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African Initiative: From Public Diplomacy to Covert Influence Operations

Version: 1.0



VIGINUM

Technical report

June 2025

With contributions from:



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office



European Union
EXTERNAL ACTION

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Caveats

This report is based on **VIGINUM's Open Source investigations**, with use of contributions by the **UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development office (FCDO)** and the **European External Action Service (EEAS)**. There is a risk that information may contradict, modify or reinforce the conclusions of this document.

1. SUMMARY

Since the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin on 23 August 2023, many questions have been raised about the future of *PMC Wagner's* digital influence activities, particularly on the African continent. The analyses contained in this report tends to confirm that some of these activities still continue, albeit in a different form, and are likely to be integrated into the Russian state's sphere of influence.

This new system is centered around *African Initiative*, a Russian news agency based in Moscow created in September 2023 with the ambition of becoming the main "information bridge between Russia and Africa." The agency works to disseminate and promote classic anti-Western and pro-Kremlin propaganda through its various channels (websites and social media accounts), in several languages, including French.

African Initiative is led by individuals suspected by several open source investigations of having ties to the Russian intelligence services (RIS) suggesting that this structure is a front, unofficially administered by the RIS to disseminate propaganda. Moreover, several of its leaders appear to have significant experience in influence, particularly in former Soviet bloc countries.

In addition, *African Initiative* is a "two-headed" structure physically present on the African continent through an "NGO" model that recruits influencers, journalists and "grassroots" activists tasked with relaying and amplifying pro-Russian narratives among local populations.

African Initiative seeks to institutionalise its model and establish itself in various strategic areas for Russian influence in Africa, as part of a long-term strategy aimed at shaping a media space that favours Moscow's foreign policy objectives. *African Initiative* is thus part of a broader Russian public diplomacy strategy on the African continent, led in particular by the state agency *Rosstrudnichestvo* and the *Russian Houses* network.

Nevertheless, *African Initiative*, which presents itself as an "independent" and "objective" news agency, has become the main vehicle for Russia's Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) activities in the region and one of the primary tools for the renewal of Russia's strategy of informational influence in Africa after Yevgeny Prigozhin, whose activities are likely directly driven by various Russian state structures involved.

In this regard, VIGINUM also outlines in this report the TTPs of a pro-Russian Information Manipulation Set (IMS)¹, named "*AI-Freak*," which is likely linked to *African Initiative*, illustrating some of the clandestine digital activities of an agency that seeks to demonstrate its harmlessness.

However, although *African Initiative* capabilities are growing, its real impact and influence on the African continent should not be overstated, judging by the low audience of its channels.

¹ VIGINUM defines an information manipulation set (IMS) as a collection of behaviours, tools, tactics, techniques, procedures and adversary resources used by a malicious actor or group of actors as part of one or more information operations.

2. BACKGROUND

Since the outbreak of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Russia has further isolated itself from Western countries, forcing it to seek new partnerships on the international stage, particularly in Africa. This strategic pivot towards Africa, enshrined in the Russian Federation's 2023 Foreign Policy Concept, has resulted in a strengthening of Russia's information influence strategy resulting in increased FIMI efforts at multiple levels.

Initially, this strategy was based on two approaches:² one "official and overt" approach relying on the international state media *RT* and *Sputnik*, and a less assertive approach based on covert information operations, notably carried out by *Project Lakhta*, founded in 2013 by the late entrepreneur of influence and leader of *PMC Wagner*, Yevgeny Prigozhin.

However, Y. Prigozhin's attempted coup in June 2023 and his death two months later were followed by the dismantling of *PMC Wagner's* structures and a broader restructuring of Russia's information manipulation and interference in Africa. According to a *New York Times* investigation, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) has taken control of *Project Lakhta*,³ and *PMC Wagner's* activities are now closely monitored by the Russian military intelligence service (GRU), notably through the creation of the "*Africa Corps*" (*Afrikansky Korpus*)⁴.

Alongside *Africa Corps*, a new highly likely state-run Russian media actor has emerged, a press agency named *African Initiative*. Employing individuals with alleged ties to Russian intelligence services (RIS) and the Prigozhin galaxy, *African Initiative* seeks to "capture the entrepreneurs and disinformation initiatives that were in place,"⁵ in order to promote and strengthen Russia's presence in Africa post-Y. Prigozhin.

Deploying a range of FIMI activities, this agency also maintains a physical presence on the African continent through a "NGO" model that recruits influencers, journalists and grassroots activists responsible for conveying and amplifying pro-Russian narratives to local populations. To date, one successful example is the establishment of an NGO of the same name in Burkina Faso, a country that has become an epicentre of Russian influence in Africa.

To disseminate its content to a broad audience, *African Initiative* also employs more covert techniques, and has likely outsourced an SEO company to carry out a dedicated information manipulation set (IMS) aimed at amplifying its content targeting English-speaking and French-speaking African audiences. This IMS, first detected by *Meta* and *OpenAI* under the name *StopNews*, has been referred to as "*AI-Freak*" in this report, due to its deceptive nature, both regarding its use of content generated by artificial intelligence (images, text and video) and its unethical search engine optimisation strategy (*Black Hat SEO*).⁶

² M. Audinet and E. Dreyfus, "A Foreign Policy by Proxies: The Two Sides of Russia's Presence in Mali," *IRSEM Report*, n°97, September 2022, 87 p. URL: <https://www.irsem.fr/media/report-irsem-97-russia-mali-en.pdf>.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/08/world/europe/Prigozhin-wagner-russia-africa.html>. Founded in 2013, *Project Lakhta* is a semi-clandestine structure responsible for developing and coordinating digital influence operations. While these operations have mainly benefited its founder Y. Prigozhin, they have also been used to support Russian foreign policy.

⁴ For more information on *Africa Corps*, see: <https://pism.pl/publications/africa-corps-a-new-iteration-of-russias-old-military-presence-in-africa>.

⁵ https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/03/09/african-initiative-the-new-bridgehead-for-russian-propaganda-inafrica_6599556_124.html.

⁶ *Meta* report: <https://transparency.fb.com/sr/Q2-2024-Adversarial-threat-report/>; *OpenAI* report: https://cdn.openai.com/threat-intelligence-reports/influence-and-cyber-operations-an-update_October-2024.pdf.

3. AFRICAN INITIATIVE: THE “PRESS AGENCY”

3.1 General presentation and digital environment

Created in September 2023, *African Initiative* advertises itself as a Moscow-based⁷ “news agency” aiming to be “the bridge of information between Russia and Africa.”⁸

To disseminate its articles, *African Initiative* has a website, *afrinz.ru*, registered on 13 September 2023, on which articles are published in Russian, English, French, Spanish and Arabic.⁹ From its launch until 30 April 2025, a total of 18,127 articles had been published in total (all languages combined). Despite its central role, the website has not generated significant engagement. According to *SimilarWeb*, total traffic to the portal between December 2024 and February 2025 amounted to 104,818 unique visits.¹⁰



African Initiative's
logo

African Initiative also has a network of six “official” *Telegram* channels relaying content from the *afrinz.ru* website in Russian, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish and Arabic, with a total of 69,720 subscribers.¹¹ This digital environment is complemented by a *Facebook* page,⁹ a *VK* account¹² and two *Rutube* channels.¹³ *African Initiative* also has a *TikTok* account dedicated to Spanish-speaking audiences.¹⁴

3.2 African Initiative editorial board

African Initiative's executives are highly likely to have been recruited for their experience of influence operations, previously exercised in the countries of the former Soviet bloc (Baltic States, Ukraine, Balkans). In addition, they appear to have links with various Russian state structures, such as the *Ministry of Foreign Affairs* (MFA) or the *Ministry of Defence* (MoD), as well as with various media with a pro-Kremlin editorial line, giving them a form of credibility and a network useful for deploying press agency activities more widely.

Several of these executives come from Y. Prigozhin's former structures, and recycle practices that have already proved effective in the past in Africa.

Finally, some members on the editorial board maintain close ties to the RIS, suggesting that *African Initiative* is a front, unofficially administered by the RIS to disseminate propaganda. This was confirmed by the *US State Department* on 12 February 2024.¹⁵ The profile of the agency's editor-in-chief Artyom Kureyev illustrates this duality well, likely having accumulated significant experience in Europe in information operations and influence projects as a RIS officer before pretending to be an expert on the African continent.¹⁶

⁷ Address: Presnenskaya Embankment, 12, Federation Tower West, 55th floor, Moskva-City.

⁸ As of 29 September 2023. Archive: <https://archive.ph/lejSC>.

⁹ IP address 37.140.192[.]69, hosted in Russia (AS 197695).

¹⁰ With an average of around 35,000 visits per month.

¹¹ Data as at 31 January 2025. Details: @africaninitiative (created on 28/09/2023 – 55,418 followers); @africaninitiativeen (created on 02/10/2023 – 3,799 followers); @africaninitiativefr (created on 02/10/2023 – 5,844 followers); @africaninitiativept (created on 02/10/2023 – 1,100 followers); @africaninitiativearab (created on 13/12/2023 – 3,130 followers); @africaninitiativesp (created on 16/09/2024 – 429 followers). ID: 291021310770232 (created on 03/06/2024 - 72 followers).

¹² <https://vk.com/afrinz> (created on 11/10/2023 – 344 subscribers).

¹³ <https://rutube.ru/channel/35783209/> (“Африканская инициатива” – 308 subscribers); <https://rutube.ru/channel/35901478/> (“Afrique libre! Свободная Африка!” – 89 subscribers).

¹⁴ @iniciativa.africa (297 followers).

¹⁵ The *US State Department* of the previous administration claimed that “Russian intelligence services provide material support and guidelines” to *African Initiative*, “which spreads disinformation about the United States and European countries.” Archive: <https://archive.ph/nqaaB>.

¹⁶ Further profiles of some of *African Initiative* executives are available in [Appendix 1](#).

3.2.1 Artyom Kureyev: editor-in-chief and likely linked to a Russian intelligence service

The *afrinz.ru* website is registered in the name of a structure called "INITSIATIVA-23" ("Инициатива – 23").¹⁷ This structure was founded under the name of Sergey Anatolevich Volkov, about whom no additional information has been found in open source.¹⁸ Alongside being the managing director of *INITSIATIVA-23*, A. Kureyev is also the editor-in-chief of *African Initiative*.¹⁹

In December 2024, the EU placed A. Kureyev under sanctions for being "involved in malign activities, namely coordinated disinformation campaigns, both in Europe and Africa."^{20,21}

There is a realistic possibility that A. Kureyev has been employed as an agent of influence within various European structures in order to propagate the Kremlin's narratives. For example, in 2011, at the fifth Russia-EU Forum organised in Brussels²² A. Kureyev attended alongside other individuals suspected of being agents of the RIS. For example, Sergey Yurevich Panteleyev, who is suspected of being a Russian intelligence officer is pictured in photos of the event.^{23,24}



Kureyev dressing up as an orc (2011) and in African Initiative offices (2024)

In 2013, A. Kureyev participated in the 17th edition of the "Human Dimension Implementation Meetings," one of the largest annual conferences on human rights and democracy in Europe, organised by the *Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe* (OSCE).²⁵ During the event, A. Kureyev presented himself as deputy head of the "Baltic Spaces Research Centre" of the "International Institute of Newly Established States,"²⁶ a Moscow-based think tank whose publications focus on maintaining the Russian sphere of influence in the countries of the former Soviet bloc. Open source investigations suggest that this structure could be a "front office" of the Russian administration or intelligence services. In this respect, an investigation by investigative news outlet *Bellingcat* into the identification of a high-

¹⁷ Tax ID: 9703155974.

¹⁸ Tax ID: 770180605510. There is a realistic possibility that S. Volkov is a nominee.

¹⁹ <https://archive.ph/X7G9F>.

²⁰ <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-jZR8cJUT7wvFHNZtuY7uCG/>.

²¹ Furthermore, an investigation from *The Insider*, not corroborated in open source, stated that A. Kureyev had been linked to an espionage case involving Tatiana Ždanoka, a Latvian MEP accused of having carried out espionage activities within the EU on behalf of the FSB for almost 20 years: <https://archive.ph/u3F2H>.

²² <https://archive.ph/zDLdc>.

²³ <https://web.archive.org/web/20170603092911/http://russiaforum.eu/fotoreportag.php?f=4>.

²⁴ <https://archive.ph/X8sQG>.

²⁵ <https://web.archive.org/web/20230514113458/https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/5/3/107277.pdf>.

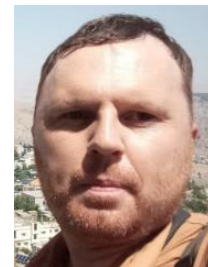
²⁶ *International Institute of Newly Established States*. Website archive: <https://archive.ph/g9zbn>.

ranking GRU officer Oleg Ivannikov (alias “Orion”) for his key role in the crash of flight MH17, showed that he was director of the “Centre for Research on Russia and the Caucasus” within the same institute in 2013, whilst A. Kureyev was also working there.²⁷

3.2.2 Viktor Lukovenko: a veteran of influence operations on the African continent

Viktor Lukovenko, also known as Viktor Vasilyev, is a blogger and self-proclaimed “expert” on West Africa. Sentenced in 2011 in Russia to eight years in prison for racially-motivated murder, he subsequently collaborated as a blogger on Y. Prigozhin’s *Project Lakhta*, and carried out several influence operations, including via his *Telegram* channel “Smile and Wave” (@afric_ylblbka).²⁸

Several open source investigations have demonstrated his close links with the GRU; in particular, he was allegedly recruited by Colonel Denis Smolyaninov, a specialist in psychological operations, and deployed to Ukraine in 2022.^{29,30}



Viktor Lukovenko

In addition to authoring articles on the *afrinz.ru* website, V. Lukovenko claims to be the founder and treasurer of *African Initiative*’s NGO and local counterpart in Burkina Faso.³¹ However, on 11 July 2024, he announced on his *Telegram* channel that he had left the project and “no longer had any connection with it,” due to a “low salary”,³² although he is still active in Africa. He also participated in the launch of a new project reminiscent of *African Initiative*, titled “*Central Asia Initiative*,” presented as a platform “for analysis of the socio-political situation [...] and public diplomacy in Kyrgyzstan and the Central Asian region.”³³ In April 2025, V. Lukovenko has been arrested in Kyrgyzstan along with an employee of the *Russian House* in Osh, on suspicion of recruiting mercenaries to participate in armed conflicts abroad.³⁴

²⁷ <https://archive.ph/96VOR>.

²⁸ The channel is best known for its involvement in *Project Lakhta* on the African continent, including the broadcast of the cartoon “The Lion and the Bear” in 2019.

²⁹ For example: <https://dossier.center/gru-ukraine/>; <https://alleesonwagner.org/2023/02/06/smile-and-wave-at-viktor-lukovenko-from-convict-toafrican-political-strategist-and-expert/>.

³⁰ <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-H6BFxdSh7Dud2BzmdBatjY/>.

³¹ See [Section 4](#).

³² <https://archive.is/sBAST>.

³³ <https://archive.is/iRnLG>. YouTube channel ID: UCPXd_ClubfO5SffKMP4Z7g. While it is not clear when the project was officially launched, the first video was published on 5 May 2024.

³⁴ <https://archive.ph/kS033>.

3.2.3 Other contributors to *African Initiative*

In addition to the individuals mentioned above, technical analysis of the *afrinz.ru* site shows a list of certain administrators and contributors over the period analysed.³⁵ The names of authors, displayed in the footer of several articles, were also used to complete this list.

Most of the profiles identified are journalists, bloggers or academics who appear to have been recruited for their knowledge of the region or specific language skills. Others come from prestigious universities or structures linked to the Russian state, notably within the MFA, with which *African Initiative* executives appear to have close links. Several of these key individuals are named and profiled in [Appendix 1](#).

3.3 Links to the Russian state

Although *African Initiative* presents itself as an “independent press agency,” it appears to be fully integrated into the Russian ecosystem of information influence, and to have several links with Russian state structures or leading political figures.

3.3.1 A press agency whose image and activities are promoted by actors linked to the Russian MoD

The official launch of *African Initiative* was covered by *Zvezda*, the official television channel of the Russian MoD, even before its website went online. The launch was attended by Yuri Podolyaka, a popular pro-Kremlin Ukrainian influencer and fervent defender of Russian aggression in Ukraine.³⁶ The *Zvezda* media coverage indicates that even at its launch, *African Initiative* had a notable network within the Russian ecosystem of information influence.

Promotion of *Africa Corps*, a substitute military structure for *PMC Wagner* in Africa

On 20 November 2023, *African Initiative's Telegram* channel published a text explaining that a “military-diplomatic source” had confirmed the creation of a special unit, *Africa Corps* (*Afrikansky Korpus*).³⁷ This unit was integrated into the Russian armed forces and tasked with “coordinating the military presence in Africa, ensuring military-technical cooperation, fighting terrorism and being able to solve, among other things, infrastructure and humanitarian problems [...] including epidemiological ones.”

This structure, supervised by Deputy Minister of Defence Yunus-bek Yevkurov and the GRU,³⁸ appears to be one of the solutions implemented by the Russian authorities to replace *PMC Wagner* in Africa. In this arrangement, *African Initiative* highly likely contributes to the information component of *Africa Corps*, in order to legitimise and promote a large-scale redeployment of Russian military contingents in Africa.

On 21 November, the day after the aforementioned *Telegram* post was published, a long article was uploaded on the *afrinz.ru* website, giving a more detailed account of the reasons for such a strengthening of Russia’s military presence in Africa and “how all this frightens Western elites, undermines their resource base for fighting Russia and opens up enormous prospects for mutually beneficial Russian-African cooperation.”³⁹ *African Initiative* was among the first to promote the launch

³⁵ Use this query: https://afrinz.ru/wp-json/wp/v2/users?per_page=100&order=asc. archive.ph/HYVRS.

³⁶ Y. Podolyaka has more than 2.8 million followers on his *Telegram* channel @yurasumy. He is also known for being behind a call for volunteers to translate pro-Russian propaganda content into several languages on *Telegram* following the invasion of Ukraine, which was subsequently grouped together under the “InfoDefense” network: https://www.isdglobal.org/digital_dispatches/the-info-defense-network-crowdsourcing-soldiers-for-the-information-war/.

³⁷ <https://archive.ph/s0bGT>.

³⁸ <https://lerubicon.org/nouveaux-acteurs-securitaires-en-afrique-de-louest-vers-une-competition-russo-turque>.

³⁹ <https://archive.ph/U0Sop>.

of *Africa Corps*, almost a month before the creation of the unit's official *Telegram* channel, @KorpusAfrica.

Subsequently, on 8 December, following a new tour by Yunus-bek Yevkurov to Libya, Mali and Niger, *African Initiative* published another article, written by A. Kureyev himself, presenting the *Africa Corps* as an opportunity to help "most African countries" achieve "security, stability and infrastructure."⁴⁰ He added that "military support in the context of strong French influence is not enough," but that Russia should also "help its allies transform the banking and financial system, guaranteeing its independence."

An article referencing *Africa Corps* in Russian media outlet *Vedomosti* published on 22 December, considered to be the second public mention of the unit, indicated that by summer 2024, the unit would be established in five African countries: Burkina Faso, Libya, Mali, the Central African Republic and Niger.⁴¹ According to this article, *Africa Corps* was formed "on the basis of units from the former *PMC Wagner* [...] with the creation process starting directly after the death of Y. Prigozhin." *African Initiative* is described as being the first to have reported on the start of *Africa Corps'* formation.

The *Vedomosti* article cited information from Russia's MoD, National Guard and FSB and was written by an *African Initiative* contributor. Since then, *African Initiative* has regularly promoted *Africa Corps* through its various social media channels, and vice versa. For example, on 24 January 2024, *African Initiative's Telegram* channel published exclusive pictures, even before *Africa Corps'* official channel, of 100 Russian military specialists landing at Ouagadougou airport, accompanied by equipment and weapons.⁴² According to the *Telegram* post, these Russian servicemen will "organise the education and training of their Burkina Faso colleagues and strengthen the country's armed forces. They will also provide support during patrols in dangerous areas [such as] the Bamako-Ouagadougou motorway [...] where French-backed militants and bandits operate." It added that "Russian specialists will provide security for the transitional president Ibrahim Traoré," a modus operandi observed when *PMC Wagner* was deployed in the Central African Republic and protected senior government officials under the cover of the private company *Sewa Security Services*, a subsidiary of *Lobaye Invest*.⁴³



Photos published on *African Initiative's Telegram* channel (24 January 2024)

⁴⁰ <https://archive.ph/cmVQV>.

⁴¹ <https://archive.ph/ygo5u>.

⁴² <https://archive.ph/syIIN>.

⁴³ <https://archive.ph/j5EH3>.

3.3.2 Cooperation with leading public universities

African Initiative regularly invites researchers, students and speakers from leading academic institutions to take part in its activities, likely to expand its network of contacts and its sphere of influence, thereby legitimising its status to its target audiences.

The *RusAfro Club* at *Moscow State University (MGU)*

One of *African Initiative's* "partner" structures is the *RusAfro Club*, a platform of influence that unites diplomats, politicians, scientists and representatives from the worlds of business, education and culture. Its main mission is to "strengthen friendly relations and global ties between African countries and Russia." Created on 23 June 2022 by the *Moscow State University (MGU)*, the *RusAfro Club* is chaired by the rector of the same university, Viktor Sadovnichy, a fervent supporter of Vladimir Putin.⁴⁴

On 9 November 2023, a meeting of the *RusAfro Club* journalists' association was held at *MGU* to present a new information and communication portal, *rusafromedia.ru*, aimed at Russian and African journalists and bloggers.⁴⁵ Discussions at the meeting focused on the "information war" waged by "the Western media against Russia" and on "solutions" for developing media and mass communication within a Russian-African framework.

At the meeting, A. Kureyev described how, "with the help of investors, he managed to deploy a network of correspondents in Africa in two months." He added that "to optimise the work of Russian media in Africa, it is necessary to rely on African graduates from Russian universities who could contribute to this activity on the ground. It is necessary to constantly maintain close links with graduates, and this should become one of the main tasks of the *RusAfro Media* platform."⁴⁶ Since then, the *Telegram* channel @*rusafroclub* has been a frequent relay of @*africaninitiative* channel's posts, and the *rusafromedia.ru* platform has already been involved in the rebroadcasting of misleading narratives conveyed by A. Kureyev's "press agency."

Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO)

African Initiative also works with researchers and students from the MFA's *Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO)*, one of the country's most prestigious universities and recognised as a centre for future recruits to the MFA and RIS. For example, *African Initiative* spoke to Associate Professor in the Institute's Department of Political Theory, covering topics like the formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), the departure of French troops from Niger and Russian opportunities on the continent. *African Initiative* likely interviews academics to evidence its claims and relay common pro-Kremlin narratives that denigrate Western presence in Africa, such as the claim that France uses "Tuareg and Islamist groups" to justify its presence in the Sahel.^{47,46}

This cooperation with *MGIMO* also involves the Institute's "*African Club*," which is comprised mainly of students and aims to "dispel stereotypes about Africa in Russia and vice versa." Its main partner is the *Russia-Africa Forum*, with which it works "closely,"



Students from the "African Club" (MGIMO) with the board of African Initiative

⁴⁴ Viktor Sadovnichy is the PhD supervisor of one of V. Putin's daughter and is one of the key supporters of the regime in the field of higher education, and has regularly been involved in V. Putin's presidential campaigns. He was also one of the first signatories of a pro-war tribune calling for the "demilitarisation and denazification of Ukraine". See: <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/Q2622956/>.

⁴⁵ The platform is available in Russian, English, French, Afrikaans, Portuguese and Arabic.

⁴⁶ <https://archive.ph/XUs0m>.

⁴⁷ <https://archive.ph/FC0xQ>.

according to Valery Zhushkov, President of the *African Club*, in an *African Initiative* interview in October 2023.⁴⁸

This "*African Club*" is highly likely seen by *African Initiative* executives as a potential pool of future journalists or researchers to recruit for a long-term strategy of information influence.⁴⁹ For example, on 11 December 2024, two members of *African Initiative*, Maksim Reva and Anna Zamaraeva, gave a lecture to *MGIMO* students entitled "Fakes, methods and counter-attack," to "recognise, denounce and reflect false information in the media."⁵⁰ *African Initiative* has developed its own "Anti-Fake" course and plans to continue training against disinformation in African countries, so that it can "independently counter the propaganda imposed by the West."

3.3.3 Cooperation with the State Duma

On several occasions, *African Initiative* has organized or participated in events directly involving members of the State Duma. For example, on March 6, 2025, A. Kureyev took part in a round table organized by the State Duma alongside figures such as the Director of the Information and Press Department of the Russian MFA, Maria Zakharova, or the head of the African content service of *RT*. In this meeting, A. Kureyev advocated for the establishment of a "single center for monitoring and working with African bloggers" emphasizing the importance of disseminating messages on social media.⁵¹

African Initiative has also collaborated several times with Russian Deputy Dmitry Kuznetsov, a member of the "World Christian Association of Parliamentarians" which is led by a former deputy of the AfD.⁵² Through this association, D. Kuznetsov has founded a platform called "Volunteers of Peace", which presents itself as "an international volunteer platform that helps volunteers and humanitarian projects who share traditional and spiritual values" but likely serves to strengthen another aspect of Russian influence in Africa.

This platform is regularly promoted by *African initiative*, and the website *volunteersofpeace.org* displays a *Telegram* icon that directly links to the channel *@africaninitiativeen*.⁵³ D. Kuznetsov is also the assistant of the ultranationalist Russian writer Zakhar Prilepin, and actively participates in the activities of his Headquarters for assisting participants in the "special military operation".⁵⁴ An article from the German media *T-Online* has finally highlighted that Kuznetsov's actions in Africa, supported by *African initiative*, were launched in the territories "precisely where, according to Ukrainian military intelligence, mercenaries are still being recruited for the battlefield in Ukraine: in Uganda and Congo."⁵⁵



Kuznetsov with Kureyev in African Initiative offices

⁴⁸ <https://archive.ph/chESW>.

⁴⁹ As some of the members possess rare linguistic skills such as Swahili: <https://archive.ph/GzF3x>.

⁵⁰ <https://archive.ph/FoyAf>.

⁵¹ <https://archive.ph/X4P04>.

⁵² <https://archive.ph/TFxGo>.

⁵³ <https://archive.ph/vWUJ1>.

⁵⁴ <https://t.me/deputatdtkuznetsov/1662>.

⁵⁵ https://www.t-online.de/nachrichten/deutschland/innenpolitik/id_100440768/ex-afd-politiker-jetzt-offiziell-fuer-rusland-aktiv.html.

3.4 Main narratives and operating procedures

3.4.1 Recurrent criticism of a “neo-colonialist and imperialist” Western model

Organising, participating in and promoting conferences with anti-Western narratives

One of *African Initiative*'s preferred ways of disseminating anti-Western narratives is by organising, participating in and promoting conferences focusing on themes such as critiques of neocolonialism, emergence of a “new world order” and benefits of Russian-African cooperation.

On 14 October 2023, *African Initiative* organised its first international conference entitled “The fight against neo-colonialism in a new reality.”⁵⁶ During this meeting, A. Kureyev asserted that “French and American contingents in African countries are essentially overseers, ready at any moment to exchange an adequate government for their puppets who can do almost anything.”

Participants included José Matemulane and Yulia Afanasyeva, two former executives of AFRIC (*Association for Free Research and International Cooperation*), a former *Project Lakhta* influence structure in Africa.⁵⁷ The presence of these *polittekhnologi* (“political technologists”)⁵⁸ about one month after the launch of *African Initiative*, highly likely reasserts that the agency is organised as a substitute for the structures of influence of the late Y. Prigozhin on the African continent.

On 20 December 2023, *African Initiative* took part in the closing session of *Our Day News* (ODN). Created at the beginning of 2023, ODN presented itself as a discussion group on politics in Europe and organised regular online conferences featuring pro-Russian personalities from Europe and Africa. The content of these conferences focused mainly on the “socio-economic difficulties in Europe,” the supposed rise of “Nazism” in the Baltic States and the war in Ukraine.

ODN was headed by a UK national living in Saint Petersburg and a member of *CyberFront Z*, an organisation and troll farm set up by Y. Prigozhin two weeks after the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022).⁵⁹ This individual has also taken part in two conferences organised by Y. Prigozhin's *Patriot* group, and has been cited in publications by the EU-sanctioned *RIA FAN* agency on russophobia in Europe.⁶⁰ At ODN's closing session, *African Initiative* was represented by Malian political scientist Adama Diabaté on the Zoom account of *African Initiative* correspondent Vitaly Taysaev,⁶¹ to discuss the advent of a “New World Order” in the “development context of the South.”



Adama Diabate on Vitaly Taysaev's Zoom account

⁵⁶ This conference was held on *African Initiative*'s premises in Moscow.

⁵⁷ <https://archive.ph/5Aqng>.

⁵⁸ According to academic Andrew Wilson, political technology is “supply-side engineering of the political system” (Virtual Politics, 2005). Political technology and its actors (political technologists) seek to act upon perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours, and aim to control information and control via information. As its application involves a range of overt and covert information control and influence operation techniques, deployment could include: government relations management, “hack and leak” stories, inauthentic election observations, “expert” opinion from pro-Kremlin sources, and the use of entirely “fake” personas. Russian political technology companies operate to influence local politics in support of Russia's foreign policy goals, for example the Y. Prigozhin-affiliated Internet Research Agency, and Africa-focused, PMC Wagner front office *Association for Free Research and International Cooperation* (AFRIC).

⁵⁹ <https://archive.ph/yqZvg>.

⁶⁰ For example: <https://archive.ph/jvXCG>.

⁶¹ Vitaly Taysaev is an active member of *African Initiative* (see [Appendix 1](#)).

Mutual amplification of information operations with other actors in the Russian influence ecosystem

Just as *African Initiative* is active in relaying information operations emanating from other actors integrated into the Russian influence system, *African Initiative* content is amplified by these same actors.

The *US State Department*⁶² considered that *African Initiative* “primarily disseminates its propaganda through numerous branded and non-branded accounts,” giving the example of *Telegram* channel *African Kalashnikov*.⁶³ This *Telegram* channel was created on 28 September 2023, the same day as the official *African Initiative* channel. *African Kalashnikov* almost exclusively focuses on highlighting publications from other Russian-speaking Africa-focused *Telegram* channels, such as @arabicafrica, @africanists, @afric_ylbbka, and @africaninitiative. The first content relayed by @africankalashnikov was a video of an evacuation operation of civilians in Mali by mercenaries from *PMC Wagner*.⁶⁴

The *African Kalashnikov* channel also broadcasts short videos in Russian, English and French, the content of which is sometimes inaccurate and misleading. For example, its first video, entitled “An experimental minefield,” is a photo montage of mutilated children and images of war with accompanying claims that “Western countries [...] have deployed hectares of [mine] fields in Africa and the Donbass to test their own devices of death and mutilation.”⁶⁵ These kinds of videos are then shared on *African Initiative*’s various *Telegram* channels, depending on the language targeted.

On its website, *African Initiative* also amplified narratives targeting US *PMC Bancroft* in the Central African Republic.⁶⁶ On 25 January 2024, several actors in the Russian information influence system amplified images of a protest in front of the US embassy in Bangui against *Bancroft* and the importation of US arms into the country. *African Initiative* relayed information from the newspaper *Ndjoni Sango*, which a consortium of international media revealed (based on *PMC Wagner* internal documents) was founded by Y. Prigozhin in the Central African Republic.⁶⁷ *African Initiative* also published previously exclusive photos,⁶⁸ at the same time as certain *Project Lakhta* websites distributed sponsored publications about the event.⁶⁹



This photo published on the *Telegram* channel @africaninitiative reads: “We require the cancellation of US arms imports in CAR”

3.4.2 Creating “educational” or cultural content

African Initiative creates and promotes educational and cultural content, such as videos on geopolitics, films and video games, increasing potential audiences, and highlighting its profile as an organization providing more than news.

Podcasts

On 6 February 2025, *African Initiative* launched fortnightly podcast “Pulse of Africa,” which is available in Russian on *Apple Podcasts* and *Yandex Music*.⁷⁰ The podcast interviews “experts”⁷¹ on politics,

⁶² Of the previous administration.

⁶³ <https://archive.ph/nqaaB>.

⁶⁴ <https://archive.ph/bFWVz>.

⁶⁵ <https://archive.ph/Zh8C1>.

⁶⁶ <https://archive.ph/ZvAmR>.

⁶⁷ For more further information on the “Wagner leaks,” see: <https://www.arte.tv/en/videos/113682-001-A/data-sources/>.

⁶⁸ <https://archive.ph/pxe9C>; <https://archive.is/6sBSM>.

⁶⁹ For example: <https://archive.ph/4UJIM>.

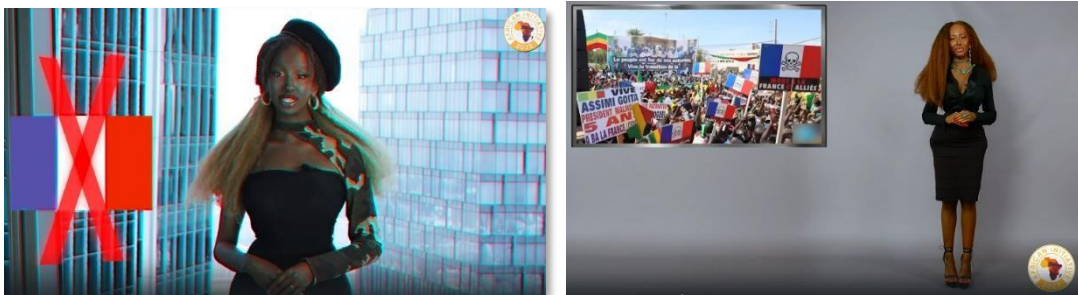
⁷⁰ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/пульс-африки/id1795646549>.

⁷¹ Experts include the director general of the Russian MFA’s *Russian International Affairs Council*, and the chairman of the *Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa*’s missionary department.

economics and military conflicts, with titles including “Orthodoxy in Africa” and “Self-awareness and colonialism.” *African Initiative’s* website and *Telegram* have provided limited Russian-language advertisement of the podcasts, which range between 18 and 40 minutes.⁷²

Educational videos on Russian and African geopolitics

In addition to its *Telegram* channels, *African Initiative* has two *Rutube* channels where it broadcasts videos.⁷³ One channel named “Африканская инициатива” [*African Initiative*] broadcasts videos on the history and geopolitics of Africa, and is presented directly from *African Initiative’s* office by Amarula Obiligbo, a graduate of *Moscow State University’s Faculty of Journalism*, who is also a model and art dealer.⁷⁴ The videos cover topics such as “How European colonisers erased the history of African civilisations,” “How to defeat neo-colonialism, the manual of Thomas Sankara,” “Africa calls for compensation from colonialism” and “The final Western illusion.”



Screenshots from videos of the Rutube channel

The other *Rutube* channel, named “Afrique Libre” [Free Africa], publishes short videos with a similar editorial line, claiming to tell the story of “how Africa is ridding itself of neo-colonial dependence and how Russia is helping people who have embarked on the path of true freedom, equality and fraternity.” The videos are presented by Russian journalist Anna Sturova. Of the 114 videos published,⁷⁵ at least a quarter directly target France, such as one titled “L’hystérie de la France” [France’s hysteria] which explains “why the French should keep quiet and stop sticking their noses in Africa,” or “Adieu Orano” [Goodbye Orano], in which the host claims that France will suffer electricity shortages following the decision by the ruling junta in Niger to withdraw the rights to exploit uranium deposits from the French group.

Cinema as a pro-Russian propaganda tool

On 25 December 2023, *African Initiative*, the Russian-African International Association GATINGO and a Russian MFA-supported organisation⁷⁶ organised in Moscow a closed-door screening of a documentary film entitled “Black to USSR,” shot in Mozambique and South Africa and presenting “the fate of Africans who studied in the Soviet Union.”⁷⁷ The event brought together African diplomats and representatives of the Muscovite diasporas of African countries.

Although the film’s director Daria Da Conceição stated that the film was produced “completely independently,” she noted that the project has since been supported by the Russian MFA-supported

⁷² <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/i5Gre>. As of May 2025, the website’s toolbar directly links to the podcast on the *Yandex Music* platform.

⁷³ *Rutube* is a Russian video platform providing a domestic alternative to *YouTube*.

⁷⁴ VK: <https://archive.ph/A1eWh>.

⁷⁵ Data collected in March 2025.

⁷⁶ The *International Alliance of BRICS Strategic Projects*, a private organisation that receives “active support” from the Russian MFA, is an effective tool of influence in Africa.

⁷⁷ <https://archive.ph/YqPGf>.

organisation itself and by the *Centre for Public Diplomacy (CND)*. Headed by Natalia Krasovskaya, the CND works extensively to develop links with Africa, particularly regarding unofficial *Russian Houses*⁷⁸ in cooperation with the state public diplomacy agency *Rossotrudnichestvo*.

In addition to the network it offers, the value of supporting such a project for *African Initiative* primarily lies in promoting a narrative based on beneficial mutual relations, enabling Africans trained in Russia to play an important role in their own countries. This system of exchanges is regularly advocated and recommended by the editor-in-chief, A. Kureyev.

Another example was the preview in Moscow, in May 2024, of a documentary film entitled “The end of neo-colonialism - Central African Republic,” directed by Serbian journalist Igor Damyanovitch⁷⁹ and co-produced by *African Initiative* and the *Russian House of Serbia*.⁸⁰ In the film, *African Initiative* relays the comment of Fidèle Gouandjika,⁸¹ Faustin-Archange Touadéra’s special adviser, who says that “if the Russian Federation abandons us today, we will be devoured by the Westerners who have been with us since independence and who have done nothing for our country.” A number of individuals linked to state structures were present at the preview, including the head of *Rossotrudnichestvo* Yevgeny Primakov,⁸² Duma deputy Dmitry Kuznechov, a university rector and representatives of *MGIMO’s African Club*.



Kureyev, I. Damyanovitch and A. Sturova presenting the film in Moscow

African Initiative’s production of such a documentary on the Central African Republic mimics the practices of other actors in the Russian information influence system, such as *RT*, who produces propaganda documentaries on Africa.⁸³ This kind of project illustrates *African Initiative’s* collaboration with other organisations in Europe to promote its objectives in Africa, thus demonstrating that its regional action is in fact global.

The use of video games

On 6 July 2024, *African Initiative* published an article stating that it had developed a “mod” (modification) entitled “African Dawn” on the strategic video game *Hearts of Iron IV*,⁸⁴ in collaboration with the team of e-sportsman and young streamer Grigory Korolev, also known as *GrishaPUTIN*.⁸⁵ In this mod, players can “lead the countries of the Alliance of Sahel States, Nigeria or Chad, as well as Russia, France or the United States. Depending on their choice, actors will have to create a sovereign Sahelian confederation or return the countries to their colonial past.”⁸⁶

⁷⁸ *Russian houses* are physical locations in a host country that seek to advance Russian soft power and promote cultural initiatives to local populations. Media reports have alleged that certain *Russian houses* have provided fronts for espionage and recruitment of influence agents (for example: <https://cyprus-daily.news/russian-house-in-nicosia-an-incubator-of-russian-spies-in-cyprus/>). *Russian houses* partner with *Rossotrudnichestvo*, and are deemed official or unofficial, with unofficial *Russian houses* operating similarly to a franchise model, where *Rossotrudnichestvo* partners with civil society organisations or businesses who operate the *Russian house* “in country”. *Rossotrudnichestvo* is “the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States, Compatriots Living Abroad and International Humanitarian Cooperation”.

⁷⁹ Profile sheet in [Appendix 1](#).

⁸⁰ <https://archive.ph/0CJgh>.

⁸¹ Fidèle Gouandjika is a key figure in the Central African Republic’s presidential clan, and has been a fervent supporter of *PMC Wagner’s* presence in the country for several years. Source: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1543985/politique/en-centrafrrique-fidele-gouandjika-le-fou-du-roi-touadera/>.

⁸² Yevgeny Primakov is the grandson of Yevgeny Primakov, former Prime Minister and first Director of the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR).

⁸³ For example, the film “La catastrophe africaine. A colonial history”. Archive: <https://archive.ph/WKdOR>.

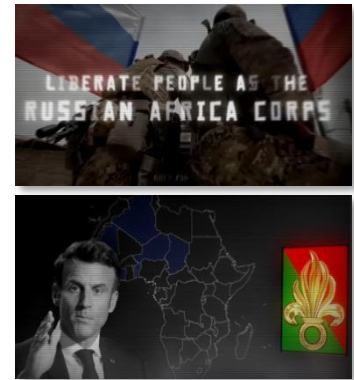
⁸⁴ *Hearts of Iron IV* is a “grand strategy” video game released in 2015, focusing on the Second World War and allowing players to take control of any country existing at that time in order to survive, build a world power or even conquer the world. Several mods exist for *Hearts of Iron IV*, i.e. specific modifications added to the original game to transform its initial appearance and allow players to play in other contexts or eras, for example.

⁸⁵ <https://archive.ph/mg964>.

⁸⁶ <https://archive.ph/StbEW>.

Since the start of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *GrishaPUTIN* has used video games as a propaganda tool to legitimise the “special military operation” and promote *PMC Wagner*. In February 2023, he was involved in an operation likely financed directly by the Wagner group, when appeared in military attire during a live broadcast recorded directly from the *PMC Wagner* centre in Saint Petersburg.^{87,88}

The realisation of such a project illustrates both the agility and the capacity of *African Initiative* to invest in different fields, platforms, and individuals of influence. It also illustrates *African Initiative*'s takeover of projects initially conceived by Y. Prigozhin's networks.



Images from the trailer of the "African Dawn" mod

4. AFRICAN INITIATIVE: THE LOCAL “NGO”

In addition to its Moscow-based “press agency,” *African Initiative* is developing a network of NGOs on the African continent made up of bloggers, journalists, artists, activists and members of civil society who are responsible for supporting, relaying and amplifying pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives on a local scale. In order to spread the image of Russia as a leading partner for African states, *African Initiative* organises a range of sporting, cultural, educational, religious and health events and projects, and forges partnerships with pro-Russian entities already established in Africa. Through offline soft power activities, *African Initiative* integrates itself into local communities, highly likely so ideas can be seeded and spread organically, enabling better long-term success, and creating an ecosystem independent of the website. Moreover, through its cultural activities and encouraging local ownership of them, it creates a defence for criticisms of the organisation. *African Initiative* began its offline presence in Burkina Faso, a country that has become a main projection area for Russian influence in Africa.

4.1 The Russian-Burkinabe NGO: general presentation

On 7 November 2023, a Russian-Burkinabe NGO, also called *African Initiative* and with a similar logo, was set up in Ouagadougou.⁸⁹ It states that its aim is to “strengthen friendship and mutual understanding, peace and harmony between the peoples of Burkina Faso and Russia” and to focus on the “moral, spiritual and physical development of the young generation of Burkina Faso and Russia.”

The NGO has a *Telegram* channel @a_initiative_bb created on 24 November 2023 (5,137 subscribers), a public *Facebook* group, a *TikTok* account and an *Instagram* account.⁹⁰



Logo of the African Initiative NGO

At the outset, the NGO announced that it was organised via an eight-member executive made up of Burkinabe and Russians⁹¹ – this number cannot be confirmed today.

⁸⁷ *GrishaPutin* also coordinates *Z Shaker Central*, a pro-Russian movement stemming from the *Hearts of Iron IV* community, a “platform committed to supporting the Russian army and people, combating Western disinformation and promoting debates on geopolitics” (<https://archive.ph/8NCys>). This platform is used in particular to collect donations for the Russian army.

⁸⁸ <https://journalonbalticsecurity.com/journal/JOBS/article/115/text>.

⁸⁹ <https://archive.ph/nplXB>. Located in the Bonheur-ville district: <https://archive.ph/dfVeo>.

⁹⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/898618951729057/about>; <https://www.tiktok.com/@african.initiative>; www.instagram.com/afrin bf.

⁹¹ <https://archive.ph/5QmAp>.

V. Lukovenko was the founder of this NGO and first contact with the Moscow press agency. Although he has announced that he no longer belongs to the project, his role was highly likely decisive in the development of partnerships and local recruitment. For example, V. Lukovenko speaks of the Burkinabe leader of this NGO as a friend, as a “sincere admirer of Vladimir Putin” and as “one of the first to raise the Russian flag” in Burkina Faso.⁹²

4.2 Organising events and projects to strengthen Russian influence locally

NGO *African Initiative* has organised numerous sporting events (football, sambo, basketball) and cultural projects (such as graffiti festivals) aimed at raising the NGO’s profile among the Burkinabe public and at the same time promoting Russia’s image locally.

NGO *African Initiative* also regularly organises screening of patriotic and pro-Russian documentaries and fiction, such as “Tourist,” a propaganda film produced by Y. Prigozhin’s company *Aurum*, which praises the Russian “instructors” sent by Moscow to the Central African Republic.⁹³

Finally, in December 2023, V. Lukovenko announced the launch of “Afrin Records,” a music label whose main task was to find and provide information and organisational assistance to artists who could “become the voice of Pan-African counter-culture, as opposed to the dominant Western consumer culture.”⁹⁴ On the associated *YouTube* channel, a number of videos show *African Initiative* NGO members and artists performing patriotic and pro-Russian music. A video entitled “Bienvenue Africa Korps” [Welcome *Africa Corps*], viewed over 5,000 times, featured artist Ouattara Drissa (a.k.a. Fadouba), singing the praises of the AES, the *PMC Africa Corps* and Russia.⁹⁵

This grassroots events strategy was previously tried and tested in the Central African Republic under the influence of local Russian networks, with the organisation of football tournaments and a “Miss Central African Republic” contest,⁹⁶ thus demonstrating the “recycling” of influence techniques that have worked in other countries.

4.3 Partnerships with local organisations: *Savane FM*

NGO *African Initiative* has invested in radio, the primary source of information in Burkina Faso.⁹⁷ It regularly broadcasts a Russian cultural show called “L’Heure Russe” [Russian Hour], on one of the nation’s most popular private radio stations *Savane FM*, and aims to promote Russia (including through language, music, and geopolitics).⁹⁸

⁹² <https://archive.ph/LA7u3>.

⁹³ <https://archive.ph/YjEVI>.

⁹⁴ <https://archive.is/Tbijj>.

⁹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oglvwKmwDLM>; *YouTube* channel ID: UCNquAAbi59GC2Mif_b870oA.

⁹⁶ https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/politique-africaine/un-concours-miss-centrafrique-sponsorise-par-la-russie_3095167.html.

⁹⁷ <https://archive.ph/FYABi>.

⁹⁸ According to the BBC, in 2022, *Savane FM* had 18.13% of the national radio audience. For context, in 2022, 86% of Burkinabe citizens listened to 2h54m of radio a day, despite only 42% of households owning a radio – this likely suggests listening to the radio is a communal activity.

“L’Heure Russe” is usually hosted by MC Ruskof, a pro-Russian rapper from Burkina Faso who is also one of the most active organising members of the NGO.⁹⁹ All episodes of the programme are rebroadcast on the *Telegram* channel @a_initiative_bb. Among the first guests was a member of the *Russian House* in Burkina Faso, highlighting its close ties to the NGO *African Initiative*.¹⁰⁰ This outsourcing of Russian influence and introduction into the domain of radio echoes the medium-term development of partnerships between Russia and various African media.

It is also reminiscent of certain practices of the Prigozhin galaxy in the Central African Republic, via the financing of the UK and EU-sanctioned radio station *Lengo Songo*,¹⁰¹ which carried out online influence operations for the benefit of the *PMC Wagner* and Russia in general. *African Initiative’s Telegram* channels regularly relay information published by *Lengo Songo*, demonstrating both the press agency’s very close links with subcontractors of Russian influence in Africa and its ability to bring its own stories into line with those of local actors.¹⁰²



Members of the NGO African Initiative with Egountchi Behanzin at the headquarters of Savane Médias

4.4 Strategic cooperation with the *Russian House* in Burkina Faso

The NGO *African Initiative* was created on 7 November 2023, just before two major diplomatic events between Burkina Faso and Russia: on 28 December 2023, Russia reopened its embassy in Burkina Faso, which had been closed since 1992, and on 13 January 2024, the Burkina Faso government, the *CND* and *Rosstrudnichestvo* inaugurated the opening of a *Russian House* in Ouagadougou, a project that had been in place since at least 22 November 2023.¹⁰³ Although these events coincide, it is unclear whether there is direct correlation.

African Initiative NGO is an important partner of this *Russian House*, as they share the objective of shaping the information space in order to promote Russia’s interests. This is demonstrated through joint events such as two conferences in March 2024, detailing “the preservation and protection of traditional values from negative Western influences.” Evgenia Tikhonova, Director of the *Russian House* in Burkina Faso, was invited to take part in the discussions.

This partnership is part of a wider strategy of Russian influence in Africa, organised by *Rosstrudnichestvo*. With a view to providing greater support for the dissemination of the Kremlin’s narratives,¹⁰⁴ the strategy for establishing a long-term presence in African countries is “based on



Director of the Russian house in Ouagadougou during a conference organized by the NGO African Initiative

⁹⁹ <https://archive.ph/YrFfH>.

¹⁰⁰ <https://archive.is/c827X>.

¹⁰¹ https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=OJ:L_202402999 ; <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/NK-RaGmn2VSDYCdMZ4YtdSut/>.

¹⁰² For example, *African Initiative* relayed the inaccurate and misleading information broadcast by *Lengo Songo* radio, according to which “France continues to finance militants and coordinates the actions of one of the armed groups of the *Union for Peace* in the Central African Republic (UPC)”. Archive: <https://archive.ph/HUOmy>.

¹⁰³ <https://archive.ph/MfYiz>.

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.intelligenceonline.fr/renseignement-d-etat/2022/06/02/l-agence-russe-de-soft-power-redouble-d-efforts-pour-soutenir-les-narratifs-du-kremlin,109788863-art>.

the Alliance française model, i.e. associations governed by local law.”¹⁰⁵ These *Russian Houses* aim to rely on local personalities and actors in order to give greater visibility and legitimacy to the Kremlin’s narratives. In this context, *African Initiative* NGO appears to be a useful “unofficial” facilitator for achieving this objective. It is notable that projects for *Russian Houses* have been set up or are underway in other African countries, including some where *African Initiative* is already operating.^{106 107} These practices are also reminiscent of those observed in the Central African Republic with the “private” *Russian House* in Bangui¹⁰⁸ run by both Russian embassy officials and members of *PMC Wagner*, such as Dmitri Sytyi.

4.5 Example of a FIMI campaign: the dengue epidemic in Burkina Faso

One of *African Initiative*’s first and main campaigns to manipulate information, which linked the press agency’s networks to its local NGO, was to target Western (particularly US) health initiatives on the African continent, accusing them of causing epidemics, particularly of dengue fever.

Since the beginning of 2023, Burkina Faso has experienced a surge in its dengue epidemic, with the death toll reaching 570 on 19 November 2023.¹⁰⁹ From 10 to 14 November 2023, a Russian medical delegation visited Burkina Faso, with the official aim of helping the Burkinabe authorities to combat the epidemic, and the covert aim of denigrating healthcare and medical support by Western countries.

The Russian delegation donated dengue screening equipment, special personal protection gear and insecticides to the Burkinabe Ministry of Health. Adding further credence to the visit, the head of the delegation was General Valery Vasilyev, Deputy Head of the *NRBC Military Protection Academy* (Marshal Semion Timochenko), which trains Russian nuclear, radiological, biological and chemical defence units.¹¹⁰ The delegation’s visit was broadcast on a number of Burkinabe media and *Telegram* channels specialising in Africa, raising the profile of the event.

At the same time, certain pro-Russia and pan-Africanist sources such as Egountchi Behanzin denounced Western action as being responsible for the dengue epidemic.¹¹¹ In particular, they criticised the “Target Malaria” project, coordinated by a consortium of over 150 African and Western researchers and funded by the *Gates Foundation*, which aims to release genetically modified mosquitoes in order to eradicate certain diseases such as malaria.¹¹²



Valery Vasilyev and Robert Lucien Jean Claude Kargougou, Minister of Health of Burkina Faso

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.africaintelligence.com/southern-africa-and-islands/2023/09/08/from-luanda-to-dakar-moscow-rolls-out-its-cultural-diplomacy.110040902-avg>.

¹⁰⁶ Such as in Equatorial Guinea (Malabo), Niger (Niamey), or in Central African Republic (Bangui).

¹⁰⁷ <https://archive.ph/BGbij>

¹⁰⁸ This “*Russian house*” in Bangui is not officially affiliated with the *Rossotrudnichestvo* network.

¹⁰⁹ <https://archive.ph/rMO1Z>.

¹¹⁰ <https://archive.is/obREP>.

¹¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=3475015512711569>.

¹¹² <https://archive.is/dff2I>.

On 15 November, the *Agence d'Information du Burkina* (AIB) relayed a statement by the *Syndicat des travailleurs de la santé humaine et animale* (SYNTSHA; *Union of Human and Animal Health Workers*) accusing the *International Monetary Fund* (IMF) and the *World Bank* of being behind the dengue epidemic.¹¹³ These statements were subsequently amplified by *African Initiative*.

On 5 December, *African Initiative* published an article accusing the US of making Kenya “a testing ground for the development of biological weapons against the whole world,”¹¹⁴ thus reinforcing the initial accusation by extending it to countries other than Burkina Faso. On 21 December, *African Initiative's Telegram* channel published a photo of graffiti depicting a “robot mosquito” with an American flag on its belly, which it claimed to have appeared in Ouagadougou. The *Telegram* post was captioned as follows: “Criticism of Western pharmaceutical monopolies is very popular among African youth.”¹¹⁵ It was unable to confirm the authenticity of this graffiti, which appears to have been circulated only on *African Initiative* channels and is unsigned.



Grffiti allegedly discovered in Ouagadougou reads “mosquito bite”

On 22 December, an international conference entitled “Health and Sovereignty” was held in Ouagadougou, bringing together researchers, naturopaths and personalities from various African countries. The head of the NGO *African Initiative* participated alongside E. Behanzin, who said that Westerners “are not there to cure the sick but to create diseases and then sell medicines to African governments.”¹¹⁶

Since then, this accusation of Western financial motivation as a cause for involvement in health initiatives has continued to be broadcast on the various *African Initiative* channels and amplified by local influencers. On 24 April 2024, the *Rutube* channel “*Afrique libre*” published a video in which Anna Sturova explained how the “*International Monetary Fund* and the French authorities destroyed Sankara’s health system in Burkina Faso, which led to new epidemics” and how when “the people of Burkina Faso got rid of the neo-colonial regime and expelled the French, the government turned to Russia to help it fight the epidemics.”¹¹⁷

In many respects, the main narrative of this campaign and the dissemination tactics deployed (sending delegations, disseminating and amplifying false content, taking part in conferences) are reminiscent of those of the Soviet KGB, which in the 1980s sought to make people believe that the US Department of Defence had created the AIDS virus (Operation *INFEKTION*).¹¹⁸

4.6 Exporting the model: other *African Initiative* partnerships in Africa

Currently, the Russian-Burkinabe NGO is the most successful at local level, but through its correspondents, it is developing partnerships in other African countries of strategic interest to Russia, particularly across the AES.

¹¹³ <https://archive.is/m1rF2>.

¹¹⁴ <https://archive.ph/ZmnpG>. During this information operation, the United States was particularly targeted, sometimes more than European countries, which is consistent with other information operations observed during the same period, in particular from *Project Lakhta*, which attacked, among other things, the establishment of *PMC Bancroft* in certain African countries. *PMC Bancroft* was also the subject of information operations by *African Initiative*: <https://archive.ph/P8FAa>.

¹¹⁵ <https://archive.ph/tMQD5>.

¹¹⁶ <https://archive.ph/Qnf4g>.

¹¹⁷ <https://archive.is/hX2lr>.

¹¹⁸ For more information, see: “*Active Measures: The Secret History of Disinformation and Political Warfare*,” by Thomas RID (2020).

4.6.1 Mali

For example, in May 2024, *African Initiative* invited several pro-Russia Malian bloggers and influencers to Moscow, including Mamadou Sidibé, administrator of the *Gandhi Malien* page, one of the most followed in Mali with 1.3 million subscribers, and Issa Diawara, a political analyst who broadcasts anti-French narratives on his *YouTube* channel.¹¹⁹

This trip was an opportunity for *African Initiative* to diffuse pro-Russian narratives via these bloggers and to conclude a long-term cooperation agreement. For example, the bloggers went to Mariupol, then published a video entitled “The exploits of the Russian army in Mariupol” on the *Gandhi Malien* page.¹²⁰ During the trip, I. Diawara noted that “there is currently an information war in Africa being waged by French media such as *France 24* and *Radio France*, so it is important not to be afraid but to listen to your enemies and know your audience in order to neutralise their propaganda.”¹²¹

Shortly after this visit, *African Initiative* announced the launch of a program entitled “Face à Mikhail” between Mikhail Pozdniakov,¹²² the head of *African Initiative*’s French editorial team, and I. Diawara, to be broadcast every fortnight on the “*Gandhi Malien*” Facebook page.¹²³

NGO “*Perspective Sahélienne*”

In July 2024, *African Initiative* announced that it had supported the creation of a Russian-Malian NGO *Perspective sahélienne* in Bamako.¹²⁴ This NGO is chaired by Mamadou Bah,¹²⁵ an invitee on *African Initiative*’s May 2024 trip to Russia described above. In its various activities, *Perspective sahélienne* bears a strong resemblance to the Burkinabe NGO *African Initiative*, with the organisation of various cultural projects, in particular the screening of Russian propaganda films.¹²⁶ Several of *African Initiative*’s key individuals have regularly appeared alongside members of *Perspective sahélienne*, such as A. Zamaraeva, V. Taysaev or M. Pozdniakov, and appear to be providing them with material and logistical support. Furthermore, on 31 July, this Russian-Malian NGO announced on its *Telegram* channel (@*Laperspectivesahelienne*) the opening of its “Russian school of journalism,” where three finishing students would “sign a contract with *African Initiative* to work in Mali.”¹²⁷



Inauguration of the “Russian School of Journalism” of *Perspective sahélienne* with some members of *African Initiative*

The existence of online classes for this “Russian School of journalism” in Bamako was confirmed in November 2024 by investigative news organisation *Forbidden Stories*.¹²⁸ In these online classes, M. Pozdniakov taught the basics of journalism, presenting the internet as “an alternative battlefield, where

¹¹⁹ Facebook page ID: 1792715307697152; *YouTube* channel ID: UCH9jH5nAnXVkp2YV3IQW4JA.

¹²⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/GandhiMalien1/videos/966082228542226>.

¹²¹ <https://archive.ph/n33ZK>.

¹²² M. Pozdniakov is a former student at *Moscow State Linguistic University*, who was likely recruited by *African Initiative* for his skills in English and French. Prior to his current employment, he was working for the Russian state-owned television channel *RT*.

¹²³ <https://archive.ph/vYTXZ7>; <https://archive.ph/L5NtB>.

¹²⁴ <https://archive.ph/RZSQP>.

¹²⁵ <https://facebook.com/doc.bah>.

¹²⁶ Example: <https://archive.ph/fQe1t>.

¹²⁷ <https://archive.ph/dTL5o>.

¹²⁸ <https://forbiddenstories.org/propaganda-machine-russias-information-offensive-in-the-sahel/>.

war is waged not by regular armies, but by journalists, information campaigners, political technologists, and opinion leaders.” Examples used in classes were not neutral and highly favourable to pro-Russia narratives. This NGO is highly likely an *African Initiative* project, designed to give the illusion of a large network of different Russian-African NGOs and to train and recruit individuals in order to facilitate the dissemination of pro-Russia narratives at local level, here, in Malian media.

4.6.2 Niger

In Niger, correspondents from *African Initiative* seek to amplify certain anti-West and pro-Russia narratives to local audiences. In response to a March 2024 interview where Vladimir Putin said “the Western elites, who have been accustomed to filling their bellies with human flesh and their pockets with money for centuries [...] must realise that the vampire ball is coming to an end,”¹²⁹ *African Initiative* broadcast a video, on 17 March, in which one of its correspondents in Niger filmed students burning a card depicting Emmanuel Macron as a vampire. The students were quoted as saying: “The French president is a vampire and Putin is absolutely right. If you look at the history of Africa, France has always been a vampire country.”¹³⁰



Screenshot of the Niger vampire video

It is highly likely that this event, which was presented as spontaneous, was an information operation orchestrated by *African Initiative*. Three days later, on 20 March, the *Rutube* “*Afrique Libre*” channel published a video entitled “The Vampire Ball is over,” in which A. Sturova discussed what “Russia can offer Africa” after the “French, Americans and British [were] swept away with a filthy broom.”¹³¹

NGO « *Ensemble main dans la main Niger-Russie* »

In May 2024, several articles mentioned the launch of the NGO *Ensemble main dans la main Niger-Russie* (*EMMNR*), an “initiative led by Nigerien citizens committed to the quest for true independence [...] and which aims to promote friendship, mutual understanding and win-win cooperation between the peoples of Niger and Russia.”¹³²

EMMNR is similar to *African Initiative* and employs individuals who work (or have worked) for it. Niger-based NGO *EMMNR*, seeks to locally promote the image of Russia as a leading partner¹³³ and is highly likely a side-project of *African Initiative* to extend its influence and give the impression of a network of NGOs across the continent. The national president of *EMMNR* is an Ivorian national who worked as a translator for *African Initiative* at its launch in Burkina Faso. The NGO employs other individuals who also work for *African Initiative*, such as the doctor Dmitry Dolbnya, and a woman called Amalia, who gives Russian language lessons in the form of video clips broadcast on *African Initiative’s Telegram* channel.¹³⁴

More broadly, *African Initiative* is rapidly extending its influence in an opportunistic manner across other

¹²⁹ <https://archive.ph/2bivw>.

¹³⁰ <https://archive.ph/j1kXb>.

¹³¹ <https://archive.ph/lYUmj>.

¹³² <https://archive.ph/EjynM>.

¹³³ <https://archive.ph/oUr7G>.

¹³⁴ Video example: <https://archive.ph/taCcc>.

African countries, including Senegal,¹³⁵ Libya,¹³⁶ Togo¹³⁷ and recently Equatorial Guinea, in order to target Spanish-language audiences. Since September 2024, *African Initiative* appears to have invested heavily in the country, setting up an office in the capital Malabo, recruiting local influencers to spread its propaganda narratives and creating various communication assets such as dedicated *Telegram* and *TikTok* channels.¹³⁸

On 8 May, the local *African Initiative* NGO in Equatorial Guinea organised an exhibition at the *Equatoguinean Cultural Centre* dedicated to the 80th anniversary of “the Victory in the Great Patriotic War,” and drawing parallels between the Nazism of the Third Reich and the so-called “neo-colonialism” of Western countries today.¹³⁹ On one of the explanatory panels in the exhibition, it says in Spanish: “Even after the victory over Nazi Germany, the Western powers continued their plans to colonise Russia [...]. The Western powers support the pre-Western regime in Ukraine and are sending mercenaries and military equipment against Russia. The same fate awaits them as those who accompanied Hitler during the Great Patriotic War.”

¹³⁵ A free Russian language course organised by the “*African Initiative* NGO in Senegal” was launched in February 2024, in cooperation with *Saint Petersburg State University*: <https://archive.ph/iWURd>.

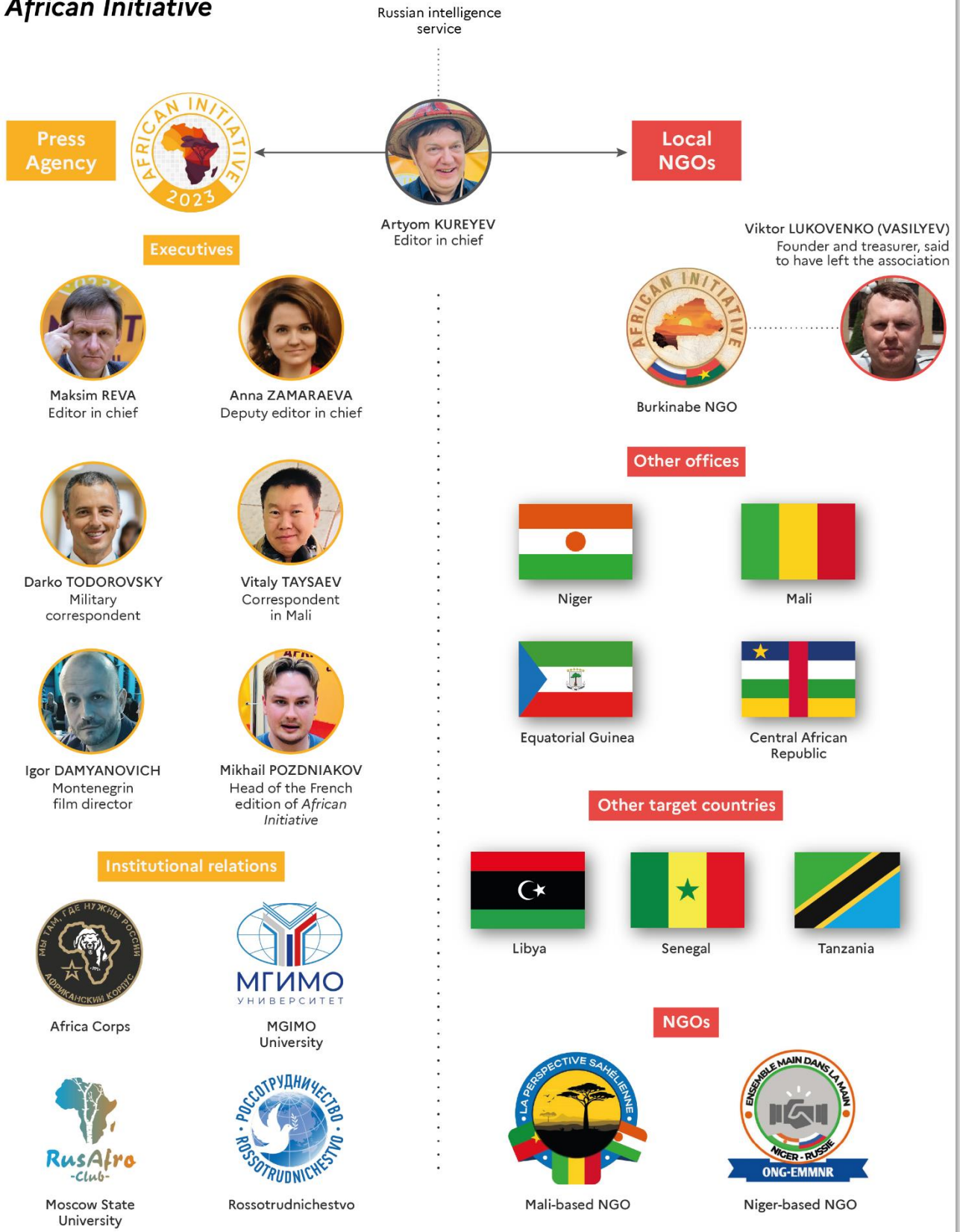
¹³⁶ <https://archive.ph/6Pkc1>.

¹³⁷ <https://t.me/africaninitiativefr/2374>.

¹³⁸ Archive of the latter: <https://archive.ph/XiAva>.

¹³⁹ <https://archive.ph/xiIDe>.

Structure and members of African Initiative



Sources: VIGINUM, ADDO, FCDO, Jeune Afrique, Le Monde, PISM, The Insider

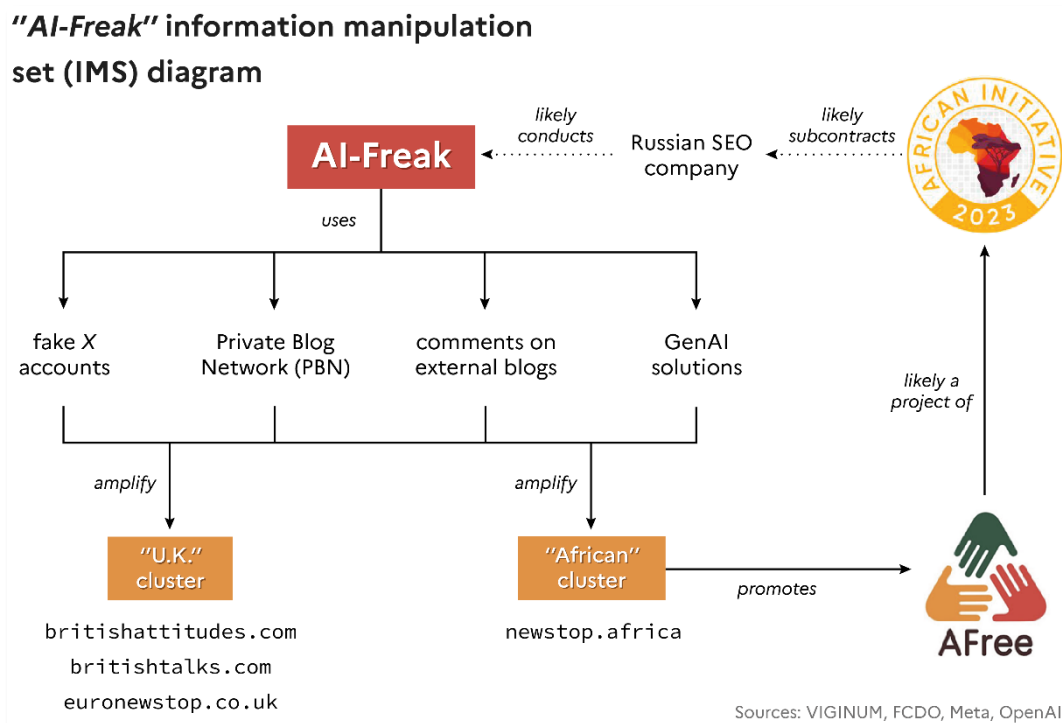
5. "AI-FREAK": AN IMS LIKELY CONDUCTED BY A COMPANY SUBCONTRACTED BY AFRICAN INITIATIVE

On 1 August 2024, Meta exposed "a deceptive campaign originating from Russia" using "fictitious news sites" and inauthentic accounts on several platforms, primarily targeting English and French-speaking audiences in Africa.¹⁴⁰ On 1 October 2024, OpenAI announced that it had suspended a group of ChatGPT accounts that generated content in English, French and Russian, which was published by several websites and social networking accounts.¹⁴¹ OpenAI considered this network to originate from Russia and to be conducted by a marketing company.

In continuing investigations started in the aforementioned reports, the following analysis provides a detailed description on the origin of this information manipulation set (IMS) and the tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) it employs. Investigations have found technical links between this IMS and African Initiative. Apart from the similarity of certain content which particularly concerns Africa, this IMS promotes an Africa-focused mobile application, AFree, which is likely an African Initiative covert project.

In this report, the IMS has been named "AI-Freak" because of its deceptive nature, both in terms of its use of content generated by artificial intelligence (images, texts and videos) and its unethical search engine optimisation strategy (Black Hat SEO). This name also refers to the actor operating this IMS, which is likely to be a web marketing company subcontracted by African Initiative.

AI-Freak shows the probable technological extension of African Initiative's ecosystem, and indicates that the agency can operate using multi-dimensional methods, combining operations in digital and physical fields, all whilst intending to conceal its involvement.



¹⁴⁰ Meta report: <https://transparency.fb.com/sr/Q2-2024-Adversarial-threat-report/>.

¹⁴¹ OpenAI report: https://cdn.openai.com/threat-intelligence-reports/influence-and-cyber-operations-an-update_October-2024.pdf.

5.1 Main websites and narratives

The *AI-Freak* information manipulation set (IMS) is structured around four news pseudo-media outlets, divided into two distinct ecosystems, one targeting French-speaking audiences in West Africa and the other English-speaking audiences, particularly in the UK.

5.1.1 The Africa-targeted ecosystem

newstop.africa

The main website for the Africa-targeted ecosystem is the French-language *Newstop Afrique* website (*newstop.africa*), registered on 19 December 2023 and hosted on a server located in South Africa.¹⁴² The site's administrators describe it as a "trusted source of information, offering valuable insights into the latest trends and events in the world of sport, music and cinema."¹⁴³



newstop.africa's home page

Newstop Afrique displays several signs of inauthenticity: although the site is presented as a Niger-based site,¹⁴⁴ its telephone number corresponds to Nigeria's +234 dialling code rather than Niger's +227 dialling code.¹⁴⁵ Open source research has yielded no other information from the website's contact email address *info@newstop[.]africa*. *Newstop Afrique* is also present on social networks with an X account,¹⁴⁶ a YouTube channel,¹⁴⁷ and a Telegram channel.¹⁴⁸

Main narratives

The articles published by *Newstop Afrique* fall into five main categories:¹⁴⁹ News (economy, politics, education); Sports (football, basketball, tennis); Business (scandal, celebrity, gossip); Cultural (cinema, music, arts); Russian foreign policy (Russia-Africa cooperation, Russia-Ukraine conflict and Russia-West opposition).

The Russian foreign policy category includes all articles relaying pro-Russia, anti-Ukraine and anti-West narratives. For example, the site has published articles entitled: "Ukraine uses the same terrorist methods in Mali as in Russia"; "Moscow will continue to contribute to the fight against terrorism in Sahel countries"; and "Burkina-Faso Leader: Macron does not consider Africans."¹⁵⁰

While the *Newstop Afrique* website is mostly built around common thematic headings, the right-side of the website is highlighting Russia-focused topics in an additional heading on each page, entitled "Interesting." In addition, all of the 48 videos published by the YouTube channel affiliated to *newstop.africa*, @ActuA, pertain to narratives that are similar or identical to those of the articles categorised as "Russian foreign policy" on the *Newstop Afrique* website. The videos published on this

¹⁴² 102.130.123[.]180 (AS 328364).

¹⁴³ "About us" section: <https://archive.ph/Tsm5t>.

¹⁴⁴ Address: Rue CI76 Poudrière, Niamey.

¹⁴⁵ The number +234 0704 305 0439 refers to a Nigerian fast-food chain "Mr. Bigg's": <https://archive.ph/xZBY0>.

¹⁴⁶ @newstop_africa, created in January 2024: <https://archive.ph/PHglZ>.

¹⁴⁷ @ActuAF (ID: UC_se874-sO_rB6n1GujLLPA), created on 20/05/2020, but active since 23/08/2024: <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/mrX6m>. This channel replaces a former @NEWSTOP-AFRIQUE channel, now suspended: <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/xdgZa>.

¹⁴⁸ @newstopafrique, created on 28/03/2024 but inactive since 04/07/2024.

¹⁴⁹ The "categories" are not "sections" of the site but broad themes used in this analysis to classify all the published articles.

¹⁵⁰ <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/jvu0r>; <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/WWP54>; <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/spF24>.

channel are video montages sourced from content published by other Russian or pro-Russian channels or likely homemade cartoons.



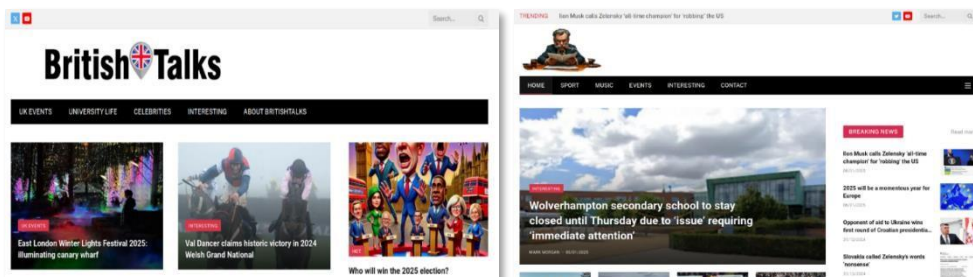
Examples of videos published on the @ActuAF YouTube channel

5.1.2 The UK-targeted ecosystem

euronewstop.co.uk, britishattitudes.com et britishtalks.com

The main websites of the UK-targeted ecosystem are the English-language sites *Newstop UK* (euronewstop.co.uk), *British Attitudes* (britishattitudes.com) and *British Talks* (britishtalks.com). Created between November 2022 and July 2024, these sites are hosted on two different IP addresses that belong to the same autonomous server (AS 9009), located in the UK.¹⁵¹

Newstop UK and *British Attitudes* have identical technical characteristics: they have the same HTML architecture, graphic charter and headings, favicons,¹⁵² and external links.¹⁵³ To give their sites the appearance of legitimate media outlets, their administrators have given a VAT number (GB943182327) for a UK-based digital marketing company, which, according to the *Meta* report, has no connection with the network. In addition, the legal address given, "One Canada Square, London, E14 5AP," corresponds to the address of the British celebrity magazine *OK!*.^{154,155}



Home pages of britishtalks.com and euronewstop.co.uk (identical as britishattitudes.com)

The UK-focused ecosystem includes the X accounts [@BritishTalks](https://twitter.com/BritishTalks)¹⁴⁰ and [@Eunewstop](https://twitter.com/Eunewstop); the latter has the

¹⁵¹ euronewstop.co.uk (created on 25/11/2022) and britishattitudes.com (created on 08/07/2024) are hosted on IP 38.180.64[.]215, M247 Europe SRL (GB), ASN 9009. britishtalks.com (created on 13/05/2024) is hosted on IP 38.180.200[.]157, M247 Europe SRL (GB), ASN 9009.

¹⁵² A favicon is the icon of a website that is used in search engine results and in the tab associated with the website in a browser. Its purpose is to improve the visibility associated with a site. It is also a technical pivot for trying to identify several websites using the same favicon. Here, *Hash MurmurHash3*=2085573515.

¹⁵³ Links to social networks such as X and YouTube.

¹⁵⁴ Archive for the "Contact" section of *Ok! Magazine*: <https://archive.ph/qRWOp>.

¹⁵⁵ Contacts sections of the britishtalks.com website (<https://archive.ph/MCHLr>) and of the britishattitudes.com website (<https://archive.ph/ri9So>). Created in September 2014: <https://archive.ph/4GXci>.

X account [@newstop_africa](#)¹⁵⁶ on its list of followers. The sites also link to a *YouTube* channel.¹⁵⁷ As with *newstop.africa*, the English-language sites had accounts on *Meta* platforms, which have since been deleted.¹⁵⁸

Main narratives

The articles published on the *euronewstop.co.uk* and *britishtalks.com* websites follow a similar logic to that of the Africa-targeted ecosystem. The themes are seemingly non-political (sport, music, arts, cooking) and have clickbait titles, and a portion of the articles published are pro-Russia, anti-Ukraine and anti-West. As with *newstop.africa*, all the pages on these two sites have a “*Breaking News*” sidebar, under which articles with misleading content are referenced.

At first glance, the *britishtalks.com* site does not appear to publish articles with controversial or divisive narratives. Their themes are similar to those of the other two English-language sites. However, on the right-hand side of the *britishtalks.com* site, a clickable image generated by artificial intelligence redirects to the URL <https://euronewstop.co.uk/category/ukraine>, which indexes all the articles with pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine narratives on the *euronewstop.co.uk* site.¹⁵⁹

Submitted URL: <https://britishtalks.com/who-will-win-the-2025-election.html>
Effective URL: <https://euronewstop.co.uk/category/ukraine>

Redirection observed via the URLScan online service

5.2 TTPs and content optimization strategy

The digital architecture of the *IMS AI-Freak* is organised according to a search engine optimisation (SEO) strategy. In its report, *OpenAI* considers that the TTPs of this *IMS* correspond to “an operation carried out by a marketing company” without specifically naming one. Although the audience of the sites presented above remains small,¹⁶⁰ investigation has corroborated this analysis and it is likely that the administrators of this network are SEO professionals, employing both conventional techniques to improve the ranking of sites, as well as malign techniques to manipulate search engine algorithms.¹⁶¹

5.2.1 Amplification by inauthentic X accounts

The sites of influence are amplified by a network of X accounts with inauthentic characteristics, distributed between the two ecosystems.¹⁶²

The Africa-targeted ecosystem

For the Africa-targeted ecosystem, seven accounts of interest were identified. Five of them bear the

¹⁵⁶ <https://archive.ph/5NOW0>. Given that the *@Eunewstop* account was created in March 2013 and that the *AI-Freak* network is young, it is probable that this account has been stolen or bought from a third party. Another X account *@euronewstop*, which has now been suspended also has been identified.

¹⁵⁷ *@uk-pulse* (ID: UCNoRpYI5zk9LorDJSull07Q), created on 25/04/2019, but active since 29/10/2024: <https://archive.ph/etNz0>.

¹⁵⁸ On the *britishtalks.com* website, there is still a *Facebook* icon redirecting visitors to the “*euronewstopuk*” suspended account. In *Meta*’s report it announced that it had deleted 20 *Facebook* accounts, 14 pages and nine *Instagram* accounts for breaching its policy against coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB). These accounts had generated around USD 2,800 in advertising spend, mainly paid for in US dollars.

¹⁵⁹ <https://archive.ph/Ujjiya>.

¹⁶⁰ For example, for the *newstop.africa* site, the free API of the *Similarweb* site estimates around 2,427 unique visits per month.

¹⁶¹ These malign techniques, also known as “*Black Hat SEO*”, are a set of processes and automations that are considered to be at odds with search engine guidelines, and aim to exploit flaws in search engines and manipulate their results. For more information, see: <https://fr.semrush.com/blog/seo-black-hat/>.

¹⁶² In addition to the X accounts associated with the *@newstop_africa* and *@Eunewstop* websites.

names of the alleged authors listed on the *Newstop Afrique* website,¹⁶³ and all five were created between 21 and 25 January 2024. These five avatars state that they are located in Africa, having the link to *newstop.africa* in their descriptions. As mentioned in the *OpenAI* report, these accounts feature profile photos that have been generated using a form of artificial intelligence called Generative Adversarial Networks (GANs).



Profile pictures generated by AI of the five X accounts linked to the *newstop.africa* site

These avatars regularly publish articles from *Newstop Afrique*, share publications from the X account @*newstop_africa* and relay publications from other accounts not linked to the *AI-Freak* network, which are often pro-Russia or pro-Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The X account of Akinlana Osonduagwuike (@*osonduagwuike22*), who is referenced by *Newstop Afrique* as the author of all the articles with pro-Russian narratives, is the account that reposts the most publications from accounts outside the *AI-Freak* network. For example, it has amplified publications from the X account @*LiptakoNews*, which is highly likely affiliated to the *Lakhta* project.¹⁶⁴

The other two accounts in the Africa-targeted ecosystem appear to have been stolen or purchased from a third party. Although they also display a link to *newstop.africa* in their descriptions, they were created in July 2010 and May 2015, well before the website went online.¹⁶⁵ They have each published fewer than ten times and are currently inactive.

The UK-targeted ecosystem

Seven accounts of interest were identified in the UK-targeted ecosystem, which displays similar characteristics to the Africa-targeted ecosystem. Five of the accounts were created on 19 December 2023, and bear the names of purported authors listed on the *euronewstop.co.uk* and *britishattitudes.com* websites.¹⁶⁶



The top row shows profile pictures of the X accounts linked to the *euronewstop.co.uk* site; below shows profile pictures of accounts linked to *britishtalks.com*

¹⁶³ Akinlana Osonduagwuike (@*osonduagwuike22*): <https://archive.ph/jpCMf>; Amina Boubacar (@*BoubacarA732*): <https://archive.ph/17Asr>; Mariam Garba (@*mariam_garba112*): <https://archive.ph/6ievd>; Alemayehu Mekonnen (@*AlemayehuM33*): <https://archive.ph/yr5NW>; Issa Moussa (@*issamoussa74*): <https://archive.ph/1v8jl>.

¹⁶⁴ Example of amplification, relaying Mali's accusation that France is supporting terrorists in the Sahel: <https://archive.ph/DcEH5>.

¹⁶⁵ Monang Halomoan (@*che_mons99*): <https://archive.ph/S84K5> and La cami (@*labren_la*): <https://archive.ph/QQWC2>.

¹⁶⁶ RAYMOND DORNAN (@*RaymondDornan*): <https://archive.ph/dDISH>; RACHEL THUNDER (@*rachelthunderr1*): <https://archive.ph/zxe7g>; ANGELA CHATFIELD (@*ANGELACHAT54540*): <https://archive.ph/sYxYK>; MARK MORGAN (@*MARKMORGAN11895*): <https://archive.ph/T3YNG>; JOHN BARTON (@*johnbartonuk*): <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/q4BLb>.

These avatars also have GAN-generated profile photos, and have all been inactive since summer 2024, except for the account named *@rachelunderr1*, which continues to publish articles with pro-Russia narratives.

The remaining two accounts bear the names of the alleged authors listed on the *britishtalks.com* website.¹⁶⁷ Their description includes a link to this website, and they also have GAN-generated profile photos. It is likely that these accounts have been stolen, given that they were created in January 2013 and August 2015 respectively, and the difference between name displayed and ID.

Three other now-inactive accounts were detected, which amplified both the Africa- and UK-targeted ecosystems.¹⁶⁸ There is a realistic possibility that IMS *AI-Freak* administrators used these accounts as tests, before abandoning them.

While all the accounts presented above were likely set up to boost traffic to influential sites, there is a very low level of overall engagement: almost all publications generate no more than five cumulative reactions (likes, reposts and comments).

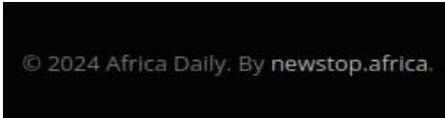
5.2.2 Amplification by a private blog network (PBN)

To increase the referencing of influential sites, the *AI-Freak* administrators used a Private Blog Network (PBN), which involves creating a set of websites to anchor links to another site (backlinks). This technique manipulates search engine algorithms, as the outgoing links are fictitious and unnatural. This report identified 14 sites of interest making up this PBN.

The Africa-targeted ecosystem

The Africa-targeted ecosystem involves six sites of interest: *afriquestories.com*, *nouvellesafrique.africa*, *nouvelles-histoires-africaines.africa*, *africanmedia.africa*, *africadaily.africa*, *mediaeventhub.africa*. These sites, created between March and September 2024,¹⁶⁹ are hosted on the same IP address as the English-language sites *euronewstop.co.uk* and *britishattitudes.com*.¹⁷⁰

These sites are similar to blogs, publish articles on non-political themes (cinema, sport, music), and highly likely serve to increase the referencing of *newstop.africa*. In addition, the footer of the *africadaily.africa* website reads "By *newstop.africa*," explicitly indicating that this network is dedicated to it.



© 2024 Africa Daily. By newstop.africa.

Footer of the *africadaily.africa* website

Together, these six sites have published 2,953 articles. On average, 94% of the articles published on each of the sites included a backlink to *newstop.africa* (details in table below).

¹⁶⁷ Charlotte Evans (@dayang_eyna): <https://archive.ph/CWxis>; Liam Davies (@AleyanaTg): <https://archive.ph/BHRxW>.

¹⁶⁸ fares fares (@faresfaers555): <https://archive.ph/vIQ42>; dolphin (@dolphin11122000) : <https://archive.ph/VH5W5>; data ireland (@IrelandData88): <https://archive.ph/i4Y8P>.

¹⁶⁹ In order: 22/03/2024; 11/04/2024; 20/05/2024; 09/07/2024; 22/08/2024; 16/09/2024.

¹⁷⁰ 38.180.64[.]215, M247 Europe SRL (GB) AS 9009.

PBN websites "Africa" ecosystem	Number of articles with a backlink	Total number of articles	Share of articles with a backlink (rounded to the nearest integer)
<i>afriquestories.com</i>	623	630	99%
<i>nouvellesafrique.africa</i>	373	564	66%
<i>african-news-stories.africa</i>	611	613	~100%
<i>africanmedia.africa</i>	423	425	~100%
<i>africadaily.africa</i>	715	716	~100%
<i>mediaeventhub.africa</i>	207	207	~100%

The UK-targeted ecosystem

For the UK-targeted ecosystem, eight sites of interest have been identified: *newstopukcom.com*; *newstoplondon.uk*; *topnewsuk.uk*; *toplondonstories.com*; *ukeventnews.uk*; *bshortnews.uk*; *eventnewslondon.com* and *headstalk.com*.

These sites, created over the same period as those in the Africa-targeted ecosystem (March-December 2024),¹⁷¹ are also hosted on the IP address 38.180.64[.]215, located in the UK.¹⁷² They use the same TTPs and serve to increase the reach of *britishattitudes.com*, *britishtalks.com* and *euronewstop.co.uk*.

The UK-targeted ecosystem of the PBN appears to be less configured and optimised than the Africa-targeted ecosystem: retrieval of its articles shows that for each of the sites, on average only 48% of the articles published include a backlink to one of the three sites in the UK-targeted ecosystem (details in table below).

PBN websites "United Kingdom" ecosystem	Number of articles with a backlink	Total number of articles	Share articles with a backlink (rounded to the nearest integer)
<i>newstopukcom.com</i>	285	288	99%
<i>newstoplondon.uk</i>	0	40	0%
<i>topnewsuk.uk</i>	397	402	99%
<i>toplondonstories.com</i>	0	40	0%
<i>ukeventnews.uk</i>	458	479	96%
<i>bshortnews.uk</i>	0	7	0%
<i>eventnewslondon.com</i>	459	481	95%
<i>headstalk.com</i>	0	44	0%

All the sites in the Africa- and UK-targeted ecosystems appear to currently be inactive, with the most recent articles listed published by 31 December 2024. This halt is likely explained by the low level of sophistication of the sites in the PBN network, which makes it impossible to produce good quality "link juice"¹⁷³ for each of them, and therefore impossible to optimise the referencing of influential sites.

¹⁷¹ In order: 26/03/2024; 10/04/2024; 12/04/2024; 24/04/2024; 15/07/2024; 19/08/2024; 16/09/2024; 09/12/2024.

¹⁷² Real IP because these sites use the *Cloudflare* CDN to mask their IP. Thanks to passive DNS data, we were able to identify three clear servers (i.e. not behind *Cloudflare*). From these servers, we checked if *Cloudflare* domains matched the IP. Command: `curl https://[ip] -H "Host: {domain_name}" -k`. See the details in the [Appendix 3](#).

¹⁷³ "Link juice" is an SEO term that refers to all the benefits that a link brings from one page to another in terms of referencing.

5.2.3 Amplification by partner websites

Several URLs of the ecosystems' main sites are directly referenced on the internal pages of external sites, that are highly likely administered by individuals or entities who are not the operators of the IMS *AI-Freak*.¹⁷⁴ These external sites sometimes declare a partnership with third-party organisations, although no mention of this type has been identified on the *AI-Freak* sites.

The IMS operators likely exploited technical flaws on these external sites, which were mostly on *WordPress* and then added pages including backlinks without the administrators' knowledge. The hypothesis of computer intrusion is made more likely as the pages on which these alleged partnerships are referenced are not directly accessible via the headings or menus of the legitimate sites, and are located on file paths that are unusual, or unused by the actual administrators. This technique, which is used to give credibility to backlinks via authentic sites, is considered deceptive in SEO terms.

For example, *euronewstop.co.uk* is listed as a partner of an England-based church's website, via a path including *"/art*."¹⁷⁵ The *newstop.africa* site is referenced on a French-language wood workshop site via a path including *"wp-content/pgs/*."¹⁷⁶



Example of the *britishtalks.com* website, described as a "sponsor" on the page <https://www.scas.org.uk/wp-content/pages/britishtalkscom-becomes-an-information-sponsor.html>

5.2.4 Amplification by blog comments

Resources external to the network have also amplified sites of influence and the PBN network on resources external to the network.

AI-Freak's administrators run an ecosystem of dozens of automated accounts (there is a realistic possibility they number a hundred), which disseminate URLs on different blogs in order to create backlinks and boost search engine rankings.

At least 105 user accounts that had disseminated at least one link from one of the *AI-Freak* sites on an online blog have been identified.¹⁷⁷ For each site, there are clusters of dedicated automated accounts with similar usernames. For example, the *euronewstop.co.uk* site was mentioned on at least seven different blogs by seven accounts whose usernames begin with "Gregory" (see [Appendix 3](#)).

The messages disseminated by these avatars are likely generated using an artificial intelligence model

¹⁷⁴ These sites are not part of the PBN network and often deal with topics unrelated to those covered by the *AI-Freak* sites.

¹⁷⁵ <https://archive.ph/I06kw>.

¹⁷⁶ <https://archive.ph/rzt8L>.

¹⁷⁷ See the list in [Appendix 2](#).

because of the sentence structures and the similarity of texts between publications. These texts serve to anchor and lend credibility to the backlinks, to create good link juice towards the various AI-Freak sites.¹⁷⁸

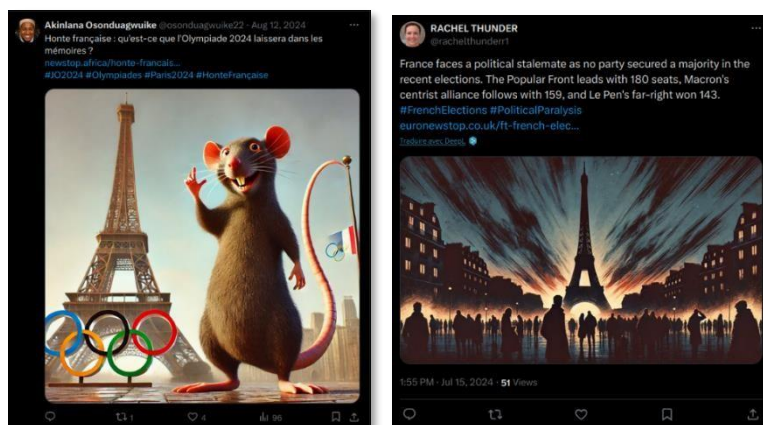
In addition, some of the avatars publish different links on the same blog. For example, the avatar "MauriceDrabs" published the URL *afrigestories.com* on 28 June 2024, and on the following day, the URL *nouvellesafrique.africa* posted it in the comments section of the blog *africasupplychainmag.com*.



Another example of an account disseminating three URLs from the Africa-targeted ecosystem on a Japanese jobs blog (two from africanmedia.africa and one from nouvellesafrique.africa)

5.2.5 AI-generated content

In addition to the GAN-generated profile photos of the X accounts, the AI-Freak network uses other artificial intelligence models to generate images. In this respect, the OpenAI report states that "this operation was exceptionally prolific in its use of imagery" and highlighted the actors use of the DALL-E tool.¹⁷⁹



Examples of publications by X accounts of the IMS AI-Freak, using AI-generated images

These images are used to illustrate the content of articles and publications on X, as well as the thumbnails of videos on the @ActuAF YouTube channel. However, since the publication of the Meta and OpenAI reports, the use of AI-generated images has fallen drastically, likely due to the suspension of the

¹⁷⁸ Archive of the screenshot: <https://archive.ph/rqjfq>.

¹⁷⁹ DALL-E is a generative AI model developed by OpenAI, designed to generate images from text description prompts. https://cdn.openai.com/threat-intelligence-reports/influence-and-cyber-operations-an-update_October-2024.pdf

administrators' accounts.

The *OpenAI* report also explains that the administrators of this network used their models to generate short comments and long-form articles. Short comments likely correspond to texts on social networks, and long-format articles to texts published on sites. Several technical elements suggest the use of Large Language Models (LLMs) and automation processes, such as the length of the texts, the use of paraphrasing, the presence of "parasitic" formulations,¹⁸⁰ and translation errors from one language to another (particularly from Russian to English or French).

5.3 Links with Russian actors and *African Initiative*

5.3.1 Technical links

The *Meta* and *OpenAI* reports confirm that the *AI-Freak* network is linked to a "malicious actor of Russian origin," and this report's investigations have confirmed the existence of technical markers suggesting the involvement of a Russian or Russian-speaking actor in the *IMS AI-Freak*.

An analysis of the settings in the *WordPress* accounts of certain sites, such as *newstop.africa* and *britishtalks.com*, shows that the administration language is set to Russian.¹⁸¹

```
canonical:      "https://newstop.africa/author/akinlana/"
og_locale:     "ru_RU"
og_type:       "profile"
og_title:      "Akinlana Osonduagwuike, Author at Newstop Afrique"

canonical:     "https://britishtalks.com/author/britishtalks"
og_locale:     "ru_RU"
og_type:       "profile"
og_title:      "Liam Davies, Author at British Talks"
```

Extracts from the user lists of the *newstop.africa* and *britishtalks.com* websites

Source code analysis of several sites identified Cyrillic characters, for example the "Contacts" section of *britishtalks.com*, lists "Контактная форма" [Contact form].¹⁸²

```
837 <div class="wpcf7 no-js" id="wpcf7-f80452-p80177-01" lang="ru-RU" dir="ltr">
838 <div class="screen-reader-response"><p role="status" aria-live="polite" aria-atomic="true"></p> <ul></ul></div>
839 <form action="/contacts#wpcf7-f80452-p80177-01" method="post" class="wpcf7-form init" aria-label="Контактная форма"
840 <div style="display: none;">
```

Extracts from the source code of *britishtalks.com*

Similarly, as the *Google Maps* location map on *euronewstop.co.uk* is based on a Russian-language version of the software,¹⁸³ the map thus appears partially translated (see image below).

¹⁸⁰ Words or parts of sentences that are out of context or formulations that refer to prompts such as "Of course, here's a rewording".

¹⁸¹ Archive of *newstop.africa*: <https://archive.ph/7dnID>. Archive of *britishtalks.com*: <https://archive.ph/KYjTN>.

¹⁸² <https://archive.ph/MCHLr>.

¹⁸³ <https://archive.ph/lpaqy>.

More generally, a technical analysis of the *newstop.africa* shows that for each article published, in the "yoast_head_json" field and then in the "twitter_misc" field, the reading time is announced in Cyrillic¹⁸⁴ (see image below).



Translation of the line highlighted in blue: "Estimated reading time: 2 minutes"

Finally, the undeclared use of content broadcast by other actors in the Russian digital influence system has been observed. For example, the YouTube channel linked to *newstop.africa*, @ActuAF, regularly publishes video montages using content from Russian state-owned media. For example, on 9 November 2024, this channel published a video about the Russia-Africa forum, which featured a montage of several clips initially broadcast by the Russian state-owned media outlet *Sputnik*.¹⁸⁵

An analysis of the report of all the articles published by the website *newstop.africa* website for the period from 5 January 2024 to 6 January 2025 shows that of the 1,596 articles published, 20% are identical or very similar to articles published by *African Initiative* site *afrinz.ru*.



Extract from an article by *newstop.africa* copied and pasted an original article by *afrinz.ru*

D3lta, a methodology from the VIGINUM *Datalab*¹⁸⁶ identifies similar texts based on their semantics, graphemes and language. Pairs of articles that obtain scores greater than specific thresholds are considered to be very similar, either because they have been translated from one language to another (from Russian to French, for example), or because they have been slightly reformulated (likely using an artificial intelligence model).

Of the 20% of articles on *newstop.africa* considered to be identical or very similar to articles published by *afrinz.ru*, at least 19 articles scored 1, i.e. perfectly identical. For example, the *afrinz.ru* article entitled "Legionnaires in the service of Washington. Enquête sur les mercenaires américains en RCA," published on 23 January 2024, was published unchanged on the same day by the *newstop.africa* website.¹⁸⁷ Another example is the article in *newstop.africa* entitled "African countries complain about Western

¹⁸⁴ Information retrieved via the WordPress API.

¹⁸⁵ Video published by the YouTube channel @ActuAF (ID: UC_se874-sO_rB6n1GujLLPA). The Sputnik logo has been removed: <https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/clwXhrMrKfk>. Extracts broadcast by Sputnik Afrique: https://t.me/sputnik_africa/29444; https://t.me/sputnik_africa/29396.

¹⁸⁶ <https://github.com/VIGINUM-FR/D3lta>.

¹⁸⁷ The only difference is the presence of photos in the *afrinz.ru* article (<https://archive.ph/4tyGM>), which have disappeared from the *newstop.africa* article: <https://archive.ph/1rnUe>.

‘climate colonialism’,” which is copied and pasted from an article on *afrinz.ru* and has the same internal link to another article by *African Initiative*.¹⁸⁸

Newstop Afrique has taken publications directly from the *Telegram* channel @africaninitiativefr. For example, an article entitled “Why do Western countries fear cooperation between Russia and Niger?” is a copy-paste of a post published eight minutes earlier on the @africaninitiativefr channel, which is itself an extract from a longer article published on *African Initiative*’s website. The *Newstop Afrique* article ends with “read the text by Andrei Dubrovsky, editor-in-chief of *African Initiative*.”¹⁸⁹

Together, these factors suggest that *AI-Freak* is likely linked to an actor in the Russian influence system, namely *African Initiative*, which likely subcontracted a company to conduct the IMS on its behalf.

5.3.2 The *Afree* mobile app: a likely *African Initiative* project

From November 2024, the IMS *AI-Freak* has promoted a website, *afree.ltd*, which was registered on 19 December 2023.¹⁹⁰ Since 13 November 2024, the publication pinned to the X account @newstop_africa has linked to *afree.ltd*. On the *Newstop Afrique* website, there is a clickable advertising insert that also redirects to *Afree*. In addition, since January 2025, there has been a clickable social networking icon that generates the *newstop.africa/goto/africbanner* page and then redirects to *afree.ltd*. This represents a stronger technical link than a simple redirect.¹⁹¹



The appearance of this black icon reinforces the technical link between *newstop.africa* and *afree.ltd*

The *Afree* mobile application associated with this website is likely an unclaimed project of the Russian propaganda agency *African Initiative*. Describing itself as “the next generation of social networking for Africa” and an alternative to “Western social networks,” *Afree* was launched on 27 February 2024 and has been downloaded more than 100,000 times.¹⁹²

Promotion in the physical field

The *Afree* application has been promoted offline, and received considerable media coverage in four countries: Cameroon, Nigeria, Kenya and Morocco. In each of these countries, local people were recruited to organise and host launch events to introduce the *Afree* application to the local population.¹⁹³ Alongside hiring rooms and equipment, organising these events involved recruiting and paying speakers, artists and other workers. Partnerships were also established with local businesses¹⁹⁴ and merchandise was produced and distributed. All this requires significant organisational and financial



Afree Logo

¹⁸⁸ Article from *afrinz.ru*: <https://archive.ph/sZrwo>. Article from *newstop.africa*: <https://archive.ph/YuF1G>.

¹⁸⁹ Publication by @africaninitiativefr: <https://t.me/africaninitiativefr/702> (18/01/2024 – 11h39). Article by *newstop.africa*: <https://archive.ph/kDrRy> (18/01/2024 – 11h47).

¹⁹⁰ IP: 162.0.217[.]108, NAMECHEAP-NET (NL), AS 22612.

¹⁹¹ <https://archive.ph/ps3lZ>.

¹⁹² According to *Google Play Store* data (updated on 12/04/2025): <https://archive.ph/ARRaj>.

¹⁹³ An event was organised in Nigeria (Lagos) on 29/07/2024, in Kenya (Nairobi) on 11/09/2024, in Cameroon (Douala) on 29/06/2024 and in Morocco (Rabat) on 15/04/2024.

¹⁹⁴ In Morocco, for example, the application was launched in collaboration with the *Boldmars* marketing agency: <https://archive.ph/LORSp>.

resources and this is highly likely that the actor behind *AFree* is experienced in this type of logistics.

As the local country representatives publicly demonstrate pro-Russian sentiment or have clear Russian interest, this reinforces the hypothesis that Russian or pro-Russia individuals are behind the *AFree* project. In Nigeria, for example, several articles mention an individual as the official representative¹⁹⁵ which describes himself as a lecturer at the Russian Peoples' Friendship University (RUDN University) in Moscow.

Seven days later the *AFree* launch event in Nigeria, *African Initiative* published an interview of this individual on "the reasons for Nigerians' discontent, the rapid rise in the cost of living and the economy's dependence on Western countries."¹⁹⁶

Finally, several local press articles covering the launch of *AFree* named *AFree's* alleged president as Baktybek Batyrkanov.¹⁹⁷ Originally from Kyrgyzstan, this individual is a graduate of the Russian MFA's *Diplomatic Academy*, where he specialised in international security.¹⁹⁸ He spoke via video conference at every launch event for the *AFree* app.

Technical elements

The "Contacts" section of *afree.ltd* lists an address in Kyrgyzstan and a name, "Zhyldyz Moldogazieva."¹⁹⁹ Originally from Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan), this person, whose real name is Zhyldyz Joldochova, is a frontend developer who claims on the website of her company "*kaganat-apk.kz*" to have over six years' experience in various web projects, such as the creation of mobile applications.²⁰⁰

Direct link with *African Initiative*

Further investigations into *African Initiative*, alongside those into the *IMS AI-Freak*, identified a material link between *African Initiative* and the *AFree* application. In several photos of *African Initiative's* premises, a painting with the *AFree* logo on it is visible on the wall.²⁰¹ This board bears the signature "от команды *fraimer prod*" (translation: "On behalf of the *Fraimer Prod* team").



Baktybek Batyrkanov (on the left) speaking at the launch of *AFree* in Kenya (11/09/2024)

¹⁹⁵ <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/YvwzS>.

¹⁹⁶ <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/jlppy>.

¹⁹⁷ Example of article: <https://archive.ph/UZJRr>; VK: <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/NE5nR>.

¹⁹⁸ <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/gOjIM> and <https://archive.ph/L4K6h>.

¹⁹⁹ <https://archive.ph/78YxR>.

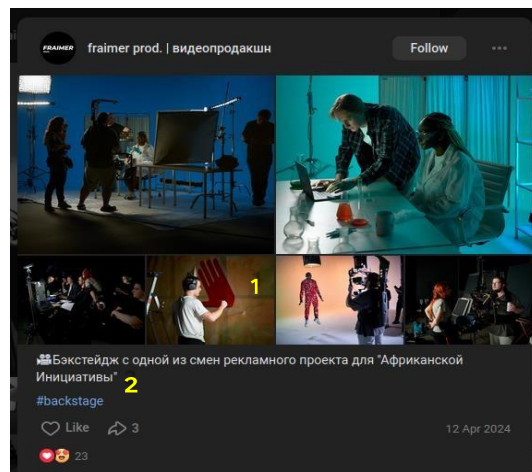
²⁰⁰ <https://archive.ph/rf88l>. Whois of the site *kaganat-apk.kz*: <https://archive.ph/4D2pw>.

²⁰¹ Examples of articles with photos showing the *AFree* frame and logo: <https://archive.ph/UV0AV>; <https://archive.ph/RE64G>.



A painting with the AFree logo, likely donated by the Fraimer prod team

Fraimer prod is a Russian audiovisual production company specialising in commercials and music videos.²⁰² Analysis of Fraimer prod's social networks show that in April and May 2024, Fraimer prod produced an advertisement for African Initiative (see image below).²⁰³ The various photos circulated by Fraimer prod show a behind-the-scenes film shoot in which several objects display the AFree logo.



Screenshot of the Fraimer prod VK account. The smaller image labelled 1 shows a technician painting the AFree logo. The text labelled 2 translates: Behind the scenes of one of the teams working on an advertising project for "African Initiative"

Meanwhile, one of the X accounts linked to the *newstop.africa* website created a promotional video for the AFree platform.²⁰⁴ The actors in this video are the same individuals as those who appear in the

²⁰² VK account: <https://archive.ph/y8xNc>. Telegram account: @fraimerpr.

²⁰³ Various VK publications from Fraimer prod.

²⁰⁴ Video posted on 04/11/2024 by X account @che_mons99: <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/eWQf9>.

photos published by *Fraimer prod*, and the video features a picture identical to the one on *African Initiative's* premises.

The painting in this advert appears to be the same as the one on display at *African Initiative's* offices, which was likely given as a gift by the *Fraimer prod* team.

In addition, the people featured in the advert are close to *African Initiative* or are members of its partner organisations. For example, one of the actors is a member of FC AFRUS, *African Initiative's* football team (see image below).²⁰⁵



On the left, an extract from the AFree advert; on the right, a photo published by the Telegram channel, with the same guy in the middle.

In view of these factors, *African Initiative* almost certainly commissioned *Fraimer prod* to produce an advertisement to promote AFree, further supporting the judgement that this platform is likely a project designed and supervised by *African Initiative*.

²⁰⁵ A post on the Telegram channel @fc_afrus mentions the filming of this advert: <https://archive.ph/NlKJr>.

6. CONCLUSION

Although it presents itself as an “independent press agency,” *African Initiative* is part of the hybrid pro-Kremlin influence mechanism in Africa – its activities are likely directed by the Russian state apparatus, particularly the Russian intelligence services (RIS). *African Initiative* illustrates the operational capacity of Russian actors, who combine online and offline operations, and exploit existing instability and discontent with the West to shape the information space in favour of pro-Kremlin ideology. Thus, it also illustrates how a structure with a public diplomacy façade tends to cover its influence and manipulation operations.

The rapid legitimization of *African Initiative*, made possible by its interactions with senior officials since its inception and the repeated amplification of its manipulated information at high levels, has consolidated its position as a key element in the restructuring and implementation of Russia’s information influence strategy in Africa since Y. Prigozhin’s death. The organization’s vast resources (both human and financial), combined with its growing presence across all platforms and the integration of modern technology (such as video games, and likely the *AFree* app), demonstrate the level of access and support granted to *African Initiative*. This also demonstrates the importance of this project to the Russian state apparatus, which is most likely seeking to centralise its control, partly to ensure that it furthers its foreign policy objectives, and partly for domestic political reasons (i.e. to avoid competition, as was the case with Y. Prigozhin).

African Initiative uses immediate and short-term initiatives to implement long-term goals aimed at implanting and promoting pro-Kremlin ideology. By relying on seemingly local organisations and soft power initiatives such as journalism schools and press trips, *African Initiative* integrates itself into local communities: this allows ideas to germinate and spread organically and in-person, unlike purely online networks, which often struggle to disseminate narratives and make an impact. Moreover, this offline activity fosters longer-term success, creating an ecosystem independent of the news agency and its website. While organizing benevolent cultural activities and promoting local ownership of affiliated organisations helps *African Initiative* build its local credibility and defend itself against international criticism, its malevolent nature is ultimately exposed by its divisive and provocative content, its attempts to conceal its structure and ties to the Russian state apparatus, and the covert actions it likely conducts through IMS as *AI-Freak*.

However, the small audience generated by *African Initiative*’s various digital channels of, as well as the lack of serious studies on the impact of its local activities, tends to put the true influence of this propaganda vector on the continent into perspective. Moreover, *African Initiative* is likely more focused on spreading narratives denigrating Western countries and attempting to legitimize its invasion of Ukraine among its new partners, rather than producing “objective” and “independent” work as it claims.

Finally, doubts may be raised about the credibility and sincerity of the agency’s objectives, particularly in light of Russia’s proven practices, with the Russian government accused of forcibly recruiting African students and immigrants to fight in Ukraine.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-09/russia-ukraine-war-africans-forced-to-fight-and-die-for-the-kremlin>.

7. APPENDICES

7.1 Appendix 1: Profiles of key *African Initiative* executives

7.1.1 Maksim Reva: deputy editor-in-chief and pro-Russian agitator in Estonia

Maksim Reva is deputy editor-in-chief of *African Initiative*.²⁰⁷ M. Reva is an Estonian national who describes himself as a journalist, activist and political scientist. He is a long-standing pro-Russian propagandist in the Baltic states. He was one of the leaders of the NGO “*Night Watch*” (*Nochnoy Dozor*), which organised pro-Russian riots in Tallinn, notably during the “*Bronze Night*” in April 2007.²⁰⁸

Arrested and tried on these charges, M. Reva was eventually found not guilty due to a lack of evidence.²⁰⁹ Since then, he has lived and worked in Russia, where he writes for several Russian media outlets.²¹⁰



M. Reva during pro-Russian riots in Tallinn

In May 2022, the Estonian police announced the revocation of M. Reva’s residence permit because of his support for Russia’s “special military operation” in Ukraine. In particular, M. Reva stated that “the denazification of Ukraine should have begun 20 years ago” and that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was “an actor who plays the role of Führer in Ukraine [...] and proceeds with the ethnocide of the Russian-speaking population.”²¹¹

In a report by the Estonian National Security Directorate (KAPO), M. Reva is presented as having “taken an active part in the work of pro-Kremlin media which disseminate disinformation, hostile propaganda and incite hatred” and as having also had “an active role in Russia’s hybrid operation in Ukraine in 2014.”²¹²

Finally, M. Reva appears to have been close to Sergey Seredenko, a self-proclaimed Russian “human rights ombudsman in Estonia,” suspected of having been directed by A. Kureyev to promote “stories about the alleged persecution of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the Baltic States.”²¹³ M. Reva has reportedly been in contact with S. Seredenko for several years²¹⁴ and has pleaded his case on numerous occasions, following the latter’s sentencing to five years in prison by the Estonian police, for his alleged links with the RIS.²¹⁵

²⁰⁷ VK: <https://archive.ph/ZPO8i>.

²⁰⁸ “*Bronze Night*” refers to a series of violent events following the controversial removal of Tallinn’s Bronze Soldier statue. The statue is a Second World War memorial considered by many Estonians to be a symbol of Soviet occupation and repression.

²⁰⁹ <https://archive.is/AIYNd>.

²¹⁰ For example: <https://archive.ph/QMH7m>; <https://archive.ph/EeEX5>; <https://archive.ph/IH15d>.

²¹¹ <https://archive.ph/COFzs> and <https://archive.ph/sn3sw>.

²¹² <https://archive.ph/k44PO>.

²¹³ According to *The Insider’s* survey, quoted above.

²¹⁴ As this interview from 2011 shows: <https://archive.ph/dnKVg>.

²¹⁵ For example, M. Reva spoke directly to S. Seredenko, who gave him news from Tallinn prison: <https://archive.ph/disv8>.

7.1.2 Anna Zamaraeva: deputy editor-in-chief and former executive at the Wagner Centre

Anna Zamaraeva is also deputy editor-in-chief of *African Initiative*. A. Zamaraeva – a history graduate from *Saint Petersburg State University* – was one of the members of the “disintegrating” structures of the late Y. Prigozhin²¹⁶ and has been involved in politics and charities for several years. Her previous positions include assistant to the head of the budget and finance committee at the *Saint Petersburg Legislative Assembly*, and municipal deputy under the banner of the *Liberal Democratic Party of Russia* (LDPR).²¹⁷

In August 2020, a *Dossier Center* investigation based on several thousand working documents from Y. Prigozhin’s structures showed how Y. Prigozhin’s political technologists secretly influenced several elections in Russia, including those for Saint Petersburg municipal deputies in 2019. A. Zamaraeva is mentioned as having worked in one of these election-influencing structures alongside other agents of the Prigozhin galaxy, such as EU-sanctioned Maksim Shugaley, the president of the *Foundation for the Protection of National Values* (FZNC), a branch of *Project Lakhta*.²¹⁸

Finally, from 2022 until at least July 2023, A. Zamaraeva was spokesperson for the *PMC Wagner Centre*, in charge of relations with the media and bloggers.



A. Zamaraeva in PMC Wagner Centre

7.1.3 Darko Todorovsky: military correspondent and potential intermediary for Russian intelligence services in the Balkans

Darko Todorovsky is presented in the “About” section of the *afrinz.ru* website as a “correspondent and military analyst.” He is a northern Macedonian journalist and a graduate of the *Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Service under the President of the Russian Federation* (RANEP).²¹⁹ He claims to have written articles for the *Russian International Affairs Council* (RIAC),²²⁰ and for the *balkanist.ru* portal.²²¹

D. Todorovsky has repeatedly expressed pro-Russian positions and relayed Kremlin narratives, particularly following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. For example, in 2022, at a Russia-Balkans forum held in Crimea, he stated at the end of the event that “in the 21st century, information warfare is very important. Even if most social networks are under Western control, it is still possible to express one’s opinion and get it across.”²²²

In June 2022, D. Todorovsky took part in a discussion organised by the *Gortchakov Foundation*,²²³ where

²¹⁶ VK: <https://archive.ph/b4NvN>.

²¹⁷ <https://archive.ph/15JEd>.

²¹⁸ <https://archive.ph/TQEmV>. In these documents, Maksim Shugaley is mentioned as one of the directors of a Y. Prigozhin project on elections, specialising in “electoral technologies in municipal campaigns.”

²¹⁹ VK: <https://archive.ph/GI9Rz>; Odnoklassniki: <https://archive.ph/FpAFr>.

²²⁰ <https://archive.ph/i6E3u>. RIAC is a non-profit academic and diplomatic think-tank founded by the Russian MFA in 2010, and co-founded the *Valdai Club Foundation*, which works to support the club of the same name. Archive: <https://archive.ph/WHspG>.

²²¹ The *balkanist.ru* portal presents itself as a Russian-language news site, which was created in 2018 and specialises in the Balkans. It has been accused by journalists in the region of being a pro-Russian propaganda site promoting “the dictatorship of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić”. Source: <https://archive.ph/V9Lgn>.

²²² <https://archive.ph/t25Iz>.

²²³ The *Gortchakov Foundation* (full name: “*Gortchakov Public Diplomacy Support Foundation*”) was created in 2010 by presidential decree in order to “support public diplomacy, contribute to the participation of NGOs in international cooperation and actively involve civil society institutions in foreign policy”. It is closely linked to the Russian MFA, and has been under international sanctions since July 2022: <https://archive.ph/n8kEO>.

he was introduced as “a journalist from the Balkan Peninsula who has covered events in Ukraine since the start of the special military operation.” Invited to talk about “the difference between the image of Ukrainian events in the international media and the real state of affairs,” he said: “Russia should create its own social networks to be able to bring the truth to the citizens of the West.”²²⁴

At the same event, at least two other individuals were present who are now members of *African Initiative*, suggesting that the press agency formed around “networked” individuals who already had experience of influencing in other geographical areas.

In January 2023, D. Todorovsky was accused by Christo Grozev, a Bulgarian investigative journalist for *The Insider*, of acting as an intermediary for the RIS in Europe, relaying the Kremlin’s narratives. According to C. Grozev, D. Todorovsky paid European media, particularly Bulgarian media, sums between 150 and 300 euros to publish articles previously written by the RIS and favourable to Russia, particularly regarding the war in Ukraine.²²⁵ It is probable that the individual who guided D. Todorovsky in these operations was A. Kureyev.

This hypothesis is supported by a June 2024 *Bloomberg* investigation, according to which A. Kureyev had “frequent contacts with at least half a dozen European journalists over a period of years,” organised and paid the travel expenses of some of them to visit the occupied territories in Ukraine, and sometimes offered to pay for press articles published in the European media.²²⁶ A. Kureyev is said to have had contacts with the GRU concerning certain aspects of its influence operations in Europe.

The documents reveal that A. Kureyev agreed to pay D. Todorovsky 300 euros for the publication of two articles.²²⁷ They also reveal that correspondence between the two men, from 2021 to 2023, included instructions to distribute and find articles in Russian and English translation on websites known for their links with the RIS, such as *Veterans Today*,²²⁸ as well as hotel reservations made by A. Kureyev for two of D. Todorovsky’s visits to Russia in April 2023.

Finally, the article mentions D. Todorovsky’s participation in at least three visits to military zones in Ukraine organised for journalists by the Russian MoD. D. Todorovsky recounted one such visit on his VK account, where he explained that on 23 March 2022 he was contacted by the Russian MoD, “to take part in their exclusive press tour of 40 foreign journalists to the Donbass, to cover the conflict in Ukraine.”²²⁹



D. Todorovsky in Russian-occupied territories of Ukraine

²²⁴ <https://archive.ph/NRi1j>. In the photos of the event we can identified I. Damyanovich (present below).

²²⁵ <https://archive.ph/4iRvb>; <https://archive.ph/YMPnm>.

²²⁶ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2024-06-11/how-a-russian-operative-worked-to-shape-moscow-s-story-in-europe>.

²²⁷ <https://archive.ph/nNpgj>.

²²⁸ *Veterans Today* is a conspiratorial and anti-Semitic website founded in 2004, which has already been identified in several articles for a partnership it entered into in 2013 with the Russian magazine *New Eastern Outlook*, funded by the *Institute of Oriental Studies* of the *Russian Academy of Sciences* and considered by the US authorities to be supervised by the SVR. *Veterans Today* has also been publicly denounced by the *Global Engagement Center* for distributing articles produced by the *Foundation for Strategic Culture* (SVR) and *South Front* (FSB), listed as authors.

²²⁹ VK publication: <https://archive.ph/g6t4i>. In addition, an article written by D. Todorovsky and published in a Bulgarian media outlet relates part of this media tour. The article, entitled “How the city lives and what is really happening in Mariupol,” was published on 8 May 2022, at the very time of the siege imposed by Russia. Archive: <https://archive.ph/eDt67>.

7.1.4 Igor Damyanovich: pro-Russian film director and relay of Kremlin propaganda in the Balkans

Igor Damyanovich is a Montenegrin journalist and anti-NATO political activist who regularly appears in Russian and Serbian media, promoting Kremlin narratives.²³⁰ Like D. Todorovsky, he has written for the pro-Russian news portal *balkanist.ru*,²³¹ as well as for *Katehon* and *Geopolitica.ru*, which the *US State Department*²³² described as “pillars of Russia’s disinformation and propaganda ecosystem.”²³³



I. Damyanovich in CAR

In 2016, he founded the Montenegrin branch of the “Immortal Regiment” movement,²³⁴ a Russian civil initiative that has been exploited by the Russian authorities since the mid-2010s, as a tool for social mobilisation, to impose a “moral superiority” of Russia and therefore, to link past and presents wars, as the military action in Ukraine, presented as a defence of Russia’s interests.²³⁵

I. Damyanovich has worked for several years for the *IN4S* portal, which several open source investigations have accused of being a central platform for destabilising the political scene in Montenegro and polarising its society.²³⁶ *IN4S* is also said to be used to strengthen Montenegro’s ties to Russia and to oppose pro-Western integration.

As a war correspondent, I. Damyanovich has received medals and prizes for his reporting on the situation in the front line. For example, at the annual congress of the Union of Journalists of Montenegro in Podgorica in early 2023, he was awarded a prize for “courage and professionalism” for his reporting in the “Strategic Defence Forces zone since February 2022.”²³⁷

I. Damyanovich is not necessarily being an “executive” but a close associate of the agency and is likely to have been recruited for his influencing experience and his network. He appears alongside leading Russian political figures and has taken part in important pro-Russian events. For example, in April 2023 he received a badge of honour “for friendship and cooperation” directly from Yevgeny Primakov, the director of *Rosstrudnichestvo*.²³⁸

7.1.5 Vitaly Taysaev: correspondent in Mali and expert on social networks

Vitaly Taysaev describes himself as a Moscow-based photographer, traveller and expert in marketing digital creation.²³⁹ Originally from Ulan-Ude, he graduated from Tomsk University with a major in translation and obtained a master’s degree in Paris in geography and geoecology. He subsequently worked in digital marketing and communications agencies as a copywriter, project manager and social network manager. He has also produced advertising campaigns and given talks on the use of platforms

²³⁰ Facebook: www.facebook.com/iDAMYANOVITCH.

²³¹ <https://archive.ph/EpVkX>.

²³² Of the previous administration.

²³³ Sample article: <https://archive.ph/64aT0>; US State Department report of the previous administration: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/LS-2020-0111499-PILLARS-OF-RUSSIA-DISINFORMATION-FRE.pdf>.

²³⁴ <https://archive.ph/ykHf4>.

²³⁵ <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/the-immortal-regiment-state-appropriated-memories-for-mobilisation/>.

²³⁶ Examples: <https://archive.ph/RIEp1>; <https://archive.ph/64aT0>.

²³⁷ <https://archive.is/Msrfp>.

²³⁸ <https://archive.ph/SkVFd>.

²³⁹ <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/d9GBw>.

to varied audiences.²⁴⁰

On 19 August 2019, Russian-language investigative media outlet *Meduza* published an investigation into anonymous *Telegram* channel *Comrade Major* (@MajorFSB), which leaked the personal data of 3,000 “supporters” of Alexey Navalny. According to the investigation, the administrator of the channel in question was V. Taysaev, who was described as an expert in the management of *Telegram* channels.²⁴¹

V. Taysaev now appears to be a correspondent for *African Initiative* in Africa, particularly in Mali. Investigations show that he has travelled there several times since the end of 2023, and that he has made various contacts in-country, having met law enforcement officers, influencers and mercenaries from *PMC Wagner*. On 27 December 2023, V. Taysaev posted on his *Facebook* account a photo of himself in Mali, carrying a weapon, alongside an unnamed man in military uniform.²⁴²



V. Taysaev in Mali

²⁴⁰ *Medium*: <https://archive.ph/MXxzp>; *LiveJournal*: <https://archive.is/ENHtY>; *VK*: <https://archive.is/qp9Vd>.

²⁴¹ <https://meduza.io/en/feature/2019/08/11/comrade-major>.

²⁴² <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=7111433122255439&set=a.101266903272131>.

7.2 Appendix 2: List of automated account identified which have disseminated at least one URL from one of the AI-Freak sites

Bradleyacask, Bradleydah, BradleyGak, BradleyJus, Bradleyvok, BradleyWhank, Bradleywoots, Brianbeelo, Brianbup, Brianfum, BrianJax, BrianLed, Brianmab, Briansop, BrianVar, Charlesdrise, CharlesDum, CharlesLeads, CharlesLer, Charlesror, Coreyorink, CoreyRot, CoreyVoips, Ernestcok, ErnestDak, GeraldArept, GeraldBOT, GeraldCaw, Geraldclope, GeraldDor, GeraldJen, GeraldSam, GeraldSap, GeraldStuts, GregoryAmumn, Gregoryfaush, Gregoryjag, GregoryJopsy, Gregoryjuibe, GregoryTap, GregoryTer, GregoryTes, JackieDag, Jackiekal, JackieSeway, Jackievok, MauriceBoarp, MauriceBract, Mauricecoofs, MauriceExelt, Mauricekak, Mauricened, Mauricetom, Mauricetrods, MichaelAgris, Michaelfeess, Michaelheece, Michaeljag, MichaelMalt, MichaelTer, Michaelzerse, NormanDerry, Normanphigh, NormanRes, Normantex, Raymondfoock, RaymondInhiz, RaymondMip, RaymondNeice, RaymondPaups, Raymondwap, Romandaw, RomanFem, RomanFuella, Romanprita, Romantab, Romanvulty, RomanWem, RubenAcamb, RubenAwaks, Rubendoump, Rubenexalk, Rubenjuini, RubenPer, Sammymus, Sammypumma, Stevenamofe, Stevenemuri, Steveneraky, StevenExema, StevenFuh, StevenInina, StevenNoura, Steventrorb, TommieNilet, TommiePlups, Tommiepooms, Tommieraw, Tommievar, Tommievop, TravisBuH, TravisBus, TravisInfic, TravisLesse, TravisPak.



About VIGINUM

Created on 13 July 2021 and attached to the SGDSN (General Secretariat for Defence and National Security), VIGINUM is tasked with protecting France and its interests against foreign digital interference.

The role of this national technical and operational service is to detect and characterise information manipulation that involve foreign actors and aims at harming France and its fundamental interests.

[Service de vigilance et protection contre les ingérences numériques étrangères | SGDSN](#)



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

About FCDO

The UK's Foreign Common Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), the Cyber, Information and Tech Threats Directorate aims to provide insights and analysis on the threat from foreign information manipulation and interference.

[Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office - GOV.UK](#)



About EEAS

The European External Action Service works on analysing and responding to Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference (FIMI) since 2015 in order to protect the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, democratic processes and citizens, as well as partners worldwide.

[The Diplomatic Service of the European Union | EEAS](#)

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