



ILLIBERAL INFLUENCE FUELS DISINFORMATION IN WEST AFRICA

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In brief

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Rising global geopolitical competition is drawing greater interest in West Africa from illiberal states.

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Recent foreign disinformation campaigns in the region have focused on vaccine diplomacy and generating anti-Western sentiment.

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Tactics used in foreign-sponsored campaigns are now being adopted by local actors for their own agendas.

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Future disinformation campaigns in West Africa may be focused around influencing electoral outcomes, building support for authoritarian control of domestic cyberspace, and generating public approval for military groups to assert themselves into national politics.

Introduction

West Africa is undergoing a period of significant transition. Demographic changes, rapid urbanisation, the spread of new technologies and the launch of the African Continental Free Trade Area have created new development pathways for the resource-rich region, home to 16 countries and roughly 5% of the world's population. Geopolitical shifts are generating new levels of foreign interest as well. With Western hegemony in decline, a splintering international order has produced opportunities for illiberal state regimes to offer African governments more diverse options for political, economic and military partnerships.

Regional involvement by these actors is not intrinsically negative. China, Russia, Turkey, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and others have all contributed to tens of billions of dollars worth of infrastructure improvements, economic trade and development initiatives across the continent. This has benefited countries with growing populations that require better transportation and communications networks, more hospitals and schools, and greater access to finance, clean water and electricity. Spin-off economic activity has created jobs for locals and supported private enterprise by benefiting African suppliers, buyers, subcontractors and entrepreneurs, while boosting intra-regional trade.¹ Consumer markets also now feature a wider array of

affordable products and greater opportunities for cultural exchange.

The latent risk is the opportunity and potential for illiberal states to further their own interests by interfering with democratic processes in these same countries. Their objective being to prevent civil society groups and electorates from pressuring ruling parties to enact more inclusive and equitable approaches to economic development. Amid a period of intense political and social change—made more complex by mounting climate crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and global food and energy shortages stemming from Russia's invasion of Ukraine—West African nations are therefore vulnerable to having their democratic progress stifled as the autocratic tendencies of governments become reinforced by foreign enablers.

A primary tool in this process has been, and will continue to be the deployment of disinformation, by foreign and domestic actors alike. The goal being to influence electoral outcomes and shape public opinion to their advantage. Given West Africa's rising geopolitical importance and rapid increases in local internet and social media access each year, combined with companies' limited ability to police their platforms, this trend will only become more prominent.

¹ Yoon Jung Park, "Chinese investment in Africa involves more than megaprojects. Private enterprises are also making their mark." *The Washington Post*, April 17, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/04/17/chinese-investment-africa-involves-more-than-megaprojects-private-enterprises-also-are-making-their-mark/>

New Competitors

In the aftermath of the Cold War, Western nations led by the United States (US) and former colonial powers France and the United Kingdom (UK) were the main foreign actors in West Africa. But by the mid-2000s, an ascendent China began garnering influence and making inroads into the region, and Africa as a whole, through securing infrastructure projects for its state-owned companies and bolstering its supply chains through massive purchases of commodities. Others have since followed China's lead.

CHINA

China's lack of colonial baggage, no-strings-attached loans and foreign policy of avoiding intervention in the domestic affairs of states has rendered it an appealing partner to governments across the continent.

From 2000-2019, China increased its foreign direct investment in Africa by an average of 40% per year, supplanting the US as Africa's top foreign investor in 2013.² That same year China's newly appointed leader President Xi Jinping unveiled the full scope of China's geopolitical strategy in the form of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). A Beijing-centric, multi-trillion-dollar global trade and infrastructure network, the BRI has since grown to include 147 countries worldwide as of March 2022.³

All West African nations have signed cooperation agreements to join the BRI, while Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Senegal were among the top-25 recipients of Chinese official development assistance from 2000-2017.

But this has not come without controversy; the environmental damage, corruption and labour issues resulting from Chinese

megaprojects is well documented. A study released in August 2021 by the UK-based Business and Human Rights Resource Centre found that Africa has recorded the second highest number of human rights abuse allegations linked to Chinese investment overseas, with most of the complaints related to mining, fossil fuels and construction projects.⁴

Furthermore, findings published in September 2021 by US-based research group AidData shows how Chinese overseas investment around the BRI is also creating new levels of what critics have labelled debt trap diplomacy—pushing unaffordable loans for use as leverage to access natural resources, state contracts, or to elicit political support in multilateral forums.⁵ The launch of the BRI in 2013 triggered a notable shift in China's foreign investment approach, with financing mostly foregoing official bilateral development assistance channels. According to AidData, over two-thirds of new funding related to the BRI is now directed toward state-owned banks and enterprises, joint ventures and private sector institutions.

² Daniel F. Runde, Conor M. Savoy and Janina Staguhn, "China and SMEs in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Window of Opportunity for the United States," Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), October 15, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-smes-sub-saharan-africa-window-opportunity-united-states>

³ Cristoph Nedopil, "Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative," Green Finance & Development Center, 2022, <https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/>

⁴ "Going out responsibly: The human rights impact of China's global investments," Business & Human Rights Resource Center, August 2021, https://media.business-humanrights.org/media/documents/2021_BHRRRC_China_Briefing.pdf

⁵ Malik, A., Parks, B., Russell, B., Lin, J., Walsh, K., Solomon, K., Zhang, S., Elston, T., and S. Goodman, "Banking on the Belt and Road: Insights from a new global dataset of 13,427 Chinese development projects," AidData, September 29, 2021, <https://www.aiddata.org/publications/banking-on-the-belt-and-road>

These so-called hidden debts rarely appear on government balance sheets in developing countries even though they are still in various ways underwritten by host governments. “The hidden debt problem is less about governments knowing that they will need to service undisclosed debts (with known monetary values) to China than it is about governments not knowing the monetary value of debts to China that they may or may not have to service in the future,” AidData’s analysis suggests.

A database of Chinese loans to Africa managed by the Global Development Policy Center at Boston University indicates that from 2000-2020 China issued \$160 billion in debt across nearly 1,200 loans to African governments and their state-owned enterprises—including to every country in West Africa except for Guinea-Bissau.⁶

However, African countries owe more money to private creditors in Europe, North America, Japan, and South Korea than they do to China,⁷ which receives far more criticism for predatory lending. African countries also pay much higher interest rates on loans from multilateral institutions than nations from other regions despite carrying lower sovereign debt loads.⁸ At a conference jointly hosted by the UN and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Dakar in December 2019, the leaders of Niger, Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso and Côte d’Ivoire

supported Senegal’s President Macky Sall in his censure of the IMF when he said, “Stereotypes that raise our interest rates are holding us back.” Moreover, most of the \$89 billion in illicit financial outflows from Africa every year—the product of corruption, capital flight, money laundering and tax evasion, rendering the continent a net creditor to the rest of the world—is facilitated by Western financial institutions and professionals, primarily in Europe and the US.⁹

Internet and communications infrastructure has been China’s fourth highest investment target on the continent, behind the transportation, energy and mining sectors. This has opened up a vast new data frontier for Chinese tech companies, in particular those working to refine the capabilities of visual recognition and surveillance tools powered by artificial intelligence.¹⁰ In his first-ever public interview in November 2021, Britain’s intelligence chief warned of China creating data traps so that it can develop global data harvesting capability to wield for a range of purposes – technological, economic, social and political.¹¹ Continued access to the data and images of hundreds of millions of Africans going forward is certain to give Chinese tech companies a serious edge in the global surveillance market, which some estimates say is on pace to be worth almost \$75 billion by 2025.¹²

7 “Chinese Loans to Africa Database,” Global Development Policy Center, n.d., <https://www.bu.edu/gdp/chinese-loans-to-africa-database/>
 “African governments owe three times more debt to private lenders than China,” Debt Justice, July 11, 2022, <https://debtjustice.org.uk/press-release/african-governments-owe-three-times-more-debt-to-private-lenders-than-china>

8 Alain Faujas, “Forget the Washington Consensus, meet the Dakar Consensus,” The Africa Report, December 6, 2019, <https://www.theafricareport.com/20919/forget-the-washington-consensus-meet-the-dakar-consensus/>

9 “Tackling Illicit Financial Flows for Sustainable Development in Africa,” UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), 2020, https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/aldcafrica2020_en.pdf

10 Amy Hawkins, “Beijing’s Big Brother Tech Needs African Faces,” Foreign Policy, July 24, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/07/24/beijings-big-brother-tech-needs-african-faces/>

11 George Bowden, “MI6 boss warns of China ‘debt traps and data traps,’” BBC, November 30, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-59474365>

12 Thomas Alsop, “Video surveillance market size worldwide 2016-2025,” Statista, June 1, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/864838/video-surveillance-market-size-worldwide/>

TURKEY

Turkey has grown its presence and trade within West Africa in the last two decades but under much less scrutiny. This has been achieved through efforts by Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to portray Turkey as the main sponsor of political Islam and protector of Muslim culture in Africa's only Muslim-majority region.¹³ Analysis by the International Crisis Group, a conflict monitoring organisation, has described how Turkey is "capitalising on shared religious identity to advance its economic interests," and as a means of projecting power and expanding its presence in the Sahel.¹⁴

President Erdoğan's motivation also aligns with his perception of Africa "as a proxy battleground of Turkey's Middle East and even European rivalries," according to one analyst from the Pretoria office of the Institute for Security Studies.¹⁵

Erdoğan has directly led Turkish outreach into Africa, having visited at least 30 countries on the continent since 2005 more than any other non-African leader and hosting three Turkey-Africa summits, the most recent in Istanbul in December 2021. Turkey's trade with Africa has grown from \$5.4 billion in 2003 to \$25.3 billion in 2020, while Turkish construction companies have been awarded projects worth over \$71 billion during this period.¹⁶ Turkey's foreign direct investment in Africa has skyrocketed as a result, from \$100 million in 2003 to \$6.5 billion in 2021. Alongside securing energy, mining and construction contracts, the Turkish state has also built numerous mosques, including in Ghana, Mali and Niger, and opened dozens of new embassies across the continent,

recently in Guinea-Bissau and Togo in 2021.

When it comes to West Africa, observers have speculated that Erdoğan's outreach to Nigeria is specifically intended to improve Turkey's energy security, given its heavy dependence on fossil fuel imports. Africa's most populous nation and leading energy producer has become Turkey's biggest trade partner in the region; the two countries exchanged goods and services worth a total \$754 million in 2020.¹⁷ Senegal has been another focus, with 29 infrastructure projects worth \$775 million being given to Turkish firms in the past few years, including a new airport, stadium and Olympic-sized swimming pool in Dakar.¹⁸

Nigeria has a military cooperation agreement with Turkey, one of many West Africa states that does.¹⁹ And yet Nigeria's defence ministry in November 2019 announced an investigation into whether Turkey was secretly supplying weapons to Boko Haram after a YouTube video showed a senior official at Turkish Airlines disclosing concern over the national carrier supposedly being used for illicit arms transfers to Nigeria.²⁰ Two years earlier customs officials in Lagos confiscated multiple illegal shipments of rifles in shipping containers originating from Turkey.

Niger signed its own military cooperation agreement with Turkey in November 2021, creating the possibility of the country being used as another test theatre for Turkey's booming military drone industry. Niamey received its first six Turkish Bayraktar TB2 armed drones in June 2022 and is reportedly studying the prospects of building an air base in Niger to host Turkish drones.²¹

14 Hannah Armstrong, "Turkey in the Sahel," International Crisis Group, July 27, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/turkey-sahel>

15 Peter Fabricius, "Making Turkey great again," Institute for Security Studies, March 12, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/making-turkey-great-again>

16 "Turkey-Africa Relations," Republic of Turkey, Minister of Foreign Affairs, n.d., <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-africa-relations.en.mfa>

17 Mucahid Durmaz, "As Erdogan set for another tour, Turkey deepens ties with Africa," Al Jazeera English, October 16, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/16/as-erdogan-set-for-another-tour-turkey-deepens-ties-with-africa>

18 Mucahid Durmaz, "Turkey goes on charm offensive in West Africa," Mail & Guardian, December 5, 2020, <https://mg.co.za/africa/2020-12-05-turkey-goes-on-charm-offensive-in-west-africa/>

19 Others include Benin, Mauritania, Gambia, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Senegal

Mustapha Bagudu, "We're Investigating Alleged Turkish Support for Boko Haram - DHQ," The Will, November 26, 2019, <https://thewillnigeria.com/news/were-investigating-alleged-turkish-support-for-boko-haram-dhq/>

21 "La Turquie livre six drones Bayraktar TB2 au Niger," Radio France Internationale



Russia

Russia has pivoted increasingly to Africa as a means of evading international sanctions against it imposed first in reaction to Russia's 2014 annexation of the Crimea Peninsula and again as a response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Russian state entities, Kremlin-linked operators and Russian corporations have all collaborated to produce a flurry of economic, political and security deals in dozens of African countries in a relatively short amount of time and despite still quite low levels of investment.²² Russia's success is instead derived from a flexible strategy that varies country-by-country and is based on catering to the needs and desires of ruling parties and local elites. Political cooperation, media and press partnerships, counter-insurgency training, personal protection, campaign and policy advice, weapons transfers and humanitarian support—these are all part of the rapid growth of Russia's footprint in Africa.²³

Russia has also found Africa to be fertile ground to push its anti-Western agenda and undermine faith in liberal democratic governance models, evidenced by Russia's sponsorship of disinformation campaigns in priority nations.²⁴ In October 2019, Facebook took down three Russian-linked networks

celebrating ruling parties in eight African countries. The networks were comprised of 73 fake pages that produced tens of thousands of pieces of content and generated nearly 10 million total user interactions. Facebook researchers were able to link all the pages to Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, one of President Vladimir Putin's most trusted operators. Prigozhin, who is now reportedly tasked with guiding Russia's strategic push into Africa, was indicted in the US in 2018 along with 12 other Russian nationals for interfering with American elections given their involvement with the Internet Research Agency, a notorious Russian troll farm in St. Petersburg.

Prigozhin is also allegedly the chief financier of the Wagner Group, a Russian private military contractor whose mercenaries have been active in conflicts in Libya, Mozambique, Sudan, Syria and eastern Ukraine.²⁵ The Kremlin denies having any association with the group, despite many of its members being former Russian state intelligence officers. Nonetheless, media reports indicate Wagner paramilitaries are present in at least 12 African countries, including Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. In late 2021, Russian mercenaries were deployed to Mali, where Russia has displaced former colonial ruler

22 "Russia in Africa: What's behind Moscow's push into the continent?" BBC, May 7, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-45035889>

23 Luke Harding and Jason Burke, "Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa," The Guardian, June 11, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>

24 Idayat Hassan and Kyle Hiebert, "Russian Disinformation is Taking Hold in Africa," CIGI Online, November 17, 2021

France as the preferred foreign benefactor of Mali's current junta regime.

Wagner's emergence in Mali is shaping up similar to its pattern of involvement in the Central African Republic (CAR). Wagner's soldiers-for-hire secure natural resource sites and serve as an elite protection, counter-insurgency and military training force for President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in the country, where UN investigators have accused them of being complicit in egregious human rights abuses.²⁶ President Touadéra signed an agreement with the Russian government in August 2017

for Moscow to provide military support in exchange for access to the CAR's large deposits of diamonds, gold, uranium and other minerals.²⁷

In early 2022, the Wagner Group reportedly offered its services to new leaders in Burkina Faso after a military coup ousted President Roch Kaboré, who had just finished his first year of a second five-year term after being re-elected in November 2020.²⁸

25 Nathaniel Reynolds, "Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 8, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/07/08/putin-s-not-so-secret-mercenaries-patronage-geopolitics-and-wagner-group-pub-79442>

26 "CAR: Experts alarmed by government's use of "Russian trainers", close contacts with UN peacekeepers," Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, March

27 "Wagner Group: Why the EU is alarmed by Russian mercenaries in Central Africa," BBC, December 19, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-59699350>

28 "Burkina Faso coup: New leader Damiba gives first speech," BBC, January 28, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-60164531>

‘The Gulf’

The UAE is also asserting a more independent foreign policy in West Africa as it transitions out from under the shadow of Saudi Arabia, its neighbour and long-time close ally. The Arab world's second richest country, the UAE now has diplomatic missions in 24 African countries, including in Nigeria, Ghana, Guinea, Mauritania and Senegal.²⁹ In the latter, Emirati state-backed port and logistics company DP World already has an existing development agreement with the Port of Dakar and is now building a \$1.1 billion deep water port and planned special economic zone at Ndayane.³⁰ The two projects combined are meant to provide the UAE with a regional logistics hub and gateway through which to access member states of the regional bloc, ECOWAS. In 2020, West Africa surpassed both North and East Africa as Dubai's main trading partner, with total exchange of goods and services valued at \$16.8 billion.³¹

Meanwhile Iran's new hardline conservative President Ebrahim Raisi, leader of the UAE's main Middle East rival, is poised to increase Iran's presence in the region too. During a meeting with the speaker of Guinea-Bissau's parliament shortly after being elected, President Raisi pledged his administration would ramp up of Iran's "capacities for cooperation" with African countries.³² Raisi reiterated this pledge in a meeting with Togo's foreign minister in January 2022.

Tehran's renewed motivation to develop deeper ties with African countries appears



rooted in a strategy of diversifying the country's economic fallback options in the event that the Iran nuclear deal is unable to be revived and US sanctions stay in place. At the same time, it also feeds into a broader attempt to position Iran as centre of power and influence in the non-Western world. This is underscored by how Iranian activity in Africa was already ramping up before Raisi came to power in July 2021—trade between Iran and Africa increased by 350% from March to June that year, according to an official from the Trade Promotion Organization within Iran's Ministry of Commerce quoted by state media.³³ During that time Ghana was Iran's top African export destination, with Nigeria ranking fifth.

29 "UAE Missions in Africa," United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, n.d., <https://www.mofaic.gov.ae/en/missions/uae-missions-abroad>

30 Jack Donnelly, "DP World to build new port in Senegal as part of major Africa investment," Port Technology, January 4, 2021, <https://www.porttechnology.org/news/dp-world-to-build-new-port-in-senegal-as-part-of-major-africa-investment/>

31 "Dubai's bilateral trade with West Africa hits a sweet spot," Gulf News, October 12, 2021, <https://gulfnews.com/business/markets/dubais-bilateral-trade-with-west-africa-hits-a-sweet-spot-1.1633940610286>

32 Eric Lob, "Iran-Africa relations under Raisi: Salvaging ties with the continent," Middle East Institute (MEI), April 11, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/iran-africa-relations-under-raisi-salvaging-ties-continent>

33 "Iran's Exports to Africa Highly Increase," FARS News Agency, July 20, 2021, <https://www.farsnews.ir/en/news/14000429000553/Iran-s-Exprs-Africa-Highly-Increase>

Illiberal influencers

China,
Turkey,
Russia,
Iran
the UAE

China, Turkey, Russia, Iran and the UAE each have distinct reasons driving their increased presence in West Africa. But all five nations also share the common trait of being run by authoritarian regimes that are participating in a global pushback against liberalism and democracy. They are also increasingly collaborating with, and learning from, each other. Journalist and historian Anne Applebaum has described how contemporary autocracy has evolved as authoritarian regimes around the world have developed mutually beneficial synergies.³⁴

“Nowadays, autocracies are run not by one bad guy, but by sophisticated networks composed of kleptocratic financial structures, security services (military, police, paramilitary groups, surveillance), and professional propagandists. The members

of these networks are connected not only within a given country, but among many countries. The corrupt, state-controlled companies in one dictatorship do business with corrupt, state-controlled companies in another. The police in one country can arm, equip, and train the police in another. The propagandists share resources—the troll farms that promote one dictator's propaganda can also be used to promote the propaganda of another—and themes, pounding home the same messages about the weakness of democracy and the evil of America.

“The unfolding competition in West Africa between illiberal states and Western democracies is already producing this very scenario of escalated propaganda and information warfare.

³⁴ Anne Applebaum, “The Bad Guys are Winning,” *The Atlantic*, November 15, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/12/the-autocrats-are-winning/620526/>

Disinformation patterns in West Africa

Disinformation is not a new phenomenon, despite the increased attention now being paid to all its different dimensions: malicious distribution of false content, hate speech, voter manipulation or incitement to violence for political gain. Instead, as highlighted in an April 2021 report from the UN's special rapporteur on freedom of expression, what is new is the reach and scope of disinformation, and the severity of its consequences.³⁵

"Digital technology has enabled pathways for false or manipulated information to be created, disseminated and amplified by various actors for political, ideological or commercial motives at a scale, speed and reach never known before. Interacting with political, social and economic grievances in the real world, disinformation online can have serious consequences for democracy and human rights, as recent elections, the response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic and attacks on minority groups have shown. It is politically polarising, hinders people from meaningfully exercising their human rights and destroys their trust in governments and institutions."

The Paris-based Organization for Economic Development and Cooperation (OECD) has likewise described how disinformation has gone global and become "industrialised" by involving a multitude of actors—domestic, international, state, non-state, private firms, and digital intermediaries.³⁶

When it comes to West Africa, Chinese and Russian actors especially have been using the region and its emerging digital ecosystems as a "grey zone" to test disinformation tactics intended to polarise public opinion and manipulate electoral outcomes to their advantage.³⁷

Analysts at the Stanford Internet Observatory, who have flagged fake networks to Facebook and helped examine their content, have detailed how Russia is developing a "franchising strategy" in Africa on Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram and other messaging platforms.³⁸ In essence, content creation focused on pushing anti-Western narratives and celebrating allied ruling parties is being subcontracted to local residents. The result is false and manipulated content that is linguistically correct and less overtly biased, rendering it more authentic to local audiences—and harder for platforms and users to detect. In March 2020 it was also revealed that Russia had been outsourcing some of its disinformation efforts aimed at stoking racial and political discord in the U.S. to troll farms in Nigeria and Ghana.³⁹

³⁵ "Disinformation and freedom of opinion and expression: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan," United Nations Human Rights Council, April 13, 2021, <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G21/085/64/PDF/G2108564.pdf?OpenElement>

³⁶ "Reinforcing democracy: addressing the main governance challenges," Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, n.d., <https://www.oecd.org/governance/reinforcing-democracy/>

³⁷ Gabriel Delsol and Claire M. Metelits, "A New Type of Threat: Russia, China and Digital Authoritarianism in West Africa," Georgetown Journal of International Affairs, December 26, 2020, <https://gjia.georgetown.edu/2020/12/26/a-new-type-of-threat-russia-china-and-digital-authoritarianism-in-west-africa/>

³⁸ "Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman," Africa Center for Strategic Studies, February 18, 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>

³⁹ Alex Hern and Luke Harding, "Russian-led troll network based in west Africa uncovered," The Guardian, March 13, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2020/mar/13/facebook-uncovers-russian-led-troll-network-based-in-west-africa>

China on the other hand appears to be relying on a quantity-over-quality approach. In conjunction with the global reach of China's state-run media channels, a "keyboard army" of millions of recruited citizens paid per post and coordinated bots and automated accounts generate waves of pro-China messages in English on social media platforms (sites which themselves are banned in China) to amplify the preferred narratives of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP).⁴⁰ Many of these campaigns are run through the CCP's United Front Work Department—a government agency tasked with mobilising pro-CCP influence operations at home and abroad.⁴¹ The United Front's mission historically has been to blunt domestic opposition to the CCP. However, under the leadership of President Xi, whose regime is eager to contrast the supposed strengths of China's authoritarian system against a weakened Western liberal democratic order, the agency has been directed and empowered to target foreign actors, states and critics, along with Chinese diaspora communities.

China, Russia and Turkey, all countries where authorities have aggressively cracked down on independent media, have equally each tried to tilt Africa's traditional media landscape in their favour through offering training opportunities and partnerships to African journalists and media organizations.⁴² Russia has additionally tried to recruit local political consultants to appear on domestic media channels to offer positive portrayals of

Russian activities in the region.⁴³ Elsewhere, the Federation of African Journalists in June 2021 accused the UAE of "efforts to use Africa and its institutions as a political football" by deliberately trying to manipulate African journalists into generating negative coverage of the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar—a competitor to the UAE in the Gulf region.⁴⁴

Covid campaigns

Disinformation and influence campaigns by both China and Russia targeting African countries ramped up significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic. China attempted to drown out criticism of its lack of transparency surrounding the initial coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, while also working to undermine trust in Western-made vaccines to boost the favourability for its own Sinovac alternative, which China began manufacturing in Algeria in October 2021. That same month China pledged to donate an additional 600 million vaccine doses on top of the 200 million it has already delivered to Africa and the 400 million it plans to produce locally in what some observers have called a shift from debt diplomacy to vaccine diplomacy.⁴⁵

Russia has likewise deployed media influence operations to generate a positive view of its Sputnik V vaccine despite a lack of independent clinical trial. Between August 2020, when Sputnik V was approved by Russia's health ministry, and November 2020, when the trial data of Pfizer's vaccine was revealed, US analytics company Novetta calcula-

40 Krassi Twigg and Kerry Allen, "The disinformation tactics used by China," BBC, March 12, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/56364952>

41 Alexander Bowe, "China's Overseas United Front Work: Background and Implications for the United States," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, August 24, 2018, <https://www.uscc.gov/research/chinas-overseas-united-front-work-background-and-implications-united-states>

42 Dani Madrid-Morales, Deniz Börekci, Dieter Löffler and Anna Birkevich, "It is about their story: How China, Turkey and Russia influence media in Africa," Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/en/web/medien-afrika/einzeltitel/detail/-/content/it-is-about-their-story>

43 "Russian Path to Mali Paved With Disinformation," Africa Defense Forum, December 15, 2021, <https://adf-magazine.com/2021/12/russian-path-to-mali-paved-with-disinformation/>

44 "African journalists slam UAE 'manipulation' over Qatar World Cup," Al Jazeera English, June 4, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/4/african-journalists-slam-uae-manipulation-over-qatar-world-cup>

45 Vincent Ni, "More cautious' China shifts Africa approach from debt to vaccine diplomacy," The Guardian, December 8, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/08/more-cautious-china-shifts-africa-approach-from-debt-to-vaccine-diplomacy>



ted that comments by Putin and Russia's health minister were prominently featured by African media sources, accounting for a combined 6.4% of quotes in all vaccine stories published by traditional outlets.⁴⁶ By December 2020, Russian tactics had evolved, as WhatsApp users in the Democratic Republic of Congo reported receiving messages from Nigerian phone numbers with links to fake news stories championing Russian-made vaccines and claiming that American-made vaccines were harming recipients' immune systems.⁴⁷

Disinformation and misinformation around Covid-19 generally has been a problem in West Africa and is credited with reducing vaccine uptake in numerous countries, including Côte d'Ivoire,⁴⁸ Liberia⁴⁹ and The Gambia.⁵⁰ Similar trends first emerged during the 2014/2015 Ebola epidemic,⁵¹ highlighting then how minority language groups are more at-risk of falling victim to false information and narratives.

And yet both Russian and Chinese influence efforts around vaccine diplomacy appear to have had limited overall impact.

By the end of 2021, more than one year after it had been made available, Russia's Sputnik V vaccine was approved in less than a third of African nations.⁵² Kenya and Namibia eventually suspended its use over safety concerns and no African country took up Russia's purchase financing offers, citing

logistical uncertainty and inflated prices several times higher than other manufactured vaccines. Of the 3.4 million doses ordered by Ghana in April 2021, three months later only 20,000 had arrived.⁵³ In Nigeria, regulators subjected Sputnik V to several months of independent testing before its approval; and despite Russia's public relations blitz the vaccine's uptake was derailed by host of domestic factors either unforeseen or underappreciated by Russia.⁵⁴ Among them being Nigeria's strong, pre-existing relationships with Western and multilateral health and development organisations, significant vaccine hesitancy within the domestic population, a lack of high-profile local advocates for Sputnik V, Nigeria's weak public health care system and bureaucratic inertia.

China, at one point the largest provider of Covid-19 vaccines to the Global South, also struggled to market its Sinovac version in Africa given its lower level of effectiveness and China's preference to provide vaccines on a bilateral basis, instead of through multilateral mechanisms like the World Health Organization's (WHO) COVAX initiative.⁵⁵ The emergence of the highly transmissible omicron variant then diverted the Chinese government's attention to domestic concerns and immunizing its own population, given the CCP's strict adherence to its zero-Covid policies. Demand for vaccines across Africa also began to wane in late 2021, with data suggesting that the

46 Beach Gray and Neil Edwards, "Russian Disinformation Popularizes Sputnik V Vaccine in Africa," Council on Foreign Relations, December 10, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/russian-disinformation-popularizes-sputnik-v-vaccine-africa>

47 Philip Obaji Jr., "Russian-Linked Disinfo is Scaring Africans Away From U.S. COVID Vaccine," The Daily Beast, December 28, 2020, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/russian-linked-disinfo-is-scaring-africans-away-from-us-covid-vaccine>

48 Sam Bradpiece, "Covid-19: How fake news is hampering Ivory Coast's vaccination efforts," France24, May 11, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210511-covid-19-how-fake-news-is-hampering-ivory-coast-s-vaccination-efforts>

49 Ibrahim Al-Bakri Nyei, "Liberia must fight its fake news epidemic to fight the pandemic," African Arguments, August 5, 2021, <https://africanarguments.org/2021/08/liberia-must-fight-its-fake-news-epidemic-to-fight-the-pandemic/>

50 "Vaccine misinformation blamed for low turnout among Gambian women," Africanews, October 14, 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/10/14/vaccine-misinformation-blamed-for-low-turnout-among-gambian-women/>

51 Amzath Fassassi, "Managing rumours and misinformation in West Africa," SciDev.Net, April 28, 2015, <https://www.scidev.net/global/features/ebola-rumours-misinformation-west-africa/>

52 Paul Stronski, "Russian COVID-19 Diplomacy in Africa: A Mixed Bag," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 10, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/12/10/russian-covid-19-diplomacy-in-africa-mixed-bag-pub-85971>

53 BBC Monitoring, "Covid: Stalled Russian vaccines cause global anger," BBC, July 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-58003893>

54 Matthew T. Page, "Nigeria's Ambivalence to Russia's COVID-19 Diplomacy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 12, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/12/nigeria-s-ambivalence-to-russia-s-covid-19-diplomacy-pub-86174>

majority of people within the region had already developed a base level of immunity after having contracted Covid-19 previously—including 80% in Ghana, and around 50% in Nigeria, according to survey findings released in June 2022.⁵⁶ In April 2022, the WHO calculated that up to 800 million Africans had been infected with Covid-19 at least once between January 2020 and December 2021.⁵⁷

Polemic politics

The most enduring purpose of foreign illiberal state sponsorship of disinformation in Africa is to cultivate and push pro-authoritarian, anti-Western sentiment, while also supporting autocratic ruling parties.

In his August 2021 meeting with Guinea-Bissau's parliamentary speaker, Iran's President Raisi highlighted the overarching anti-Western narratives being used by illiberal states: that Africa's traditional Western partners “do not contribute to the development and welfare” of African populations and instead “pursue a policy of backwardness of African countries.” Ever-evolving disinformation campaigns based upon these narratives are now gaining traction among local populations in Africa especially disaffected youth by mixing false and sensationalised content with credible

critiques of Western policies.

In October 2020 Iran was found to be using proxy social media accounts in Nigeria to spread anti-Western propaganda and other content in support of Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.⁵⁸ Meanwhile French President Emmanuel Macron has accused Russia and Turkey in particular of generating post-colonial resentment of France across West Africa.⁵⁹ Both countries have been working to spread disinformation about France's counter-terrorism operations in Mali, framing them as a front for the mining of the Sahel's uranium riches and as neocolonialism disguised as counter-terrorism.

In September 2021 and again in January 2022, the Foundation for National Values Protection a Russian non-profit organization financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, and placed under US sanctions in April 2021 for its role in global disinformation campaigns released surveys claiming overwhelming public support among Malians for the deployment of Wagner mercenaries and spiking disapproval of France's military presence in the country.⁶⁰ In April 2022, after France and its European allies withdrew their forces from Mali in protest over Bamako's growing ties with Russia, Wagner personnel were accused of using real bodies in their attempts to stage and publicize alleged mass graves supposedly found near a former French military base in central Mali.⁶¹

55 Josephine Ma, “China was the world's biggest Covid-19 vaccine exporter. Not any more,” South China Morning Post, April 14, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3174162/china-was-worlds-biggest-covid-19-vaccine-exporter-not-any>

56 Antony Sguazzin and Janice Kew, “Most West Africans Had Covid-19 With Rich More Affected, Data Show,” Bloomberg, June 9, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-09/most-west-africans-had-covid-19-rich-more-affected-data-show#xj4y7vzkg>

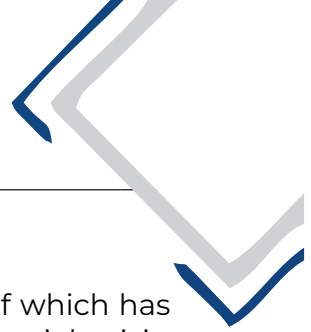
57 “WHO: Two-thirds of people in Africa may have had COVID,” Al Jazeera English, April 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/two-thirds-of-africans-may-have-had-covid-who-study>

58 Shelby Grossman, Sean Gallagher, Ada Johnson-Kanu and Nicole Wilson, “#ZakzakylifeMatters: An Investigation into a Facebook Operation Linked to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria,” Stanford Internet Observatory Cyber Policy Center, October 8, 2020, <https://stacks.stanford.edu/file/druid:vk551rc5348/facebook-NG-202009.pdf>

59 “Macron blames Russia and Turkey for bolstering anti-French sentiment in Africa,” France24, November 20, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20201120-macron-blames-russia-and-turkey-for-bolstering-anti-french-sentiment-in-africa>

60 Jared Thompson, Catrina Doxsee and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., “Tracking the Arrival of Russia's Wagner Group in Mali,” Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS), February 2, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/tracking-arrival-russias-wagner-group-mali>

61 Amy Mackinnon, “Russian Mercenaries Staged Atrocities in Mali, France Says,” Foreign Policy, April 26, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/26/russian-mercenaries-staged-atrocities-mali-france-says/>



This coordinated propaganda resonates with local negative sentiments about current and historical French presence in Mali, as well as in neighbouring Senegal and Burkina Faso. Pro-Russia banners, flags and merchandise have steadily become more visible during recent anti-France protests in all three countries. French media outlets were also banned in Mali beginning in March 2022 after they reported on comments by the UN's human rights commissioner and Human Rights Watch condemning the killing of dozens of civilians by Mali's army during security operations dating back to December 2021.⁶²

China, Russia and Turkey are all pushing self-serving influence strategies in Niger as well, weakening the public perception of France and the US.⁶³ Since 2018, the latter has maintained a \$110 million CIA drone base in the northeastern town of Dirkou.⁶⁴ Two people were killed and 18 injured in November 2021 after clashes between anti-France demonstrators and a French military convoy, which was in transit to Mali but was blocked by protestors in western Niger after crossing the border from Burkina Faso, where it was stopped days earlier by hundreds of protestors after arriving from Côte d'Ivoire.⁶⁵ Efforts to discredit France's presence in Niger are likely to escalate in the near future now that Paris has indicated it will make Niger the new hub for its counterterrorism operations across the Sahel.⁶⁶

Illiberal influence and disinformation campaigns tend to hinge on invoking the failures and perceived hypocrisy of the West, the

reliability and moral authority of which has been eroded by the 2008 financial crisis, enormous domestic inequalities and the global war on terror. The latter especially, which featured discrimination against Muslims, military interventions into Muslim-majority countries, extrajudicial rendition, and torture at US-run black sites. At least 22,000 innocent civilians have been killed in Africa and the Middle East as the result of indiscriminate US airstrikes and drone attacks in the post-9/11 era.⁶⁷ More recently, the mainstreaming of protectionism and xenophobia in the US and Europe emboldened by far-right populist movements, Brexit and the presidency of Donald Trump—has also damaged perceptions in Africa of the West's commitment to advancing the interests of the continent and its people. This was exemplified during the pandemic by discriminatory travel restrictions being placed on eight southern Africa countries by wealthy nations in response to the emergence of the omicron variant, even though similar measures were not enacted against travellers from countries like Canada, Germany and the UK, which also reported cases of the variant at the same time.

The West's failure to impose its own preferred forms of democracy on the continent, and selective support for chosen autocratic African regimes in Cameroon, Egypt, Rwanda, Uganda and elsewhere in the name of stability is also viewed as contributing to the very instability and terrorism it is claiming to suppress. Prior to his death in April 2021, the despotic tendencies of Chad's former president Idriss Déby, for example, were not only tolerated

62 Barbara Bibbo, "UN condemns Mali's ban on French media," Al Jazeera English, April 29, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/29/un-condemns-malis-ban-on-french-media>

63 Manisha Aryal, "Disinformation In Niger: Trends and Recommendations," United States Agency for International Development, January 28, 2021, https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00X8TH.pdf

64 Eric Schmitt and Christopher Koettl, "Remote C.I.A. Base in the Sahara Steadily Grows," The New York Times, March 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/08/us/politics/cia-drones-sahara-niger-libya.html>

65 Boureima Balima and John Irish, "At least two killed, 18 wounded as French convoy faces new protests in Niger," Reuters, November 27, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/french-convoy-faces-new-protests-after-crossing-into-niger-burkina-faso-2021-11-27/>

66 John Irish, "Ahead of Mali withdraw, France prepares future Sahel strategy," Reuters, July 13, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/ahead-mali-withdraw-france-prepares-future-sahel-strategy-2022-07-13/>

67 Imogen Piper and Joe Dyke, "Tens of thousands of civilians likely killed by US in 'Forever Wars,'" Airwars, September 6, 2021, <https://airwars.org/news-and-investigations/tens-of-thousands-of-civilians-likely-killed-by-us-in-forever-wars/>

by Western governments preaching the values of democratic development and human rights, but enabled by a steady supply of money, arms and military training due to Chad's ascribed status as a reliable military partner. The country is a leading member of the G5 Sahel, a security and development bloc created in 2017 which comprises Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania and Niger that has partnered with France to combat hardline Islamists groups in the Sahel. A founding member of the bloc, Mali pulled out in May 2022 after its military government cited a "lack of progress" in suppressing militants and frustration over the bloc's other members being unwilling to host meetings in the country.⁶⁸

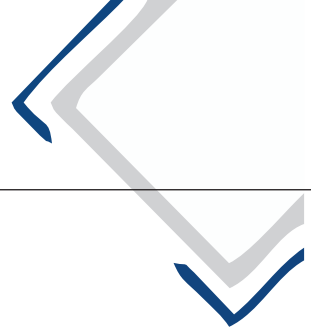
The conflicts, which have worsened in recent years, are being escalated by insurgent groups linked to al-Qaeda and the

Islamic State, yet at their core stem from underlying issues related to political instability, poor governance, corrupt authorities, acute poverty, climate change, inter-communal conflict and abusive security forces—all factors which make recruitment easier for extremists.

In the face of these multilayered challenges, Western countries have been accused of taking a narrow, militarised approach at the expense of offering long-term development support. This has created the opening for illiberal states to become more involved. As journalist Nosmot Gbadamosi has written: "the United States may provide military hardware and boots on the ground, but in Africans' daily lives, the mobile phones used, the televisions watched, and roads driven are built by China."⁶⁹

68 "Mali's military junta pulls out of regional G5 Sahel force," Reuters, May 15, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/malis-military-junta-pulls-out-regional-g5-sahel-force-2022-05-15/>

69 Nosmot Gbadamosi, "What Is China's Future in Africa?" Foreign Policy, December 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/12/08/china-africa-cooperation-investment-belt-road/>



Impacts of growing illiberal influence

There is a risk that deepening involvement by illiberal actors in West Africa could become a barrier to the desires of local populations for enhanced civil rights, liberal freedoms and democratic accountability.

Despite recent coups in Burkina Faso, Guinea and Mali, and suggestions that democracy is decline not only regionally but across the continent, evidence may indicate otherwise. Peaceful transitions of power in Nigeria (2015), The Gambia (2016), Liberia (2017) and Sierra Leone (2018) have led some analysts to suggest that African countries are actually more democratic than other regions based on their level of development.⁷⁰

With biometric voting being used across Africa and greater civic engagement and demands for accountability, manipulating elections is becoming harder compared to Poland and Hungary or even emerging market heavyweights such as India and Turkey where significant democratic erosion has occurred these examples suggest that Africa's democratic trajectory is not that grim. Africa's young 'Facebook generation' want better and more accou-

ntable governance and insist on democracy and development simultaneously, rather than one or the other.

Survey data released by Afrobarometer in November 2020, comprising of responses from nearly 27,000 people across 18 African countries, suggests that, on average, the US development model, based on liberal democracy and free markets, is still preferred by African electorates to China's authoritarian state capitalist model.⁷¹

However, the findings for West Africa contained the most variability, underscoring the ideological competition currently playing out in the region. Mali and Burkina Faso were the two outlier countries in the survey where the Chinese model was favoured by respondents over the US model, while respondents in Ghana and Sierra Leone had the highest approval of the democratic development model. In Nigeria West Africa's largest and most influential country approval of the US model slipped by 7% between 2014 and 2020. This occurred alongside growth in approval for the Chinese model, though the US still retained higher favourability (36% to 28%).

⁷⁰ Ronak Gopaldas, "Democracy in decline in Africa? Not so fast," Africa Portal, November 5, 2021, <https://www.africaportal.org/features/democracy-decline-africa-not-so-fast/>

⁷¹ Josephine Appiah-Nyamekye Sanny and Edem Selormey, "Africans regard China's influence as significant and positive, but slipping," Afrobarometer, November 17, 2020, https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/migrated/files/publications/Dispatches/ad407-chinas_perceived_influence_in_africa_decreases-afrobarometer_dispatch-14nov20.pdf

Afrobarometer's analysis also highlights that "it is notable that younger Africans are more likely than their elders to favor the US model (35% of those aged 18-35 vs. 27% of those over age 55), while regard for the Chinese model is fairly steady across all age groups." Although, the 2022 edition of the smaller African Youth Survey compiled by the South Africa-based Ichikowitz Family Foundation would seem to show these sentiments may be shifting. Of 4,500 young people aged 18-24 polled across 15 countries, 76% picked China as a foreign nation that had a positive influence on their lives compared to 72% for the US.⁷² Perhaps of more concern, less than third of respondents felt their country was moving in the right direction, highlighting once again how disaffected youth may be more susceptible to influence from disinformation going forward.

But development models aside, the deepening involvement of illiberal states contains a host of other potential long-term consequences. One being that African countries could begin to contribute to intern-ational networks and synergies being developed by autocratic regimes.

Russian-sponsored actors supported former Guinean President Alpha Condé's re-election campaign in 2020 after Condé pushed through controversial constitutional reforms to allow himself to run for a third term as a means to protect Russian aluminum producer Rusal's bauxite assets, half of which come from Guinea. That same year, ahead of presidential elections in Côte d'Ivoire, pro-Russian operatives are thought

to have spread disinformation on social media to undermine political opponents of the ruling party there as well.⁷³

Mali throughout 2020 allegedly facilitated the transit of illicit gold sales being sent to UAE by the Maduro regime in Venezuela.⁷⁴ In January 2022, China and Russia together blocked the UN Security Council from making a statement, drafted by France, in support of sanctions imposed on Mali by ECOWAS after the country's military regime announcing it was delaying elections promised for February 2022 by up to five years.⁷⁵ Russia also offered to facilitate trade between landlocked Mali and Guinea, the latter also subject to ECOWAS sanctions after its military overthrew President Condé in September 2021.

More recently, during the early stages of Russia's unprovoked invasion of Ukraine, nearly half of African nations withheld their support for two resolutions at the UN General Assembly condemning Russia's attempt to violently force regime change in Kyiv. Countries across the continent have also refused to join Western nations in imposing sanctions on Russian entities.

Nevertheless, even as African countries have generally stayed neutral in Russia-Ukraine conflict pushing back against Western pressure to fall in line against Russia in favour of non-alignment, or out of indifference to war in Europe after having their own crises insufficiently addressed the continent has been not only a target, but a source of pro-Russian influence campaigns.

⁷² Antony Sguazzin, "China Surpasses US in Eyes of Young Africans, Survey Shows," Bloomberg, June 12, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-06-12/china-surpasses-us-in-the-eyes-of-young-africans-survey-shows>

⁷³ Idayat Hassan, "Disinformation is Undermining Democracy in West Africa," CIGI Online, July 4, 2022, <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/disinformation-is-undermining-democracy-in-west-africa/>

⁷⁴ "Mali, Emirates facilitated Venezuelan gold trade in 2020, opposition says," Reuters, March 5, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-politics-gold-idUSKCN2AX0QO>

⁷⁵ "Russia, China block UN support for ECOWAS sanctions on Mali," Al Jazeera English, January 12, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/1/12/russia-and-china-block-un-support-for-ecowas-sanctions-on-mali>

One week after Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February, researchers from the London-based Centre for the Analysis of Social Media began monitoring the emergence of the pro-invasion hashtags #IStandWithPutin and #IStandWithRussia.⁷⁶ Early in the conflict, around 10,000 Twitter accounts shared the hashtags at least five times, with researchers using linguistic cues to identify a significant cluster of these accounts as genuine users likely coming from Ghana and Nigeria. The majority originated in South Asia and South Africa. The accounts posted and retweeted memes that “pushed vivid anti-colonial and anti-Western imagery mixed with Putin strongman motifs and solidarity among the BRICS.”⁷⁷ They also echoed Kremlin messaging and pretense for Russia's invasion: NATO expansion and the supposed need to liberate Russian-speaking Ukrainians from state oppression.

Furthermore, during the first two months of the conflict, Code for Africa, a civil society investigative consortium based on the continent, identified at least 175 Facebook pages across 21 African countries, including dozens in Burkina Faso and Mali, promoting pro-Russia social media content.⁷⁸ Posts often involved images either celebrating Vladimir Putin or crude doctored photos insulting US President Joe Biden or Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, with one Burkinabe official describing the activity to the Washington Post as “industrial” in scale. Another tactic of the pages was to invite users to join private chat groups on WhatsApp and Telegram where it is easier

to evade content moderation efforts.

By June, the Kremlin began orchestrating disinformation campaigns around the Africa's growing food crisis stemming from commodity and energy price shocks related to the war in Ukraine.⁷⁹ For weeks Russian diplomats in numerous African capitals and pro-Russian Facebook accounts in Mali, Côte d'Ivoire and South Africa repeated the false narrative that Western sanctions were to blame for skyrocketing food prices in African countries—narratives that reportedly gained traction within several African governments. This despite the US and EU placing no sanctions on any Russian agricultural products and most independent experts pointing to Russia's blockade of Ukrainian ports in the Black Sea as the reasons for food shortages in African countries heavily reliant on imports of grain and cooking oil from both Ukraine and Russia.

West African nations with large or majority Muslim populations have also publicly backed China in the face of condemnation over its internment, persecution and mass surveillance of Uyghur and Muslim minority groups in China's northwest province of Xinjiang. A December 2021 report from an independent UK-based tribunal described how over a million Uyghurs being held within a network of detention camps are “subjected to acts of unconscionable cruelty, depravity and inhumanity,” including torture and sexual violence.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Carl Miller, “Who's Behind #IStandWithPutin?” *The Atlantic*, April 5, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/04/russian-propaganda-zelensky-information-war/629475/>

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Danielle Paquette, “He's pro-Russia, anti-Zelensky and rallying for Putin in West Africa,” *The Washington Post*, April 21, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/21/russia-west-africa-disinformation-burkina-faso/>

⁷⁹ Antony Sguazzin, Alberto Nardelli and Megan Durisin, “Putin's Media Blitz on Africa Food Crisis Sparks Alarm in Europe,” *Bloomberg*, July 3, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-07-03/putin-s-media-blitz-on-africa-food-crisis-sparks-alarm-in-europe>

⁸⁰ “Uyghur Tribunal Judgement”, Uyghur Tribunal, December 9, 2021, <https://uyghurtribunal.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Uyghur-Tribunal-Summary-Judgment-9th-Dec-21.pdf>

Leaked papers indicate China's policies of population control in Xinjiang come directly from orders from the top levels of the CCP.⁸¹ Yet in March 2021, while attending a Chinese government-sponsored event in Xinjiang, Burkina Faso's ambassador to the country claimed "some Western forces hyping up the so-called Xinjiang-related issues are actually launching unprovoked attacks on China to serve their own ulterior motives."⁸² At a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in July 2020, numerous African countries also backed China's new national security law imposed in Hong Kong, which led to a severe crackdown on civil society groups and independent media critical of CCP rule.⁸³ Among those lending their support for the law were The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Mauritania, Niger and Togo.

Closer alignment with illiberal regimes will provide African governments the chance to learn more modern methods to repress civil society, including through heightened digital surveillance and the simultaneous suppression and stoking of political speech online. As well as through the facilitation of transnational repression—the practice of authoritarian governments targeting dissidents, journalists and activists abroad to silence criticism and dissent.

With the encouragement and expertise of pro-authoritarian foreign benefactors, African countries may also pursue an anti-

democratic implementation of digital sovereignty.

Digital sovereignty exists to a degree in all countries. Proponents say expanding digital sovereignty, particularly in Africa, is necessary to improve national security and strategic autonomy, accelerate economic development, reduce cybercrime and protect citizens' data from being exploited by international tech companies.⁸⁴ Critics and rights groups argue that it will instead reduce net neutrality by placing a chilling effect on free speech and access to information, and limit the ability of civil society groups to organise while also vastly increasing state surveillance capabilities.⁸⁵

In December 2019, African countries contributed 30 of the 79 votes supporting a successful Russia-backed resolution at the United Nations calling for a new global anti-cybercrime treaty based on digital sovereignty.⁸⁶ This included all West African countries except for abstentions from Ghana, Guinea-Bissau and Liberia.

China—whose Great Firewall represents the most extreme form of digital sovereignty, including a "traffic-light system" used for monitoring journalists⁸⁷—has been offering African countries loans, equipment and technical expertise through Chinese telecoms giant Huawei to help them build their own ICT ecosystems. In June 2021 Senegal announced it would construct a new national data centre outside of Dakar with

81 "Leaked papers link top Chinese leaders to Uyghur crackdown," BBC, November 30, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-59456541>

82 "Western hype about Xinjiang an unprovoked attack on China: African ambassadors," Xinhua, March 16, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-03/16/c_139814305.htm

83 Dave Lawler, "The 53 countries supporting China's crackdown on Hong Kong," Axios, July 2, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/2020/07/02/countries-supporting-china-hong-kong-law>

84 David Monyae, "Africa's digital sovereignty a timely and relevant debate," Business Day, September 27, 2021, <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2021-09-27-david-monyae-africas-digital-sovereignty-a-timely-and-relevant-debate/>

85 Deborah Brown, "Proposed UN Cybercrime Treaty Could Undermine Human Rights," Human Rights Watch, January 18, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/19/proposed-un-cybercrime-treaty-could-undermine-human-rights>

86 "Countering the use of information and communications technologies for criminal purposes: resolution/adopted by the General Assembly," United Nations Digital Library, 2019, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3841023?ln=en>

87 James Clayton, "China surveillance of journalists to use 'traffic-light' system," BBC, November 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-59441379>

China's help.⁸⁸ Nigerian government officials reportedly reached out to Chinese cyberspace authorities to inquire about building Nigeria's own internet firewall less than a year after the #EndSARS movement in late 2020 triggered mass protests and broad condemnation of the country's political class.⁸⁹ More than two dozen African countries have already signed up for private Chinese companies to begin delivering "smart" government service solutions.⁹⁰ When it comes to China's involvement in building ICT ecosystems, there is additional risk given how Chinese law compels private companies to assist with state intelligence gathering if requested by the government.

This underscores what Jonathan Hillman, author of *The Digital Silk Road: China's Quest to Wire the World and Win the Future*, has said previously: digital sovereignty "feeds into the myth that storing data locally makes it more secure, even if the whole technical and support package is provided by foreign firms."⁹¹

This issue is especially pertinent given how the Covid-19 pandemic has rapidly accelerated the use of digital surveillance ostensibly in the name of public health, but which US-based democracy watchdog group Freedom House says is also "fuelling digital repression worldwide."⁹²

88 "Senegal aims for digital sovereignty with new China-backed data centre," Reuters, June 22, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/senegal-datacenter/senegal-aims-for-digital-sovereignty-with-new-china-backed-data-centre-idINLSN2O44D3>

89 Finbarr Toesland, "Is a China-style 'Great Firewall' coming to Nigeria?" *NewAfrican*, October 4, 2021, <https://newafricanmagazine.com/26999/>

90 Yinka Adegoke, "The real reason China is pushing "digital sovereignty" in Africa," *Rest of World*, December 1, 2021, <https://restofworld.org/2021/the-real-reason-china-is-pushing-digital-sovereignty-in-africa/>

91 Ibid.

92 Adrian Shahbaz and Allie Funk, "The Pandemic's Digital Shadow," Freedom House, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2020/pandemics-digital-shadow>

Future threats

As illiberal states expand their engagement in West Africa, it is highly likely there will be a correlating increase in disinformation and influence campaigns seeking to improve their reputation or support the electoral success of ruling parties favourable to them. Likewise, anti-Western campaigns are bound to carry on, given their low-cost and evident success as a foreign policy tool by authoritarian regimes. The advancement of digital sovereignty if implemented without the proper oversight mechanisms in place could also make it easier for illiberal foreign regimes to collaborate on mutually beneficial disinformation campaigns and surveillance operations with authoritarian African states.

But of more immediate impact for West Africa's development may be the accelerating application of foreign disinformation tactics by domestic actors for their own propaganda purposes. Governments may over time learn the art of effectively manipulating public opinion while still allowing for a veneer of freedom of expression and democratic engagement online, rather than resorting to the type of heavy-handed, pull-the-plug internet crack-downs and communications blackouts that alienate citizens and encourage the formation of more organised opposition.

As disinformation tactics evolve, those conspiring to seize power from democratically elected governments may signal their intentions through online campaigns

promoting the virtues of military leadership and the inability of democracy to deliver public goods and security to citizens. Content may also focus on the lack of resources and material support security forces are being provided by civilian governments in their fight against highly mobile and coordinated jihadist groups, which is a genuine problem. In essence, certain groups may begin more forcefully pushing a narrative that alleges that democratic systems lead to societal dysfunction and how domestic security needs necessitate the suspension of constitutional order. Amid such political instability, terror groups will likely also find it easier to sow disinformation and spread propaganda that helps with their own recruitment efforts.

These dynamics are reflected in how researchers from the Digital Forensics Lab at the Atlantic Council, a US-based think tank, say campaigns on Facebook in particular have been used by groups in West Africa as a tool to sway public opinion in favour of military takeovers and strongman regimes.

According to their analysis, beginning in February 2020 coordinated propaganda networks using at least five Facebook pages in Mali—which tried to pass themselves off as non-profit organisations or community groups—artificially promoted anti-Western, anti-French narratives with the intention of paving the way for Wagner mercenaries to be deployed to the country several months before they are said to have actually arrived

93 Jean Le Roux, "Pro-Russian Facebook assets in Mali coordinated support for Wagner Group, anti-democracy protests," Medium, February 16, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/pro-russian-facebook-assets-in-mali-coordinated-support-for-wagner-group-anti-democracy-protests-2abaac4d87c4>

in late 2021.⁹³ As of February 2022, the network had amassed 140,000 total followers and posted some 24,000 pieces of content, one third of them similar in nature and posted on multiple pages within seconds of each other. Aside from promoting the Wagner Group, the posts also advocated for the preservation of military rule and postponement of elections required to transition back to democracy. "Content shared by the network is aimed at undermining French interests, promoting Russia as a viable alternative to the West, and mobilising public support for the government of interim President Assimi Goïta and the Malian military," say researchers. Parallel analysis by the Digital Forensics Lab and Code for Africa shows that a similar scenario played out in Burkina Faso in the lead-up to its January 2022 coup.⁹⁴

Confronting these issues is also made more difficult by the complexities and shortcomings of platform governance. Tristan Harris, the co-founder of the San Francisco-based Center for Humane Technology, has warned that social media companies' lack of content moderators fluent in local languages and dialects makes it virtually impossible to effectively police extremist content and disinformation in Africa, even if platforms wanted to.⁹⁵ Frances Haugen, the former product manager at Facebook turned whistleblower in late 2021, has similarly cited a lack of content oversight in the Global South by Facebook (whose parent company has since rebranded to Meta) as a glaring flaw in the social media

company's user safety policies.⁹⁶ Documents provided to the Wall Street Journal reveal that in 2020 the platform's employees spent only 13% of their content moderation efforts addressing false or misleading material posted from outside the US, even though nearly 90% of Facebook's 2.9 billion global users reside outside of the country.⁹⁷

All of these factors point to numerous upcoming elections in West Africa as likely targets for disinformation and influence campaigns by both foreign and domestic actors. These include general elections in Nigeria in February 2023, as well as polls in Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Togo that same year, with Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire to follow in 2024.

Similar campaigns could also emerge to influence or delay transitions back to civilian rule by the junta government in Mali, which in June 2022 promised to hand power back to a civilian government in March 2024.⁹⁸ Military leaders in both Burkina Faso⁹⁹ and Guinea¹⁰⁰ have also pledged to arrange for elections in 2025. There is a risk that regimes in all three of these countries may seek to replicate recent events in Sudan. In October 2021, in the lead up to a coup that suspended the country's fragile democratic transition two years after former president Omar al-Bashir was ousted by popular protest, Facebook removed nearly 1,000 accounts and pages synthetically boosting the reputation and content of Sudan's Rapid Support Forces (RSF).¹⁰¹ The accounts were discovered after a sudden spike in their

94 Tessa Knight and Allan Cheboi, "Local support for Russia increased on Facebook before Burkina Faso military coup," Medium, February 16, 2022, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/local-support-for-russia-increased-on-facebook-before-burkina-faso-military-coup-a51df6722e59>

95 "Tristan Harris," Armchair Expert with Dax Shepard, November 19, 2020, <https://armchairexpertpod.com/pods/tristan-harris>

96 Dan Milmo, "Frances Haugen: 'I never wanted to be a whistleblower. But lives were in danger,'" The Guardian, October 24, 2021,

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/24/frances-haugen-i-never-wanted-to-be-a-whistleblower-but-lives-were-in-danger>

97 Justin Scheck, Newley Purnell and Jeff Horwitz, "Facebook Employees Flag Drug Cartels and Human Traffickers. The Company's Response Is Weak, Documents Show," The Wall Street Journal, September 16, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-drug-cartels-human-traffickers-response-is-weak-documents-11631812953>

98 "Mali announces two-year wait before returning to civilian rule," Radio France Internationale, June 7, 2022,

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20220607-mali-announces-two-year-wait-before-returning-to-civilian-rule>

99 Sam Mednick and Arsene Kaboré, "Burkina Faso ruler approves 3-year transitional charter," Associated Press, March 1, 2022,

<https://apnews.com/article/ouagadougou-burkina-faso-africa-elections-charters-c03dcfda4e30f9e57b11c934f09ad039>

100 "Guinea to move to civilian rule in three years," BBC, May 1, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-61288641>

101 Nafisa Eltahir, Malaika Tapper and Khalid Abdelaziz, "Facebook shuts fake accounts in Sudan, as fight for public opinion rages online," Reuters, October 19, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/facebook-shuts-fake-accounts-sudan-fight-public-opinion-rages-online-2021-10-19/>

activity just prior to a scheduled changeover in leadership of Sudan's transitional administration from military to civilian representatives.

It is also important to note that while disinformation campaigns in West Africa appear to be predominantly the work of illiberal regimes and anti-democratic actors, this is not exclusively the case. In late 2020, the head of cyber security policy at Facebook announced that the platform had dismantled a disinformation network originating in France that had evidently been created to compete and engage with Russian disinformation networks in Africa.¹⁰² The network was comprised of 84 Facebook accounts as well as nine pages, in addition to 14 Instagram accounts, that mostly targeted the CAR and Mali, as well as Algeria, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire and Niger. These fake accounts tried to portray themselves as domestic users and posted content supportive of France's policies and military intervention in the region, while also condemning Russia's involvement in the CAR and engaging with suspected Russian-sponsored, anti-France content being posted in target countries. This network had a much smaller reach than its rival pro-Russia networks, totaling just under 6,000 followers on Facebook and 200 followers on Instagram.

Private firms can also play a role in trying to sway public opinion and manipulate elections, catering to whichever interests have the connections or wherewithal to

access their services. This was most notable in the way British political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica interfered in elections on behalf of clients all over the world before being forced to shut down in 2018 amid growing scandal once its activities were revealed by media reports. According to a former employee and whistleblower, the company was hired by a member of Nigeria's wealthy elite to interfere in Nigeria's 2015 presidential election on behalf incumbent President Jonathan Goodluck, a Christian from Nigeria's south, by circulating a violent, Islamophobic "murder video" online.¹⁰³ This was done "with the sole intent of intimidating voters" by characterising all Muslims—like Goodluck's then opponent and eventual election winner, Nigeria's current President Muhammadu Buhari—as hardline extremists.

What is clear is that as they are discovered, disinformation campaigns throughout the region need to be studied and understood much more than they currently are, so that proper legislative, regulatory, and non-regulatory measures and responses can be taken to maintain the integrity of online civic space and limit the polarisation of societies. These measures need to be properly resourced, subject to oversight and applied in a way that does not encroach on freedom of expression if they are not just to prevent disinformation from flourishing, but to support a more open and free flow of information.

¹⁰² Nathaniel Gleicher and David Agranovich, "Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour from France and Russia," Meta, December 15, 2020, <https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>

¹⁰³ Carole Cadwalladr, "Revealed: graphic video used by Cambridge Analytica to influence Nigerian election," The Guardian, April 4, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/apr/04/cambridge-analytica-used-violent-video-to-try-to-influence-nigerian-election>





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