

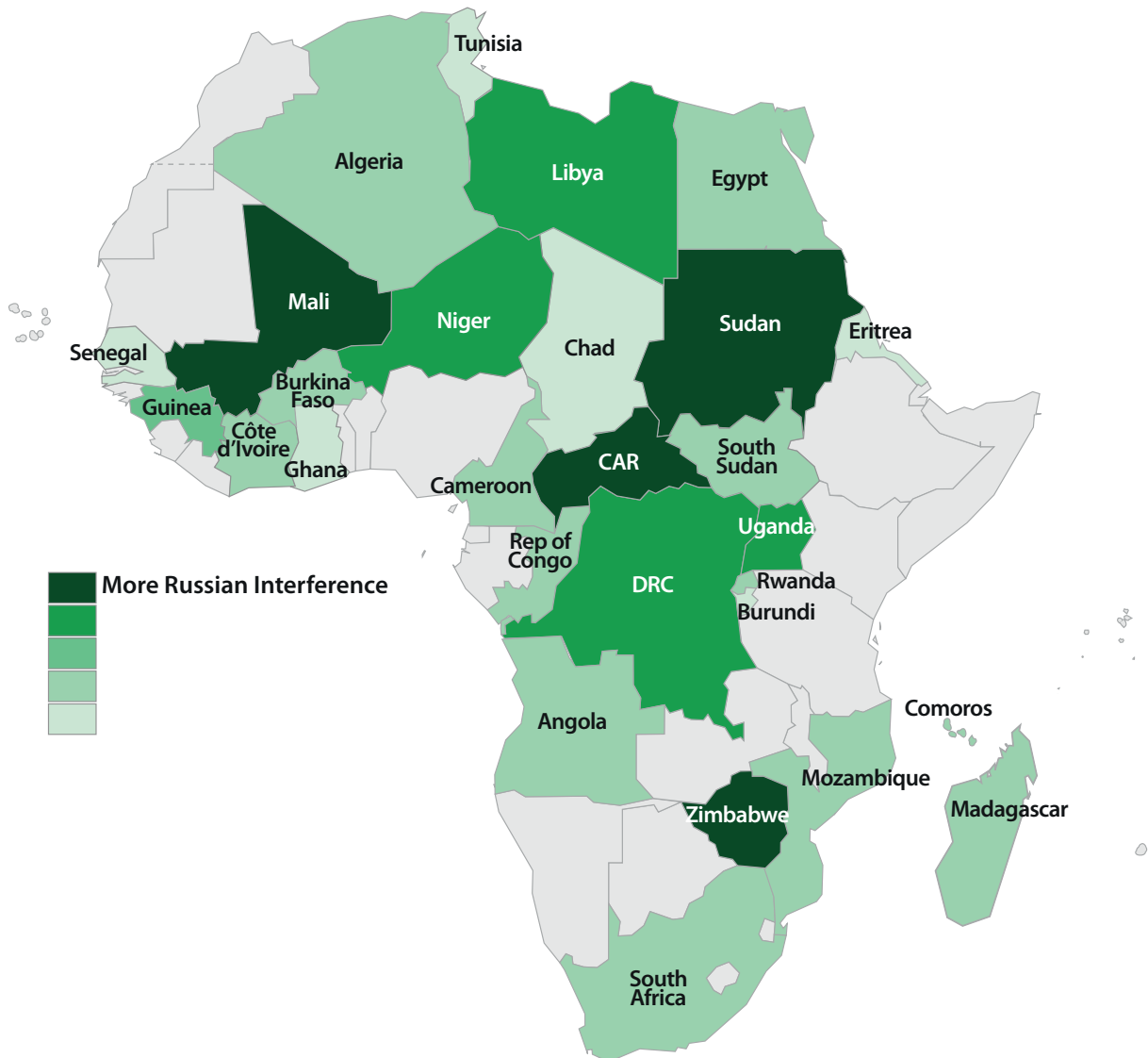
Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa

By the Africa Center for Strategic Studies

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Systematic efforts by Russia to undercut democracy in Africa have inhibited democratic development in two dozen African countries.

RUSSIAN INTERVENTIONS TO UNDERMINE DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA



There has been much attention given to democratic backsliding in Africa in recent years. According to Freedom House, 31 African countries have seen their democracy scores decline over the past 5 years. Less well appreciated is the role that external authoritarian actors have played in facilitating this deterioration. Russia stands out in this regard. Among other aims, undermining democracy has been a strategic objective of Russia's Africa policy for the past two decades. Authoritarian governments lacking domestic checks and balances provide permissive environments for enabling Russian influence on the continent. Normalizing authoritarianism abroad, meanwhile, validates Russia's nondemocratic governance practices at home.

Russia's disruption of democratic processes occurs through both official channels (such as blocking UN resolutions condemning African regimes' human rights abuses or fraudulent electoral claims) and irregular means (such as disinformation campaigns targeting democratic proponents, election interference, the deployment of Wagner paramilitary forces, or illicit arms for resources deals). As the nature of these irregular interventions is intentionally opaque, the depth of Russian intervention is often unclear. Nonetheless, the breadth of Russia's efforts to undermine democracy in Africa is remarkable, having actively deployed at least one of these tools in 28 African countries spanning the continent.

The effect of these interventions is to thwart the aspirations of the three-quarters of African citizens who want to see democracy flourish in their countries, thereby weakening African voices, sovereignty, and self-determination.

HIGHLIGHTS





- Russian interference to undercut democracy in Africa occurs across a range of methods with disinformation (17 countries targeted), electoral interference (15), and support for extraconstitutional claims on power (14) being most common.
- Russia's methods of democratic interference in Africa tend to be reinforcing. Disinformation campaigns are nearly always accompanied by efforts to interfere in elections to keep Moscow-friendly regimes in power, to support their extended tenures in office beyond constitutionally mandated term limits, or to validate coups.
- Russia primarily targets African countries with relatively weak democratic institutions. The median Freedom House freedom score (on a scale of 0-100) for African countries in which Russia is actively undermining democracy is a 28. This compares to a median score of 51 (nearly double) for African countries that Russia is not recognized as undermining.
- In African countries where Russia is most active (i.e., engaging in four or five of the identified undermining elements), the median freedom score is just 19.
- Russia is, thus, helping prevent political rights, civil liberties, and checks and balances on the executive branch from gaining traction in some of the continent's most enduring authoritarian systems. As a result, despite massive popular protests for democracy in places like Algeria, Guinea, Sudan, Uganda, and Zimbabwe, exclusionary regimes persist.

- The notable exception to this pattern of targeting countries with weak democratic institutions is South Africa, which is recognized as having some of the strongest checks and balances on the continent. This reflects the opening Russia perceives it can exploit to coopt South African leaders and gain further influence.
- 11 of the 23 African countries where Russia is actively undermining democracy are in conflict. This represents three-fourths of all African countries in conflict.
- Many of these conflicts are internal, resulting from the unwillingness of ruling parties to share power. Russia's thwarting of democracy in these countries is effectively prolonging these conflicts by blocking mediated political solutions. Russian support to the military government in Sudan, for example, helped derail the planned democratic transition there, precipitating the ensuing conflict.
- Non-coincidentally, 7 out of the 10 African countries with the highest levels of forced population displacements have been targets of Russian interventions to undercut democracy.

Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa

Russia's Toolbox for Obstructing Democracy in Africa					
	(1) Election/ Political Interference	(2) Illicit Arms / Wagner/ Africa Corps	(3) Undermining the UN	(4) Disinformation	(5) Political Support for Extraconstitutional Seizures/Term Limit Evasions
Algeria				X	X
Angola	X			X	
Burkina Faso	X	X		X	X
Burundi					X
Cameroon	X			X	
CAR	X	X	X	X	X
Chad				X	
Comoros	X				X
Congo-B				X	X
Côte d'Ivoire	X			X	
DRC	X		X	X	X
Egypt				X	X
Eritrea			X		
Ghana				X	
Guinea	X				X
Libya	X	X	X	X	
Madagascar	X			X	
Mali	X	X	X	X	X
Mozambique	X			X	
Niger	X	X		X	X
Rwanda	X				X
Senegal				X	
South Africa	X			X	
South Sudan		X	X		
Sudan	X	X	X	X	X
Tunisia				X	
Uganda	X	X		X	X
Zimbabwe	X	X	X	X	X
Total:	18	9	8	22	15

NORTH AFRICA

 Algeria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian disinformation claims the Hirak democracy movement is controlled by radical Islamists. • Since 2002, Russia has supplied over 75 percent of the arms to the four-term Bouteflika government, which continues under Tebboune. 	 Libya <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russia/Wagner support Haftar's repeated attempts to seize Tripoli by force and displace UN-recognized government. • Russia refuses to withdraw troops from Libya despite repeated demands by the UN. • Russian-supplied dinar banknotes in 2016 undermine common Libyan monetary policy run by Tripoli-based Central Bank. • Russia blocks UN resolution imposing travel ban and asset freeze on Haftar-aligned militia leader responsible for massacres in Tarhuna. • UN-recognized government alleges Wagner carried out a series of chemical attacks against government forces from December 2019 to February 2020. • Russian disinformation attempts to disrupt Libyan Political Dialogue Forum while polarizing and sowing distrust in Libyan information spaces. • Russia backs parallel government in the East, while thwarting constitutional referendum and national elections.
 Egypt <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian disinformation claims democracy movement controlled by "radical Islamists" and takes counter-revolutionary stance against protesters calling for reform and democracy. • Russian disinformation attempts to delegitimize Egypt's democratic transition, warning of civil war in response to protests on constitutional referendum. • Al-Ahram and Sputnik Arabic maintain media cooperation agreement. • Russian officials characterize Egyptian military coup as a "new kind of revolution" and the "right democratic path." 	 Tunisia <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian disinformation characterizes 2011 pro-democracy demonstrations as "riots" and a "coup d'état." • Russia's counter-revolutionary narratives, aimed at delegitimizing the Arab Spring protests, claim these were sponsored by foreign-backed saboteurs.

CENTRAL AFRICA



Burundi

- Russia blocked a UN resolution condemning Pierre Nkurunziza's evasion of terms limits and remaining in power for an unconstitutional third term.



Cameroon

- Russian political consultants help Biya dissipate pro-democracy protests and calls for reform.
- Russia disinformation networks linked to electoral interference.
- Russia blocks UN resolution criticizing Cameroon's excessive use of force in responding to Anglophone crisis.



Chad

- Russian disinformation promotes anti-French narratives and calls to increase cooperation between Chad and Russia.
- Russian coordinated social media network used copy-and-paste techniques to amplify Chad-related content posted by Wagner-linked influencers such as Kémi Séba. Possible impersonation of media members and rebel groups to seed anti-French and pro-Russian content.
- Russian sponsored disinformation network promotes false claims that France had provided pro-LGBTQ umbrellas for a festival in Chad.



Central African Republic



- Russia actively involved in Touadéra's reelection in 2020.
- Russia supports Touadéra's bid to stay in power for an unconstitutional third term.
- Russians serve as National Security Advisor and as overseers in Ministry of Finance and Customs.
- Wagner has been directly involved in customs revenue collection.
- CAR foreign minister, prime minister, and senior judicial officials have been forced to resign after protesting CAR's loss of sovereignty to Russia.
- Wagner allegedly responsible for human rights abuses against CAR citizens.
- Wagner has threatened MINUSCA personnel, blocked MINUSCA patrols, and seized MINUSCA supplies coming into the country.
- Russian disinformation has touted Touadéra's successes and attacked political opponents.
- Russian political organizations have disseminated falsified polling results to show broad popular support for Touadéra.
- Wagner intervened to prevent an ally and former warlord from being brought before special criminal court for war crimes.
- Russia undermined fragile diplomatic efforts by the UN to bring together competing factions in CAR's ongoing armed conflict.



Democratic Republic of the Congo

- Russia blocked calls for an independent UN investigation into inconsistent vote tallying from the 2018 presidential elections.
- Russian disinformation networks have been linked to electoral interference and have targeted opposition and civil society leaders.
- Russia illicitly supplied arms to Rwanda in its invasion of the DRC during the First Congo War to install Laurent Kabila as leader.
- Russia supported Joseph Kabila's extra-constitutional extension of his term.

CENTRAL AFRICA, cont.

 Republic of the Congo	 Rwanda
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Russia has supported term limit evasions by Sassou-Nguesso.• Russian disinformation networks linked to electoral interference.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Russia has supported Kagame's evasion of term limits and promoted Rwanda as an effective illiberal governance model in Africa.• Russia has supplied surveillance technology to Rwanda to monitor political rivals and civil society groups.• Russia is a major arms supplier of Rwanda and supporter of Rwandan force deployments into the DRC during Congo Wars and CAR.

EAST AFRICA



Eritrea

- Russia has been one of the few international partners to the isolated, totalitarian government of Isaias Afwerki.
- Russia opposed UN sanctions on Eritrea for its border dispute with Djibouti, lack of cooperation with UN monitoring group, and alleged support for al Shabaab.



Sudan

- Wagner forces encouraged Sudanese military's violent assaults on civilian protesters in 2018 and 2019.
- Russia advisors instruct regime of Omar al-Bashir to label pro-democracy protesters as "enemies of Islam," "pro-Israel," "pro-LGBT," and sponsored by "foreigners."
- Russian advisors proposed increasing the price of newsprint to make it harder for democracy organizers to get their message out.
- Russia blocks UN statement condemning coup in Sudan.
- Russia called for lifting arms embargo on Sudan's military government.
- Russia encouraged post-Bashir military leaders to retain power and resist planned transition to civilian rule.
- Russia continues to advise and allegedly arm military factions in Sudan conflict.



South Sudan

- Russia has repeatedly opposed UN arms embargos on South Sudan and vetoed sanctions in 2017.
- Violating arms embargoes, Russian has supplied military equipment, including Mi-24 attack helicopters, to government of South Sudan.
- The majority of weapons in South Sudan throughout its civil war are of Russian origin.



Uganda

- Russia has extolled the integrity of Uganda's controversial election processes where opposition leaders are detained and opposition supporters are arrested or killed.
- Russia provides Uganda military aid for enabling Russian messaging on Ugandan state television.
- Russian disinformation support, known as the Africa Back Office, has aimed to dispel criticism of the ruling party while discrediting opposition leaders.

WEST AFRICA



- Russia has endorsed successive military coups in Burkina Faso, which followed coordinated Russian disinformation campaigns.
- Dozens of Russian-sponsored social media accounts promoting pro-Russian and pro-Wagner narratives have been identified in Burkina Faso.
- Russian-sponsored AI-generated videos attempt to drive popular support for the military government.



- Russian-sponsored disinformation campaigns provide political cheerleading for favored candidates, fan anti-French sentiments, and champion Russian interests around mineral extraction and arms deals.
- Russian disinformation campaigns promote expanded Russian military influence in Côte d'Ivoire.
- Videos, such as a cartoon portraying a Russian mercenary heroically intervening against French forces in West Africa. Artificially amplified photos of four activists who had wrapped themselves in Russian flags at an opposition rally for former president Laurent Gbagbo. Posts suggesting that Gbagbo had ties to Moscow and Putin's support. Paid promotion of Putin's official Facebook page.



- Pro-Russian disinformation campaign claims to have the backing of the Russian government and Wagner to attract online followers and donations. Funds used to purchase Wagner t-shirts and Russian flags distributed at a rally, photographed and shared online.
- Russian state media and Wagner-linked actors, including Prigozhin, amplified the campaign group's rally and championed the network after several of its members were arrested. A single voice recording from Prigozhin on Telegram related to this group received more than 539,800 views and 15,100 interactions.



- Russia supported Alpha Condé's evasion of term limits.
- Russian political technologists advised Condé prior to his unconstitutional third term.

WEST AFRICA, cont



Mali

- Russia actively involved in Touadéra's reelection in 2020.
- Russia supports Touadéra's bid to stay in power for an unconstitutional third term.
- Russians serve as National Security Advisor and as overseers in Ministry of Finance and Customs.
- Wagner has been directly involved in customs revenue collection.
- CAR foreign minister, prime minister, and senior judicial officials have been forced to resign after protesting CAR's loss of sovereignty to Russia.
- Wagner allegedly responsible for human rights abuses against CAR citizens.
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Niger

- Russian disinformation fomented protests against the democratic government in 2019 and 2020.
- Russia is the first country to recognize the military junta that seized power in a coup in 2020.
- Wagner forces have propped up military junta since 2021.
- Wagner implicated in pattern of human rights abuses against Malian civilians. Four out of five Malians killed by Wagner have been civilians.
- Wagner has blocked the UN's ability to conduct independent investigations and has impeded MINUSMA's ability to move outside its bases and implement its mandate.
- Russian disinformation and political organizations have attempted to boost the popularity of the military junta.
- Russia has supported military junta's bypassing deadlines for transition to civilian government, encouraging junta to retain power indefinitely.



Senegal

- Russian disinformation portrays Senegal as a puppet of France and as framing President Sall's attempts to delay the election as a ploy by the West to prevent Senegal from turning to Russia and China.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

 Angola <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian consultants advised Lourenço campaign during 2022 elections. 	 South Africa <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian political operatives advise ANC on ways to discredit the opposition in the 2019 presidential elections. Russian-sponsored disinformation inflames inter-racial and intra-ANC tensions. Joint mining interest between sanctioned Russian oligarch, Viktor Vekselberg, and ANC, allegedly creates leverage over ANC policies.
 Comoros <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian disinformation inflames territorial dispute between Comoros and Mayotte. 	 Zimbabwe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia vetoed UN resolution to impose arms embargo on Zimbabwe for ZANU-PF violence during 2008 elections. Russian proxy election monitoring group, AFRIC, declares highly problematic 2018 elections to be free and fair. Russia evades arms embargo on Zimbabwe, in place for ZANU-PF's undermining democracy and violating human rights. Russian disinformation supports ruling ZANU-PF party.
 Madagascar <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian political operatives sponsored rival presidential candidates in the 2018 presidential elections. Russian operatives pay demonstrators to advance pro-Russian themes. Russian proxy election monitoring groups, AFRIC and CIS-EMO, attempt to illegally conduct exit polls in 2018 elections. Russian disinformation networks promote falsehoods to steer attention to favored candidates. Wagner maintains presence in Madagascar, reportedly with links to gold smuggling and high-level government officials. 	
 Mozambique <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russian political advisors actively support Nyusi's 2019 reelection campaign. Russian polling firm, International Anticrisis Center, promotes fraudulent polls suggesting ruling FRELIMO party enjoys widespread popular support while discrediting the opposition. Russian proxy election monitoring group, AFRIC, declares 2019 elections, characterized by electoral violence and fraud, to be free and fair. Russian Internet Research Agency runs large network of webpages promoting FRELIMO and criticizing opposition. 	

