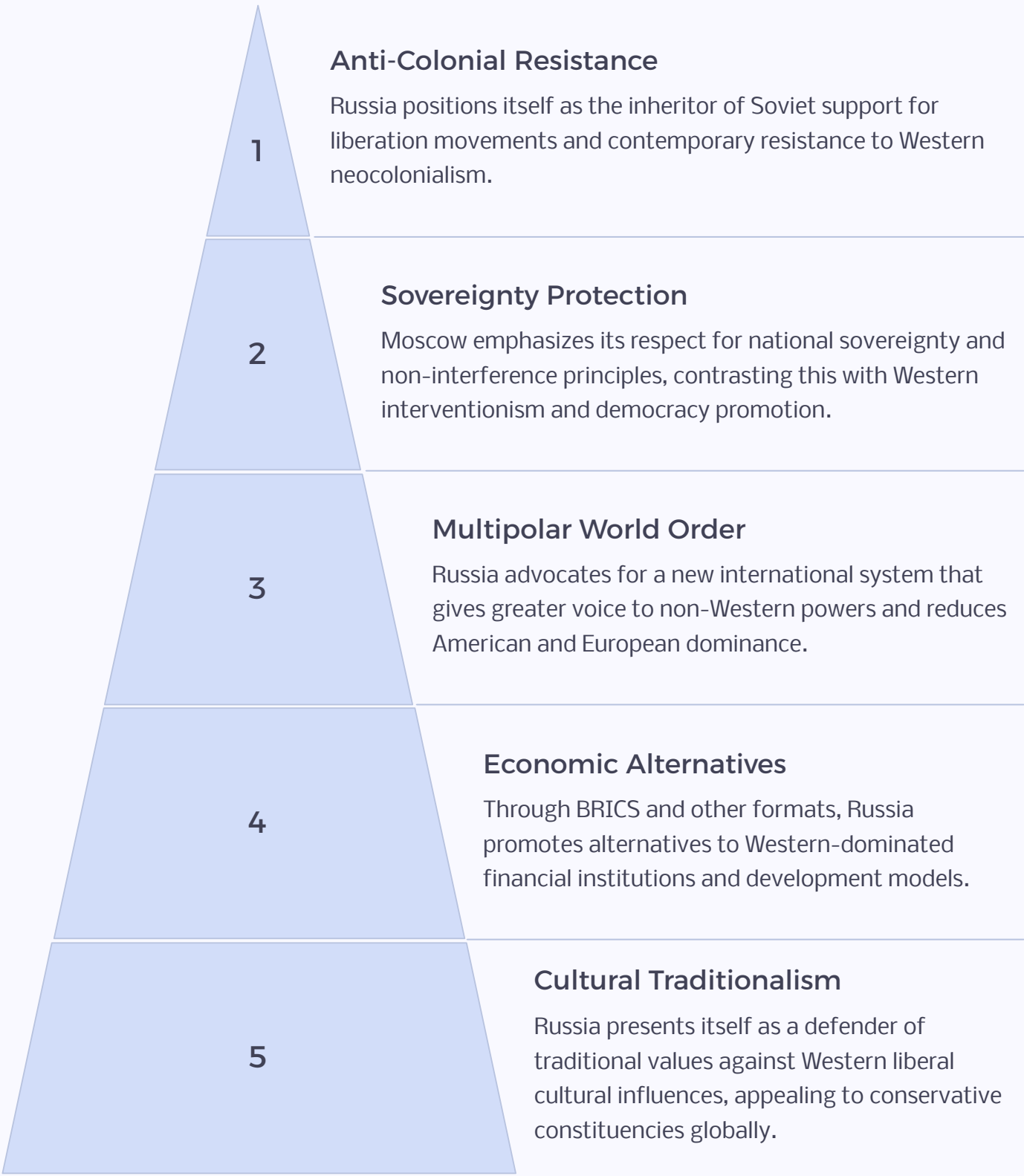
- **Weak Democratic Institutions:** Many states lack robust checks and balances that could limit the power of leaders who align with Russia.
- **Security Sector Deficiencies:** Undertrained and underequipped security forces create dependencies on external security providers like Wagner.
- **Resource Governance Challenges:** Opaque resource management systems enable extractive deals that benefit Russian interests.
- **Limited Diplomatic Capacity:** Many states lack the resources to maintain comprehensive diplomatic relationships, creating information gaps.

## Information Environment Vulnerabilities

- **Media Literacy Gaps:** Limited critical media consumption skills among populations make disinformation more effective.
- **Digital Connectivity Disparities:** Urban-rural divides in internet access create segmented information environments.
- **Language Barriers:** Linguistic diversity complicates counter-messaging efforts and creates openings for targeted disinformation.
- **Historical Grievances:** Colonial legacies create receptivity to anti-Western narratives that Russia effectively exploits.

# Russia's Global South Narrative

R



# Conclusion: Confronting Russia's Narrative Warfare

Russia's Africa strategy is not just about geopolitics. It is about shaping a worldview. One in which Moscow stands not as an aggressor, but as a liberator. One in which Ukraine is cast as a puppet of the West. One in which colonialism is condemned – unless it wears a Russian face. And unless this narrative is confronted head-on, its reach will only grow.

The multifaceted nature of Russia's engagement with Africa demonstrates the evolution of Moscow's approach to global influence in the 21st century. Rather than competing directly with Western powers on their own terms, Russia has developed asymmetric strategies that leverage its comparative advantages: willingness to support authoritarian regimes without governance conditions, ability to deploy irregular military forces outside formal international frameworks, and sophisticated information operations that exploit digital vulnerabilities and historical grievances.

For Ukraine and Western democracies seeking to counter Russian influence in Africa, this analysis suggests several strategic imperatives. First, engagement must be comprehensive rather than narrowly focused on either security or development. Second, information strategies must address both elite and popular audiences across multiple platforms and languages. Third, partnerships must be developed with African civil society organizations and independent media that can provide credible local voices to counter Russian narratives. And finally, historical grievances about Western policies must be acknowledged rather than dismissed if counter-messaging is to have credibility.

The contest for influence in Africa represents more than just a regional competition. It is a microcosm of the broader ideological struggle between democratic and authoritarian visions for the international order. Russia's success in positioning itself as a champion of sovereignty while simultaneously undermining the independence of its client states highlights the sophisticated nature of contemporary authoritarian statecraft. Countering this influence will require equally sophisticated responses that combine hard security measures, economic engagement, diplomatic presence, and narrative strategies tailored to diverse African contexts.

As this analysis has shown, Russia's soft war on the African continent employs a complex blend of historical narratives, contemporary grievances, military capabilities, and digital manipulation. Understanding this comprehensive approach is the first step toward developing effective counter-strategies that can protect both African sovereignty and the integrity of the rules-based international order.

---

The project 'Strengthening the Capacity of Ukrainian and African Civil Society Organizations to Detect and Counter Russian Influence in West and East Africa' is supported by the International Renaissance Foundation. The IRF is not responsible for the content of this publication. All materials reflect the position and initiative of the Institute of Innovative Governance and were not commissioned by the IRF.