REVEALING AND COMBATTING RUSSIAN INFLUENCE

IN EASTERN AND WESTERN AFRICA

INTERNATIONAL RENAISSANCE FOUNDATION

Institute of Innovative Governance

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1. Executive summary

The proliferation of disinformation and the manipulation of digital media are global phenomena that do not respect geographic boundaries and Africa, unfortunately, is no exception. However, the challenges posed by disinformation on the African continent are deeply rooted in a long and complex history of information control and political influence over media. Indeed, disinformation is not a new issue in Africa; rather, it has evolved in form and medium over time.

After many African countries gained independence in the 1950s and 1960s, most media outlets were controlled by governments or ruling parties. State-owned broadcasters were often the main sources of news, promoting the interests of the ruling elite and supporting autocratic regimes. Other media systems were remnants of colonial propaganda machinery and thus mostly mistrusted by locals.

Very often, state media outlets operated under the control of political actors, shaping public perception, influencing electoral outcomes, and endorsing only government-approved narratives. Naturally, this made it difficult for people in many African countries to access diverse viewpoints and to develop trust in the media. Citizens learned to view information with skepticism, particularly when it originated from sources perceived as government-aligned or politically compromised by colonial legacy.

Several other factors have further eroded trust in media across African societies. These include the post-colonial influence of Western countries in both the information and economic spheres, the persistent rural-urban divide, and the limited access to sustainable educational opportunities for disadvantaged groups. Various Western nations have continued to exert substantial influence both openly and covertly over African economies and information flows, often reinforcing narratives that serve external interests rather than local realities. These dynamics have further distorted the media environment and contributed to a perception that news and information are tools of elite or foreign manipulation.

Furthermore, the rural-urban divide remains a significant obstacle. In many rural communities, access to traditional media infrastructure such as newspapers, radio, or television is limited or non-existent. These areas often rely on informal information channels, including word of mouth, community rumors, or social media platforms accessed via mobile phones – sources that are particularly vulnerable to the spread of disinformation.

Educational disparities also play a crucial role. Disadvantaged groups, particularly women and youth in marginalized communities, frequently lack access to quality, sustained educational opportunities. This limits their ability to develop critical media literacy skills, making them more susceptible to manipulation and less equipped to discern credible information from misleading or false content. In recent decades, this context has enabled Russia to expand its influence through information manipulation, propaganda, and media disinformation.

2. Introduction

Russia has been actively expanding its influence in Africa, particularly in Eastern and Western regions, using a combination of diplomatic, military, and media strategies. This push is part of a

broader geopolitical effort to counter Western influence, particularly that of the United States and European powers, and to establish itself as a major global player in the region.

Russia uses its state-controlled media outlets, like RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik News, to spread propaganda and pro-Russian narratives in Africa. These outlets focus on anti-colonial rhetoric and criticize Western policies. By providing news coverage that highlights Russia's positive role in the world, Russia can shape public opinion in African countries and enhance its soft power.

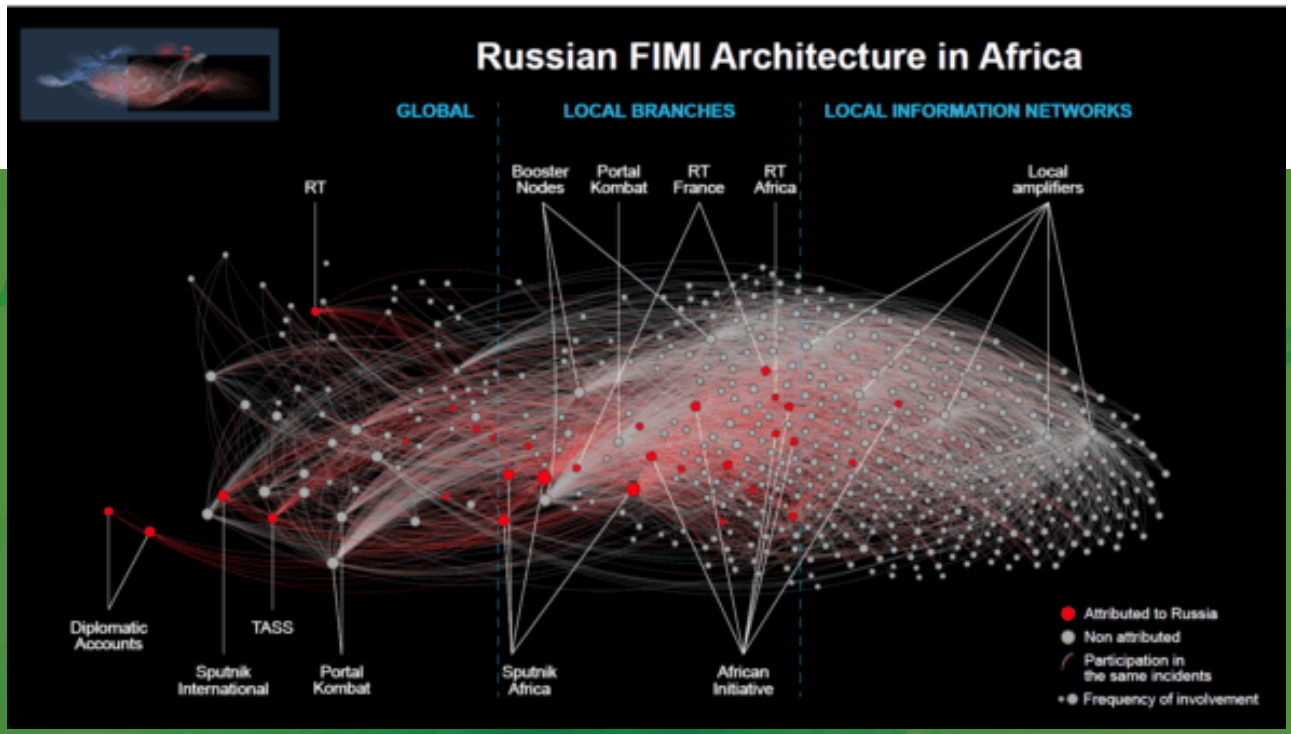
Russia is also actively using its embassies and cultural centres to organise events and activities that, under the guise of local support, spread Russian narratives about the war in Ukraine.

In addition to traditional media, Russia is also leveraging social media platforms to spread its influence. The Kremlin has been accused of using online bots and fake accounts to spread pro-Russian messages, promote anti-Western sentiment, and amplify political divisions within African countries. This form of cyber-diplomacy is particularly effective in countries with young and growing digital populations, such as Kenya and Nigeria[1].

In both Eastern and Western Africa, which are strategically important for both Ukraine and Russia, Russia taps into local social media influencers and digital content creators to promote narratives that align with its interests. These influencers often work to amplify messages through their significant social media reach, and sometimes through more direct coordination with Russian-backed media outlets or organizations.

In Kenya, Ethiopia, Ghana, and Nigeria, Russian propaganda through influencers and content creators operates by strategically targeting popular digital personalities with large followings to promote narratives that align with Moscow's

1 https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/russias-growing-footprint-africa



Source: EUvsDisinfo

broader geopolitical goals. These influencers amplify pro-Russian sentiments, anti-Western rhetoric, and messages of sovereignty, self-determination, and economic independence. The rise of social media platforms makes it easier for Russia to reach large audiences in these countries, whether through direct engagements or more subtle influence campaigns that promote Russia as a counterweight to Western dominance in African politics.

3. Research methodology and literature review

Our study was built on qualitative fieldwork conducted in Ghana and Kenya, organized around four main activities:

First, we conducted open interviews with civil society activists working on media literacy, disinformation monitoring, and democratic governance. We developed our analysis working closely with African partners based on what they told us. During these semi-structured interviews, we asked participants to identify and describe instances of Russian disinformation they had seen in their work, share specific examples of pro-Russian narratives circulating in local media and social platforms, and compare the visibility and impact of Russian influence operations to other sources of disinformation. We documented the cases they reported that fit our research focus.

Second, we spoke with Ukrainian embassy staff in Accra and Nairobi. These conversations gave us insight into how diplomats on the ground see Russian information activities in the region, what counter-narratives Ukraine is trying to promote, and what obstacles they face competing with Russian messaging in African media spaces.

Third, we ran two workshops in October 2025 (one in Ghana and one in Kenya) bringing together civil society representatives, journalists, and researchers. During these sessions, we collected participant observations about Russian narratives circulating in their countries, discussed how pro-Russian content spreads, and explored local views on the war in Ukraine and Western versus Russian engagement in Africa.

Fourth, we shared with workshop participants a survey, asking them to document specific examples of Russian disinformation, describe how it spreads, and assess whether it resonates with local audiences. We collected 15 written responses that provided concrete examples and additional perspective on Russian disinformation and influence operations in Africa.

This fieldwork, combined with thorough desk research and review of existing literature on Russian influence in Africa, forms the basis of this report and its policy recommendations.

4. Russian influence in Eastern Africa

Contrary to some popular narratives, Russia's current involvement in Eastern Africa is not a direct continuation of its Soviet-era engagement and political actions. During the Cold War, especially in the 1960s and 70s, the Soviet Union maintained strong ties with many African countries, including those in Eastern Africa. These relationships were often built on shared ideological positions such as anti-Western and pro-communist sentiments. Moreover, these relationships were often sustained through strong personal connections between authoritarian

leaders and the Soviet military and political establishment. However, with the collapse of the USSR in 1991, Russia deliberately dismantled much of its global influence infrastructure, including its extensive network in Africa. Eastern Africa, once a critical front in the Soviet Union's global strategy, was effectively abandoned and for more than 20 years the connection between Russia and Eastern Africa was occasional and lacked any long-term strategic coordination.

Yet, Russia's renewed interest in Eastern Africa only began to take place in the post-2010s, coinciding with escalating tensions between Moscow and the West, particularly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent sanctions imposed by the EU and the USA. In contrast to the ideological motivations of the Soviet period, the new Russian approach in Eastern Africa is mostly pragmatic, transactional, and strategic. It is rooted in economic opportunity, geopolitical positioning, and security cooperation, which is often conducted through local militaries and private military companies (PMCs) such as Wagner.

One of the key drivers of Russia's return to Eastern Africa after the collapse of the USSR is access to the Red Sea, one of the world's most important maritime trade routes. The Red Sea is critical for the global economy, as it facilitates trade between Europe, Asia, and the energy-rich Gulf Arab states. Control or influence over key access points, such as Port Sudan and potentially Djibouti, would allow Russia to increase its naval power into the Indian Ocean, monitor or disrupt Western maritime operations, and secure its own trade and military interests.

Additionally, Russia's engagement is aimed at countering Western influence in the region. With many Western countries scaling back their military and political presence or losing favor among local governments, Russia has moved in as an alternative partner, offering benefits such as arms, political support, and security cooperation without the conditionality tied to democracy or human rights. In other words, Russia has sought to exploit an opportunity gap left by the West. Russia's new ambition is also motivated by resource acquisition. In particular, the motivations of Kremlin include securing economic interests in areas such as mineral and energy resources. Eastern Africa is rich in gold, uranium, and other valuable minerals. Arms-for-resources deals and mining concessions enable Moscow to extract economic value while cementing long-term influence in fragile or authoritarian states.

Given this context, Russia's anti-Western narratives have proven remarkably effective in Eastern Africa due to a unique convergence of historical grievances, current geopolitical vacuums, and sophisticated information operations tailored to local contexts. These narratives, which were often centered around sovereignty, anti-colonial resistance, and Western hypocrisy, resonate deeply in societies still facing the consequences of the legacy of colonial rule and ongoing Western influence. Unlike the overt ideological framing of the Soviet era, modern Russian propaganda is far more pragmatic and locally adaptable. It operates on a spectrum of subtle suggestions and targeted messaging rather than overt communism or anti-capitalism. The effectiveness of these narratives begins with their grounding in widely held historical memory. For example, Eastern African countries such as Ethiopia (despite never being colonized in the traditional sense), Sudan, and Djibouti maintain a strong cultural and political awareness of colonialism, Western exploitation, and neo-colonial structures. Russia skillfully taps into these sentiments by framing itself not as a new superpower imposing its will, but as a counter-hegemonic force supporting African agency. For instance, during the Tigray conflict in Ethiopia, Russian media outlets like Sputnik portrayed Western sanctions and criticism of the Ethiopian government not as humanitarian interventions but as a form of neocolonial pressure aimed at controlling

sovereign African states [2]. By contrast, Russia's stance was depicted as one of solidarity and non-interference precisely the kind of message that appeals to governments and populations of Western "African interventions" [3].

Russia effectively leverages diplomatic symbolism and soft power to reinforce its narratives. For instance, Russia-Africa summits are often staged as partnerships of equals, deliberately contrasting with what is often perceived as the paternalistic or conditional tone of Western aid programs, for example through USAID, AfD or GIZ. The use of African symbols, languages, and traditions at such summits is not accidental. It is a soft power strategy that supports the narrative of Russia as a respectful, non-colonial partner. Russian embassies and cultural centers frequently emphasize shared struggles against Western dominance, even invoking Soviet support for African liberation movements during the Cold War. Furthermore, the Russian Orthodox Church and educational exchanges are also deployed strategically.

Perhaps most importantly, Russian anti-West narratives thrive because they are adapted to the local context. For example, during Sudan's internal conflicts [4], while Western nations called for democratic transition and imposed sanctions, Russia framed the chaos as a consequence of Western meddling and presented military actors as the only forces capable of maintaining order. Even when these arguments are simplistic or misleading, they resonate because they mirror local fears, frustrations, and lived experience.

Russia has also been increasingly expanding its influence in countries that are traditionally considered as Western allies, such as Kenya[5]. In Kenya through a combination of strategic tactics, including military support, economic aid, and diplomatic engagement, Russia has established a robust presence. In 2019, Russia signed a military cooperation agreement with Kenya, potentially opening the door for more direct military involvement[6]. Moscow has capitalized on Kenya's growing frustration with Western foreign policy by promoting anti-Western sentiment, particularly in media and political circles. This presence has amplified narratives in Kenyan politics, influencing the country's position on the Ukraine-Russia conflict. For example, Kenya has subtly adjusted its stance on the Russia-Ukraine war, shifting from its earlier, vocal criticism of Moscow's invasion to a more neutral and non-aligned position[7].

However, the issue of Russian influence in Kenya has become a widely accepted and politicized narrative, often used to frame public dissent. During the 2024 protests against a controversial finance bill, the government and affiliated online networks launched a coordinated campaign to discredit demonstrators. AI-generated images were circulated, falsely depicting protesters with Russian flags, and hashtags like #LiesVsFacts and #EnemiesOfTheState were used to link the movement to alleged foreign interference. Claims of connections to Russian actors, including the Wagner Group, were promoted without evidence. These tactics capitalized on the existing sensitivity around Russian influence in Kenyan society, using it as a tool to delegitimize protest and portray it as externally orchestrated[8].

2 https://tass.com/world/1329199

3 https://www.ethiopia-insight.com/2022/10/22/the-battle-of-narratives-around-the-war-in-tigray/

4 https://indopacificresearchers.org/sudan-and-russia-what-the-conflict-and-the-relationship-means-for-the-indo-pacific-theater/

5 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv22nd9pdwwo

6 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cv22nd9pdwwo

7 https://eastleighvoice.co.ke/ukraine/159661/kenya-shifts-to-neutral-stance-on-russia-ukraine-war-in-new-foreign-policy-pivot

8 https://dfrlab.org/2024/12/20/ai-tools-used-in-kenya-to-discredit-protesters-and-allege-russian-connections/

5. Russian influence in Western Africa

Over the past 15 years, Russia has significantly expanded its influence in Western Africa, particularly in the Sahel, by capitalising on regional instability, anti-Western sentiment, and the erosion of public trust in traditional partners such as France, the United States, and the European Union.

This evolution marks a sharp departure from Russia's relative absence in the region after the Cold War. Russia's approach has been largely transactional and security-driven, often bypassing formal diplomatic channels and instead forging direct ties with military juntas that have seized power in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. For example, across the region, Russia has bolstered its presence through pro-Kremlin media outlets like RT and Sputnik in French, and by supporting anti-Western activists and military groups.

In other Western African countries, Moscow has developed solid links in the energy sectors. For example, Russia's state nuclear corporation, ROSATOM, is among the contenders to construct Ghana's first nuclear power plant. Additionally, Russian oil companies like Rosneft and LUKOIL have initiated production and exploration projects in Ghana, aiming to position the country as a hub for distributing Russian oil across Africa. These initial contacts through the energy sector soon developed into media influence. In the media landscape, Russia has extended its reach through partnerships such as the 2021 agreement between News Ghana and Russia's Sputnik Information Agency, facilitating news exchange and promoting Russian perspectives within Ghana.

A clear example of this influence is related to the War in Ukraine. Between 2017 and 2019, Ghana experienced strong economic growth, but the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russia-Ukraine war caused significant setbacks, particularly in agriculture and food production sector. In this context, Russia positioned itself as a champion against Western imperialism, which resonated with Ghana's historical anti-colonial stance. Many Ghanaians, influenced by this narrative, viewed the conflict through the lens of African independence struggles, aligning with Russia as a counterforce to Western powers[9]. This narrative painted the war as a proxy battle for Western interests, with Ghana's support for Ukraine being seen as a betrayal of its founding values[10]. As Russia successfully pushed its narrative, it shifted public opinion in Ghana, making it difficult for many to back Ukraine[11].

Moreover, military cooperation has become another key instrument of influence. Through arms deals, training programs, and the deployment of paramilitary forces – most notably Wagner and now its successor entities under direct Russian state control – Moscow has positioned itself as a pragmatic ally willing to support regimes without imposing moral or political conditions. In contrast to Western actors, who typically promote governance, democratization, and human rights as prerequisites for cooperation, Russia offers immediate security assistance and political backing, a particularly attractive proposition for regimes facing regional or international sanctions. African paramilitary and military leaders, in exchange for military aid, often support Russia's geopolitical ambitions, including backing its position in conflicts like the war in Ukraine.

9 https://zmina.info/en/columns-en/why-african-countries-believe-russian-propaganda-and-how-to-prevent-it/

10 https://ppu.gov.ua/en/press-center/p-iata-panelna-dyskusiia-rosiyski-propahandystski-naratyvy-v-riznykh-chastynakh-svitu-yak-tse-vplyvaie-na-spryyniattia-ukrainy-y-zokrema-krymu/

11 https://uacrisis.org/en/countering-russian-propaganda-lessons-from-ukraine-africa

There are three compelling factors that make Russian military support and political influence particularly effective[12]. First, the conditionality of Russian military aid is almost non-existent, and it can quickly reach conflict zones. As a result, both state and non-state actors are more willing to accept it compared to Western counterparts, which often come with lengthy negotiations on human rights and democratic checks and balances. For example, the Central African Republic (CAR) provides a clear example of Russia's operational blueprint and its appeal to African military juntas[13]. In 2018, Russia successfully lobbied the UN Security Council for an arms embargo exemption, allowing it to deploy several hundred Wagner "instructors" to CAR's capital, Bangui, under the guise of supporting UN peacekeeping operations. By 2019, more than a thousand Wagner mercenaries were operating in CAR, exploiting natural resources such as gold, diamonds, and timber. Wagner not only infiltrated local markets through force and intimidation but also secured a foothold in President Faustin-Archange Touadéra's government, installing a Russian national as his chief security advisor and thus influencing its international political stance as well[14].

Second, Russian military support does not come with a single, unified narrative but can be justified through multiple perspectives. In other words, Russia's military support can be framed in various ways depending on the narrative and the public opinion being targeted [15]. For example, in some countries (such as the CAR example mentioned earlier), Russia is portrayed as a proponent of global stability, contrasting its interventions with those of Western nations, especially the United States, which are seen as sowing chaos. In other cases, Russia promotes ideological solidarity, positioning itself as a challenger of the "unfair international system," "Western hegemony," and "neo-colonialism." This narrative was especially prevalent in Niger, where social campaigns were launched to support Russian military interventions, fostering a climate of hostility toward the "colonial powers", particularly France and the U.S., fueled by government media and social media campaigns[16].

Third, neocolonial narratives remain a strong tool of influence. Russia casts itself as an anti-colonial partner, invoking the legacy of Soviet solidarity with African liberation movements and presenting itself as respectful of national sovereignty. This framing resonates powerfully in francophone West Africa, where frustration with France's perceived neocolonial posture has intensified amid ongoing jihadist violence and economic stagnation. Meanwhile, Western narratives have struggled to adapt and lead to stronger cooperation with the West, particularly from a narrative perspective. The EU and US continue to emphasise institutional reform and civilian rule, but their efforts are increasingly perceived as intrusive, ineffective, or self-serving – particularly as Western-backed security operations, such as France's Operation Barkhane, failed to stem the tide of extremism. Public opinion in parts of the Sahel has turned decisively hostile toward Western presence, with Russian flags now a common feature in pro-junta demonstrations, symbolising defiance rather than allegiance.

Although Russia's economic presence in West Africa is still relatively limited, it has managed to secure access to key natural resources like gold and uranium, often through opaque deals that benefit ruling elites. Its influence runs deep in some places, but it remains narrow – focused

12 https://edition.cnn.com/2025/01/18/africa/russia-expanding-influence-in-africa-intl-cmd/index.html

13 https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2025/03/24/russia-in-africa-private-military-proxies-in-the-sahel/

14 https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-africa/2023/12/19/wagner-s-valery-zakharov-makes-discreet-return-to-bangui,110130676-art

15 https://www.marshallcenter.org/en/publications/security-insights/russian-foreign-policy-narratives-0

16 https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/why-niger-left-the-west-and-embraced-russia/

more on elite ties, regime survival, and strategic messaging than on broader development goals. Western countries, on the other hand, still have wider influence thanks to their aid programs, trade relationships, and institutional partnerships. However, their credibility is slipping.

In addition, Russia's engagement in Africa increasingly reflects a sophisticated use of soft power, with modern media. For example, the recent film Touriste exemplifies this strategy, not merely as entertainment, but as a vehicle for political messaging. By portraying Russian military personnel as heroic and stabilizing actors in the Central African Republic, the film constructs a narrative that aligns with Moscow's broader geopolitical aims. However, the impact of Touriste lies not only in its content, but in how it was distributed and consumed. Its strategic circulation through a network of Instagram and Facebook pages across Francophone Africa, and the viral spread of key scenes, reveals a deliberate use of digital platforms to amplify influence[17].

Russia's growing role is changing the region's geopolitical landscape and contributing to the breakdown of regional structures. ECOWAS, once considered a cornerstone of West African cooperation and democracy promotion, is now being openly challenged by the emergence of the pro-Russian Alliance of Sahel States, which includes Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. This shift threatens regional coordination on issues like security, migration, and economic development – and has knock-on effects for Europe and beyond. At a deeper level, Russia's rising influence reflects a broader transformation in how power is exercised and perceived across the region. It marks a move toward a more contested, multipolar order, where calls for sovereignty, security, and post-colonial emancipation are used to push back against traditional Western dominance.

6. Key elements identified

Based on the comprehensive analysis we conducted, we have identified several key challenges related to the influence of Russian narratives in Africa, particularly in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war and associated issues.

Anti-Western views damage Ukrainian reputation

Russia uses its anti-colonial stance in Africa to jeopardize relationships between Ukraine and African partners, particularly in areas related to trade and international cooperation. Ukraine is often portrayed as a Western puppet, and the war against Russia is presented as a way for Western and former colonial powers to expand their influence over Russia. By promoting this viewpoint, Russia seeks to weaken African support for Ukraine and damage bilateral cooperation and trade between African countries and Ukraine.

Russia monopolizes the 'anti-colonial' narrative to prevent criticism from African countries

By positioning itself as an anti-Western ally, Russia spreads misinformation about anti-colonial power dynamics, which ultimately undermines further research on the subject in countries that have suffered most from Western colonial crimes. For instance, any association with Russian or Soviet colonialism is dismissed as "Western propaganda." This hampers the ability to study and compare Russian colonial actions in Ukraine, Central Asia, and other former Soviet states, preventing a broader understanding of

17 https://disinfo.africa/how-a-movie-drew-more-eyes-and-more-influence-for-russia-in-africa-e12911b509ce

colonialism's impact across different regions and hindering the identification of common patterns in Russia's historical actions.

The understanding of the Russian war in Ukraine remains extremely limited

By spreading disinformation and pro-Kremlin narratives, Russia effectively controls the story surrounding the conflict, particularly limiting information about its military losses and defeats. This narrative control is especially important as Russia continues to recruit mercenaries and soldiers, with any truthful information about the real situation on the ground potentially hurting these recruitment efforts. This is particularly concerning because many soldiers and mercenaries recruited from Africa face discrimination within the Russian military. being assigned to high-risk, "cannon fodder" roles in Ukraine.

Russia's strategic influence in Africa has an impact on international justice mechanisms and African countries' participation in them.

Russia has gained international support in forums like the UN and other multilateral bodies by spreading disinformation and increasing its political influence in Africa. Through this strategy, Russia has secured strong political allies who are particularly useful in key forums, such as the UN General Assembly, where decisions about investigating and addressing Russian crimes in Ukraine can be made. This is especially problematic because many African nations have firsthand experience with similar crimes and possess the knowledge and capacity to investigate and report on such violations. By cultivating these alliances, Russia undermines Africa's potential to play an active role in advancing international justice and promote effective ways to investigate war crimes based on international law.

7. Ghana as case study

Following our Workshop discussions and engagement with civil society organizations in Ghana, we found that Ghanaian civil society demonstrates a notable awareness of digital disinformation risks and Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI), particularly regarding developments in neighboring West African countries.

Ghana's civil society sector is among the most vibrant in West Africa, characterized by a dense ecosystem of NGOs, grassroots organizations, professional associations, and advocacy networks. Many of these groups have developed robust capacities in governance monitoring, electoral transparency, human rights, and anti-corruption work. However, their engagement on information-environment issues remains uneven. Organizations with expertise in digital rights – such as those working on freedom of expression, privacy, and online safety – are comparatively small and under-resourced, creating a structural imbalance in civil society's ability to monitor and respond to emerging disinformation trends. Moreover, several CSOs noted that long-term donor funding has increasingly shifted toward economic development and social protection, leaving digital information integrity as a peripheral priority. As a result, only a handful of actors consistently track online influence operations or produce research on cross-border information manipulation.

Ghana's media landscape mirrors these dynamics. The country benefits from a constitutionally protected press, hundreds of private radio stations, and a growing digital news sector. Yet despite this plurality, Ghanaian media faces persistent structural weaknesses: limited investigative capacity, high levels of political parallelism, and economic pressures that make outlets re-

liant on patronage or commercial sponsorship. These pressures, combined with insufficient fact-checking infrastructure, create vulnerabilities that foreign or domestic actors can exploit. Journalists and editors we engaged with acknowledged that their newsrooms rarely have the time or resources to investigate complex information-operations narratives – particularly those involving foreign actors or opaque online networks. Instead, reporting often relies on syndicated content or political commentary, which can allow unverified claims to circulate with minimal scrutiny.

At the same time, Ghana's media environment is undergoing rapid digital transformation. Social media platforms – especially Facebook, WhatsApp, TikTok, and increasingly Telegram – play a central role in shaping public discourse. This shift has weakened the gatekeeping function of traditional media and created a fragmented information ecosystem in which rumors, partisan narratives, and foreign-origin disinformation travel quickly across linguistic, generational, and regional boundaries. Civil society groups attempting to counter disinformation emphasized that the speed and emotional tone of online narratives often outpace their ability to respond. They also noted growing audience distrust of mainstream media, driven by concerns over political bias and sensationalism. This dynamic further empowers unregulated online influencers, bloggers, and pseudo-news pages, many of whom operate without transparency and remain susceptible – whether intentionally or unintentionally – to amplifying foreign-backed narratives.

Most activists we interviewed were well-informed about regional Russian activities in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, for instance via PMC and mercenaries. For instance, they identified specific instances of cross-border disinformation campaigns in which Russian narratives propagate through the region, primarily via social media platforms. However, our discussions revealed that the issue remains relatively low on the agenda of both civil society and state institutions.

Interviewees identified three related factors contributing to this gap

First, Ghana is a functioning democracy with regular elections, multiple political parties, and constitutional institutions. Yet its democratic system remains in a process of consolidation. This ongoing process fundamentally shapes national priorities: both government and civil society concentrate their efforts on issues directly affecting governance, electoral integrity, and institutional stability. In other words, the country's political attention and resources remain focused inward on strengthening democratic foundations rather than outward on external information threats This prioritization has direct consequences for how regional threats are perceived. Russian interference in West Africa, for instance, tends to be viewed as a secondary concern unless it demonstrates a tangible impact on Ghana's own democratic stability. Disinformation counter-efforts follow the same logic. Civil society organizations working on disinformation have concentrated primarily on domestic threats (local electoral manipulation, local misinformation campaigns, and national governance issues). Regional disinformation networks and narrative only spark significant attention when they begin to affect Ghana's internal political landscape.

Second, Russia's capacity to influence Ghana's information landscape is constrained by its limited economic footprint in the country. While Russia maintains political connections dating back to the Soviet era, its economic presence remains limited in comparison to other international actors. For example, China stands out as by far the most significant economic partner, with bilateral trade reaching billions of dollars annually and spanning imports, exports, and major infrastructure investments. This economic dominance translates into substantially greater influence over Ghana's

information space and public narratives. Beyond China, Ghana's most substantial economic relationships are with the European Union and the United States. Both serve as primary destinations for Ghanaian exports – particularly cocoa, gold, and oil – and major sources of investment, development assistance, and technology. Like China, this economic integration grants these actors considerable visibility in Ghana's media environment. For example, during our field activities, we observed that initiatives by GIZ (Germany's federal development agency) received regular coverage in local newspapers and national television, generating sustained public discussion (even during our workshop). Russian initiatives, by contrast, enjoy no comparable media presence and generate minimal public discourse. Despite Russia's diplomatic activities and occasional cultural events in Accra, when Russia attempts to amplify its narratives or build influence, it does so from a position of profound informational disadvantage. And so, the public awareness of the danger of these views remains limited. Paradoxically, this limitation creates its own vulnerability: because Russian information activities operate below the threshold of public attention, awareness of their potential risks remains correspondingly low. What is rarely seen is rarely scrutinized, and what goes unscrutinized generates little defensive mobilization among civil society or media watchdogs.

Third, activists and representatives of civil society confirmed that disinformation has significantly impacted Ghana over the past decade, but Russian involvement remains difficult to establish or identify. False narratives on social media have inflamed ethnic and partisan tensions, particularly during elections. Misinformation about electoral processes, COVID-19, and economic policy has eroded public trust in government institutions and media. Politicians and influencers have exploited these dynamics to sway opinion and deepen polarization.

Yet the Ukraine war barely registers in Ghana's information space. While the conflict attracted public attention in early 2022, it has since faded from the informational landscape – especially compared to regional crises with direct consequences for Ghana: the Sahel conflict, jihadist violence, and ethnic tensions across West Africa. Civil society activists confirmed that disinformation around these regional issues is far more visible and consequential than anything related to Ukraine. More importantly, even where disinformation circulates in Ghana's information space, tracing it back to clear Russian activities proves extremely difficult. The disinformation exists but the Russian hand behind it remains elusive and difficult to identify or track.

Nevertheless, multiple participants confirmed that messaging damaging to Ukraine's image did spread through certain media channels and was amplified to some extent. For example, the narrative that Ukraine and Russia are fighting a proxy war (with Ukrainians manipulated by the West) circulated online and through some media. Other war-related issues also gained traction in Ghanaian online spaces, particularly disruptions to global wheat markets. In these discussions, Ukraine and specifically the Ukrainian government were blamed for rising food costs. These narratives aligned with Russian messaging and worked to shift blame away from Russia's invasion and onto Ukraine and its Western partners.

8. Kenya as case study

While in Ghana our discussions on disinformation remained largely at the activist and civil society level, our Kenya workshop allowed us to engage more deeply with policy dimensions of the issue. Kenyan participants demonstrated a stronger grasp of disinformation-related policy frameworks, particularly those concerning artificial intelligence and AI-generated disinformation. This difference

likely reflects Kenya's more developed regulatory conversations around digital technologies and the country's position as East Africa's tech hub, where questions about AI governance and online content regulation have gained greater traction in both government and civil society circles.

Kenya's civil society landscape is one of the most developed and influential on the African continent, with a wide range of organizations active in governance reform, human rights, digital rights, and election monitoring. Over the past decade, several Kenyan CSOs have acquired substantial expertise in tracking online misinformation and political propaganda, particularly during election cycles, when disinformation campaigns intensify. However, despite this strong institutional base, the focus of most Kenyan organizations remains on domestic political disinformation – such as manipulated narratives around ethnic politics, electoral competition, and government accountability. External information manipulation, especially from foreign actors such as Russia, receives less systematic attention. Stakeholders noted that funding for digital resilience and information integrity tends to be episodic and concentrated around elections, making sustained capacity building difficult. This creates a structural gap: organizations that are otherwise highly capable lack long-term resources to map or investigate cross-border influence networks originating outside Kenya.

The Kenyan media environment faces many of the same vulnerabilities. Although Kenya boasts a competitive, diverse media sector – featuring strong investigative outlets, national broadcasters, and a large ecosystem of radio and digital platforms – economic and political pressures have weakened editorial independence. Media houses increasingly rely on sponsored content and political advertising, which can subtly shape editorial priorities and reduce capacity for in-depth verification work. Several journalists we consulted highlighted that foreign influence operations, particularly those originating from Russian actors or their proxies, often go unnoticed partially because they operate through indirect channels: social media memes, local influencers, niche online outlets, or pan-African ideological content that blends seamlessly with existing political narratives. Without dedicated investigative resources, Kenyan newsrooms struggle to identify and analyze the foreign origins of such narratives, even when they gain significant traction online.

Kenya's rapid digitalization further complicates efforts to counter FIMI. With high mobile penetration, widespread use of WhatsApp and TikTok, and a dynamic influencer economy, the Kenyan information ecosystem is highly decentralized and fast-moving. This makes it fertile ground for narratives that exploit grievances around governance, foreign policy, or economic hardship – narratives that Russian actors have historically leveraged in other parts of Africa. While Kenya is not a primary target for Russian influence operations, narratives that align with Russian geopolitical objectives – such as anti-Western sentiment, pro-sovereigntist messaging, or skepticism toward liberal democratic norms – periodically circulate in Kenyan online spaces. Civil society actors noted that such narratives often enter the Kenyan environment indirectly, via pan-African pages, diaspora networks, or regional content originating in countries where Russian influence is more overt. Because these messages do not always appear "foreign," Kenyan audiences and watchdogs often treat them as organic local debate rather than as part of broader influence strategies. This lack of visibility – combined with resource constraints and domestic political distractions – reduces Kenya's ability to systematically counter FIMI, even as receptive online communities help sustain the narratives' circulation.

Two aspects of Russian disinformation proved particularly relevant to our research in Kenya. First, Russian messaging taps directly into anti-colonial narratives that carry enormous

Series of lectures "Ukraine Conflict and its Effect on Africa" by Patrick Loch Otieno Lumumba, a Kenyan lawyer and anti-corruption activist, broadcast on the Russian state-owned RT TV network.

weight in Kenyan political discourse. Russia presents itself as a historic supporter of anti-colonial movements and a champion of pan-African efforts to address post-colonial legacies – not just in Kenya, but across East and Southern Africa more broadly. Workshop participants told us that outlets like Sputnik and RT are highly effective at promoting these narratives, often by creating viral content that spreads quickly through social media. Within this framing, Ukraine gets cast as a "Western puppet" or an enemy of the global anti-colonial struggle.

Second, these outlets repackage Russia's war in Ukraine as part of an anti-colonial fight against Western imperial powers. They portray the illegally self-proclaimed "republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk as anti-colonial liberation movements rather than Russian-backed separatist territories. This narrative twist is deliberate: by borrowing the language and symbolism of African liberation struggles, Russian media tries to align Moscow's invasion with African experiences of resisting foreign domination – even though Russia is engaged in a straightforward act of colonial conquest. Unfortunately, some participants reported that these narratives resonate particularly well in rural communities with limited access to diverse news sources or where Russian state media has filled information gaps left by reduced coverage from international outlets. The effectiveness of these messages appears linked less to education levels and more to media consumption patterns (specifically, reliance on social media as a primary news source and limited exposure to alternative perspectives on global events, including the war in Ukraine.

One example of this pattern is Lumumba's Africa, a highly successful series of lectures by Patrick Loch Otieno Lumumba, a Kenyan lawyer and anti-corruption activist, broadcast on the Russian state-owned RT TV network. The lecture series is filmed in Kenya and broadcast internationally in English and Russian, mixing legitimate and relevant discussions of African economic and social development – including anti-colonialism – with elements of Russian propaganda and disinformation.

In the episode "Ukraine Conflict and its Effect on Africa," Lumumba argues that the war in Ukraine is a proxy conflict with Ukraine fighting "in the interest" of Western powers. He claims

that disruptions to fertilizer supplies affecting many African countries are a direct result of this proxy war. Lumumba also argues that the war prevents Russia from exporting oil and gas to Africa, claiming that Russia is a crucial partner for crude oil in many African countries but can no longer support them because of the war in Ukraine. He largely portrays the war as driven by Western interests and highlights BRICS and Russia-Africa Forum meetings as positive developments for overcoming the challenges brought by the Russo-Ukrainian war. In this episode, Ukraine is not portrayed as a country with its own agency or identity but simply as a proxy of Western powers.

Other episodes of Lumumba's Africa also amplify Russian narratives and disinformation. For example, in an episode on Africa and the BRICS, Lumumba presents BRICS as "an alternative to Western financial institutions that have dictated the rules of the global economy for decades." In another episode titled "Africa & USSR," he emphasizes that many talented African youth received Soviet education during the Cold War and returned home to work for their countries' development and independence. Lumumba argues that Russia, as "the USSR's successor," continues this legacy by seeking genuine partnerships based on mutual respect rather than the exploitative relationships he attributes to Western powers. This narrative frames Russia as a historical ally of African liberation movements and positions current Russian engagement as a continuation of that supportive role. What goes unmentioned in this episode is the Soviet Union's own imperial record, particularly in Ukraine, where Russification efforts and genocidal acts like the Holodomor (the forced famine that killed millions of Ukrainians in the 1930s) are completely overlooked.

In general, in Lumumba's Africa Ukraine itself is either ignored or reduced to a footnote in these discussions, erasing its own experience as a victim of Soviet and Russian colonialism. And of course, Russia's current war of aggression against Ukraine gets reframed as part of a Western effort to prevent Russia from building partnerships with the Global South, turning an act of imperial conquest into yet another story of Western interference.

Series of lectures "Ukraine Conflict and its Effect on Africa" by Patrick Loch Otieno Lumumba, a Kenyan lawyer and anti-corruption activist, broadcast on the Russian state-owned RT TV network.

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Help! We are dying...

...Mr President, don't turn your back

PLEASE SAVE US! As the world's deadliest war grinds on, Kenya's forgotten sons are bleeding on the Russian frontlines—trapped by deceit and abandoned by diplomacy. President William Ruto and Prime Cabinet Secretary Musalia Mudavadi, who vowed swift action nearly two weeks ago, have gone silent as families drown in anguish, begging for news of their children. PAGES 6 & 7

John Kariuki with his wife Rahab Muthoni, parents of missing ex-KDF soldier Samuel Maina, hold portraits of their 31-year-old son at their home in Kilimambogo, Kiambu County. Maina is reported to be in Russia and has been missing for several months. [Gitau Wanyoike, Standard]

Below: A Russian soldier and foreign fighters, including Kenyans. [Courtesy]

The Standard Group is recognized as a leading multi-media house in Kenya with a key influence in matters of national and international interest.

While we do not have precise data on the viewership of these documentaries, our interviews with civil society activists and media monitors indicate that this type of content (and similar Russian-produced material) frequently goes viral on social media platforms, particularly TikTok. Short clips from Lumumba's lectures get extracted, repackaged, and shared widely, reaching audiences far beyond those who watch RT directly. As a result, these narratives exert significant influence in rural communities where access to diverse news sources is limited and among young people who primarily consume news through social media rather than traditional outlets.

Another example of how Russia manipulates Kenyan society concerns its military recruitment efforts. Russian actors use systematic disinformation tactics to recruit Kenyan citizens for military purposes. Fake job advertisements spread through social media serve as the primary recruitment tool, presenting false information about employment opportunities in Russia. Recruits are promised comprehensive support packages – including visa processing, travel costs, and accommodation – along with compensation that is simply too high to be realistic in the current Russian job market.

Crucially, these disinformation campaigns deliberately conceal the true nature of the work recruits will be required to perform upon arrival in Russia. Kenyan nationals are subsequently coerced into military service against Ukraine or

employed in military production facilities. This practice amounts to forced military mobilisation disguised as lawful labour migration, enabled entirely through deception and information manipulation. Kenya's embassy in Moscow has formally documented injuries sustained by recruited citizens, providing official confirmation of this recruitment pattern.

These recruitment efforts are preceded by the systematic use of open-source intelligence (OSINT) to identify socially and economically vulnerable groups within Kenyan society, reflecting established patterns of Russian Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) and hybrid warfare doctrine. Russian-linked actors monitor public social media activity, employment platforms, community forums, and migration-related discussions to map and profile potential targets. Identified individuals are then approached through direct messaging on platforms such as Telegram, WhatsApp, Facebook, and other social media channels. These engagements rely on cyber-enabled social engineering tactics, including impersonation, tailored narratives, fabricated credibility, and incremental trust-building, gradually shifting interactions from employment offers to covert military recruitment.

During fieldwork in Kenya, researchers observed that the issue was receiving considerable attention in national media. The Standard, one of Kenya's oldest and most influential newspapers, placed the story about forced mobilization on its front page, underscoring its perceived significance. The reporting detailed how Kenyan citizens were being recruited into Russian military service through deceptive job offers.

According to The Standard, fake job advertisements serve as a central instrument in the recruitment process. These adverts form part of a broader Russian disinformation effort that exploits genuine economic aspirations.

The newspaper's coverage also shows how prominent this issue has become within Kenyan society. It documents the existence and scale of the recruitment operations, demonstrates growing public awareness of these deceptive practices, and provides contemporaneous evidence of the phenomenon during the period of our fieldwork.

Moreover, reporting by the BBC has documented individual cases that illustrate the scale and risks of these recruitment operations. One case concerned a Kenyan woman, Faith, who applied for what she believed was a factory job in Russia. She was assured of good pay and a safe working environment. Only after arriving did she learn that she had been assigned to the Alabuga Special Economic Zone in Tatarstan, a site involved in the production of military drones used in Ukraine, information that had not been disclosed to her prior to departure. On 2 April 2024, Ukrainian forces carried out a drone strike on the Alabuga facility, barely two weeks after Faith's arrival. The incident underscores that civilian workers placed in military production sites become potential targets, a risk that recruits are never made aware of before they travel.

Bloomberg has also documented how Russia has expanded this recruitment model. Its investigation found that the Alabuga programme has drawn in hundreds of young Africans through social media and other informal digital channels. Many recruits only discover upon arrival that they are expected to take part in military production. The facility manufactures drones and other weapons used in the war against Ukraine, and workers frequently sign contracts written in Russian that they cannot fully understand. Several reported pressure to remain even when they wished to leave. Bloomberg's findings indicate that this approach has been replicated across additional facilities, suggesting a coordinated strategy to employ foreign labour in military production while concealing the true nature of the work in Russia.

9. Other cases reported by our partners

Because our research involved close collaboration with partners in both Ghana and Kenya, we also want to note a few additional issues they raised. While these are not directly tied to Russian disinformation, they help illustrate how foreign actors can shape or manipulate the information space in countries like Ghana and Kenya.

Erosion of Public Trust

Partners noted that over the past decade, disinformation – both domestic and foreign has substantially undermined public confidence in government, major institutions, and prominent individuals. Young people, in particular, were described as increasingly disengaged and distrustful of official sources such as traditional media. While this problem is not unique to African societies, in the context analysed it has particularly disruptive effects on democratic consolidation in Africa.

Political Destabilization and Polarization

Partners reported that disinformation has contributed to widening political divides, heightened partisan tensions, and deeper community-level polarization, both in Kenya and Ghana. These dynamics have weakened democratic processes.

Weaponization by Regimes and Political Actors

Several partners emphasized that disinformation is frequently deployed as a political tool: to advance propaganda, obstruct justice, manipulate public narratives, and shape mass opinion. In some contexts, these practices reinforce authoritarian tendencies and help political elites maintain control over public perception.

Country-Specific Impact

In the Ghanaian context, partners reported that false narratives circulating on social media have intensified ethnic and partisan tensions. Misinformation related to electoral processes and COVID-19 has contributed to declining public trust, while low levels of digital literacy leave many citizens particularly vulnerable to manipulation. This is an issue that all civil society organisations working in the digital sphere need to address.

Capacity Building and Training

Numerous initiatives have been implemented by our partners, focusing on capacity-building workshops and training for media practitioners, journalists, youth, digital content creators, regulators, and religious leaders. Unfortunately, challenges such as limited funding and insufficient support from both local governments and international organisations have been identified as major obstacles to scaling up these efforts.

10. Policy Recommendations

Based on the research findings on Russian disinformation and influence operations in Eastern and Western Africa, we recommend the following four policy interventions:

1. Establish a Pan-African-Ukrainian Counter-Disinformation Network

Create a formalized, sustainable network connecting Ukrainian diplomatic missions, Ukrainian civil society organizations, African civil society organizations, media practitioners, and academic institutions across the continent to collectively identify, analyze, and counter Russian disinformation narratives. This network should:

- Establish regional hubs in key countries (Kenya, Ghana, Nigeria, Ethiopia, South Africa) with dedicated coordination staff from both Ukrainian and African partner organizations
- Facilitate regular information sharing on emerging disinformation trends, Russian narrative strategies, and effective counter-messaging approaches
- Develop joint rapid-response mechanisms to address false narratives about the war in Ukraine and related geopolitical issues that may affect Africa.
- Create collaborative research initiatives that document Russian information operations in Africa.
- Provide a platform for African voices to share their own analysis of the war in Ukraine, moving beyond binary Western-Russian framings
- Connect Ukrainian experiences of Russian colonialism with broader discussions of imperialism, colonialism and sovereignty in African contexts

This network should be funded through a combination of EU support, bilateral Ukrainian partnerships, and contributions from democratic foundations, with governance structures ensuring African ownership and leadership.

2. Develop Comprehensive Regional Disinformation Mapping and Monitoring Systems

Implement coordinated, systematic monitoring and documentation of Russian disinformation campaigns across Eastern and Western African regions, creating publicly accessible databases that track:

- Specific disinformation narratives circulating in each country and their regional spread patterns
- Platform-specific dynamics (Facebook, TikTok, X/Twitter, WhatsApp) and how content migrates between them
- Attribution indicators linking content to Russian state media, embassies, cultural centers, or proxy actors
- Economic and political context that makes certain narratives resonate in particular communities
- Impact assessment of disinformation on public opinion, policy debates, and bilateral relations

This mapping should be conducted in partnership with local civil society, employing locally-based researchers who understand cultural and political contexts. The system should provide early warning capabilities when Russian narratives gain traction and enable targeted interventions before narratives become entrenched. Data should be shared with governments, civil society, regional organisations, media organizations, and international partners while protecting researcher security.

3. Launch Targeted Media Literacy and Digital Resilience Programs for Rural and Underserved Communities

Address the vulnerability of rural communities and young social media users to Russian disinformation through comprehensive, locally-adapted media literacy initiatives that:

- Prioritize outreach to rural areas with limited access to diverse news sources, where Russian narratives encounter less competition
- Train community leaders, religious figures, and local influencers to identify and counter disinformation within their networks
- Develop educational content in local languages and formats suitable for low-bandwidth environments and mobile-first users
- Focus specifically on recognizing foreign information manipulation tactics, including how colonial and anti-imperial language can be weaponized
- Create youth-focused programs addressing social media literacy, with particular emphasis on TikTok and other platforms where short-form Russian propaganda content goes viral
- Establish partnerships with universities to integrate critical media literacy into curricula, developing long-term societal resilience

These programs should be co-designed with local communities to ensure cultural relevance and avoid replicating the paternalistic dynamics that Russian narratives exploit. Funding should be sustained over multiple years, addressing the chronic under-resourcing of civil society partners identified during fieldwork.

4. Support African Civil Society Through Strategic Funding and Institutional Capacity Building

Address the resource constraints that limit civil society's ability to monitor and counter Russian disinformation by:

- Establishing dedicated, multi-year funding streams for African organizations working on disinformation research, fact-checking, and democratic resilience (not short-term project grants)
- Providing institutional support for organizations to hire permanent staff, invest in technology infrastructure, and develop sustained monitoring capabilities
- Creating mentorship and knowledge-exchange programs connecting African and Ukrainian researchers, journalists, and activists
- Supporting African-led research that documents Russian influence operations while also examining Western communication failures and the historical roots of anti-Western sentiment
- Funding investigative journalism that traces opaque economic relationships between Russian entities and African elites, exposing corruption that enables information manipulation
- Building technical capacity for open-source intelligence (OSINT) investigations that can attribute disinformation campaigns to specific actors

This support should recognize that African partners are not merely implementers of external agendas but strategic actors with vital expertise on their own information environments. Funding mechanisms should be flexible, trust-based, and responsive to rapidly evolving information threats rather than constrained by rigid bureaucratic requirements that partners described as obstacles to effective work.

11. Contributors

We are deeply grateful to the partners and organisations whose insights, expertise, and commitment made this research possible. Their willingness to share concrete experiences, best practices, and critical perspectives – before, during, and after our field research activities in Ghana and Kenya – proved invaluable in shaping this report.

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