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The Russian Obsession: Disinformation and Propaganda in the Sahel

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Abstract:

This document analyzes Russia's growing influence in the Sahel region through sophisticated disinformation and propaganda campaigns. These campaigns have achieved significant success, especially among African youth, as evidenced by the rise in pro-Russian sentiment and the expulsion of Western presence from several Sahel countries. The Russian approach has capitalized on the region's informational vulnerabilities, such as the weakness of local media, the high use of social media among young people, and limited access to reliable news. As a result, Russian disinformation has contributed to the destabilisation of the Sahel, the consolidation of military regimes, and the marginalisation of dissenting voices, positioning Russia as a geopolitical actor that is both central and dangerous in the region. Europe must commit to a more comprehensive, engaged, and ambitious approach that combines the fight against disinformation with support for governance, local development, and transparent communication tailored to the realities of the Sahel. Only in this way can it recover lost influence and prevent Russia's military, diplomatic, and economic presence—as well as its popularity and influence in the Sahel—from continuing to grow and ultimately becoming a permanent concern for European and Spanish security interests.

Keywords:

Sahel, disinformation, propaganda, Russia, Europe, Africa, hybrid warfare, influence, military juntas, anti-colonialism, information warfare.

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The Russian concept of disinformation and propaganda

The Royal Academy of the Spanish language defines the verb "desinformar" as the action of "giving information intentionally manipulated to serve certain ends, or giving insufficient information or omitting it". Intentionality differentiates it from false or misleading information that is created and disseminated by mistake or with no intention to deceive.

Although generally identified with propaganda, this does not imply that all propaganda is necessarily disinformation, as disinformation primarily seeks to deceive and confuse, giving messages an appearance of plausibility and plausibility to a confused and frightened recipient audience, whereas propaganda seeks to persuade and shape opinions for partisan purposes, although it usually includes disinformation as a routine procedure.¹

Russian doctrine makes a clear distinction between the two terms. Propaganda refers to a mixture of true with manipulated or exaggerated, or simply false, information that seeks to generate uncertainty and make it difficult for the public to distinguish between truth and falsehood.² Its main characteristic is the intention to persuade and mobilize a certain audience, whether internal or external, by openly using its state media such as RT and Sputnik, which present official narratives that serve to justify the government's actions and dehumanize the adversary.³

Russia, for its part, bases disinformation, or *deziformatsiya*, on the so-called Gerasimov Doctrine, the current Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, who in an article entitled "The value of science is in foresight" published in February 2013 in the Russian military-industrial weekly *Kurier*,⁴ stated that "The very *rules of warfare* have changed. The role of non-military means to achieve political and strategic objectives has

¹ Navarro, O., and A. Wagner. "Disinformation and censorship, two key tools of war in Ukraine." *The Conversation*, 1 Mar. 2022, <https://theconversation.com/desinformacion-y-censura-dos-herramientas-clave-de-la-guerra-en-ucrania-178596>

² Martí News. "How Russian propaganda works: dissemination channels, methods and narratives." *Martí Noticias*, 18 Apr. 2024, <https://www.martinoticias.com/a/c%C3%B3mo-funciona-la-propaganda-rusa-canales-de-difusi%C3%B3n-m%C3%A9todos-y-narrativas/388187.html>

³ Galán Cordero, C. "El ecosistema de propaganda rusa." *Foreign Policy*, 6 Oct. 2023, <https://www.politicaexterior.com/articulo/el-ecosistema-de-propaganda-rusa/>

⁴ Gerasimov, Valery. "The Value of Science Is in the Foresight: New Challenges Demand Rethinking the Forms and Methods of Carrying out Combat Operations." *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 27 Feb. 2013. Translated by Robert Coalson. *Military Review*, Jan.-Feb. 2016, pp. 23-29, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/portals/7/military-review/archives/english/militaryreview_20160228_art008.pdf

increased and, in many cases, they have surpassed the power of arms in effectiveness". In this new context, "...Information space opens up vast asymmetric possibilities for reducing the enemy's combat potential".⁵

In other words, for Russia, the media and social networks have become a powerful weapon to deliberately distort the enemy's perception of reality and "promote its economic, political or ideological interests, or simply to destabilize"⁶. It is a sophisticated technique that employs human and artificial intelligence (bots) to create false, manipulated or fabricated information, which is passed off and disseminated as plausible or true.

There is an obvious overlap between the two terms, as in reality both propaganda and disinformation are part of what is called "active measures", a set of operations that include propaganda, media manipulation, infiltration of agents and covert operations⁷ and that aim to weaken, discredit and disorient opponents. The major difference lies in the new forms of dissemination through digital platforms that disinformation uses.

Precisely because of the functioning of social networks for sharing and disseminating information, false and misleading information can spread quickly and reach many people. Moreover, the ease with which users can forward this type of information on a large scale and the existence of a large number of fake user accounts that spread false or misleading information on different platforms, even in an automated way through so-called "bots", make disinformation campaigns highly effective.⁸

The lack of neutrality in Russian media such as Russia Today (RT) or Sputnik, which do not report independently but are under state control, is also exploited to carry out disinformation activities, the reach of which has multiplied exponentially through social media.

⁵ Galeotti, Mark. "The Gerasimov Doctrine." *POLITICO Magazine*, 5 Sept. 2017, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538/>.

⁶ Navarro, O., and A. Wagner. "Disinformation and censorship, two key tools of war in Ukraine." *The Conversation*, 1 Mar. 2022, <https://theconversation.com/desinformacion-y-censura-dos-herramientas-clave-de-la-guerra-en-ucrania-178596>

⁷ Colom Piella, Guillem. "Anatomy of Russian Disinformation." *History and Social Communication*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2020, pp. 473-480.

⁸ German Federal Ministry of the Interior and Home Affairs. Frequently asked questions - Disinformation in the context of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine. 2024, p. 4. <https://www.bmi.bund.de/SharedDocs/downloads/EN/themen/disinformation/faq-desinformacion-es.pdf>

	Propaganda	Disinformation
Transparency	Open (identifiable state media)	Covert (fake accounts or <i>troll farms</i>)
Transmission	Traditional media and social networks	Social networks (80%), local forums and rumors
Time Space	Persistent (long-term story building)	Ad hoc (e.g. before coups d'état or military operations)

Source: own elaboration generated with Perplexity AI (2025).

How Russian disinformation works in the Sahel

In recent years, Russia has been responsible for approximately 40% of all documented operations on the continent. Since 2022, at least 80 Russian-sponsored campaigns have been identified, targeting more than 22 African countries, reaching millions of people through fake or dubious websites, publications and media channels⁹. In these campaigns, Russia promotes itself as an alternative to Western countries, presenting itself as an advantageous partner willing to reshape the world order in favour of states experiencing injustice due to Western actions.¹⁰

This narrative is in line with the Russian Foreign Policy Concept¹¹, which states that "the unjust model of global development, which for centuries ensured exponential economic growth of colonial powers by appropriating the resources of dependent territories and states in Asia, Africa and the Western Hemisphere, is irreversibly in the past. "Russia aims to establish a "just and sustainable" world order, which, in the case of Africa, is realized through support for "the sovereignty and independence of the African states

⁹ Milosevich-Juaristi, Mira. Russia in Africa and the possible repercussions for Spain. Real Instituto Elcano, 2023, Elcano Policy Paper, <https://media.realinstitutoelcano.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/policy-paper-rusia-en-africa-y-las-posibles-repercusiones-para-espana.pdf>

¹⁰ war.ukraine.ua. "Russia lies. Why the world should ban the Kremlin's media." war.ukraine.ua, 8 Feb. 2024, <https://war.ukraine.ua/es/articulos/piojos-rusos-por-que-el-mundo-deberia-prohibir-los-medios-de-comunicacion-del-kremlin/>

¹¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation. 31 Mar. 2023, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/fundamental_documents/1860586/?lang=es

concerned, in particular through assistance in the areas of security, including food and energy security, and military and military-technical cooperation".

This Russian propaganda message has been remarkably successful in Africa, where intentional misinformation dissemination has proven very effective in misleading African societies receptive, especially in the Sahel, to the Russian message. According to a 2020 study, 68 per cent of young Africans had a favorable opinion of Russia, compared to only 57 % with a positive opinion of France.¹²

Russian disinformation in the Sahel is a key component of Moscow's geopolitical strategy to strengthen its position on the international stage, replacing Western powers, especially France, as the main partner in the resource-rich and strategically vital Sahel region. At the same time, Russia's actions in Africa should be understood as a form of retaliation against the Atlantic Alliance for its role in the Ukrainian war and as a way to challenge Western influence by creating difficulties for NATO on its southern flank.¹³

The process begins with attempts to discredit Western actors, through false or manipulated narratives accusing them, and primarily France, of practicing a new form of colonialism based on economic exploitation and crimes against civilians. Russia has skillfully exploited anti-imperialist sentiment and historical colonial grievances to turn public opinion in Africa against France and the West in general¹⁴. For example, during the withdrawal of French troops from Chad in 2024, pro-Russian accounts disseminated videos with identical messages about the "final humiliation" of France, presenting the departure as the end of colonial oppression.¹⁵

Russia has been able to present itself as the legitimate heir of the former Soviet Union, appropriating the positive legacy it left in the region when it became the main aid to African ex-colonies in their struggles to secure their independence. Soviet support created a

¹² GIS Reports. "Russia's Propaganda Campaign in Africa: Discrediting France, Destabilizing the Sahel." *GIS Reports*, 2024, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/r/russia-africa-propaganda/>

¹³ "La Vanguardia Dossier." *Russia extends its influence on NATO's southern flank despite Ukraine war*, 17 Apr. 2025, <https://www.lavanguardia.com/internacional/vanguardia-dossier/revista/20250417/10557086/rusia-extiende-influencia-flanco-sur-otan-pese.html>.

¹⁴ Vega, Alba, and Anastasia Herranz. *Russia-Africa Summit 2023: What can we expect?* IEEE Opinion Paper 66/2023, 4 July 2023, https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2023/DIEEE066_2023_ANAHER_Cumbre.pdf.

¹⁵ Wilkins, Henry. "Kremlin Disinformation Campaigns Aim to Discredit French Military in the Sahel, Analysts Say." *VOA News*, 20 Feb. 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/kremlin-disinformation-campaigns-aim-to-discredit-french-military-in-the-sahel-analysts-say-/7988010.html>.

relationship of emotional dependency in large sectors of African societies, as well as material and operational dependency in its armed forces, which were inherited by Russia after the collapse of the USSR.

Russian disinformation has been facilitated by the end of Operation Barkhane in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad in 2014 and the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) in 2013, which have been presented as clear examples of failed counter-terrorism strategies by Western powers. The cancellation of both missions in December 2023, along with the European Union Training Mission (EUTM), has meant the end of European efforts in the Sahel region and the creation of a vacuum that Russia has skillfully exploited.

Moreover, the failure of US counter-terrorism policy to combat terrorist groups such as Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and the Islamic State in the Sahel has fuelled anti-American attitudes in African societies. Russian disinformation has capitalized on these failures to attack the US by using the message of anti-imperialism and neo-colonialism, so prevalent in Africa, to inflame anti-Western sentiment.¹⁶ In addition to the disinformation effect, the very constraints of US legislation have forced the US to cut off security assistance once the coups occurred, ending more than a decade of investment on security in the Sahel, favoring Russia's entry into the region .

Russia has capitalized on Western strategies failures in the Sahel to create a narrative aimed at convincing local societies that Westerners are to blame for the security problems plaguing the region. And that despite the fact that, since France began withdrawing in 2022, conflict-related fatalities in the Sahel have increased by 65%, according to the renowned Armed Conflict Location and Events Database (ACLED).¹⁷

In the Sahel, misinformation is spread through both social media and traditional channels, taking advantage of the social structure: elders rely on oral tradition and community leaders, while increasingly connected youth look to paid local *influencers*, digital avatars and manipulated media to fuel anti-Western sentiment and a sense of policy failure.¹⁸

¹⁶ Fikra Forum. "An Iron Curtain in the Sahel." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 May 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iron-curtain-sahel>.

¹⁷ Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). *Data on Armed Conflict in Africa*. 2024. ACLED, <https://acleddata.com>. Accessed 10 May 2025.

¹⁸ Africa Center for Strategic Studies. "Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa." *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 14 May 2024, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>.

With an average age of just 15.6, young Africans are a particularly vulnerable target audience, and Russian campaigns play on their emotions and aspirations by reinforcing identity-based or pan-Africanist discourses, portraying Russia as a friendly state and the new military junta leaders as liberating heroes.¹⁹

Russia's African Initiative as a platform for disinformation

For its disinformation campaigns, Russia has created in September 2023, the so-called "African Initiative"²⁰, a virtual communication platform closely linked to the Russian Ministry of Defense and the Africa Corps, the new brand of military intervention after Wagner, where many of its employees come from.²¹

Although it presents itself as an independent news agency with the aim of building a bridge between Russia and Africa, its real purpose is to spread pro-Russian propaganda, undermine Western influence and support military regimes on the continent²². The African Initiative operates websites and social media channels in Russian, English, French and Arabic, and has offices in Ouagadougou (Burkina Faso) and Bamako (Mali) and countries where Russian mercenaries are based. It even has an online video channel and five *Telegram* channels, with tens of thousands of subscribers.

The Initiative has become a key instrument of Russian disinformation and influence operations in Africa, sponsoring events, press tours and journalism programs designed to indoctrinate African journalists and *influencers* with pro-Russian narratives, which they then disseminate in local languages. This exploits the technique known as 'content laundering'²³ of disseminating false, manipulated or dubiously sourced information

¹⁹ La Razón. "La desinformación en el Sahel, impulsora del terrorismo internacional y madre de los golpes de Estado." *La Razón*, 1 Nov. 2024, https://www.larazon.es/internacional/desinformacion-sahel-impulsora-terrorismo-internacional-madre-golpes-estado_202411016724aab8d058410001cb5db1.html.

²⁰ ADF Staff. "'African Initiative,' a New Russian Media Outlet, Promotes Disinformation." *Africa Defense Forum*, October 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/10/african-initiative-a-new-russian-media-outlet-promotes-disinformation/>.

²¹ ADF Staff. "'African Initiative,' a New Russian Media Outlet, Promotes Disinformation." *Africa Defense Forum*, October 2024, <https://adf-magazine.com/2024/10/african-initiative-a-new-russian-media-outlet-promotes-disinformation/>.

Eydoux, Thomas, and Morgane Le Cam. "African Initiative, la nouvelle tête de pont de la propagande russe en Afrique." *Le Monde*, 7 Mar. 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2024/03/07/african-initiative-la-nouvelle-tete-de-pont-de-la-propagande-russe-en-afrique_6220609_3212.html.

²³ Corral Hernández, David. *Media in the Ukrainian war, voices and certainty in the face of silence and disinformation*. IEEE Opinion Paper 47/2022, 2022, https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_opinion/2022/DIEEE047_2022.pdf.

through apparently legitimate or trustworthy local individuals and groups through apparently legitimate or trustworthy channels, in order to lend it credibility and social acceptance. By doing so, Russia manages to create an impression of authenticity.

Russian disinformation campaigns are widespread, and the timing is not coincidental. The African Initiative benefits from the nearly 300 million Africans who have accessed social media in the last 7 years, and the more than 400 million active social media users and 600 million internet users on the continent²⁴. Inadequate media infrastructure, poor newspaper distribution and the poor quality of news sourced through the internet have created information poverty across the continent and, consequently, made many Africans vulnerable to misinformation provided by social media platforms.

The result has been a considerable success of these Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns, which can be seen as the key drivers of France's exit from the Sahel. Thus, on 20 February 2025, Côte d'Ivoire became the last African nation to expel French troops, a move that followed the departure of Chad, which had hosted them for almost 70 years. Others, such as Senegal, have scheduled the last French troops to leave in June 2025. These withdrawals mark the end of France's military presence in the Sahel region and West Africa in general, following expulsions from Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, all of which are ruled by military juntas.

The departure of French forces from these countries was accompanied by pro-Russian messages circulating on social media, often from influencers and content creators. This was the case, for example in Chad, with African Hub, Typical African and RT News India platforms well known for pushing anti-Western narratives²⁵. To reinforce this support from both citizens and their leaders, the Russians have favored local government officials, much as they have favored journalists, with free trips and tours throughout Russia and occupied territories in Ukraine.

Russian disinformation has been a key element in limiting any dissenting discourse, paving the way for pro-Russian sentiment and anti-imperialist rhetoric to flourish and

²⁴ Harvard International Review, "Soft Power in the Sahel: Russian Influence and the Kremlin's Internet Stronghold". *Harvard International Review*, 13 Mar. 2025, <https://hir.harvard.edu/soft-power-in-the-sahel-russian-influence-and-the-kremlins-internet-stronghold/>.

²⁵ Wilkins, Henry. "Kremlin Disinformation Campaigns Aim to Discredit French Military in Sahel, Analysts Say." *VOA News*, 26 Apr. 2024, <https://www.voanews.com/a/kremlin-disinformation-campaigns-aim-to-discredit-french-military-in-the-sahel-analysts-say-/7988010.html>.

spread across the Sahel. In fragile countries, where the population has little access to reliable and quality information due to a biased press, the Russian media become an excellent opportunity for disinformation to spread.

Disinformation to justify coups d'état and military juntas

As French forces left one country after another, and with them the rest of the West, instability in the Sahel became chronic. The lack of effective measures taken by Western democracies and organizations such as the European Union to help countries in the region contain the upsurge in violence exacerbated already existing tensions with former colonial powers, creating a power vacuum that needed to be filled.

Russia's disinformation campaigns via social media and pro-Kremlin online campaigns seized the opportunity presented by the French government's failed counter-terrorism strategy in the Sahel to spread the idea that France had increasingly encouraged jihadist cells in parts of Africa. As a result, anti-colonial and anti-French sentiment will be consolidated in the region²⁶. Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso, whose governments had authorized the French presence, were subjected to a fierce disinformation campaign that resulted in a series of successive coups, making them easy prey for Russia. As Westerners left, Russia found the way paved for direct intervention by refining its image through media influence campaigns that simultaneously served to close the door to any European presence in the Sahel.²⁷

There have been more than 12 coup attempts in West and Central Africa in the last five years, eight of which have been successful. Most have taken place in former French colonies where pro-French and in many cases, French-backed rulers were in power. In the end, as analyst Edwige Sorgho-Depagne puts it, "the French were tolerated, rather

²⁶ Harvard International Review, "Soft Power in the Sahel: Russian Influence and the Kremlin's Internet Stronghold." *Harvard International Review*, 23 Feb. 2024, <https://hir.harvard.edu/soft-power-in-the-sahel-russian-influence-and-the-kremlins-internet-stronghold/>.

²⁷ Al Jazeera. "The 'Ghost Reporters' Writing Pro-Russian Propaganda in West Africa." *Al Jazeera*, 20 Mar. 2025, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2025/3/20/the-ghost-reporters-writing-pro-russian-propaganda-in-west-africa>.

than welcomed"²⁸. The time, resources and success promised by Western powers ended up paradoxically invested to Russia's benefit.

The rest was easy. In countries characterized by economic instability and severe security problems, the military juntas limited any dissident discourse, paving the way for a growing sentiment in favour of a Russia to which they owed their existence. This, however, did not lead to any improvement in security, but rather the opposite. Take the case of Burkina Faso, for example, a country that, before the Russian intervention, was already experiencing a profound political and security crisis marked by institutional instability, coups d'état and the advance of jihadist terrorism. The lack of resources to deal with it, together with social disenchantment and anti-French discourse, were encouraged by Russian disinformation to push for a shift in its foreign policy and a strategic rapprochement with Russia.²⁹

Since the September 2022 coup, contacts between Ouagadougou and Moscow have intensified. The Burkinabe government of Captain Ibrahim Traoré sought Russian military cooperation as an alternative to confront the jihadist threat, given the perceived ineffectiveness of Western support. This rapprochement resulted in military training agreements, visits by high-level Russian delegations and the arrival of Russian military instructors and personnel in the country.³⁰

This has become standard practice in all countries in the region. Russian mercenaries have helped military regimes maintain their grip on power, bolstering the security of post-coup governments and training both the armed forces and presidential guards, which are key to the internal stability of the regimes and the survival of their leaders.³¹

At the same time, Russia has managed to deflect and minimize criticism of its activities in the Sahel - including abuses associated with the presence of mercenaries and the

²⁸ BBC News. "Wagner in Africa: How the Russian Mercenary Group Has Rebranded." *BBC News*, 15 Feb. 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-68322230>.

²⁹ Pardo, Nicolás. "Russia successfully culminates its propaganda and disinformation operation in the Sahel." *El País*, 13 May 2024, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-05-13/rusia-culmina-con-exito-su-operacion-de-propaganda-y-desinformacion-en-el-sahel.html>.

³⁰ García, J. "Burkina Faso, one of the hotspots of violence in the Sahel, moves closer to Moscow's orbit." *El País*, 19 Dec. 2022, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2022-12-19/burkina-faso-uno-de-los-focos-de-violencia-en-el-sahel-se-acerca-a-la-orbita-de-moscu.html>.

³¹ DW. "Russia's influence in Africa could weaken after the fall of Assad." *DW*, 13 Jan. 2025, <https://www.dw.com/es/la-influencia-de-rusia-en-%C3%A1frica-podr%C3%ADa-debilitarse-tras-la-ca%C3%ADda-de-asad/a-71279978>.

brutality of military operations - through a combination of information warfare, propaganda and political alliances. Moscow has exploited the region's historical grievances against the West, promoting disinformation and propaganda campaigns that portray Russia as a respectful, alternative partner to former colonial powers.

This narrative is reinforced by plausible deniability of direct involvement in any crimes committed by local governments using private military companies such as what was once Wagner and now - once surreptitiously incorporated into the Russian Ministry of Defense - is the Africa Corps. All this makes it difficult to attribute political or criminal responsibility to the Russian state.³²

Similarly, Russian disinformation has been able to redirect blame for human rights atrocities onto the former colonizers. An infamous example of disinformation warfare in the Sahel occurred after the French transfer of power to the Malian armed forces in August 2022. Wagner's Russian mercenaries staged evidence through Russian-linked social media accounts that the French had deliberately killed numerous civilians in Gossi, a rural area of Mali. In doing so, they sought to deflect blame onto the French despite mounting evidence that Kremlin-linked mercenaries had massacred more than 300 civilians in this central Malian town a month earlier.³³

Resource exploitation and economic control

Another area in which Russian disinformation also manifests itself is in the exploitation of resources and economic control of the mineral extractive sectors in the countries where it operates. Control of these resources is crucial to the economies of the Sahel countries, as the extractive industry provides many jobs and generates much-needed foreign exchange for their governments.

Over the past three years, Moscow has intensified its activities in the Sahel region, including countries such as Mali and Burkina Faso, taking advantage of disinformation campaigns, to gain access to the exploitation of valuable natural resources. The pattern

³² Abellán, L. "Russia successfully completes its propaganda and disinformation operation in the Sahel". *El País*, 13 May. 2024, <https://elpais.com/internacional/2024-05-13/rusia-culmina-con-exito-su-operacion-de-propaganda-y-desinformacion-en-el-sahel.html>.

³³ Harvard International Review, "Soft Power in the Sahel: Russian Influence and the Kremlin's Internet Stronghold." *Harvard International Review*, 23 Feb. 2024, <https://hir.harvard.edu/soft-power-in-the-sahel-russian-influence-and-the-kremlins-internet-stronghold/>.

is very similar in all countries that are particularly receptive to disinformation campaigns. While presenting itself as an alternative to "Western plunder", Russia exploits insecurity to appropriate gold and strategic minerals in Mali and Burkina Faso, through companies linked to Russian mercenaries, either as payment for security services or through biased deals that benefit its state-owned extractive companies³⁴. Thus, in 2024 alone, Mali exported 50 tons of gold to Russia, equivalent to 20 per cent of its reserves, with a market value of approximately \$3.747 billion.³⁵

These measures have allowed Russia to generate resources to cover the costs of its military forces in the African countries where it has a presence. It also helps the Russian regime to continue evading the constant economic sanctions imposed by the West and to continue financing the war effort in Ukraine.³⁶

In these countries characterized by institutional instability, the Russians have forced the rewriting of mining codes to benefit their companies. The most significant case is Niger, where Russia had been increasing its security cooperation long before the 2023 coup, including the supply of 12 Mi-35 attack helicopters. A combination of political pressure and disinformation campaigns has allowed Russia to expand security ties after Niger revoked its military cooperation agreement with the US in March 2024 following the US accusation of Niger's government of selling uranium to Iran. The Russians currently control 65 per cent of gold mining licenses from 2023.³⁷

Similarly, 15% of the uranium used in French reactors comes from Niger, where, in 2024, France lost control of its main uranium mines following the withdrawal of licenses from the French company Orano by the Nigerien military junta. Since then, Niger's military junta has invited Russian companies, especially the state-owned Rosatom, to invest in uranium mining and there are preliminary contacts for the transfer of assets.³⁸

³⁴ Blood Gold Report. *The Blood Gold Report*. 2024, <https://bloodgoldreport.com>.

³⁵ "Gold price forecast 2024." *Skilling*, 2024, <https://skilling.com/eu/es/blog/commodities-trading/gold-price-forecast-2024/>.

³⁶ Observatory of International Politics. "Geopolitical Competition in the Sahel: Russia as the Great Protagonist and Antagonist to France." *University of Costa Rica*, 8 Jul. 2024, <https://opi.ucr.ac.cr/node/2315>.

³⁷ Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "An Iron Curtain in the Sahel." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 May 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iron-curtain-sahel>.

³⁸ "Niger cuts France off from uranium deposits and confirms its rapprochement with Russia". *La Razon*, 21 June 2024, https://www.larazon.es/internacional/niger-aparta-francia-yacimientos-uranio-confirma-acercamiento-rusia_2024062166751bfa901ca9000182071a.html.

Conclusions

Despite a successful disinformation campaign and the numerous military equipment and personnel, it has provided to countries in the Sahel region, Russia has proven to be an unreliable security partner, given its extreme and ineffective counter-terrorism tactics. This raises serious doubts about its ability to maintain continued popular support among wavering African public opinion.

Paradoxically, however, Russia's failure to improve the security situation is serving to deepen the dependence of the military juntas that dominate the Sahel on Russian assistance. The worsening situation calls into question the long-term viability of regimes that have based their credibility on reducing Islamist violence and have relied heavily on Russia to achieve this.

In a degraded security scenario, the Juntas are increasingly dependent on Russia to ensure the survival of their regime. This dependency relationship was highlighted, for example, in June 2024 when Russia sent between 80 and 120 Africa Corps mercenaries to Burkina Faso to provide security for President Traoré, who was forced to suppress an alleged military mutiny, following an attack by jihadist insurgents that killed more than 100 soldiers³⁹. This new approach, which prioritizes regime survival over counterinsurgency, can only worsen the security situation and, with it, the Russian message.

For the time being, having achieved its goal of entering and consolidating in the Sahel, Russia seems content with the status quo achieved as long as it maintains its influence over the Juntas that grant it access to the region's lucrative resources. However, as instability spreads in the region, the status quo becomes less sustainable. The creation of the so-called Alliance of Sahel States (AES) following the decision by Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to withdraw from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and form a confederation designed to compete with the bloc, further complicates the situation.

Russia's objectives in West Africa and the Sahel do not involve making these countries client states. Russia has no interest in doing so, nor, for that matter, the capacity to do

³⁹ Fikra Forum. "An Iron Curtain in the Sahel." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 May 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iron-curtain-sahel>. Fikra Forum. "An Iron Curtain in the Sahel." *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 13 May 2024, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iron-curtain-sahel>.

so. Rather, Russia is interested in pragmatic cooperation that does not cost too much, but leads to resources such as gold or strategic minerals from the Sahel flowing to Russia rather than Europe, offering terms that are more generous in return than Westerners are able to give.

Russia will continue obsessively with its disinformation campaigns, which are, after all, nothing more than propaganda, but which have been working so well for it. Its presence adds to the chaos afflicting the region and contributes to the influx of migrants towards Europe and to increasing tensions weighing on the governments of the West African coast and North Africa. All this translates into a growing insecurity that may end up directly threatening Europe.

It is understandable that the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East rightfully captivate European attention and security concerns, but so too is the need for greater effort to combat the Russian disinformation campaigns that are deeply destabilizing the Sahel.

Combating Russian disinformation requires greater European efforts to strengthen media education, support independent journalism and promote international cooperation to address the root causes of disinformation. These include improving the living conditions of local populations and governance in states to prevent disinformation from remaining a powerful tool in Russia's hands to manipulate populations, perpetuate authoritarian regimes and hinder European involvement in stability and development in the Sahel.

Europe must go beyond a simple 'information war' and go for an ambitious, comprehensive approach that combines the fight against disinformation with support for governance, local development and transparent communication adapted to the realities of the Sahel. This is the only way to regain lost influence and prevent Russia's military, diplomatic and economic presence, as well as its popularity and influence in the Sahel, from growing and becoming a permanent obsession for European security interests.

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