Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa

By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

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Disinformation campaigns seeking to manipulate African information systems have surged nearly fourfold since 2022, triggering destabilizing and antidemocratic consequences.

REGIONAL MAP OF DISINFORMATION IN AFRICA

15 North African Campaigns

23 Trans-African Campaigns

33 East African Campaigns

72 West African Campaigns

21 Central African Campaigns

25 Southern African Campaigns

Sponsors

- Kremlin-linked actors
- CCP-linked actors
- Other foreign actors
- Militant Islamist group actors
- Military actors (including juntas)
- Domestic political actors
- Other or undetermined actors

The proliferation of disinformation is a fundamental challenge to stable and prosperous African societies. The scope of these intentional efforts to distort the information environment for a political end is accelerating. The 189 documented disinformation campaigns in Africa are nearly quadruple the number reported in 2022. Given the opaque nature of disinformation, this figure is surely an undercount.

Actors driving sophisticated disinformation attacks on African media ecosystems are taking advantage of the rapid expansion in the reach and accessibility of digital communications to reshape the continent's information systems at scales and speeds not possible through traditional analog platforms.

There is a strong link between the scope of disinformation and instability. Disinformation campaigns have directly driven deadly violence, promoted and validated military coups, cowed civil society members into silence, and served as smokescreens for corruption and exploitation. This has had real-world consequences for diminishing Africans' rights, freedoms, and security.

This onslaught of purposeful obfuscation comes as 300 million Africans have come onto social media in the past 7 years. There are now more than 400 million active social media users and 600 million internet users on the continent. Africans who are online rely on social media platforms for consuming news at among the highest rates in the world. Social media users in Nigeria and Kenya are near the top of the globe in the number of hours per day spent on social platforms. They are simultaneously the countries that report the most concern about false and misleading information.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Disinformation campaigns have targeted every region of the continent. At least 39 African countries have been the target of a specific disinformation campaign.

- Disinformation tends to be concentrated. Half of the countries subjected to disinformation (20 of the 39) have been targeted three or more times, up from just seven countries meeting that threshold in 2022.

- African countries experiencing conflict are subject to much greater levels of disinformation—facing a median of 5 campaigns– highlighting the connection between instability and disinformation.

- Countries confronting disinformation typically face multiple disinformation actors. At times, these actors amplify one another's misleading narratives, while at others, they clash or stay in separate lanes.

- Nearly 60 percent of disinformation campaigns on the continent are foreign state-sponsored—with Russia, China, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Qatar as the primary sponsors.

- Russia continues to be the primary purveyor of disinformation in Africa, sponsoring 80 documented campaigns, targeting more than 22 countries. This represents nearly 40 percent of all disinformation campaigns in Africa. These 80 campaigns have reached many millions of users through tens of thousands of coordinated fake pages and posts. Aggressively leveraging disinformation is a mainstay of Russia's use of irregular channels to gain influence in Africa.

- Russia has promulgated disinformation to undermine democracy in at least 19 African countries, contributing to the continent's backsliding on this front.

- African elections provide prime opportunities for disinformation. Some employ mercenary disinfo-ops teams. One private Israeli group, dubbed "Team Jorge," has reportedly implemented disinformation campaigns to disrupt over 20 African elections since 2015.

- Domestic actors have also increasingly integrated disinformation into their political playbooks, notably during Kenya's 2022 and Nigeria's 2023 election.

- African countries that uphold presidential term limits (i.e., those with stronger checks and balances) are less exposed to foreign sponsored disinformation, with an average of 1.5 campaigns compared to an average of over 3 campaigns for countries without term limits. This underscores the common aim of foreign disinformation to prop up authoritarian actors.

- Disinformation is surging in African information spaces at a time when press freedom—a critical protective barrier against disinformation—is in decline. Legislation targeting digital disinformation has been used as a pretext for harassing and detaining journalists.

REGIONAL DISINFORMATION TRENDS

### Africa-wide Disinformation Campaigns: 23

- Africa is subject to 23 transnational disinformation campaigns—nearly all of which are sponsored by external state actors attempting to assert influence on the continent.

23 Trans-African Campaigns

- Russia and China are the leading sponsors of these Africa-wide campaigns to advance their geostrategic interests and shape narratives that undermine democratic processes, promote coups in Africa, stoke anti-Western and anti-United Nations sentiment, and spread confusion about climate change science, among others.
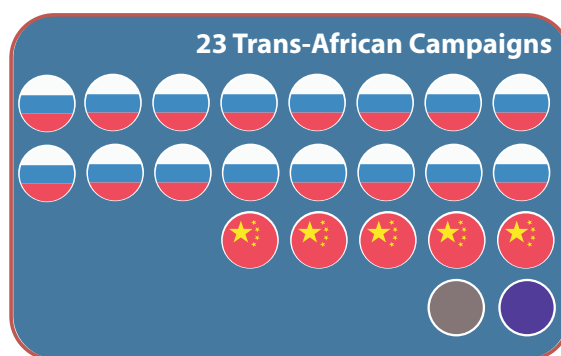
- Given their scale, these attacks achieve some of the most expansive reach. Two prominent disinformation influencers connected to Russia, for example, have a combined social media following of over 28 million users and their content has been amplified by a sprawling ecosystem of hundreds of Russian-linked accounts and pages.

- Russia is the single largest sponsor of Africa-wide disinformation campaigns with 16 of these far-reaching operations.

- These disinformation campaigns employ paid African influencers, digital avatars, and the circulation of fake and out-of-context videos and photographs. These messages copy-and-paste from and are amplified through multiple channels of Russian state-controlled media, radio, and official communications, creating the repetitive echo chambers in which disinformation narratives become rote. Russian embassies appear to have helped set up a network of ostensibly African grassroots front organizations (Partenariat Alternatif Russie-Afrique pour le Développement Économique (PARADE) and Groupe Panafricain pour le Commerce et l'Investissement (GPCI)) to generate and amplify disinformation.

- The Wagner Group has been the Kremlin's primary vehicle for engineering disinformation in Africa—with direct links to approximately half of all Russian-linked campaigns on the continent. Following the 2023 death of Yevgeny Prigozhin, Wagner's founder, Russian disinformation operations are being absorbed into the newly established Russian Africa Corps and the Africa Initiative News Agency, connected to Russian intelligence services and overseen by Artem Sergeyevich Kureyev from Moscow.

- The Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—via the United Front and China Media Group— is the second most prolific Africa-wide sponsor of disinformation with five known multi-regional campaigns. Two of these cases have aligned with or amplified Russian narratives. However, the CCP's approach is more institutionalized and heavily invested in laundering official CCP narratives through the ownership and control of ICT infrastructure as well as through licensing and training agreements with African media. These campaigns are part of a wider CCP effort to step up its use of disinformation.

West Africa: 72 Campaigns Targeting 13 Countries

- West Africa is the region most targeted by disinformation— accounting for nearly 40 percent of documented disinformation campaigns in Africa. Roughly half of these attacks are connected to Russia. Russia has inundated the Sahel with disinformation since 2018 with 19 campaigns directed at Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. All three countries have experienced military coups that Russian networks have

72 West African Campaigns
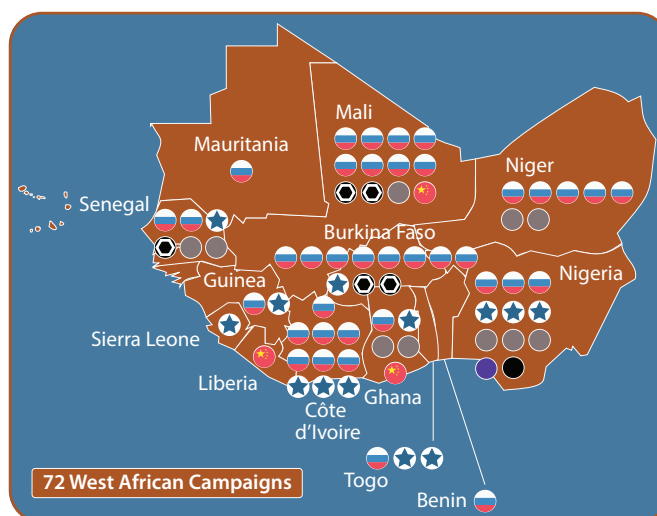
helped prime and promote despite their abysmal track records. As described by fact-checkers in Mali, these campaigns are often "produced on an industrial scale" and have toxic impacts on the narratives circulated and tenor of online conversations.

RUSSIAN DISINFORMATION AROUND NIGER'S COUP

Building on a template employed in Mali and Burkina Faso, Wagner-linked campaigns surrounding the coup in Niger showcase an increasingly well-calibrated Russian disinformation playbook in West Africa that is both calculated and opportunistic. The campaigns targeting Niger have utilized online networks, assets groomed on-the-ground like UNPP (Union des Patriotes Panafricanistes) and GPCI (Groupe Panafricain pour le Commerce et l'Investissement), and Russian state media to launch a barrage of fake content before, during, and after the July 2023 coup in Niger.

Pre-coup: following the October 2022 coup in Burkina Faso, pro-Russian Telegram channels suggested Niger as a future target. Disinformation networks connected to the Wagner Group twice sought to spark rumors of a coup in Niger, including through what appears to have been a carefully orchestrated online scheme coinciding with a trip abroad by President Bazoum in February 2023.

Immediate aftermath: as the coup was unfolding in late July, the leader of the Wagner Group, Yevgeny Prigozhin, welcomed the events, posting a message of support on Telegram from St. Petersburg where he was attending the Russia-Africa Summit. Wagner-linked networks echoed Prigozhin in cheering the coup, encouraging the violent suppression of pro-democracy demonstrators in Niamey, and exploiting the confusion to frame the events as anti-France and as representing a momentous surge in African support for a Russian vision of the global order. Fact-checkers reported having difficulty keeping up with the volume of fake claims. The effect was to confuse and paralyze citizens from responding. As one observer described, "I've had to distance myself from everything because I don't know what's true and what's not. … Everything seems to be a lie or exaggerated."

Post-coup: Wagner assets sought to consolidate the coup in Niger by derailing negotiations between its leaders and regional mediators. Networks spanning closed channels (Telegram, WhatsApp), social media sites (X/Twitter, Facebook), and traditional media (Afrique Média) spread content intended to inflame Nigerien mistrust of these processes, including claims that an ECOWAS invasion was imminent and that French fighter jets were landing in Senegal to support ECOWAS. Russian campaigns moved to exploit the coup by spreading false narratives promoting Wagner mercenaries as an answer to Niger's security challenges. Content related to Niger spiked by 6,645 percent on 45 Russian state and Wagner Telegram channels in the month after the coup, as these accounts ramped up disinformation to cement the military junta and associate it with Russia.

- The second largest sponsor of disinformation in the region are the military juntas in Mali and Burkina Faso. These regimes are isolated and increasingly dependent on Russian-backing to hold onto power. They are emulating Russian disinformation techniques, while scapegoating France, the United Nations, the Economic Community of West African States, and human rights groups. These regimes attempt to control the information space by cracking down on domestic journalists and banning reputable international media outlets.

- Militant Islamist groups are a third major sponsor of disinformation in West Africa. Nigeria is an illustration of how these groups have used a variety of disinformation tactics via local languages and closed networks (Telegram) to recruit and spread their messages.
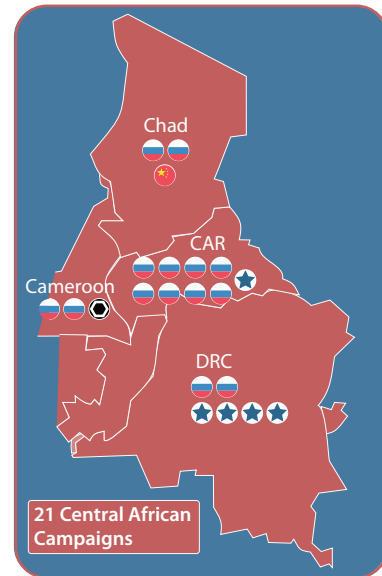
East Africa: 33 Campaigns Targeting 8 Countries

- East Africa has the second highest number of documented disinformation campaigns on the continent and the highest percentage (over 60 percent) of domestically originating campaigns. Most of these are in two countries: Sudan (14 campaigns – 6 domestic) and Kenya (9 campaigns – 5 domestic).

- Sudan has been swamped by disinformation emanating from the two sides in the country's conflict—the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) and Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). RSF and SAF networks have actively thickened the fog of war, spreading conflicting claims of territory occupied and battle outcomes, creating an even more unsafe and difficult environment for civilians.

- Sudan has been swamped by disinformation emanating from the two sides in the country's conflict

- Regional and foreign powers with vested interests in the war (Russia, the UAE, and Egypt) have also been active sponsors of disinformation in support of their respective proxy.

- Prior to the outbreak of open conflict, these networks sought to undermine the country's pro-democracy movement through disinformation, including by manipulating social media platforms to mute or block content from authentic grassroots Sudanese resistance committees—a practice called shadowbanning.

- Kenya has seen an unparalleled rise of domestic political disinformation, illustrating a paradox in which democratic countries' open information spaces can be weaponized against them when rapid technological change occurs without an adequate policy response.

- Al Shabaab and the Islamic State in Somalia (ISS) have been early and innovative adopters of disinformation in East Africa, setting up pages that pose as media outlets on Facebook and using those pages to spread extremist ideology in African languages. ISS pages called for a boycott of Kenya's election and the excommunication of Muslims who voted in it.
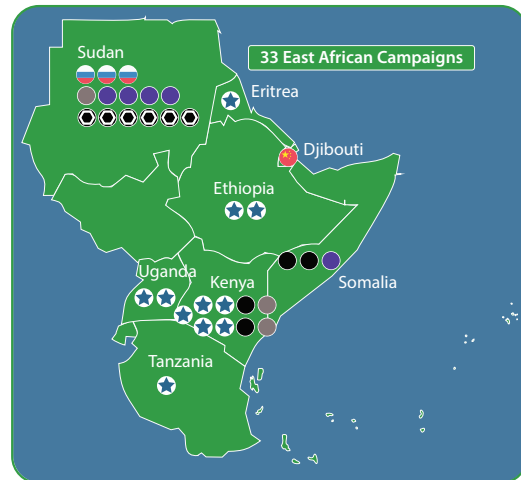
Central Africa: 21 Campaigns Targeting 4 Countries

- United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions have been repeatedly targeted by disinformation campaigns in central Africa. In the Central African Republic (CAR), supporters of the Russian-co-opted President Faustin-Archange Touadéra have spread disinformation about the UN's mission (MINUSCA) by creating and fanning conspiracy theories. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), "pressure groups" have been recruited by politicians to spread online disinformation to incite anti-UN mission (MONUSCO) sentiment. These false conspiracies—including claims that the UN was supporting and selling weapons to armed rebel groups—sparked violent protests in 2022 that resulted in the deaths of 5 peacekeepers and over 30 protesters who clashed outside a MONUSCO base.

21 Central African Campaigns

- Disinformation and inaccurate "doxing"—cyberbullying by sharing sensitive personal information—spread by online networks connected to the armed actors in the Ambazonian conflict in Cameroon have possibly resulted in the summary execution of innocent civilians.

- Russia has been connected to eight disinformation campaigns in CAR going back to at least 2018. Russian-connected disinformation in CAR blurs the lines between external and domestic disinformation, having cultivated a corps of Russian-instructed journalists, bloggers, and regime spokespersons who promote the Touadéra regime's interests, including supporting the removal of term limits.

- Pervasive disinformation clouded the DRC's December 2023 election, further adding to the confusion that undercut its legitimacy.

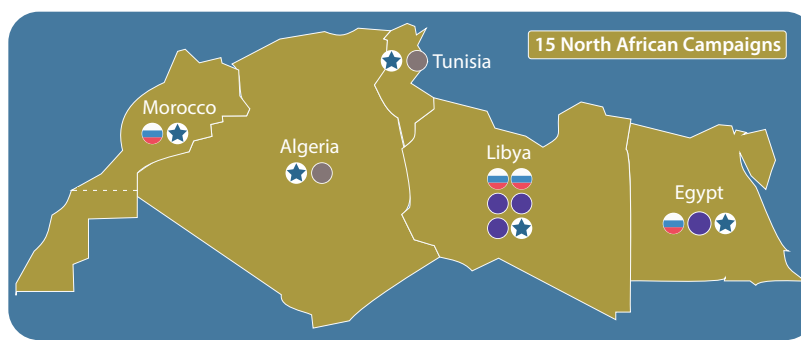## Southern Africa: 25 Campaigns Targeting 8 Countries

- China's armies of bots artificially amplifying Chinese diplomats in Africa have been most active in southern Africa, targeting 6 countries.

- The most documented campaigns in the region have been directed at South Africa and Zimbabwe.

- In both countries, external and internal actors have used disinformation to shape narratives and sow distrust among the population during presidential campaigns.

25 Southern African Campaigns
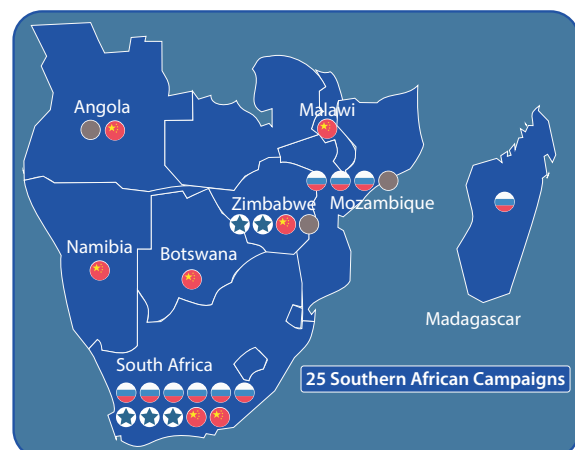
- Russia has been the primary disinformation actor in South Africa. In addition to pushing narratives intended to polarize communities, fan distrust, and bolster the African National Congress, Russia has used influential South Africans to promote pro-Russian narratives within South Africa and abroad.

- China has been the primary external purveyor of disinformation in Zimbabwe. China has enacted campaigns to support ZANU-PF by suppressing opposition and civil society voices, promote Chinese political and business propaganda, and push anti-Western narratives. China has weaponized social media channels and traditional state-controlled media to disseminate and amplify false claims to support these campaigns.

North Africa: 15 Campaigns Targeting 5 Countries

- Russia has carved out significant space in the information environment in North Africa. Egypt has emerged as a hub for spreading Russian narratives in the region with Egyptian state-run media outlets regularly republishing Russian state media content. RT Arabic is the second largest RT outlet behind the English language edition.

15 North African Campaigns

Tunisia · Morocco · Algeria · Libya · Egypt

- Russian disinformation in Libya has sought to boost warlord Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), stoke nostalgia for the Qaddafi regime, and to disrupt the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum. Disinformation undermining the UN Support Mission in Libya has been widely circulated, benefiting the LNA.

- Domestic disinformation targeting opposition political actors and pro-democracy activists has been documented in each North African country.

- Domestic disinformation targeting opposition political actors and pro-democracy activists has been documented in each North African country. Supporters of Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed have been especially active in deploying these tools to discredit the opposition and normalize his extraconstitutional seizure of power.

- In Tunisia, Saïed has promoted racist conspiracies about Sub-Saharan Africans in his speeches, narratives that have been immediately amplified by influence networks on social media.