

How Putin Became a Hero on African TV

Pro-Russian content presenting a distorted version of the war in Ukraine and promoting Russia's interests in Africa is gaining an audience on the continent.

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Henri Doué Taï watching Afrique Média at home in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in February. Arlette Bashizi for The New York Times

In South Africa, a social media influencer who added "Vladimir" to [his Twitter name](#) to convey his reverence for the Russian president transmits Russian-generated content over Twitter and Telegram to a growing audience that now numbers 148,000 followers.

On Afrique Média, a television channel based in Cameroon that reaches millions of people in Africa and recently signed a partnership with RT, the state-funded Russian television network, pundits regularly praise Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with one recently declaring, "Glory to Putin."

An animated video circulating online — and a cause of alarm in one newly revealed U.S. intelligence document — shows a brave Russian commando from the Wagner group, which is fighting for Russia in Ukraine, joining West African soldiers to defeat a horde of invading zombies from France.

Over the past year, a flood of pro-Russian content has increasingly been surfacing on news outlets and social media platforms in Africa. The messages aim to drum up support for the invasion of Ukraine, and to frame Russia's growing presence on the African continent as beneficial, while vilifying American and European — especially French — involvement in Africa.

Among the U.S. intelligence documents found leaked last week is a report saying that Russia's military intelligence agency in February planned a propaganda campaign using African media to "realign" public opinion in Africa with Russia, away from the West.

A broad mix of media has been carrying this content, including influencers on social media and news websites and television networks that have signed partnerships with Kremlin-funded operations.

Afrique Média broadcast on Wednesday a prisoner exchange between Ukraine and Russia. Afrique Média

Some of the outlets, according to experts, are affiliated with the Wagner group, the Kremlin-backed network that is operating in several African countries, seeding disinformation while sending thousands of mercenaries to prop up friendly governments and mine for gold and other natural resources.

“Russian fake news is produced on an industrial scale here,” said Abdoulaye Guindo, the coordinator of Benbere, a fact-checking website based in Mali, where the Wagner group has a sizable presence. “The prowess of pro-Russian accounts is undeniable.”

At the same time, the reach of Western news outlets has been dwindling on some parts of the continent. The BBC is cutting dozens of journalists in Africa and shutting down at least three channels broadcasting in local African languages, part of a broader retrenchment.

Radio France Internationale and France 24, which are funded by the French government, have been suspended in Mali and Burkina Faso, where leaders aligned with Russia have expelled French reporters. Such bans and expulsions “have created space for media favorable to a pro-Russian narrative,” Reporters Without Borders said in a [recent study](#).

Supporters of Burkina Faso’s junta leader holding the flags of their nation and Russia during a demonstration in Ouagadougou in October. Issouf Sanogo/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

From the [Central African Republic](#) to [Madagascar](#), [Mali](#) to [South Africa](#), Russia aims to position itself as a [bulwark against the West](#) in Africa. That influence became even more apparent to Western governments when 26 of the continent’s 54 countries refused to join a U.N. vote condemning the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Interviews with more than two dozen government officials, analysts and journalists show how media and disinformation operations are promoting Russian interests in Africa.

“We’re facing a juggernaut,” said Gen. Pascal Ianni, a French military official in charge of countering Russia’s disinformation operations in West Africa.

Help from China

Shortly after the invasion of Ukraine, the European Union [suspended](#) the Kremlin-backed television network RT (short for Russia Today).

Since then, RT has expanded its operations in Africa and has been developing an “English language Africa hub” in Johannesburg to “cover the broadest possible range of stories that are of interest to local audiences and RT’s international viewers alike,” said Anna Belkina, RT’s deputy editor in chief, in response to questions.

Western countries, she said, have long sought “to curtail our journalistic work and stifle the perspectives we bring to public attention.”

RT’s French-speaking channel, RT France, had also sought to relocate from Europe to a Francophone country in West Africa, according to Séga Diarra, a Malian journalist who said he had been commissioned by RT France’s president to work on the move.

Those plans have not yet materialized, so Russia is also distributing its material through friendly African media outlets and influencers. RT and Sputnik, a Kremlin-funded news agency, have signed partnerships with at least a dozen African news outlets, said Maxime Audinet, who [studies](#) Russia’s media operations in Africa at IRSEM, a research institute affiliated with the French defense ministry.

RT France’s last live broadcast from Paris after the European Union suspended the Kremlin-backed network over the invasion of Ukraine. Ludovic Marin/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

Afrique Média, which broadcasts from the Central African nation of Cameroon, announced a partnership with RT in December. “The end of the West’s misleading propaganda,” it said on a [news banner](#).

Sputnik has rebranded its French-speaking service, once primarily aimed at reaching an audience in France, into [Sputnik Afrique](#). Now most of its traffic, albeit shrunken, comes from African countries. In Mali, a Bamako-based radio station now broadcasts a Sputnik news podcast every

evening.

“This is Moscow’s way to expand across Africa,” said Mr. Diarra, the Malian journalist. “With mercenaries and media outlets.”

Social media influencers also play an important role.

From his home just outside Johannesburg, Modibe “Vladimir” Modiba reposts video content from RT over Twitter and from his own news blog on Telegram. In an interview, he maintained that he is paid by family and friends — not by Russia. He said his attitudes reflected growing “irritation” among young Black South Africans toward the West and to mainstream South African media.

Western countries, he said, “always want to interfere with African issues, or you’re here to steal our resources.”

There is also evidence of Chinese companies helping spread Russian content in Africa. StarTimes, a Beijing-based media and satellite television provider, has continued to make RT available to customers even as other companies dropped the channel following the war.

Protesters waving Russian flags and holding a portrait of Vladimir V. Putin gathered in front of the French Embassy in the Democratic Republic of Congo last month. Arsene Mpiana/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

As part of a content-sharing agreement, Xinhua, the Chinese state news agency, translated items from the Russian state news service, Interfax, which were then picked up by outlets in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other countries. Some articles promoted the false allegation that the United States was storing chemical weapons inside Ukraine, according to Dani Madrid-Morales, a disinformation expert at the University of Sheffield.

Russian heroes and French zombies

From 2019 to 2022, Meta took down at least eight different networks of accounts that were targeting African audiences on Facebook and Instagram, the company says. Many were linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, the founder of the Wagner network, according to Meta. Facebook pages in Mali also [pushed pro-Wagner messages](#), just as Wagner mercenaries were arriving in the country last year.

The media campaigns have since grown more sophisticated and visible, said General Ianni, the French military official.

In an [animated video](#) that circulated on social media this year, a commando wearing a uniform emblazoned with the Russian flag and the insignia of the Wagner group jumps from a helicopter to come to the rescue of two besieged African soldiers, from Mali and Burkina Faso.

Together, the African soldiers and their Russian ally defeat France, the former colonial power, depicted as a pack of menacing zombielike skeletons and a giant snake. At the end of the video, the three head to the Ivory Coast — traditionally an ally of the West.

“Happy to help,” the Russian soldier tells his West African counterparts.

African and Western intelligence and military officials said they were alarmed by both the message and the format: Animated videos can reach even audiences who can’t read.

According to a U.S. document found to be leaked this week, dated from February, the Ivorian President’s chief of staff summoned Russia’s ambassador to Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso to express “displeasure” with the video depicting Ivory Coast as the “next target” of the Wagner network.

Russia and the West have long competed for influence in Africa, and the use of influence operations and mercenaries there is not a Russian

invention.

But with Russia shunned by much of the Western world over its invasion of Ukraine, it is now making a bid to pull more African countries into its orbit. And the Russian-generated media is having an impact, said Yurii Pyvovarov, Ukraine's ambassador to Senegal and to four other West African countries.

He said that a senior minister in Senegal asked him why Ukraine had attacked Russia — a falsehood often promoted in Russian media. And Senegalese journalists asked him why Ukraine was harboring Nazis — citing a propaganda article from Sputnik as proof.

"If African states are so attached to neutrality, which I fully respect, why are they so attached to Russian narratives?" Mr. Pyvovarov said in an interview.

Yurii Pyvovarov, Ukraine's ambassador to Senegal, in front of a Ukrainian flag signed by soldiers from the frontline at the Ukrainian Embassy in Dakar on Wednesday. Carmen Abd Ali for The New York Times

Pro-Russian content on the war in Ukraine still dominates the coverage of television networks like Afrique Média, potentially shaping the views of generations of viewers.

Henri Doué Tai, 80, a retired oil company administrator, watches the channel from his living room in Abidjan, Ivory Coast's largest city. A framed photograph of Russia's president, Vladimir V. Putin, sat nestled among family pictures.

He was joined by his 41-year-old nephew, Serge Bah, who had studied oil engineering in Moscow. Mr. Bah said he preferred watching Afrique Média, Russia Today or a little-known Telegram channel that carries updates on the war in French.

Unlike Western news outlets that show biased coverage of the war in

Ukraine, these sources, Mr. Bah insisted, are independent.

“It’s firsthand material,” he said.

Mr. Tai with a photograph showing Mr. Putin with the former Ivorian ambassador to Russia. Arlette Bashizi for The New York Times