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Russia's Soft Power Strategies in the MENA Region and Africa

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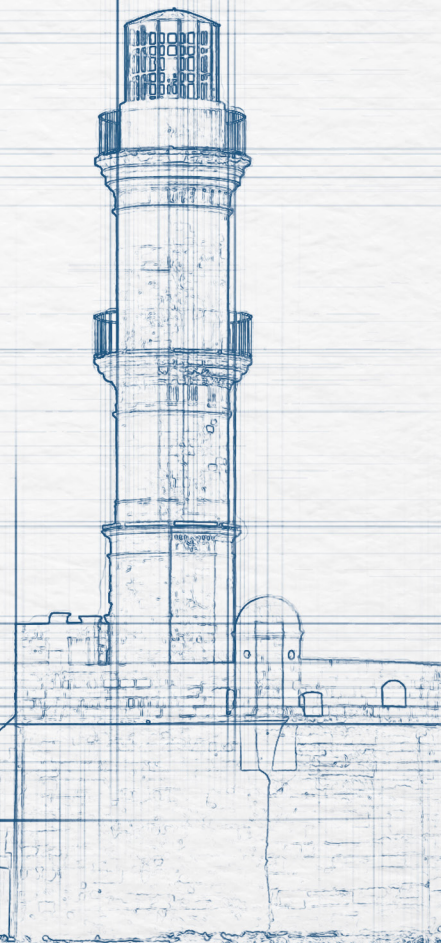


Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Soft Power and Information Tactics in Russia’s Strategic Posture	1
MENA and the Sahel/Horn of Africa in Russia’s Struggle for Influence	2
The Study	4
I. Soft Power in Russia’s Strategy: Lessons from the Syrian Intervention	8
Introduction	8
1. Backlash on the Freedom of Speech and Russian Media	8
2. Influence Strategy in Times of Conflict: The New Rules of War	9
3. Key Elements of the Russian Intervention in Syria	10
4. A Syrian Territory “On Lock”	11
5. A Key-Moment in History: The Reconquest of Aleppo	12
6. The Battle of Aleppo - Setting the Journalistic Frames	13
7. An Example of Counter-Narrative and Fake News Building: The 2018 Douma Chemical Attack	17
Conclusion	20
II. Russia’s Soft Power in Libya: “The Elephant Is Already in the Room”	26
Introduction	26
1. Russia’s Relationship with Libya: A Tale of “Strategic Patience”	27
1.1. 1970-2011: A shaky relationship based on military assistance	27
1.2. Russia in the face of the 2011 uprising: The (relative) cost of neutrality	29
1.3. Libya in turmoil: The benefits of Russia’s wait-and-see strategy	29
2. Libya’s Continued Fragmentation and Instability: An Opportunity for Moscow	31
2.1. The figure of Khalifa Haftar: The best available partner in Libya’s intensifying turmoil	31
2.2. Libya’s continued institutional divisions: The arrival of Russian boots on the ground	32
2.3. The war on Tripoli: Russia’s opportunity to consolidate influence despite military setback	33
3. Moscow’s Textbook Hybrid War: Information Warfare and the Power of Narratives	34
3.1. Information warfare: Undermining UN mediation and influencing elections	34
3.2. The appeal of the concepts of “World Majority” and “Civilizational Proximity”	36
3.3. Russia’s accelerated diplomatic and economic engagement with both sides of the conflict	37
Conclusion	39
III. Russia’s Strategic Narrative in Mali: Enhancing Soft Power via Informative Influence	44
Introduction: Exploring Russia’s Soft Power in Africa	44
1. The Genealogy of Pro-Russia (Social) Media Campaigns in Mali	45
2. Methodology: Unit of Analysis and Data Sources	46
3. Russia’s Strategic Narrative in Mali: A Content Analysis of Afrique Média TV Articles	48
4. Malians’ Perception of Russia’s Strategic Narrative	50
Conclusion	51

IV. Russia’s Soft Power Strategies in the Mena Region and Africa: The Case of Algeria	55
Introduction	55
1. The Discourse on Russia and Algeria: A Shared Strategic Vision, a Close Relationship	56
1.1. Russia’s and Algeria’s strategic postures	56
1.2. The partnership beyond military cooperation	57
1.3. Political support: A blind eye for a blind eye	58
2. From Discourse to Reality: Russia-Algeria Relation in a Snapshot	59
2.1 The historical background	59
2.2. The centrality of the military partnership: Gradually questioned?	60
2.3. A lackluster trade relationship	61
2.4. An ambiguous energy cooperation	61
3. What About the People? Russian Influence in Algeria Through Media, Culture, and Education	62
3.1. The media landscape	62
3.2. The education landscape	64
3.3. The cultural landscape	65
3.4. Tourism: A limited people-to-people connection	65
4. Algerian Public Perceptions of Russia	66
Conclusion	67
V. Russia’s Expertise in the Mena Region: Changes and Continuities	72
Introduction and Findings	72
1. The Landscape of Russia’s Research Institutes on Africa and the Middle East Before and After the 2022 War	73
2. Moscow’s Laboratory of Soft Power Evolving Discourse in the Mena Region	76
3. The “World Majority” as Russia’s Discourse’s Anticolonial Alternative to the West’s “Global South”	77
Russia’s Use of Soft Power in the MENA and Sahel Regions: Key Takeaways from the Case Studies	82
Main Take Aways	82
Policy Responses	83
The Authors	87

Introduction

Luigi Narbone

Moscow's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has pushed Russia's relationship with the West to a breaking point, potentially signaling the collapse of the post-Cold War international order. For the West, this conflict prompted a reassessment of its strategic defense posture in response to the reemergence of territorial threats in Europe and underscored the need to rebuild NATO's conventional capabilities. The war in Ukraine also brought renewed urgency to a long-standing, and largely inconclusive, debate about establishing a European defense. Additionally, the international polarisation that emerged in reaction to the Ukraine war served as a wake-up call for the West, revealing the new realities of a multipolar world and the decline of Western influence.

However, Russia and the West were on a collision course long before the invasion. Since Vladimir Putin came to power in 1999, Russia's primary strategic objective has been to address the humiliation caused by the chaotic collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent turmoil of the 1990s, which Putin has described as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century." Russia has frequently sought to challenge what it perceives as the encroachment of Western institutions and to maintain its sphere of influence, particularly in the former Soviet space. Russian political and military thought, alongside its foreign and security policies, have largely focused on restoring the country's global standing and geopolitical influence, as a means of countering the perceived expansionist ambitions of the U.S. and the West.

Soft Power and Information Tactics in Russia's Strategic Posture

Russia's geopolitical revanchism has been accompanied by the development of new theories on 21st-century warfare, influenced by Russian thinkers' reflections on how the U.S. and the West defeated the Soviet Union during the Cold War. In these reflections, soft power tools and the informational dimension are viewed as crucial instruments that contributed to the West's victory, with their coordinated

use being key to its success. Russian military thinkers are drawing important lessons from this. According to these theorists, political objectives in the modern era can be achieved without resorting to traditional military force. For instance, by using information and disinformation to influence networks of people and organizations, it becomes possible to manipulate social processes and target decision-making from within, thereby weakening or undermining the adversary's political authority. The informational space can be exploited through the coordinated manipulation of elites and public opinion to generate political dissent, separatism, and social unrest. Within this framework, Aleksandr Dugin's theory of net-centric warfare and Igor Panarin's concept of information warfare highlight both the risks and opportunities associated with manipulating and controlling the informational domain¹.

Defensive and offensive aspects of the information struggle play a significant role in Russia's political and military strategies. Defensively, increased control over the domestic traditional and digital media, along with the promotion of specific narratives, has been used to legitimize the regime's actions and silence critical voices. Offensively, information tactics—often referred to as Russia's new generation warfare or hybrid warfare (*gibridnaya voyna*)—have become a central element of Russia's strategic posture. As Luca Rainieri says in his chapter,

Russian authorities have made no mystery of their ambition to leverage informational influence and (social) media campaigns in order to bolster Moscow's soft power, which Joseph Nye famously defined as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment".

Indeed, important references to information tactics are embedded in all major Russian foreign and security policies, including the 2014 military doctrine, the 2015 national security strategy, the 2016 informational security doctrine, and most recently, the strategic orientation report, published in 2023 by Sergei Karaganov and a group of Russian foreign policy experts and institutes, titled [Russia's Policy Towards the World Majority](#).

¹ Fridman, Ofer (2002). *Russian Hybrid Warfare. Resurgence and Politicisation*, Oxford University Press, pp. 75-98.

Written in the aftermath of the Ukraine war, this latest report outlines a new international role for Russia as a fundamental pillar of an emerging global order built on the so-called “civilizational powers” and backed by regional groupings of smaller states (the “World Majority”). This vision presents an alternative to the collapsing Western-led order, with a strong anti-Western and anti-colonial stance. Interestingly, the report emphasizes the importance for Russia of maximizing the use of soft power tools—though the authors caution against using this Western term—to build coalitions with countries in the Global South. It also focuses on constructing and disseminating convincing anti-Western narratives through public diplomacy and media influence. (p. 47)

MENA and the Sahel/Horn of Africa in Russia’s Struggle for Influence

While the core geographic area in the Russia-West confrontation has been Europe—marked by several Russian military interventions in former Soviet countries and by growing friction over NATO expansion—the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel/Horn of Africa regions have also become important theaters for Russia’s revanchist ambitions. By the same token, while the Russophone regions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia have traditionally been the primary focus of Moscow’s soft power efforts, the MENA region and the Sahel/Horn of Africa are emerging as a crucial front in this broader struggle for influence and as a testing ground for Russia’s strategies.

In this context, Elise Daniaud in her chapter refers to the interest that the Arab Spring raised in General Valery Gerasimov, one of the fathers of the Russian new-generation warfare.

The Arab Spring [provides] an holistic framework for understanding Russia’s approach to communication strategies and new-generation warfare [...] In particular, the concept of “information warfare” reveals how new information technology and weaponry can be combined to achieve political objectives by “breaking the coherence of the enemy.” According to General Valery Gerasimov: “It would be easiest of all to say that the events of the ‘Arab Spring’ are not war [...] but maybe the opposite is true—that precisely these events are typical of warfare in the twenty-first century.” (p. 13)

Geopolitical factors also explain Russia’s growing interest in the MENA region and beyond. The widespread instability that followed the Arab uprisings has provided Russia with opportunities to project power across numerous countries. In particular, Moscow’s capacity to become an important player in local crises has increased after its successful military intervention in Syria in 2015. Russia hard power tipped the balance of power in favor of Bashar Al-Assad allowing the regime to have the upperhand in the war. It also secured key Russian strategic objectives, such as control over naval and air bases, making the MENA region and the Mediterranean pivotal to Russia’s geostrategic ambitions.

In the following years, Russia established military footholds in several conflict countries across the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa, mainly through the deployment of the Wagner Group, a private military contractor linked to the Kremlin. This allowed Russia to become an active military player in these theaters while officially denying state-level involvement. Even after the death of Wagner’s founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin, Russia’s projection of hard power continues, with the group morphing into “Africa Corps,” now operating directly under the Russian Ministry of Defense. Russia’s strategies have contributed to the rise of a new multipolar order in the region.

As mentioned by by one of the interviewees quoted by Virginie Collombier et al. in their chapter on Libya:

“Russia entered Libya militarily in 2018. Haftar signed an agreement with the Russian military chief in 2017, and implementation commenced in 2018. They seized control of the Jufra base, featuring an airport with a 4.5 km long runway, likely not built for Libyan needs in the 1980s. In 2018, Russia deployed aircraft and armored vehicles to Libya, establishing five bases with a clear objective aimed at Congo and its resources. Russia’s economy heavily relies on natural resources, and when it observed France’s economic struggles, particularly exacerbated by the pandemic, it seized the opportunity to extend its influence into Congo and French-speaking countries in Western and Central Africa. Utilizing various resources, including drugs and smuggling, Wagner, acting as a front, furthered Russia’s interests. (...) Simultaneously, these bases serve as launch points for advancing toward the northern Mediterranean and facilitating the movement of armed extremists toward Europe.”²² (p. 35)

2 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

Russia's penetration strategies, driven by hard power and the willingness to use force, are key factors in its perceived success across the MENA region and Africa. However, its growing influence also stems from skillful management of soft power and information tools aligned with its strategic objectives. Opportunistic and adaptive, Russia consistently crafts and adjusts strategies to advance its interests, tailoring its approach to fit local contexts. Russia appears particularly capable to design and implement effective strategies to influence and polarize public opinion amidst the fog of (hybrid) war.

Luca Rainieri, in his chapter on Mali, explains that Russia's rising popularity in the country is largely driven by a media narrative framing the Malian military regime as defenders of the nation against non-state armed groups and foreign powers, notably France. In this portrayal, Russia and the Wagner Group are cast as loyal allies aiding Mali in protecting its sovereignty. This narrative taps into deep-rooted anti-colonial sentiments, resonating strongly with Malian historical perspectives and boosting Russia's soft power.

Russia's strategic narrative is successful precisely because it taps into the repertoire of (neo-colonialism and its enduring legacy in Africa (Tull 2021): it "feels true" because it resonates with "deeply culturally embedded, views of history", as Halverson et al. (2011, 13) observed. (p. 55)

By leveraging strategic narratives, Russia has cultivated an image of itself as a strong, reliable partner that respects the sovereignty of its allies while aligning with the interests of local political elites and regimes. It emphasizes its ideological affinity with the masses in the Global South, particularly in opposing the legacies of colonialism and the alleged neo-colonial attitudes of the West. This portrayal stands in stark contrast to the West, often depicted as unreliable, hypocritical, and prone to interference in the internal affairs of its partners, driven by neo-colonial ambitions and self-interest. As Carolina De Stefano states in her chapter

Russian leadership [...] reproduce a traditionally Soviet discourse that aims to portray Russia as an essentially anti-colonialist country in opposition to former Western colonialist countries such as France and the United Kingdom, and this notwithstanding deep ambiguities

of this position scholars have repeatedly stressed, considering Russia's imperial and Soviet history.³ On the other hand, Russia's anticolonial discourse has been fostered and experienced an evolution as a consequence of the Ukraine war, which led to an explicit willingness to reinforce Russia's influence in the MENA region and Africa through, among others, the support of soft power initiatives.⁴ Russian research centers and regional experts have been actively promoting and gradually defined more precisely the contours of this evolving narrative addressed to the MENA region, the African continent, and the non-Western world more in general, which is arguably there to stay. (p. 82)

Russia's strategies are deployed not only in conflict zones but also in relatively stable nations, where the competition is primarily economic and strategic. In these environments, Russia aims to secure, consolidate, or disrupt existing alliances to strengthen its position in the broader contest for influence against the West. In this pursuit, soft power plays a pivotal role, enabling Russia to compete. Moscow has strategically deepened military, diplomatic, and economic ties with several MENA countries, signing key agreements, expanding trade, and increasing arms sales.

However, in the case of more stable countries the effectiveness of Russia's soft power shows clear limitations. The example of Algeria is particularly telling. As mentioned in the chapter by Luigi Narbone et al.

Moscow often describes the relationship between the two nations as a "long friendship that must be cemented." Conversely, Algeria views its strategic relationship with Moscow as a key component of its foreign policy. Algiers remains a strong supporter of Russia's role in the international arena. [...] Both sides frequently highlight their convergent perspectives. (p.58)

But although both countries publicly assert their intention to expand cooperation in areas like foreign policy coordination, trade, investment, education, and cultural exchanges, progress in deepening the relation has been scant. Politically, Algeria carefully balances its ties with Russia through strategic hedging, maintaining strong relations with Europe and the US, as well as pursuing a multi-alignment strategy in the MENA region and Africa.

3 Among many, Selbi Durdıyeva, 'Not in Our Name: Why Russia is Not a Decolonial Ally or the Dark Side of Civilizational Communism and Imperialism', The SAIS Review of International Affairs, 29 May 2023, <https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/not-in-our-name-why-russia-is-not-a-decolonial-ally-or-the-dark-side-of-civilizational-communism-and-imperialism/>.

4 For the analysis of concrete initiatives in the MENA region in this sense and the way they are perceived in the recipient countries, see the other contributions in this e-book.

Moreover, Russia and Algeria have disagreements over regional stability, with Moscow's growing influence in the Sahel causing discomfort in Algeria.

Economically, Algiers is far more focused on building energy partnerships with Europe and attracting Western companies that can provide technology, investment, and aid in diversifying its economy away from hydrocarbons. Moscow avoids publicly criticizing Algeria, as its lukewarm relationship with the Algerian leadership helps counteract Russia's image of international isolation. At the same time, Russia shows little interest or capability in deploying aggressive strategic approaches in Algeria. Perhaps this is because Moscow considers Algiers *acquis*.

The Study

This study examines the soft power dimension of the strategies employed by the Russian Federation over the past decade in its relations with four key countries in the MENA and Sahel regions: Syria, Libya, Mali, and Algeria. These case studies have been selected due to the central role they play in Russia's penetration strategies in the MENA and Sahel regions. The analysis focuses on several soft power tools that Russia seeks to mobilize to strengthen these relationships, with a particular emphasis on its strategic narratives and information tactics. It explores how these tools, narratives and tactics have been tailored to local contexts to serve Moscow's political objectives, and how they resonate in the countries under study.

The objective of the four country studies is to understand if and how soft power has been used as a tool to accompany, justify or maximise the impact of other components of Russia's strategy in the MENA region and Africa, and to analyse its effectiveness both with the local authorities and the populations. Thus the focus is on the tools, levers, and narratives employed by Russia to increase its presence in these countries.

A fifth chapter analyzes the role of Russian elites, focusing on how the expertise in the MENA region and sub-Saharan Africa has been reorganised and the role it has in shaping narratives created for these regions. This chapter also examines the evolution of this policy field in Russia following the Ukrainian war, and how it is supporting the regionalization of Russian foreign policy-making.

Syria

The chapter examines how Russia succeeded in disseminating its narratives about the Syria conflict and its military intervention among both national and international audiences. It also explores the role these narratives played in "information warfare" and in reinforcing Russia's military action on the ground.

By restricting access to foreign journalists, Russian correspondents' coverage of events was widely shared on social media and Russian outlets, eventually reaching international media platforms. The chapter specifically explores social media narratives posted by nine Russian war correspondents and focuses on the mediatization of the Aleppo campaign and two instances of fake news aimed at both national and international audiences.

The chapter concludes that unrestricted access to Syrian territory, combined with considerable freedom of action, made Syria an ideal testing ground for Russia. War correspondents had significant advantages in shaping public perception: during the initial deployment in Aleppo, war correspondents established key frames that persisted over time: the portrayal of a homogenous, barbaric enemy, the reduction of opposition forces to terrorist groups, and Russia's role as an isolated peacekeeper restoring order in chaos. Additional frames later emerged, including the portrayal of a Syrian nation rallying behind its president, the verticality of Russian power, the effectiveness of the Russian military, war as a technical endeavor, and a special connection between Russia and Syria's cultural heritage. The framing of the Aleppo campaign also revealed the deliberate omission of other aspects of the war, such as the complexity of Syrian society, the violent repression of civilians, and the hostility toward Bashar al-Assad.

The ambitious goals of the communication strategy deployed by Russia underscore its central role for the Russian government. The chapter also highlights the inability of other international stakeholders, particularly Western ones, to accurately assess the strategy's impact and to take a decisive stance against Russia's aggression in Syria.

Libya

This chapter explores hard and soft power strategies used by Russia to achieve significant influence in Libya, taking advantage of over a decade of instability and power vacuums. Russia views Libya as key battleground in its global power struggle with the West and the U.S. By solidifying its position in Libya, Russia not only secures a

military foothold on NATO's southern flank, but also creates a strategic gateway to project its influence across Africa and the Sahel.

The study examines the evolution of Russia-Libya relations before and after the 2011 revolution, focusing particularly on the pivotal period of 2017-18 which marked a momentous return of Russia to the North African country. With the signature of military cooperation agreements, Marshal Haftar obtained from Moscow arms, training, and the deployment of mercenaries. The Wagner Group deployed aircraft, armored vehicles, and military personnel, transforming Libya into a hub for Moscow's operations in sub-Saharan Africa. With Wagner's support, Haftar's Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) gained military control over eastern Libya.

In late summer 2019, Russia shifted its strategy by opting for direct military intervention in support of Haftar's offensive against Tripoli. However, Turkey military intervention in support of the UN-recognized government in Tripoli tipped the balance of forces and obliged Haftar's LAAF to retreat south of Tripoli in June 2020. Despite this setback, Russia's influence in Libya remained unaffected. The chapter highlights how by backing Haftar, Russia made its role in Libya's military and political landscape appearing even more central. The conflict consolidated Russia's presence and legitimized its actions, reinforcing its narratives. Russia framed its involvement as a loyal commitment to an ally, presenting itself as a reliable partner without ambiguity or ulterior motives.

This chapter also analyzes Russia's strategies to dominate the information space in Libya. The country is particularly vulnerable to information warfare due to its fragmented social and political landscape, further weakened by a historically suppressed media environment. The divisions among competing governments, tribal affiliations, and shifting armed factions create fertile ground for the spread of disinformation.

Russia's information strategy has demonstrated remarkable efficiency, particularly through its online operations. A September 2019 *Daily Beast* report, along with internal Wagner Group documents, revealed that the group had built a strong online presence targeting Libyan audiences. By March 2019, Wagner had created 12 Facebook pages with specific objectives: supporting Khalifa Haftar, providing news coverage for key Libyan regions, and promoting Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. The content of these pages—patriotic posts and memes featuring Gaddafi—was crafted to evoke nationalist sentiments and push pro-Russian narratives.

Russian operators worked with Libyan consultants to spread disinformation by exploiting local grievances and highlighting contentious issues.

The chapter concludes that Russian pragmatic opportunism allowed it to erode Western influence and build partnerships based on perceived shared grievances against the West. Using both formal and informal means – including private military companies, economic incentives, and disinformation— the Kremlin has steadily positioned itself as a significant player and a credible alternative in the region advancing Russian interests in Libya

Mali

The chapter traces Russia's initial interest in Mali to 2017, a time when the Malian government's efforts against a persistent jihadist insurgency, supported by international forces led by France, were proving largely ineffective. In this context, activists began to praise Russia for its perceived ability to mount decisive counterinsurgencies and support vulnerable regimes against emboldened jihadist organizations, as Moscow had done for Syria's al-Assad against the Islamic State.

Turning to the period leading up to the legislative elections, initially scheduled for late 2018 but repeatedly postponed until spring 2020, the chapter highlights how pro-Russia social media activism intensified. New civil society organizations emerged celebrating Mali's patriotic and martial virtues while advocating for the withdrawal of French and UN troops. On the information front, Facebook and Instagram accounts linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin amassed tens of thousands of followers and exhibited suspicious coordination through nearly simultaneous cross-posting. By 2021, these pages began openly endorsing Wagner Group's security services as an alternative to the French military presence

In late 2021, the junta led by Goita formally requested security cooperation from Russia which responded by sending Wagner Group operatives as "military instructors". Amid growing hostility from the Malian government, Paris decided to withdraw its substantial military presence, and after the invasion of Ukraine, the withdrawal of French and other Western contingents to the UN stabilization mission in Mali (MINUSMA) accelerated. The last French troops officially left Mali in August 2022.

The chapter also analyzes articles posted in the website *Afrique Média TV*, a Cameroon based partner of Russia Today, a Russian state outlet. The analysis reveals a

coherent strategic narrative promoted by Russia in Mali, which includes widespread conspiracy theories. Mali is depicted as confronting two primary categories of foes, or antagonists: non-state armed groups—jihadist terrorists and Tuareg rebels—threatening the country’s sovereignty and security; and a coalition of foreign states and international organizations that threaten the stability of Mali and the broader Sahel region. This coalition is allegedly led by France, with ECOWAS, MINUSMA, the US, and “the West” as supporting actors with the ultimate aim of to perpetuate “colonialism.”

The chapter on Mali is particularly significant, as the country played a crucial role in Russia’s deepening foothold in Africa. Unlike in the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, and Madagascar—where Western reluctance to engage left space for unchecked Russian penetration—Mali posed a different challenge. Russia had to assert its influence in direct opposition to the West’s, and particularly France’s, warnings and interests.

Furthermore, the strong partnership between Mali’s military junta and their Russian allies eventually set a precedent for the broader Sahel region. In 2022 and 2023, both Burkina Faso and Niger experienced military coups, with local supporters waving Russian flags as they celebrated the ousting of French influence. This shift underscored Russia’s growing influence across the region, positioning Moscow as a key player in the evolving political dynamics of the Sahel.

Algeria

The chapter on Algeria explores how Russia’s soft power is employed in a non-conflict country. In the context of escalating geopolitical and geo-economic competition in North Africa Russia’s strategy aims to secure, consolidate, or disrupt strategic alignments to enhance its position relative to the West.

Analyzing Russia-Algeria relations, the chapter emphasizes that military cooperation has historically been the cornerstone of their relationship, with Algeria heavily dependent on Russian military equipment. However, this centrality is increasingly being questioned as the volume of Russian military exports has significantly declined over the past decade and is expected to continue to fall due to the ongoing Russia-Ukraine War.

Additionally, despite the close ties between their political and military elites, Russia is a minor trade partner for Algeria. This lackluster trade relationship is mirrored by an ambiguous energy dynamic as Algeria’s new role as one of the principle gas supplier to Europe is clearly problematic

for Russia. However, Moscow has not opposed Algeria’s efforts to position itself as an alternative supplier of gas to Europe and has portrayed this as a business issue rather than a geopolitical issue.

Russian influence on the Algerian public through media, culture, and education remains minimal. The perception of Russia among Algerians is relatively positive, but this favorable view seems to be influenced more by Algerians’ negative perceptions of the West than by Russian soft power efforts. Algerians’ perceptions of Russia have also been shaped by the post-Hirak government’s portrayal of Moscow as a key partner. However, failed attempt to join the BRICS grouping has not been particularly helpful in bolstering Russia’s image. Algerians’ positive view of Russia are also tempered by an awareness of the political implications of the relationship, as Russia is seen as a strong supporter of the regime.

The chapter concludes that Algeria is not a major focus of Russia’s broader soft power or strategic communication efforts. This finding challenges the hypothesis that Russia would test soft power instruments, narratives, and informational influence in countries where it has developed stronger relationships. Instead, Russia tends to invest more heavily in these areas in contexts where stakes and uncertainties are higher, such as in conflict zones or countries experiencing pronounced geopolitical confrontation with the West. Russian media and strategic narratives have been notably active in regions like Syria, Libya and Mali, where the goal is to counter Western influence and secure strategic advantages.

Algeria’s case illustrates the selective and often limited nature of Russia’s soft power. It also suggests that Russia’s soft power efforts are contingent upon geopolitical stakes and the level of uncertainty in its relations with different countries. Thus, while Algeria maintains a solid relationship with Russia, it does not serve as a primary arena for Russian power projection—at least not yet—highlighting the strategic pragmatism underlying Russia’s foreign policy.

Russia’s Expertise on MENA and Africa

The chapter examines how Russia’s academic and think tank communities focusing on the MENA region and Africa have evolved since the invasion of Ukraine. Many institutions have transitioned into echo chambers for the Kremlin’s official discourse, with influential figures contributing to the development and promotion of strategic narratives that support Russia’s foreign policy objectives.

A significant effort is now dedicated to promoting the concept of the “World Majority.” This term is being increasingly adopted by Russian scholars and think tanks as a substitute for “Global South.” This rebranding highlights Russia’s anti-Western and anti-colonial positions, emphasizing its solidarity with nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The narrative shift aims to foster a collective identity opposing Western dominance, which is portrayed as a ‘minority dominance.’

The chapter also highlights that Institutional changes have broadened the focus on Africa and anti-colonial narratives. The Ukraine conflict has catalyzed an expansion of academic and research projects centered on Africa, reinforcing Russia’s anti-colonial stance. This includes efforts to promote the Russian language and culture and to develop new communication strategies designed to shape local perceptions in African countries. These initiatives are part of a broader strategy to enhance Russia’s soft power.

Finally, the chapter shows that a generational renewal within Russia’s intellectual elite is elevating younger experts to prominent roles. These emerging figures are spearheading new programs that align with the Kremlin’s foreign policy and are tasked with facilitating a cultural shift reminiscent of the changes under Khrushchev and Brezhnev during the Soviet era. This renewal mirrors broader transformations within Russian bureaucracy and research institutions.

Soft Power in Russia's Strategy: Lessons from the Syrian Intervention

Elise Daniaud Oudeh

Introduction

In reaction to the growing influence of Russia in the international arena in the last decade, a significant number of policy reports published by experts of the post-Soviet sphere have been reflecting on the overall strategy behind September 2015 Russian military intervention in Syria⁵. Special attention has been paid to the strategic motivations leading Vladimir Putin to step in the Middle East to back Bashar al-Assad, both in terms of diplomatic and military means, as well as its consequences on international relations in an evolving world order. In particular, the deployment to Syria has been approached as a concrete manifestation of contemporary “coalition-based hybrid war”⁶ succeeding in leading “flexible and limited actions” abroad while restoring the combat capability of the local army, but also in promoting the efficiency of the Russian army by showcasing Russia's latest weapons and testing them⁷.

This chapter aims to develop a complementary approach by addressing the Syrian intervention as a representative case of contemporary soft power through a carefully designed and implemented communication strategy under authoritarian leadership. By investigating the factors that made the Russian discourse efficient towards both national and international audiences, the chapter will focus on the non-military offensive means related to “information warfare” and the virtual presence of Russia in the mediatic space doubling its presence on the Syrian ground.

To do so, the chapter will explore the world of social media narratives. The researcher will analyse a database of 5448 social media posts that she created regarding the presence of 9 Russian war correspondents (“voenkor”) from October 2015 to January 2020 on Russian social media platform Vkontakte. It will focus on the mediatisation of the Aleppo campaign as a turning point of the reconquest of the territory by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), starting under the impetus of the Russian military intervention, as well as take a deeper look into two cases of fake news targeting both national and international audiences.

1. Backlash on the Freedom of Speech and Russian Media

There is a broad consensus on the fact that “the Putin era has not been a good one for the Russian media”⁸. In Russia, the media landscape has taken “a big step backwards in the Putin era”⁹, the latter progressively imposing a strict control on the media sphere as part of a wider process of restriction of civil liberties affecting the political life and the society of the country, as well as the independence of its institutions. In particular, new digital spaces of expression, such as social media, are considered a growing threat since the 2010 presidential elections, leading Putin to “fight back”¹⁰.

5 Sovet Federacij, “Senatory Edinglasno Odobrili Ispol'zovanie Rossijskix Vooruzhenyix Sil Na Territorii Sirii,” Federation Council of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, 30 September 2015, <http://council.gov.ru/events/news/59272/>

6 Mason Clark, “The Russian Military's Lessons Learned in Syria,” ISW's Military Learning & The Future of War Series, (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2021), <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/russian-military%E2%80%99s-lessons-learned-syria>

7 Rossijskaja Gazeta, “Šojgu: V Sirii Provereno Bolee 320 Vidov Rossijskogo Oružija [Šojgu: In Syria, More than 320 Russian Weapons Were Tested],” 14 July 2021, <https://rg.ru/2021/07/14/reg-ufo/shojgu-v-sirii-provereno-bolee-320-vidov-rossijskogo-oruzhiia.html>

8 Jonathan Becker, “Russia and the New Authoritarians,” *Demokratizatsiya The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 22, no. 2 (2014): 191–206.

9 Becker, 2014.

10 Paul Chaisty and Stephen Whitefield, “Putin's Nationalism Problem,” in *Ukraine and Russia. People, Politics, Propaganda and Perspectives*, (Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing), 157–64.

By implementing a full set of laws¹¹ targeting privacy and personal data, improving the internet surveillance software “System of Operative Investigative measure SORM-2”¹² and collecting data about mass preferences¹³, the State is attempting to “assert its sovereignty over national fragments”¹⁴ of the digital space through three axes: “national securitisation, territorialization of information flows, and efforts to structure control of critical Internet resources along national lines”¹⁵. In parallel, active measures¹⁶ are taken by the Russian state to co-opt social media, and “pollute the global information”¹⁷. Synthetic and non-synthetic actors, among them hackers, bloggers and journalists, proactively favour the dissemination of official narratives, rapidly adapting to new narratives in relation with critical political events¹⁸, drowning dissident voices and resorting to logical fallacies, majority illusions, framing news, disinformation and opinion manipulation¹⁹.

Hence, the backlash and censorship affecting all the media sphere does not limit itself to Russian borders. It is inseparable from a long-term vision of what the Russian state should embody, both at national and international levels. The impact of restrictions and propagandist discourses does not limit itself to internal policies, but also shapes communications directed towards the international community. By controlling online spaces, coercing media outlets, and compromising their autonomy, the Russian government hopes to promote a strategic discourse legitimising its actions and its existence as such, while silencing criticisms. This is particularly true at times of political tension, conflict, and war.

2. Influence Strategy in Times of Conflict: The New Rules of War

To understand the role of censorship paired with controlled narratives, key political events such as the 2015 intervention of Syria are paramount. They represent strategic opportunities for the Russian government to improve its legitimacy, prove its competence and convince international stakeholders, therefore justifying an important investment in communication strategy. The objective is multiple: implement a strategic communication inside the war, paired with narratives about the war, to show the strength of Russia and the capacity of Russian leaders – the president in particular – to deal smoothly with “unexpected” episodes of tensions and threats, therefore justifying his continued existence in power and his growing influence in the international arena, while raising serious concerns and fears among other stakeholders.

As highlighted by researchers Lin and Kerr²⁰, the premises of such a political line were already present in conflicts involving Russia with Estonia in 2007, with Georgia in 2008, and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. At that time, media campaigns were central to the “psychological warfare” and “psychological operations” through an official discourse aimed at influencing public opinion of Russian citizens as well as the international community, creating uncertainty towards Russian military operations on the ground. Domestic Russian media “played on emotions and biases”, “emphasising the ‘Russianness’ of the local Crimea population” but also “the role of soldiers as peacekeepers protecting the Russian ethnic-population from the menace of Ukrainian nationalist extremist violence”²¹.

11 One can notably mention the 2016 Federal law No. 374-F3 (Draft Federal Law No. 1039101-6, 2016; Federal Law no. 374-FZ, 2020), the 2 Federal laws of 2019 no. 31-FZ and No.27-FZ “On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection” (Federal Law no. 31-FZ, 2019; Federal Law no. 27-FZ, 2020). The No.28-FZ and No.30-FZ (Amendments to the Federal Law “On Information, Information Technologies and Information Protection,” 2019) have been targeting news outlets and private social media users (Moyakine & Tabachnik, 2021).

12 Such as the Decree No. 743 of 13 July 2014.

13 Seva Gunitsky, “Corrupting the Cyber-Commons: Social Media as a Tool of Autocratic Stability,” *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 1 (2015): 42–54.

14 Ilona Stadnik, “Internet Governance in Russia – Sovereign Basics for Independent Runet,” (paper presented at the TPRC47: The 47th Research Conference on Communication, Information and Internet Policy 2019, American University, Washington, D.C., on 18 July 2019).

15 Ilona Stadnik, “Internet Governance in Russia – Sovereign Basics for Independent Runet,” (paper presented at the TPRC47: The 47th Research Conference on Communication, Information and Internet Policy 2019, American University, Washington, D.C., on 18 July 2019).

16 Steve Abrams, “Beyond Propaganda: Soviet Active Measures in Putin’s Russia,” *Connections* 15, no. 1 (2016): 5–31.

17 Abrams, 2016.

18 Mona Elswah and Philip N Howard, “Anything That Causes Chaos: The Organizational Behavior of Russia Today (RT),” *Journal of Communication* 70, no. 5 (2020): 623–45.

19 Sanda Svetoka, *Social Media as a Tool of Hybrid Warfare* (Riga: NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, 2016).

20 Herbert Lin and Jaclyn Kerr, “On Cyber-Enabled Information Warfare and Information Operations,” in *Oxford Handbook of Cybersecurity* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2019), 29.

21 Lin and Kerr, 2019.

In particular, the “new rules of war” as put forward in an article in 2013 by General Valery Gerasimov²², chief of the general staff of the Russian Armed Forces, in the context of the so-called “Arab spring”, offered a holistic approach to the Russian understanding of communication strategies and new generation warfare in the contemporary media systems. The description of the role of “non-military means” give us precise information regarding the combination of new information technology and weaponry to achieve political goals by “breaking the coherence of the enemy”: “the role of non-military means of achieving political and strategic goals has grown, and, in many cases, they have exceeded the power of force of weapons in their effectiveness”. Gerasimov stresses the power of “new methods of conflict” such as “political, economic, informational, humanitarian, and other non-military measures”, insisting on the role of “new information technology”.

As concluded by political scientist Dmitry Adamsky²³, “it is difficult to overemphasise the role that Russian official doctrine attributes to the defensive and offensive aspects of information struggle in modern conflicts”, which is characterised by a complex combination of both psychological and technological components. The final objective is nothing less than “manipulate the adversary’s picture of reality, misinform it and eventually interfere with the decision-making process of individuals, organisations, governments, and societies to influence their consciousness”²⁴. In particular, Adamsky mentions the role of the Syrian operation, which “has enabled Russian practitioners to further refine a notion of new generation warfare”²⁵ and played the role of a “laboratory” for military theories and concepts tested by trial and error.

3. Key Elements of the Russian Intervention in Syria

To understand the role of the coverage made by Russian war reporters as a gateway to Russia’s new rules of war, one must remember into the “almost ideal-type example of a relationship between a super-power and its regional ally”²⁶.

Since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, Russia logically sided with its long-term Syrian ally, by first focusing on the international diplomatic scene. Therefore, the UN Security council became the mirror of growing opposition between its members²⁷, as more than 18 resolutions were vetoed by Russia and China, forbidding any action towards al-Assad’s government, and condemning any path towards peace. If in parallel, financial and military assistance were also provided to the regime starting 2012, the position of Russia seemed to remain moderate, indirect and hoping for a political transition that Russia could lead, therefore reasserting its growing presence in the international arena while opposing Western liberals²⁸.

In 2015, after four years of conflict, President of Syria Bashar al Assad was unable to secure the territory and to guarantee a military victory of the SAR that would make him win the war²⁹. Iranian support was increasing through the presence of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Palestinian militia Liwa al-Quds, Hezbollah, and other forces loyal to the Islamic Republic, while the opposition forces were reinforcing their positions, and jihadist groups were growing locally. Moreover, the brutality of the SAA strengthened the image of the president as the “enemy” of the Syrian people. Bashar al Assad struggled to have “an army in all corners” and tried to avoid defeat while calling upon international support.

The accumulation of such factors led the Russian government to consider a military intervention at the invitation of

22 General Valery Gerasimov, “Novye Vyzovy Trebujut Pereosmyslenija Form I Sposobov Vedenija Boevyx Dejstvij” [New Challenges Require Rethinking Forms and Methods of Conducting Combat Operations], *Military-Industrial Kurier*, 2013, <https://militairespectator.nl/artikelen/russias-perception-warfare>

23 Dmitry Adamsky, *Cross-Domain Coercion: The Current Russian Art of Strategy* (Paris, France: IFRI Security Studies Center, 2015).

24 Adamsky, 2015.

25 Dmitry Adamsky, “Russian Lessons from the Syrian Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation,” *Security Insights* 47, *Marshall Center*, February 2020.

26 Theodor Tudoroiu, “The Reciprocal Constitutive Features of a Middle Eastern Partnership: The Russian–Syrian Bilateral Relations,” *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 6, no. 2 (2015): 143–52.

27 Franck Petiteville, Manon-Nour Tannous, and Simon Tordjman, “Polarization and Plasticity at the United Nations Over the War in Syria,” in *Crisis of Multilateralism? Challenges and Resilience*, edited by Auriane Guilbaud, Franck Petiteville, and Frédéric Ramel (Paris: Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 17–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-39671-7_2.

28 Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2019), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3180.html.

29 Christopher Kozak, “An Army in All Corners: Assad’s Campaign Strategy in Syria,” *Middle East Security Report* 26 (Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, 2015), <https://www.understandingwar.org/report/army-all-corners-assads-campaign-strategy-syria>.

the Syrian government³⁰, legitimising the presence of Russian troops in terms of international law. While saving its historical ally, Russia could avoid the creation of a new government supported by the West and secure its own national, regional, and international interests.

On 28 September 2015, at the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the UN General Assembly, Vladimir Putin reaffirmed his objectives in a decisive speech, calling for “comprehensive assistance towards the legitimate government of Syria in accordance to the UN charter”³¹ in order to develop a “comprehensive strategy of political stabilisation as well as social and economic recovery of the Middle East”³², adding that Russia decided to provide military assistance to Syria, since “president Assad’s government forces and the Kurdish militia are the only forces really fighting terrorists”. Two days later, the Federation Council voted unanimously in favour of the use of the Russian military air force in Syria to fight “terrorist groups”, leading to the first air strikes across the country³³.

4. A Syrian Territory “On Lock”

The military intervention rapidly changed the situation on the ground, therefore also impacting in depth the media coverage of the ongoing events. In particular, the Russian media started to promote an offensive discourse in line with the pre-existing communication line of the Syrian regime, radically opposed to the narratives of the Syrian opposition.

Such method was made possible by the concomitant restriction of Syrian territory to foreign journalists. In 2013, Robin Vandevoordt, in his article “Covering the Syrian conflict: how Middle East reporters deal with challenging situation”³⁴, already insisted on the fact that “one of the most elementary ways in which political actors in the Middle East attempted to steer media coverage” was by “restricting journalist’ access to parts of their territories”, therefore

preventing them to “see for themselves what is going on” and include “diverging perspectives”. Since the beginning of the war, Western reporters regularly underlined the systematic refusal of press visas imposed by the Syrian authorities, but also the severe risks that covering the situation on the ground involved, as attacks and abductions became common³⁵.

As Iran and Russia remained the faithful allies of Bashar al-Assad, Iranian and Russian journalists could on the contrary benefit from a privileged access to the military operations on the ground. Since the beginning of the Russian intervention, Russian press agencies started covering the Syrian territory increasingly³⁶ through the deployment of war correspondents. As soon as 2015, were notably regularly present journalists working for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *RIA Novosti*, Russia 24, Ren TV, Anna News, and VGTRK (the All-Russia State Television and Radio broadcasting Company) etc. Their reporters were actively describing the situation on the ground, sometimes several times a day, while also sharing more personal analyses on social media.

By sharing posts on their profiles, they covered diverse topics from the army’s daily life, maps of the operations and soldiers’ progression on the ground, weapons, to activities of terrorist groups and foreign actors involved, but also topics related to the Syrian culture, history, and heritage sites. They also adapted and explored new communication channels such as YouTube, social media platforms including *Vkontakte*, the principal Russian social media network, but also Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, as well as encrypted applications offering online chat groups including Telegram, and resort to a broad set of reporting tools: live streaming, short videos, pictures, texts etc.

Since the beginning, their posts raise strong concerns regarding the fundamental ethics and standards of journalism. Firstly, in the aftermath of the recent wars where journalists had to deal with a rapidly evolving mediatic environment and the emergence of social media platforms, the possibility to remain objective, to have access to all the

30 Vladimir Putin and Bashar al-Assad, “Vstreča s Prezidentom Sirii Basharom Asadom [Meeting with the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad],” Moscow, 20 October 2015, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50533>.

31 Vladimir Putin, “President of Russia Vladimir Putin Speech at the 70th Session of the UN Assembly,” Presented at the 70th session of the UNGA, New York, 28 September 2015, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/documents/d-ru/dv/dru_20151015_06/dru_20151015_06en.pdf.

32 Putin, 2015.

33 TASS, “Sovet Federacii Dal Prezidentu RF Soglasie Na Ispol’zovanie Vooruzhenykh Sil RF v Sirii” [The Federation Council Gave the Russian President Consent to the Use of the Russian Armed Forces in Syria], 30 September 2015, <https://tass.ru/politika/2302922>.

34 Robin Vandevoordt, “Covering the Syrian Conflict: How Middle East Reporters Deal with Challenging Situations,” *Media, War & Conflict* 9, no. 3 (2016): 306–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17506352166480>

35 Reporters Without Borders, “Journalism in Syria, Impossible Job?” November 2013, <https://rsf.org/en/journalism-syria-impossible-job>

36 The Moscow Times, “‘Crazy Abkhaz’ Journalists Cover Syria Frontline,” 12 March 2013, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/03/12/crazy-abkhaz-journalists-cover-syria-frontline-a22325>

necessary information, to be able to share it rapidly and to keep a distance towards the ongoing events on the ground, the ideologies of the involved parties and the stakes of the war, has been considered unrealistic. Most importantly, in the case of Russian war reporters, their work has been deeply affected by Vladimir Putin's progressive grip on freedom of speech and independent media, compromising and co-opting mainstream outlets, therefore leaving little space for independent thinking.

When taking a closer look at the database, additional elements are catching the attention of the reader. The war reporters are often dressed as civilians or as military staff, not wearing their press jackets. They seem to be embedded to the military unit that they are following and to have strong links with the army. They showcase themselves repeatedly carrying and testing weapons. Moreover, their activities on the social media platform *Vkontakte* blur the lines between professional work, citizen journalism and simple citizen testimony³⁷. Indeed, the journalists also post during their breaks, and share personal moments of their daily lives, such as their hikes, their stays in resorts on the seashore, their night activities in Damascus etc. The information is not only personalised as the reporters emotionally bond with their audiences, but also aestheticised through beautiful pictures of Syria, contrasting with the rumbles of the war.

Finally, if war correspondents have different profiles, their close ties with the Kremlin are regularly highlighted and rewarded. In the context of their coverage of the war in Ukraine, three of them got sanctioned in spring 2022 by the UK and Australia for their pro-Kremlin stance³⁸: Evgeny Poddubny, Alexander Kots, and Dmitry Steshin. It is also important to note that their commitment is encouraged by the Russian state itself: Alexander Kots, Dmitry Steshin and Leonid Kit received the medal "participant of the military operation in Syria" by the Russian ministry of defence, while Evgeny Poddubny won the competition in the nomination "for military distinction"³⁹. Finally, the latter was nominated "authorised representative of presidential candidate Vladimir Putin" to ensure his re-election in 2018. He received in 2022 a governmental prize in the field of mass media for "providing information coverage of military operations and

measures to restore peaceful life during a special military operation" and is currently a member of the "working group special military operation" established by Vladimir Putin and focused on Ukraine⁴⁰.

5. A Key-Moment in History: The Reconquest of Aleppo

As the Russian army intervened in Syria, the efforts were soon focused on the city of Aleppo where war correspondents were deployed. The reconquest of Aleppo represented a key moment to regain control, both for Syria and Russia, on military and communication levels. Since 2011, the city had remained relatively calm even while having peaceful protests. In July 2012, the population witnessed the beginning of "the battle of Aleppo" as the governmental forces launched an offensive to eliminate rebel fighters who entered the city, progressively transforming the city centre in a scene of clashes between the SAR and the Free Syrian Army, a variety of militia groups including radical Islamist groups, foreign fighters, Kurdish groups, the Syrian Democratic Forces, *Hezbollah*, Iranian militias, and the Russian army in 2016, leading to combat in a city sliced in two. From July 2016, the situation reached its peak as Eastern Aleppo faced a siege that put "250.000 people in Eastern Aleppo at the mercy of Russia and the regime" according to the "Aleppo project" by the Shattuck Center on Conflict, Negotiation and Recovery⁴¹.

As the Russian intervention was just starting, Russia had to discourage its adversaries by conveying an image of its forces being omnipresent, able to efficiently "put order in the local chaos" and smoothly supporting its ally. Second, in the battle of Aleppo, the Russian army and its air force got the opportunity to be depicted as a central actor: by disrupting the course of events and stabilising the country in good time, Russia could fulfil its objective and be perceived as a respectable power able to counter other important international actors such as the USA, therefore recovering a lost prestige. Finally, a successful intervention would convey a positive image of Vladimir Putin and the executive power structures, therefore legitimising his leadership.

37 Meryl Alper, "War on Instagram: Framing Conflict Photojournalism with Mobile Photography Apps," *New Media & Society* 16, no. 8, (2014): 1233–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813504265>.

38 Government of the United Kingdom, "Russia Cut off from UK Services," Press release, 5 April 2022, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/russia-cut-off-from-uk-services>; and Interfax, "Australia Imposes Additional Restrictions on Russian Journalists, Civil Servants," 18 May 2022, <https://interfax.com/newsroom/top-stories/79233/>

39 TASS, "Shoigu Nagradil Medaljami Žurnalistov Za Osveščenie Operacii v Sirii" [Shoigu Awarded Medals to Journalists for Covering the Operation in Syria], 17 April 2016, <https://tass.ru/obschestvo/3213554>.

40 Open Sanctions, "Evgeniy Evgenievich PODDUBNY," <https://www.opensanctions.org/entities/O4367499/>.

41 The Aleppo Project, "Eastern Aleppo under Siege," July 2016, <https://www.thealeppoproject.com/july-2016/>.

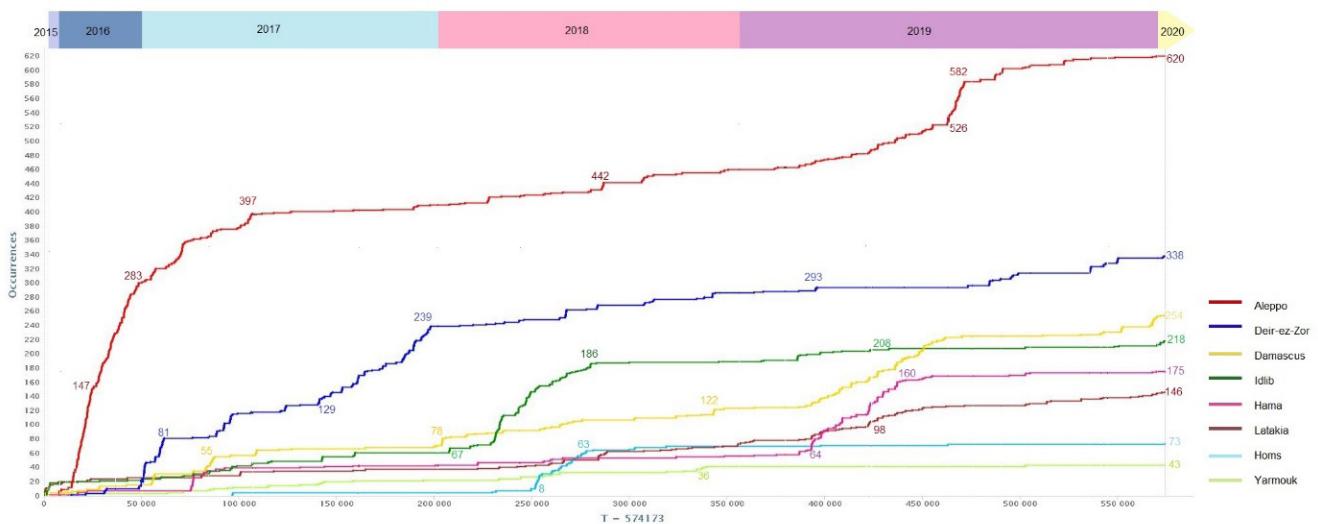
To support those objectives, the first-hand content that Russian journalists embedded with the SAR and the militias faithful to al-Assad – the Palestinian brigade Liwa al-Quds in particular – were posting was then shared in hundreds of groups describing themselves as discussing the daily news of the operations on site⁴². These groups were extremely productive, and the number of videos and photos shared on them is difficult to collect and analyse. All the content was in Russian language and was mostly reposted from other pages.

The exclusivity that they benefited from, paired with the internal control on mainstream media, gave them the opportunity to “set the frame” that will be adopted to cover the conflict: as defined by political communication specialist Robert Entman, “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”⁴³.

6. The Battle of Aleppo - Setting the Journalistic Frames

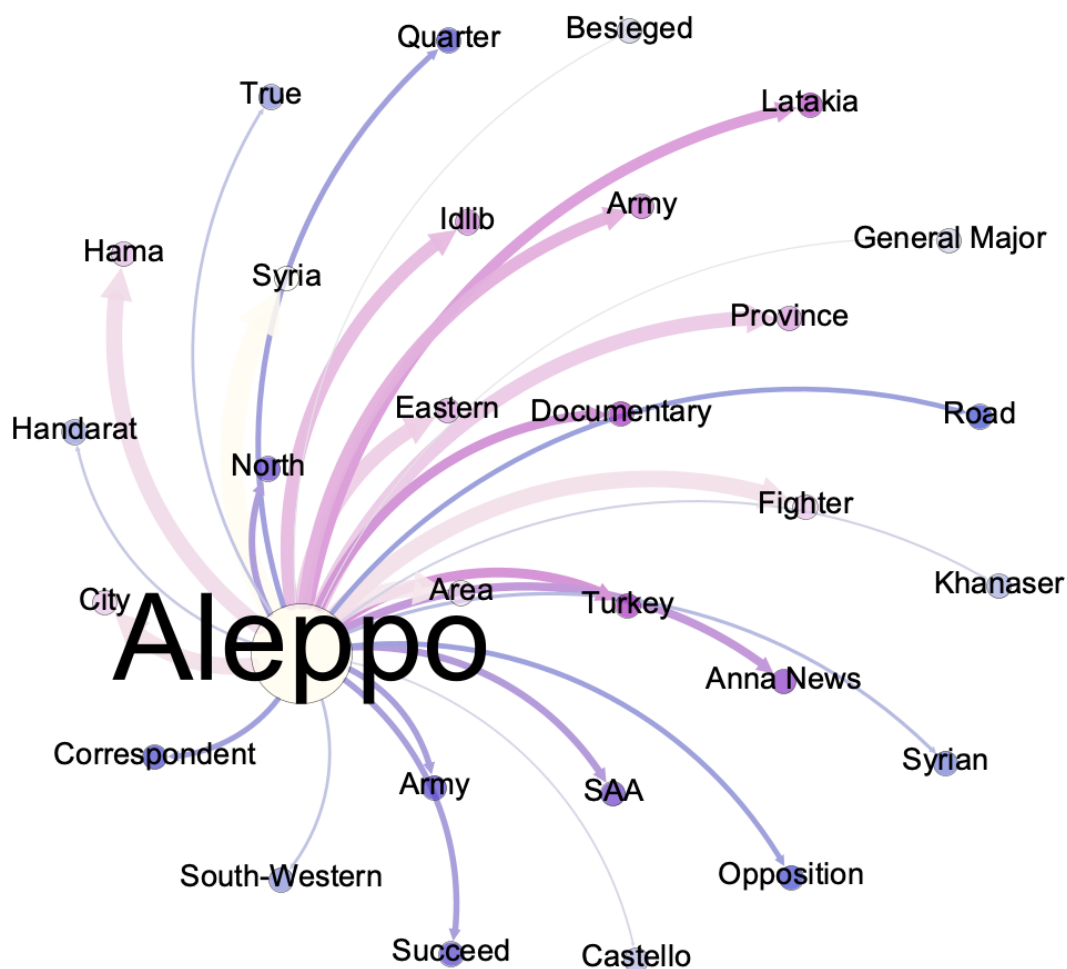
To get a better understanding of the framed social media narratives offered to *Vkontakte* users, linguistic textometry research software “TXM”⁴⁴ is of significant help. TXM was designed to analyse wide corpuses of raw text data, transforming it into narrative information. The open-source programme analyses frequencies, co-frequencies, word progressions and linguistic statistics. Textometry therefore constitutes an entry point to any broad set of semiotic content and can help us assess the depiction of Aleppo over the course of several months⁴⁵.

First, according to the “occurrences” function, Aleppo is mentioned 620 times in the corpus, twice as much as Deir-ez-Zor (338), and three times more than capital city Damascus (254). Second, the cumulative progression of occurrences of the 8 most frequently named cities highlights strong fixation on “Aleppo” only, starting at the beginning of 2016, and peaking in the middle of 2017, before stabilising its progression into a plateau with a more modest peak in the middle of 2019. As shown by the following figure, at the end of 2016, Aleppo has already been mentioned close to 300 times, reaching 397 times in the second semester of 2017, corresponding to 65% of mentions in the total corpus.



Visual 1: co-occurrences of the 8 most frequently named cities in Syria by TXM software.

- 42 It is for example the case on *Vkontakte* of “Syrian tube” (72081 members), “Syria NovoRussia Russia” (9069 members), “Syria defence” (83.200 members), “soldiersstories” (9100 members), “Russian Army” (40.000 followers), “igil.info” (24.181 members), “War_News today” (74.500 members), “Anti_Daesh” (35.200 members), “Igil_info” (24.000 members), “Syria Assad” (14.000 members) etc.
- 43 Robert M. Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.
- 44 TXM is an open-source platform supporting text/corpus analysis developed by the Ecole Normale Supérieure of Lyon.
- 45 Christine Barats, Jean-Marc Leblanc, and Pierre Fiala, “Approches textométriques du web : corpus et outils,” in *Manuel d’analyse du web en sciences humaines et sociales* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2013), 99–124.



Visual 2: co-occurrences of lemmas gravitating around “Aleppo”

The word progression follows the events on site, and the last months of the Aleppo resistance as the regime recapturing progressively towns and villages around Aleppo, while al-Assad vowed to “liberate every inch of Syria” on the 7 June 2016⁴⁶, before imposing a siege to the Eastern population of the city and launching a series of offensives from June to September, ending on 13 December 2016 with the first ceasefire.

Exploring co-occurrences allows the researcher to delve into the main topics gravitating around “Aleppo”. The following graph is a visual representation of the network of words gravitating around each mention of the city, built with the help of visualisation software Gephi⁴⁷. It reveals a pragmatic description of the daily events on site, the progression, and backlashes that the SAA and the Russian army faced, as well as major events concerning the reconquest of the city in a precise and technical way.

Precise geographic references related to Aleppo are mentioned, such as Handarat camp, the South-Western front, the Khanaser offensive, the Castello Road, the Aleppo province, and the besieged city. A manual exploration of the posts reveals the mention of 37 areas of Aleppo as well as the description in detail of the recapture of known strategic locations located in the South-East, such as al Hamdaniyeh, Ramouseh artillery base during the campaigns of summer 2016, the Eastern districts, roads like Castello Road and the road leading south. Also mentioned is the strategic building al-Kindi hospital in Northern Aleppo, recaptured in October along with Northern Handarat camp by the SAA after it had announced an operation aiming at reconquering the whole city, advancing simultaneously in the North and in the centre. This progress depended on other interventions in Aleppo’s outskirts, in towns including Khanaser, al-Hadher, and Ithriyah. This level of precision in the terminology,

46 Bashar al-Assad, “Assad Vows to ‘liberate Every Inch’ of Syria,” Damascus, 6 July 2016, <https://apnews.com/general-news-07068292e4954a61b850df121689c28>

47 Gephi is an open-source software for graph and network analysis. It facilitates the display of large networks in real-time.

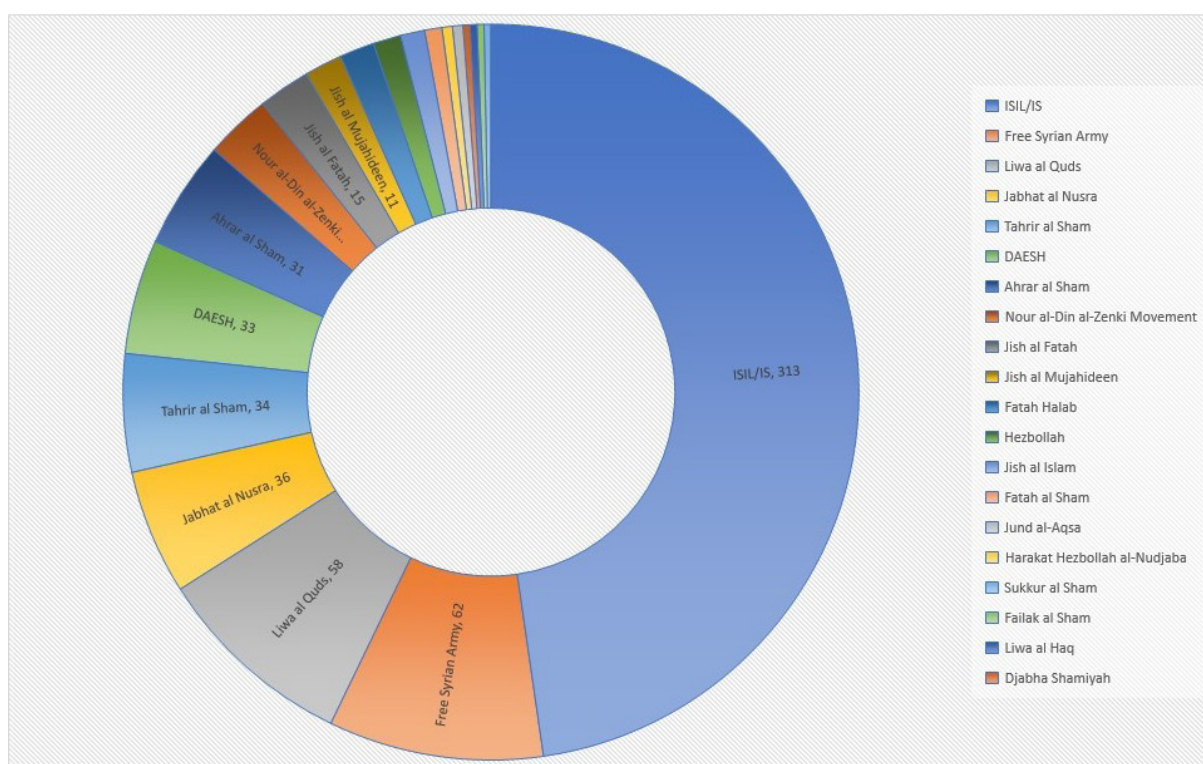
coupled with spatiotemporal details, aims to legitimise the information, and convince the readers that journalists are showing the “whole truth” in real time to their audiences, who have a “right to know”⁴⁸.

By focusing on the recapture of the city, the reader gets a good overview of certain recurring frames later “infused” in the whole corpus. To apprehend them, the work of Nolwenn Lorenzi Bailly on discourse circulation, radicality discourse and hate speech can be extended as an efficient reading grid⁴⁹. First, the starting point for any war and military intervention to take place is the presence of an identifiable enemy which nurtures a symbiotic relation with the unavoidable necessity of a physical confrontation, a discursive construction meticulously explored by Lorenzi Bailly. In Aleppo, Russian journalists discover this “enemy” for the first time, yet can immediately give extremely precise information and terminology regarding its name, referring in detail to local militias. Over the corpus, not less than 20 of them including Jaish al-Fatah, Jaish al-Islam, Jaish al-Mujahideen, ISIL, Nour al-Din al-Zenki Movement, Jabhat

al-Nusra, the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat al-Shamayah, Jund al-Aqsa, Liwa al-Haq are mentioned, along with “various Free Syrian Army units sponsored by Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, the three main promoters of the opposition in the Middle East”⁵⁰.

If fighters are described as extremists, the expressions “moderate Syrian opposition” and “moderate terrorists” are introduced as sarcastic reference to the US strategy backing the rebels that are here described as extremely violent, reinforcing the systematic erasure of the original peaceful and grass-rooted Syrian uprising and of the civilians.

While Russian journalists do refer to precise groups, their names are however used with surprising flexibility. The terms “fighters”, “terrorists”, “jihadists” and “the opposition” are porous and interchangeable in the same post, showing an “ideological positioning”⁵¹ aiming to depict a homogenous enemy, and therefore not reflecting the reality on site. In the spirit of the narratives defended by the Syrian regime since 2011, there is only one enemy, terrorism, representing a minority of the population constituted of “germs, outlaws



Visual 3: militias and armed groups mentioned by the war correspondents, 2015-2020

48 Larry Gross et al. (eds.), *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film, and Television* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).
 49 Nolwenn Lorenzi Bailli, “Discourse Circulation: ‘Naming the Unnameable and Proposing a Framework to Understand It,’” PRACTICIES (Partnership Against Violent Radicalization in Cities), August 2020, <https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/documents/downloadPublic?documentIds=080166e5beebd029&appId=PPGMS>
 50 Mr. Grin, Vkontakte, 25 January 2017.
 51 Lorenzi Bailli, 2020.

and extremists⁵², holding the “civilised”⁵³ Syrian people hostage since the beginning of the “crisis” and conspiring to destroy the Syrian nation⁵⁴. In reaction, the goal is therefore clear: Aleppo must be cleared from terrorists, and the war must be won, to guarantee a better future.

Post after post, the journalists are discursively depicting a barbaric enemy, engaging in inhumane acts towards civilians and in heavy destruction. As explained on 1 October 2016, “the militants do not take anything into account, especially not the lives and destinies of the population of Aleppo⁵⁵”. In another post, one can read: “you call the opposition in Syria moderate? Moderately shelling temples! In Aleppo alone, 300 mosques were bombed. And how many people they destroyed, how many heads were cut off, how many were quartered? There are no moderates here. They’re beasts⁵⁶.”

Violent descriptions are paired with graphic content which reflect three objectives. First, journalists are reinforcing their quest for legitimacy: unlike the international community “sugar-coating” the brutality of reality without really showing the truth, they express themselves “honestly”. By using sharp vocabulary and committing to a simple writing style, they are faithfully depicting the violent reality. Second, the state of barbarity characterising the enemy justifies the use of ultra-violence as the only solution to limit the devastating impact of terrorism, which has no moral limits. This sustains the moral discourse: “Good should triumph over Evil, which should perish”. As written by one of the correspondents, “war is not just about success. It’s a loss. There are victims. Our adversaries in Syria are bastards, but not idiots or wimps. [...] Moderate terrorists and immoderate terrorists will be buried in the same pit. The victory will be ours. Eternal memory and glory for those who died for the better future of humanity⁵⁷”. Third, “creating the enemy means authorising oneself to wear the mask of the hero⁵⁸”. Russia can therefore incarnate the civilisation resisting barbarity and terrorism and saving Syria as the peacebuilding character of its military intervention is frequently underlined.

Finally, the situation on the ground allows for extrapolation, feeding an analysis of international relations: no one witnesses the “heroism” of the Syrian and Russian armies but the journalists. Worse, Russia is being unjustly isolated in the international arena, an observation which shocks and angers the war reporters who see the events with their own eyes. Russia is described as the only state which has not lost the moral compass, and which is unjustly blamed for its legitimate action in Syria. As explained by Plets, “depicting Russia as an encircled fortress in a hostile landscape” can be linked back to the USSR and the Russian empire, “to bolster national cohesion and obfuscate deeply rooted socioeconomic and ethnic problems⁵⁹”. In that same logic, an imperial West aims to sabotage the work of Russian forces by trying to delegitimise Russia’s fight against terrorism, lying about the reality, and manipulating Western audiences.

Therefore, the identification and definition of an enemy is the first step necessary to the further goals of coverage of the Russian intervention. By doing so, Russian war correspondents can develop further frames favouring a pro-Assad reading of the ongoing events. They include, in particular, the depiction of a homogeneous Syrian people supporting Bashar al-Assad, the verticality of the Russian power, the efficiency of the Russian military apparatus, and war as a technicality, as well as the personal connection between the Syrian cultural heritage and Russia⁶⁰, through Orientalist, pan-Orthodox and neo-imperialist prisms.

The promotion of specific frames also supports the erasure of other aspects of the war. The complexity of Syrian society is not described, as well as the violent repression and the systemic suffering of the population and the generalised hostility towards Bashar al-Assad. Finally, a sectarian reading of the conflict internalised and put forward by the Syrian regime as a strategic tool because of its relevance to the West, as described by Yassin Kassab analysing the

52 Aljazeera Mubasher, “Speech of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad” [in Arabic], YouTube, 20 June 2011, https://youtu.be/yhLnc_OiQVO

53 Syrian Ministry of Local Administration and Environment, “President Assad to the new government: The citizen is the compass” [in Arabic], Press statement, 18 April 2011, <https://bit.ly/3XZOJE5>.

54 Nura Ibold, “Infiltrators among Us. The Mundasīn in the Syrian Revolution.” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 15, no. 4 (2022): 414–26; and Eylaf Bader Eddin, *Translating the Language of the Syrian Revolution (2011/12)* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023).

55 Mr. Grin, Vkontakte, 1 October 2016.

56 Leonid Kit, Vkontakte, 10 August 2016.

57 Me. Grin, Vkontakte, 1 August 2016.

58 Lorenzi Bailli, 2020.

59 Gertjan Plets, “Violins and Trowels for Palmyra,” *Anthropology today* 33, no. 4 (2017): 18–22, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8322.12362>

60 Russia beyond the Headlines, “Archeologist: “for Russia, Syria’s Cultural Heritage Is Personal,” 16 October 2016, https://www.rbth.com/international/2016/10/05/archeologist-for-russia-syrias-cultural-heritage-is-personal_636093 ; and Timur Karmov, “Fenomen Pal’miry v Obchtchestvennom Soznanii Rossii: Istorija I Sovremennost’” [The Phenomenon of Palmyra in the Public Consciousness of Russia: History and Modernity], *Russian Colonial Studies* 1, no. 5 (2015): 165–80.

writings of Yassin al-Haj Saleh⁶¹, is also amplified by the Russian war correspondents, reducing the war in Syria to a framework based on religious communities, overshadowing the expectations of the Syrian people.

7. An Example of Counter-Narrative and Fake News Building: The 2018 Douma Chemical Attack

As narrative frames have progressively developed over the years, key events of the war receive particular attention in the overall communication strategy of Russia. It is notably the case of the recurring chemical attacks. The 2018 chemical attack on the city of Douma, in the suburbs of Damascus, constitutes a clear case of discursive hijacking spreading simultaneously at different levels.

Despite being considered as a “red line” by Barack Obama in 2012, the use of chemical weapons has been central to the Syrian war⁶². Their existence, in breach of international law, was regularly denounced and reported by Syrian civilians, while denied by the Syrian regime and its allies. The UNSC resolution 2118 of 27 September 2013 condemned “any use of chemical weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic, in particular the attack on 21 August 2013, in violation of international law”⁶³, leading to special collaboration between the UN and the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. The Sarin attack of Ghouta on 21 August 2013 and the Sarin attack of Khan Kheikhoun on 4 April 2017 respectively killed 281 and 89 people, and were confirmed by the UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Syrian Arab Republic and the OPCW’s Fact Finding mission (FFM)⁶⁴.

One year later, the 2018 chemical attack which took place in Douma, in the Eastern Ghouta, constituted a clear case of the “up-bottom-up” strategy of diffusion of counter-narratives implemented from Syria. On 7 April 2018, social media posts composed of pictures and videos as well as reports in the press began to highlight two alleged chemical attacks taking place in Douma, leading to the death of 41 civilians, including 12 children⁶⁵. Due to the symptoms experienced by the victims, the use of chlorine and sarin gases were suspected. Images of children being treated in a hospital, together with those of corpses wrapped in shrouds and lined up on the ground, received significant coverage in the West. The suspicion of an illegal use of chemical weapons called for the rapid deployment of a fact-finding mission by the OPCW, which could not enter the site before 21 April as it was attacked while trying to reach the scene⁶⁶. The FFM team “conducted its first visit to one of the alleged sites of interest” and “deployed four additional times to other sites of interest over the following 10 days” as survivors, eyewitnesses and paramedics shared their testimonies⁶⁷. Syria and its Russian ally “fought back”, denying the use of any toxic gas.

In an “up-bottom-up” movement, the Russian government developed counter-narratives implanted on the ground by the Russian war correspondents, which were then diffused at different communication levels: Russian national press, international press, diplomats, and political representatives. The discursive counter-offensive started on 18 April 2018, as war correspondents Poddubny and Kots met with “Hassan Diab”, a child showing physical similarities with a victim appearing in the images of the chemical attack. Diab revealed having been forced to act as a victim on that day. The news was shared on Vkontakte, Facebook, and Instagram, along with pictures of the correspondents posing with the healthy boy⁶⁸.

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- 61 Robin Yassin-Kassab, “Yassin Al-Haj Saleh on the Syrian Majority,” *Pulse Media*, 21 October 2016, <https://pulsemedia.org/2016/10/21/yassin-al-haj-saleh-on-the-syrian-majority/>
- 62 Wendy Pearlman, “Syrian Views on Obama’s Red Line: The Ethical Case for Strikes against Assad,” *Ethics & International Affairs* 34, no. 2 (2020): 189–200; and Arms Control Association, “Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012–2022,” October 2023, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/timeline-syrian-chemical-weapons-activity-2012-2022>
- 63 UNSC, Resolution 2118 (2013), 27 September 2013, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_res_2118.pdf
- 64 OPCW, “OPCW Fact-Finding Mission Confirms Use of Chemical Weapons in Khan Shaykhun on 4 April 2017,” 30 June 2017; and UN Mission to Investigate Allegations of the Use and of Chemical Weapons in the S.A.R., “Report on Allegations of the Use of Chemical Weapons in the Ghouta Area of Damascus on 21 August 2013,” A/67/997 S/2013/553, 2013, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/756814?v=pdf>
- 65 SNHR, “Additional Evidence and Investigations Prove That the Syrian Regime Was Probably Implicated in Attacking Douma City Using Chemical Weapons,” 11 May 2018, https://snhr.org/wp-content/pdf/english/Additional_Evidences_and_Investigations_Prove_that_the_Syrian_Regime_en.pdf
- 66 OPCW, “Interim Report of the OPCW Fact-Finding Mission in Syria Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, Syrian Arab Republic, on 7 April 2018,” S/1645/2018, 2018, https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/S_series/2018/en/s-1645-2018_e_.pdf
- 67 SNHR, 2018.
- 68 See for example: Evgeny Poddubny, “In return for playing a victim in #WhiteHelmets propaganda video 11 year old #HassanDiab got some badly needed food a few dates, rice, and a cookie He is alive and well and sends his greetings to everyone” [in Russian], Instagram, 18 April 2018, <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bht2xhwHTKt/>



Visual 5: 18 April 2018, *Vkontakte* account of Evgeny Poddubny. The picture received 1139 likes.

The news was then widely covered by Russian press outlets in the next two days, including an interview of Evgeny Poddubny on Russia 24, where the war correspondent gave the following testimony, underlining that the attack was staged by the White helmets: “We met our boy, his condition was wonderful, Hasan Diab did not experience any health problems. [...] He said that he was at home, heard shouts on the street that he had to run to the hospital, went there, was told that he had to pour water on him and imitate a first aid operation. He then laid down on a bunk bed and was given dates, sweets, and biscuits.”⁶⁹

A similar interview was also conducted by Aleksander Kots for *Komsomolskaya Pravda*⁷⁰. The interviews were then

covered by central Russian news agencies RIA Novosti⁷¹ and media outlets including, RT, Gazeta.ru, Rossiskaya Gazeta, News.ru, Izvestia, Vesti, Lenta etc. The news also reached foreign platforms in Russian such as Sputnik Kazakhstan⁷², Sputnik Lithuania, Sputnik Abkhazia, Sputnik Moldova, Baltnews, as well as Sputnik World, RT in English, and RT in Arabic, where the child was filmed again in the Douma hospital and asked to show what happened on site. The article by Vesti called “The story of the Syrian boy from the video about the chemical attack did not interest anyone in the West”⁷³ was reposted on 23 April by Poddubny, under the title “Everything you need to know about Western media. It’s simply indecent.”⁷⁴

69 Evgeny Poddubny, “Imitacija ximataki Xasan Diab rasskazal svoju istoriju [Staged chemical attack : Hassan Diab told his story],” *Rossija 24*, 26 April 2018, <https://smotrim.ru/video/2110926>

70 Alexandr Koc, “Bylo Xolodno i Strašno”: Geroi Videos”emki o Posledstvijax “ximataki” v Sirii Rasskazali “Komsomols’koj Pravde”, Što Na Samom Dele Proisxodilo v Bol’nice Goroda Duma,” *Komsomol’skaja Pravda*, 18 April 2018, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26821.4/3857756/>.

71 See the website: <https://ria.ru/20180420/1519015912.html>

72 See the website: <https://ru.sputnik.kz/20180420/himicheskaya-ataka-video-syria-5352700.html>

73 See the website: <https://www.vesti.ru/article/1455288>

74 Evgeny Poddubny, “Everything you need to know about Western media. It’s simply indecent.” [in Russian], *Vkontakte*, 23 April 2018.

The counter-narrative strategy then reached the diplomatic and political levels, as the video of Hassan Diab was shared by the Twitter account of the Russian mission to the UN on 19 April (@RussiaUN 2018)⁷⁵. On 20 April, Russian ambassador to Britain Alexander Yakovenko mentioned the story during a press conference held at his residence in London and played the video of Hassan Diab with war correspondent Poddubny⁷⁶. The ambassador reiterated that the attack was staged. 6 days later, Russia decided to hold an “information” meeting at the headquarters of the OPCW in the Hague on 26 April 2018, boycotted by 17 OPCW members, in presence of Syrian “witnesses” including Hassan Diab and his father Omar.

In a joint statement, the boycotting members explained that “Russia is trying to create the false impression that the OPCW has convened this meeting at Russia’s request⁷⁷. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Director General of the OPCW has made a clear point of distancing himself from this event. He informed Russia that such a meeting, in which “witnesses” will claim to have been hired to simulate a chemical weapons attack, runs against the work currently being carried out in Syria by OPCW investigators⁷⁸. At this occasion, Russia’s permanent representative to the OPCW Alexander Shulgin denounced the fact that “the media alleged that the Syrian authorities had used chemical weapons against their own people. But for us it was clear from the beginning that it was a confirmation of, yet another sinister plan masterminded by the enemies of the legitimate government of the SAR.”⁷⁹ This press conference received significant coverage from the Western press including the BBC⁸⁰, Sky News, The Times, The Intercept, The Mirror, The Sun, Euronews, ABC, but also Arabic-speaking channel

Al Jazeera⁸¹, Al Arabi Al Jdid, Al Arabiya, Al Quds and pro-Assad channels including the Syrian Arab National Agency, Al Mayadeen (Lebanon), Al Alam (Iran), Al Manar (Lebanon), CGTN (China), Al Watan (Oman).

On 14 February 2019, journalist Sacha Kots relaunched the campaign with a link to his new article for news outlet *Komsomolskaya Pravda* “BBC admitted: Filming the aftermath of the chemical attack in the Douma was staged”⁸² on VK⁸³ and Twitter⁸⁴, with the following comment: “The BBC admitted: Filming the consequences of the chemical attack in Douma in April last year was staged. The investigation took them six months. And I have exactly one question. What exactly have they been doing all these six months? Why did it take so much time if all the evidence of an obvious staging could have been obtained in the very first days? We got them; together with colleagues from Russia 24, we were the first to find the boy who appeared in the footage of the “rescuers” The very same day, the Russian embassy in the UK also shared such news, which was denied by a BBC spokesperson to Sputnik⁸⁵.

On March 1st, 2019, the OPCW published its final report stating that “the evaluation and analysis of all the information gathered by the FFM provided reasonable grounds that the use of a toxic chemical as a weapon has taken place on 7 April 2018”⁸⁶. The Russian embassy in the Netherlands commented immediately that “In spite of all the evidence presented by Russia, Syria, and even British journalists that the Douma incident is no more than “White helmets” staged provocation, Technical Secretariat of OPCW states in today’s report that chlorine was used in Douma as a chemical weapon.” The latest report led Russia to try to block the budget of the OPCW in Autumn 2019.⁸⁷

75 Russia at the United Nations, “#BREAKING 11-year-old #Syrian boy Hassan Diab who was showed in the video on the alleged chemical attack in #Douma witnesses that everything was staged by #WhiteHelmets.” Twitter, 19 April 2018, <https://twitter.com/RussiaUN/status/986761245666750471>

76 CCTV, “Video about Syrian Boy Victim of ‘Chemical Attack’ is Fake: Russian Ambassador,” YouTube, 21 April 2018, <https://youtu.be/Kpv0K90t4ll>

77 French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, *Joint Statement by France and 16 other member countries of OPCW*, 26 April 2018, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/news/article/syria-chemical-attacks-in-douma-7-april-joint-statement-by-france-and-16-other>

78 French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018.

79 Alexander Shulgin, “Opening Remarks by Russia’s Permanent Representative to the OPCW Following a Briefing at the OPCW with Residents of Douma (SAR),” The Hague, 26 April 2018.

80 See for example BBC’s coverage: BBC, “Russia says its witnesses discredit alleged chemical attack in Syria,” 26 April 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-43912739>.

81 See for example Al Jazeera’s coverage: Al Jazeera, “Report: Russian TV fabricates accusations against opposition of faking Douma attack” [in Arabic], 24 April 2018, <https://bit.ly/3Y6lH5p>.

82 Alexandr Koc, “BBC Priznala : S'emki Posldestvij Ximataki v Duma – Inscenirovka” [BBC Admitted: Filming the Aftermath of the Chemical Attack in the Duma Was Staged], *Komsomol'skaja Pravda*, 14 February 2019, <https://www.kp.ru/daily/26942/3993268/>.

83 Sacha Kots, Vkontakte, 14 February 2019. Translated from Russian.

84 Sacha Kots, Twitter, 14 February 2019. Translated from Russian.

85 EUvsDisinfo, “DISINFO: BBC Admits That Reason for Bombing Syria Was Fake,” 2019, <https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/bbc-admits-that-reason-for-bombing-syria-was-fake/>.

86 OPCW, 2019. “Note by the Technical Secretariat Report of the Fact-Finding Mission Regarding the Incident of Alleged Use of Toxic Chemicals as a Weapon in Douma, SAR, on 7 April 2018,” S/1731/2019, 2019.

87 Ryazantsev, O.N., “Statement by Mr. O.N. Ryazantsev, Head of the Delegation of the Russian Federation, at the Twenty-Fourth Session of the Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention,” OPCW, 25 November 2019, <https://www.opcw.org/sites/default/files/documents/2019/11/Russian%20Federation%20CSP-24%20Statement.pdf>.



Visual 6: War correspondent Sacha Kots posing with Hassan Diab and his father Omar. 14 February 2019

Until today, the Duma attack is regularly brought back to the forefront by Western sympathisers of the Assad regime and the Russian government, accusing officials at the OPCW of suppressing findings and putting out unsupported conclusions. It includes Aaron Maté, of the Grayzone, calling out the OPCW in front of the UNSC, in an effort to discredit the institution⁸⁸.

To conclude, the media coverage created by Russia regarding the Douma chemical attacks constitutes an important case to apprehend the “bottom-up-bottom” communication strategy, but also understand its further goals. Following the communication line designed by the government, elements are implanted on the Syrian ground, where a story countering the local narratives is built from A to Z and unveiled into Russian media, then imported in Europe with the support of diplomatic actors, to reach decision-makers through the OCPW, an organism which directly cooperates with the UN and the UNSC. The media coverage therefore touches several levels: national audiences are reassured regarding the legitimate presence of the Russian troops in Syria, Western audiences are destabilised by the unveiling of alternative narratives, and

Russia confronts other leaders of the international arena as it tries to alter the reality concerning a key episode of the war. The strategic communication is paired with important actions by Russian officials to try to discredit the OPCW, an intergovernmental institution with 193 member states, in order to regain control on the consequences of the actions of the Syrian regime, which seriously impacted al-Assad’s credibility and threatens his survival in the international arena.

Conclusion

The offensive aspect of Russian communication strategy in times of war is an integral part of Russia’s new generation warfare. Not only did the Russian military intervention in Syria constitute a testing ground for Russian weapons and military campaigns, but it also allowed Russia to benefit from an illimited access to the Syrian territory paired with a great deal of freedom in its actions on the ground, and to test non-military means including communication.

88 Aaron Mate, “Aaron Maté’s Opening Remarks to UN Security Council Member,” Presented at the UNSC, UNSC, 24 March 2023.

By forbidding access to foreign journalists and having full access to the territory, Russian correspondents developed an intensive coverage of the events which was widely shared on social media and in Russian outlets. The first-hand information that they shared daily also found its way to international media platforms.

The work of war correspondents presents many advantages when it comes to convincing audiences: the local anchorage of the information conveys a feeling of instantaneousness and “raw truth”, an impression reinforced by the presence of a consequent number of pictures, precise spatiotemporal descriptions, and accurate terminology. During the first deployment in Aleppo, war correspondents seized the opportunity to set essential frames which were diffused over the months: the designation of a homogeneous and barbaric enemy, an opposition to the legitimate Syrian regime reduced to terrorist groups, and Russia as an isolated peacekeeper putting order in the local chaos. Further frames then appeared and included the depiction of a Syrian Nation supporting its president, the verticality of the Russian power, the efficiency of the Russian army, war as a technicality, and the special connection linking Russia to the Syrian cultural heritage. The framing of the Aleppo conquest also unveiled the calculated absence of other aspects of the war such as the complexity of the Syrian society, the violent repression faced by civilians, along with the hostility expressed towards al-Assad.

The energy deployed by the war correspondents and Russian officials to regain control on the narratives gravitating around key events such as the 2018 chemical attack on Douma by aggressively promoting their own reading of the situation gives the reader a small overview of the ambitious goals of the communication strategy deployed by the Russian official doctrine, and confirms its centrality for the Russian executive power as a complement of concrete actions, such as its vote against the OPCW budget in 2019. It also sheds light on the incapacity of other international stakeholders, in particular Western ones, to rightly evaluate its reach and to take a firm stance towards the Russian aggression of Syria.

The freedom of action that Russia experienced for 9 years did not bode well. As soon as 2016, editorialist [Natalie Nougayrède stated](#) that “what happened in Aleppo would shape Europe’s future”, as she highlighted “the connections between the Syrian tragedy and the strategic weakening of Europe and the West in general”⁸⁹. The same view was expressed six years later by Syrian intellectual Yassin al-Haj

Saleh who warned in March 2022 that “the costless mandate over Syria encouraged Putin to want to annex Ukraine”⁹⁰.

89 Natalie Nougayrède, “What Happens next in Aleppo Will Shape Europe’s Future,” *The Guardian*, 5 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/05/aleppo-europe-vladimir-putin-russian-military>.

90 Yassin al-Haj Saleh, “Why Ukraine Is a Syrian Cause,” *DAWN (blog)*, 4 March 2022, <https://dawnmena.org/why-ukraine-is-a-syrian-cause/>.

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Russia's Soft Power in Libya: “The Elephant Is Already in the Room”

2

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Introduction

This study aims to explore the evolution of the Russian Federation's strategy and influence in Libya since the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011. From the Russian perspective, Libya is a crucial battleground in the global competition for power and influence, one that is starkly divided between the West, particularly the United States and NATO, and Russia. More than a decade of instability in the North African country has created significant power vacuums that Russia appears to have adeptly exploited as part of its broader global strategy.

The Russian presence in Libya has significantly expanded in recent years, evidenced by increased military activity, including a major recent delivery of military supplies to the eastern port of Tobruk. This shipment was not an isolated event but part of a larger strategy to secure a permanent military foothold on NATO's southern flank. By consolidating its position in Libya, Russia is also creating a strategic gateway for further influence across Africa and the Sahel. Recent, though unverified, allegations of an increase in Russian agents in Libya raise several important questions: How entrenched is Russia's presence in Libya? How has Russia managed to achieve such significant influence? What instruments of soft power has it used to complement its military strategy?

“The roots of Russia's strategy [in Libya] can be traced back to the deteriorating relations between Russia and the West following Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Prior to this, Russia had made three attempts to join NATO, all of which were rejected. Feeling humiliated by the West, Russia began preparing to confront it, marking the beginning of a new form of Cold

War. Putin embarked on a course to restore Russia's prominence on the international stage. (...) Russia sought to avenge the collapse of the Soviet Union, which it believed was facilitated by the West. (...) This sentiment was exacerbated by incidents of humiliation suffered by Russian representatives in international forums, such as the UN. (...) Putin, upon assuming power, sought to redress such humiliations.”⁹¹

This quote from a Libyan political figure from Tripoli, interviewed in April 2024 for this study, exemplifies the profound penetration of Russia's narrative in the Libyan people's discourse. When examining the increasing influence of Russia in Libya over the past decade, it becomes evident, as one of our Libyan interlocutors aptly stated, that “the elephant is already in the room.”⁹² How did this happen?

Analyzed from a historical perspective, Russian policies in Libya have consistently been grounded in the use of hard power strategies, particularly through the provision of military assistance. However, the specificities of the Libyan context – first under Gaddafi, then as a result of the uprising and foreign military intervention against his regime – posed significant limitations to Moscow's expansion of influence for several decades. The failed transition after 2011, characterized by ongoing political divisions and recurrent military conflict between rival Libyan factions, provided an opportunity for Russia to step in and assert its influence. Both the Libyan domestic developments and the policies implemented by other external actors (especially the West) created a particularly favorable environment for Moscow to translate its foreign policy doctrine into practice.

91 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

92 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

After 2014, in the context of the Crimea war, the theory of “hybrid warfare” (“gibridnaya voyna”) became a central component of Russia’s military doctrine.⁹³ This approach emphasized avoiding traditional battlefield engagements in favor of a strategy aimed at undermining adversaries through a combination of ideological, informational, financial, political, and economic methods. Libya offered a unique set of conditions that allowed Moscow to experiment with such a blend of hard and soft power: a strategic location and abundant resources, political fragmentation and security vacuum, and a failed political transition that could be attributed to the duplicitous policies of the West. Combining strategic patience and opportunism, from 2014 onwards, Russia has sought to leverage these conditions to its advantage.

This report analyzes how this was done and assesses the degree of success achieved. Using an explanatory research design, it examines the tools, levers, and narratives employed by Russia to increase its presence in the country. The report contextualizes these efforts in relation to key domestic and international developments that have shaped the Libyan political and security landscape. Notably, the emergence of Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi (2014), the Ukraine war, and the subsequent increased global polarization (2022-2024) have clearly contributed to the acceleration of Russia’s strategic reorientation in Libya.

The report is based on diverse sets of sources obtained through various methodologies to ensure a comprehensive analysis. The first set of data includes a qualitative synchronous open-source analysis. This analysis systematically observed available sources in English and Arabic, including newspapers, online media, social media, official institutional documents, blogs, and opinions from Russian and Libyan repositories. Only cross-referenced sources were utilized to maintain the credibility of the information. A second set of data comprises official Russian documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Presidential Office, as well as Russian academic publications and programmatic manifestos, to develop an understanding of the concept of soft power in Russia’s doctrine.

The third and most original set of data was gathered through a series of in-depth interviews. Five online interviews were conducted with key Libyan political figures and social leaders, representing various regions and political perspectives, along with a government official from Tripoli.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select individuals with strong societal ties and firsthand experience of the significant transformations that have reshaped Libyan society and its perception of the international community over the past two decades. The sample comprised three men and two women, all of whom are actively engaged in domestic politics in different capacities. The interviews were semi-structured, using open-ended questions. Participants were verbally briefed on the project objectives and given a sample of the questions beforehand. Depending on their preference, interviews were conducted in either English or Arabic, and all sessions were recorded. To protect the participants’ safety, their identities remain anonymous. No written consent forms were issued; instead, consent was obtained verbally along with the explanation of the project objectives and questions. While the interviews generated a significant amount of additional, sensitive information—referred to as “shadow data”—this was only incorporated into the study when it could be confirmed through open-source analysis.

By incorporating numerous quotes from these interviews directly into the analysis, the report seeks to offer a detailed account of the various Libyan perspectives on Russia’s influence encountered during the research. This approach emphasizes how Russian narratives—concerning the West, its duplicity, and its lack of strategic vision—have permeated Libyan discourse, even among those critical of Russia’s political stance. Contrary to initial expectations, despite the interviewees’ diverse political affiliations and often contrasting views on Libyan and international politics, their assessments of Russia’s gradual increase and consolidation of influence in Libya were remarkably similar.

1. Russia’s Relationship with Libya: A Tale of “Strategic Patience”

1.1. 1970-2011: A shaky relationship based on military assistance

In the 1970s, Libya and the Soviet Union developed a significant relationship centered on military and technical cooperation. For over 15 years, Libya was one of the largest importers of Soviet military equipment worldwide and the leading importer in Africa. Gaddafi purchased weapons, imported heavy military equipment such as tanks and

93 Ofer Fridman, *Russian Hybrid Warfare. Resurgence and Politicisation*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002)..

missiles,⁹⁴ and employed specialized engineers from the Soviet Union to build a defense infrastructure. Additionally, the Soviet army trained Gaddafi's most loyal forces and many of his high-ranking officials, including his youngest son, Khamis. Another key military figure within the Jamahiriya who benefited from Soviet training was Khalifa Haftar, then a young army officer.

Soviet-Libyan relations flourished due to both practical considerations and ideological alignment. Gaddafi sought Russian military support in a moment where relations with neighbouring Egypt and Chad transitioned into direct military confrontations and as its crusade against the USA was intensifying. Ideologically the Soviet-Libyan entente was, indeed, sustained by a mutual dislike of the United States and a deep desire on both sides to create an alternative order to the capitalistic West. Gaddafi, seeking to consolidate and expand his pan-Arab and pan-Islamist ideals inside and outside the Jamahiriya, found an unexpected ally in the Soviet Union. During the Cold War, Moscow was heavily funding communist resistance movements around the world, and Gaddafi's far-sighted projections of the Third Universal Theory offered a wide scope for cooperation. However, the cultural and political proximity between the two peoples remained, at large, limited. When Russia attempted to enter other sectors, they did not encounter much interest on the Libyan side. To most Libyans, the West, seen as the pinnacle of development, had a much more powerful magnetism. Russia, in contrast, was perceived as backward and obsolete.

“Russia didn't have any significant economic presence in Libya since the Soviet Union; its involvement was primarily military, including arms provision, military training, and the deployment of advisors. Outside the military sphere, Libyans didn't view Russia as a particularly developed country, aside from its achievements in space exploration and nuclear power. Even during the experimental nuclear project of 1978 and the training of Libyan leaders in nuclear energy in the early 1970s and 1980s, Libya tended to lean towards the West rather than Russia. This preference was influenced by factors such as geographical distance, lack of shared history, and the West's status

as developed. Therefore, Libya remained distant from the communist ideas of the Soviet Union and Russia.”⁹⁵

The American bombing of Libya in 1986⁹⁶ marked a significant decline in bilateral relations between the two countries. Gaddafi was particularly angered by the Soviet Union's soft and disinterested response. Additionally, as the US and the Soviet Union entered a phase of relative détente, Moscow seemed increasingly reluctant to be associated with Gaddafi's terrorist activities. The bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988 was a definitive turning point. Russian disengagement culminated in 1992, when the Security Council adopted Resolution 748, imposing sanctions on Libya with the positive approval of the Russian Federation. This gradual alienation from the international community ultimately led to a cessation of diplomatic relations between Libya and the Russian Federation.

The first decade of the 2000's saw a renewed Russian interest in Libya, capitalizing on the country's international rehabilitation and economic reforms led by Saif al-Islam Gaddafi.⁹⁷ In 2008, Vladimir Putin visited Tripoli, establishing the first dialogue channel with the Jamahiriya since the 1990s. This visit marked a pivotal moment in bilateral relations. The Russian Federation clearly intended to build on the legacy of military relations between Gaddafi and the Soviet Union. A few months later, in October 2008, Gaddafi visited Moscow to further strengthen the revitalized bilateral relations. The deals concluded during this visit were estimated to be worth between \$5 billion and \$10 billion, encompassing arms sales and confirming the commission for the Sirte-Benghazi Railways project.⁹⁸

Moscow sought to expand its reach beyond military cooperation, aiming to position itself as a great power capable of fostering comprehensive ties in multiple domains: economic, diplomatic, and cultural. It introduced a narrative and symbolic dimension to its economic and political strategy. During his 2008 visit, for instance, Putin paid homage to Libyan history by visiting the monument dedicated to the Libyan resistance against the Italian colonial aggressor, underscoring Russia's stance against Western neo-colonial dominance.

94 Henry Tanner, “Libyans Confirm Soviet Arms Deal,” *The New York Times*, 24 May 1975, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/05/24/archives/libyans-confirm-soviet-arms-deal-but-embassy-terms-cairos-report.html>.

95 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

96 BBC, “The Libyan Bombing - 1986,” History of the BBC, <https://www.bbc.com/historyofthebbc/research/editorial-independence/libyan-bombing>.

97 Alison Pargeter, “Reform in Libya: Chimera or Reality?,” *Mediterranean Paper Series*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, October 2010, https://www.iaj.it/sites/default/files/mediterranean-paper_08.pdf.

98 Federica Saini Fasanotti, “Russia and Libya: A Brief History of an on-Again-off-Again Friendship,” *Commentary*, *Brookings*, 1 September 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-and-libya-a-brief-history-of-an-on-again-off-again-friendship/>.

At the time, however, Russia was not the only actor seeking economic rapprochement with Libya. The UK, France, and Italy were also forging new economic and trade agreements in the energy and military sectors. Towards the end of 2010, relations with Moscow were jeopardized again by a failed aircraft deal, as Tripoli preferred the French Dassault Rafale over its Russian competitor.

Both the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation placed significant importance on the Libyan dossier and were highly committed to creating enduring partnerships with Gaddafi's Jamahiriya. However, their reliance on hard power and military cooperation failed to establish a consolidated presence in Libya. This shortcoming is undoubtedly due to a general neglect of soft power strategies. The ideological and cultural distance between Russia and Libya has always been significant. Historically, Russia has shown limited capacity to attract and engage Libyan society, in contrast to Western countries, which, despite periods of intense geopolitical tension, have found more durable channels of communication and exchange with Libyan actors.

1.2. Russia in the face of the 2011 uprising: The (relative) cost of neutrality

As popular protests erupted across Libya in 2011, rapidly escalating into military confrontations between Gaddafi's security forces and armed protesters, the swift reactions of Western countries and the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) placed the Russian Federation, then led by President Medvedev, under significant pressure regarding how to respond. On 17 March 2011, a draft resolution was proposed that allowed the NATO coalition to impose a no-fly zone and an arms embargo over the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya. Moscow chose to abstain, a decision accompanied by vocal diplomatic efforts to ensure that the NATO operation would not become a regime change operation led by the West.⁹⁹ This abstention allowed Resolution 1973 to pass and dramatically altered the course of the conflict as the NATO intervention provided military support and a tactical advantage to the rebel Libyan forces. On 20 October 2011 Gaddafi was brutally killed, leading to the collapse of his regime.

Consequently, Russia felt betrayed by the West's actions, perceiving that its efforts to engage constructively in UN politics had been undermined and its trust violated. Russia

was deeply humiliated when it was excluded from the first three contact groups held in London, Rome, and Doha after the war. Its abstention also significantly affected its relations with the Libyan parties involved in the conflict, leading to its subsequent marginalization in the years to come. By failing to take a clear stance, Russia lost any leverage or connection with the revolutionary forces that ultimately prevailed and would shape the new political landscape.

"Libyans who supported the revolution viewed Russia with a somewhat positive outlook due to its abstention from using the veto, though they didn't consider them allies as they still associated Russians with Gaddafi's regime. (...) As for the supporters of the Gaddafi regime, it was completely different. They felt betrayed by Russia and didn't anticipate Russia abandoning their ally. Despite their political awareness, many Libyans struggled to comprehend Russia's actions fully. Supporters of Gaddafi experienced a sense of betrayal but still clung to a faint hope that Russia, having initially refused to use the veto, would grasp the situation and reverse its decision."¹⁰⁰

"In 2011, Russia abstained from using its veto power for Decision 1973, allowing other countries to intervene in Libya. (...) Russia felt deceived and, being accustomed to the Cold War mentality, preferred strategic preparation over hurry."¹⁰¹

1.3. Libya in turmoil: The benefits of Russia's wait-and-see strategy

The period from 2011 to 2014 was indeed characterized by a wait-and-see approach. Lacking an entry point into national politics and finding no space of cooperation with the major Western countries involved in the Libyan dossier, the Russian Federation waited for events to unfold and entered a stand-by phase, apparently disengaging from the North African country.

"Libya experienced relative stability during portions of 2012, 2013, and part of 2014, with media attention primarily directed towards Syria rather than Libya. Russia had multiple fronts to address, and prioritizing Syria, which it deemed strategically more important, seemed logical. (...) Russia couldn't afford to confront various issues simultaneously."¹⁰²

99 Hannah VanHoose, "Understanding the Russian Response to the Intervention in Libya," *Center for American Progress*, 12 April 2011, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/understanding-the-russian-response-to-the-intervention-in-libya/>.

100 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

101 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

102 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

However, the rapid deterioration of the political and security situation in Libya provided Moscow with a significant opportunity to highlight the failure of Western strategy. Despite the successful 2012 elections, the newly established institutions quickly fell into deadlock. Conflict and polarization between rival Libyan factions rapidly extended beyond these institutions, resulting in violent competition for power and resources. By early 2013, the situation on the ground exposed the shortcomings of the Western approach and fueled disillusionment among various segments of the Libyan population.

This disillusionment was further compounded by negative experiences of Western interventions in other conflict contexts, such as Afghanistan and Iraq. A Libyan official drew a parallel between Libya and Iraq, noting how the US intervention in Iraq had transformed a nation once home to a significant number of scientists into a chaotic country plagued by displacement and widespread illiteracy.¹⁰³ At the time of the vote on UNSC Resolution 1973, Vladimir Putin, then Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, had described the Western coalition's agenda as a call for crusades, likening the intervention to the Bush-era invasion of Iraq.

Hence, in these circumstances, its stance on UNSC Resolution 1973 eventually provided a formidable foundation for Russia to consolidate and spread its anti-Western strategic narrative.

“The Russians used this card to say they are defending something different from Western countries. The conflict with the West and Western positions went far beyond the Libyan issue (for instance in Syria).”¹⁰⁴

Despite its apparent withdrawal or marginalization from the Libyan scene, Russia's approach to the North African country can be best characterized by the concept of “strategic patience”: a deliberate and long-term strategy which involves refraining from immediate or aggressive actions in favor of waiting for a more opportune moment to achieve its goals. In fact, while it demonstrated “little interest” in Libya between 2011 and 2015, Moscow appeared to continue working behind the scenes.

“The voice of the [2011] revolution was high, and it was connected to the West. Russia was trying to diminish the voice of the revolutionaries. Even if its actions were not publicized and visible, Russia was always

present at that time, through its social and tribal links. People in these communities were always saying they had links with Russia. This was not something new or that happened by chance, but the result of something studied. (...) Always they were in the background, their presence was not visible, and this way they managed to develop their strategy and to choose the elements of their strategy, that would support their long-term strategy, not only in the post-2011 era. They chose the constituencies with whom they had built links for a long time.”¹⁰⁵

This was notably the case with affiliates of the former regime, who were suffering from deep social stigma and political exclusion during that period. They were among the constituencies most sensitive to the narrative deployed by the Russian authorities.

“The previous regime had a positive history of relations with Russia, further solidifying its perception [of Russia] as the only viable solution to the impasse. Russia was vocal about its opposition to NATO intervention and the subsequent collapse of the regime, paralleling events in Iraq with the fall of Saddam Hussein. Some supporters of the former regime, particularly nationalists, still saw Russia as having a significant role, considering its historical involvement in Libya dating back to Jamal Abdel Nasser's era when Russia provided arms to Libya in 1969. Additionally, many members of the Libyan army had studied in the Soviet Union, (...) further strengthening the close relationship. It's important to note that Libyans view the US as a colonizing and oppressive force.”

Numerous testimonies point to the continuous relationships maintained by some Libyan stakeholders and Russia between 2011 and 2014.

“There were still relations and meetings. (...) Russia typically intervenes through specific individuals rather than entire groups or tribes. Therefore, Russia would select from a restricted circle of people. It would engage in dialogue with specific individuals and directly intervene on the ground, often favoring those with significant influence, such as tribal leaders. (...)

103 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

104 Author interview, WhatsApp, 17 April 2024.

105 Author interview, WhatsApp, 17 April 2024.

Yet, while Russia remained well-informed about the situation on the ground, it hesitated to intervene in conflicts, particularly due to its commitments on other fronts.¹⁰⁶

2. Libya's Continued Fragmentation and Instability: An Opportunity for Moscow

2.1. The figure of Khalifa Haftar: The best available partner in Libya's intensifying turmoil

The first opportunity for Moscow to regain a foothold in Libya arose with Khalifa Haftar's launch of Operation Dignity in Benghazi in May 2014. The military operation was initiated in the eastern city, which had been a hotspot for terror attacks and the killings of former security officials and civil society figures over the preceding two years. Haftar, a former army officer himself, vowed to eradicate the Islamist militias and extremist groups that were deemed responsible for the surge in violence and insecurity. The anti-terror narrative mobilized by Haftar and his allies, combined with the coalition's composition—comprising Gaddafi-era military officers, soldiers, and various allied militia groups, including tribal and anti-Islamist militias from eastern Libya—aligned perfectly with Moscow's own views and interests.

"[Prior to this] Russia sought to intervene in Libya through various channels, excluding those aligned with Western powers such as the US, Türkiye, Italy, France, and the UK, who held sway in the West of Libya. Russia was acutely aware of the absence of Russian allies in the West, prompting them to await the emergence of a figure in either the South or the East to forge an alliance. (...) Al Karama [Haftar's Dignity Operation] comprised a blend of regime loyalists and supporters of the February revolution. This coalition, consisting of elements from the Libyan army and non-extremist February supporters, combated Islamic extremism and Daesh."¹⁰⁷

Moscow capitalized on what it perceived as an opportunity. Although it had maintained relationships with former regime constituencies both inside and outside Libya (primarily in Egypt), these connections alone were insufficient to justify a more assertive Russian role.

This was because the former regime constituencies lacked credible and legitimate leadership.¹⁰⁸ No one had the capacity to unify the ranks of the defeated or to represent them effectively. The defeat at the hands of the revolutionary forces and the NATO Alliance had left deep scars, both militarily and psychologically.

"The former regime at that time (2014) didn't have a leadership. Saif [al-Islam Gaddafi] was imprisoned and there was no clear leadership. Some of the members were in Egypt, or in Jordan, etc. While several personalities thought of themselves as leaders, there was no specific individual with enough charisma to take the lead at that time. At the same time, they were also weak and still impacted by the defeat of 2011. Some were still shocked by the defeat and didn't wish to return as they saw in this defeat both a personal defeat and the end of Libya as well. (...) Haftar appeared as the only choice. There was no alternative."¹⁰⁹

Yet, why would Moscow bet on Haftar, given his well-known longstanding relationship with the CIA¹¹⁰? The Russians likely viewed the Dignity commander as a means to an end, given the absence of credible alternatives, and as an instrument to restore the pre-2011 status quo.¹¹¹ The narrative that Libya needed a strong leader to restore authority and order in a fragmented country threatened by Islamist extremists also served as a key connecting point.

"Russia gravitated towards Haftar not due to his ties to the previous regime, but because of his purely militaristic approach. They sought a military leader capable of altering the landscape through force rather than through democratic processes. Their shared values of gaining control through armed conflict cemented their alliance."¹¹²

106 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

107 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

108 See Virginie Collombier and Misbah Omar, "The Revenge of the Defeated? The Re-Emergence of the Jamahiriya Networks after 2011", in *Violence and Social Transformation in Libya*, ed. Virginie Collombier and Wolfram Lacher (eds) (Oxford University Press/Hurst Publishers, 2023). Also see Virginie Collombier, "Sirte's Tribes under the Islamic State: from Civil War to Global Jihadism", in *Tribes and Global Jihadism*, ed. Virginie Collombier and Olivier Roy (Oxford University Press/Hurst Publishers, 2017).

109 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

110 Missy Ryan, "A former CIA asset has become a US headache in Libya", *The Washington Post*, 17 August 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-former-cia-asset-has-become-a-us-headache-in-libya/2016/08/17/a766e392-54c6-11e6-bbf5-957ad17b4385_story.html.

111 This lack of viable alternatives was also confirmed to the author by a Russian military officer in September 2018. Author interview, Moscow.

112 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

2.2. Libya's continued institutional divisions: The arrival of Russian boots on the ground

The bifurcation of Libya's political institutions in the summer of 2014, coupled with the violent conflict that pitted the two main rival political and military coalitions (Haftar's Dignity and Tripoli's Dawn) against each other and led to widespread armed confrontations across the country, marked a crucial turning point in Libya's trajectory. The dire humanitarian situation and acute political crisis prompted the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to intervene and facilitate a mediation process, culminating in the signing of the Libyan Political Accord in Skhirat in December 2015. While the agreement did lead to a cessation of hostilities, it failed to achieve the anticipated reunification of political institutions; the country remained divided between two rival parliaments and governments competing for resources and legitimacy.

In these circumstances, Haftar visited Russia twice in 2016, in June¹¹³ and November¹¹⁴, meeting with the country's top political figures. These visits marked his first formal political recognition, as he was identified as a key player and a central figure in Russia's strategy.

Between 2017 and 2018, Haftar signed military cooperation agreements with Russia that included arms sales, training and the deployment of Russian personnel on Libyan territory under the guise of Russia's top private military company, the Wagner Group. This support aimed to train and assist the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), Haftar's forces. With Wagner's backing, the LAAF gradually established military control over eastern Libya and succeeded in their operations in Benghazi and Derna.¹¹⁵ Within two years, military cooperation increased exponentially, resulting in Wagner Group troops establishing military bases near Al Jufra, Sabha and Sirte. In 2018, the Russian contractor deployed aircraft and armoured vehicles to Libya and increased the number of local personnel with the clear aim of turning the

country into a hub for Moscow's operations in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Russia entered Libya militarily in 2018. Haftar signed an agreement with the Russian military chief in 2017, and implementation commenced in 2018. They seized control of the Jufra base, featuring an airport with a 4.5 km long runway, likely not built for Libyan needs in the 1980s. In 2018, Russia deployed aircraft and armored vehicles to Libya, establishing five bases with a clear objective aimed at Congo and its resources. Russia's economy heavily relies on natural resources, and when it observed France's economic struggles, particularly exacerbated by the pandemic, it seized the opportunity to extend its influence into Congo and French-speaking countries in Western and Central Africa. Utilizing various resources, including drugs and smuggling, Wagner, acting as a front, furthered Russia's interests. (...) Simultaneously, these bases serve as launch points for advancing toward the northern Mediterranean and facilitating the movement of armed extremists toward Europe."¹¹⁶

Russian cooperation extended beyond purely military and hard power strategies to include economic and financial dimensions. In May 2016, the eastern-based Central Bank contracted the Russian state-owned Joint Stock Company Goznak to print its own version of the Libyan dinar, without official authorization from Tripoli.¹¹⁷ Over the subsequent four years, the Kremlin-controlled company delivered at least 14 billion LYD (then about \$10 billion to Libya's eastern factions, thereby providing a lifeline to the eastern-based government and Haftar's forces. The printing contract also appears to have netted a huge profit for Goznak.¹¹⁸ Moreover, some accounts suggest that Moscow began infiltrating Libyan institutions and, in particular, building connections with Libya's National Oil Corporation (NOC).¹¹⁹

113 The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Press release on Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa, Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov's meeting with Commander of the Libyan National Army Khalifa Haftar," Press release, 29 June 2016, https://mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_safety/1530945/.

114 The Guardian, "Libyan general Khalifa Haftar meets Russian minister to seek help", 29 November 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/29/libyan-general-khalifa-haftar-meets-russian-minister-to-seek-help>.

115 Akram Kharief, "Wagner in Libya – combat and influence", *Rosa Luxembourg Stiftung*, January 2022, <https://rosaluxna.org/publications/wagner-in-libya-combat-and-influence/>.

116 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

117 Patrick Wintour, "Battle of the banknotes as rival currencies are set to be issued in Libya", *The Guardian*, 20 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/20/battle-of-the-banknotes-rival-currencies-libya>.

118 Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, "Report: Libyan Central Bank Failed to Account for Billions of New Bills", Report, 21 June 2023, <https://www.occrp.org/ru/daily/17769-report-libyan-central-bank-failed-to-account-for-billions-of-new-bills>.

119 Author interview, WhatsApp, 25 February 2024.

According to all accounts, the year 2018 marked a turning point for Russia's engagement and rising influence in Libya. This shift resulted from Moscow's opportunism in exploiting enduring institutional divisions and the competition for international support among Libyan rival factions. Another determining factor, highlighted by several interviewees, was the Western and European response to the conflict.

"Following 2018, Russia increased its engagement in Libya. Meanwhile, the Western trio (USA, France, and the UK) lacked a coherent strategy. Their approach was characterized by tactical responses rather than proactive decision-making. (...) European involvement in Libya was marked by disunity and even internal discord. There was a disjointed competition among European countries, some of which supported militias to pursue interests that conflicted with those of other nations. This period witnessed the European Union's weakest performance as an institution in Libya, with member states demonstrating conflicting interests despite their collective association under the EU banner. (...) The absence of a clear strategy often leads to chaos, whereas Russia's coherent strategy, whether deemed positive or negative, has enabled it to assert its influence effectively."¹²⁰

2.3. The war on Tripoli: Russia's opportunity to consolidate influence despite military setback

In late summer 2019, amidst its pursuit of a hard power strategy in Libya, Russia opted for direct military intervention in support of Marshal Haftar's offensive against Tripoli. After months of heavy fighting without success in taking control of the capital, the LAAF contracted the Wagner Group to deploy mercenaries to southern Tripoli. The U.S. Department of Defense later issued a report suggesting that this contract was underwritten by the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).¹²¹ The Russian forces also partnered with Emirati drone operators, resulting in increased targeting success and causing panic among the forces of the Government of National Accord (GNA) defending Tripoli.

Haftar's escalating attack on the Libyan capital prompted Turkey to strengthen its ties with the UN-recognized

government in Tripoli. In the fall of 2019, Prime Minister Sarraj sought formal assistance from Ankara. In exchange for signing a security agreement, Turkey secured a bilateral maritime agreement that delineated the two countries' maritime boundaries and established an exclusive economic zone. Unlike Russia, which relied on covert support through the Wagner group, Turkey provided assistance through an official agreement requested by and concluded with Libya's UN-recognized government.

Turkey's involvement marked a turning point, transforming the conflict into a fully internationalized civil war. It also tipped the balance of forces in favor of Tripoli's GNA. In June 2020, Haftar's LAAF were forced to withdraw to the south of Tripoli. The loss of the al-Watya airbase and the fall of Tarhuna, his stronghold in the West, signaled Haftar's defeat. From then on, Wagner's new mission was to stop the Turkish army and the GNA forces from advancing eastward, to defend Sirte and the Libyan Oil Crescent. This mission evolved during 2020 and 2021 into the construction of a defense line separating Tripolitania from Cyrenaica and Fezzan.¹²²

Quite unexpectedly, in the eyes of many Libyans, Russia's failed attempt to support Haftar's siege did not appear as a defeat but rather as a clear demonstration of Russia's central role in the country's military and political theatre. By siding with Haftar, Russia showcased its commitment to playing a leading role in Libya's future. The war consolidated Russia's presence and legitimized its actions, reinforcing its narrative. Russia presented its involvement as a firm gesture of loyalty to an ally, leaving no room for doubts or underhanded maneuvers.

"The Tripoli war did impact Russia's image in Libya, but only temporarily. When Russian forces aligned with Haftar, residents in the western part of the country opposed Haftar and Russia. However, they continued to support Russia in other international conflicts, showcasing a degree of double standards. Overall, the Tripoli war did not significantly alter Libyan support for Russia, as they continue to endorse the idea of a bipolar or multipolar system over a unipolar one. Unlike the US, Russia does not have a history marred by bloodshed in countries like Iraq."¹²³

120 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

121 Amy Mackinnon and Jack Detch, "Pentagon Says UAE Possibly Funding Russia's Shadowy Mercenaries in Libya," *Foreign Policy*, 30 November 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/pentagon-trump-russia-libya-uae/>.

122 Omar Al-Hawari, "Tensions rise in Libya's Sirte as the city becomes central to the conflict," *MEDirections blog*, 12 October 2020, <https://blogs.eui.eu/medirections/tensions-rise-in-libyas-sirte-as-the-city-becomes-central-to-the-conflict/>.

123 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

“Russia makes effective use of propaganda and media, which has been very influential on the Libyans, even if indirectly. Russia’s involvement in the 2019-2020 war is the official announcement that ‘we are present in Libya and in the Libyan file after the fall of the Gaddafi regime. Did we manage to take control of Tripoli? Are the groups we support in control of Tripoli? Good. We didn’t? Well, it does not matter. We now have a new position, different, publicized, in line with the strategy and the instruments that we have chosen.’ The game [the Russians] played in 2020 is not an adventure for them. This signals that they are in control, that they are present on the main political stage: ‘we have a presence on the ground – geographic depth –, our political tools, and also the agreements that were produced by this war.’”¹²⁴

Indeed, despite Haftar’s eventual military failure in Tripoli, the hard power mobilized to support his forces also proved valuable to Moscow, enabling it to influence the diplomatic process. In the final weeks of the offensive, Russia reached an agreement with Turkey that paved the way for a ceasefire. The bilateral arrangement, which bore some similarities to the earlier Syria-focused ‘Astana Process,’ exerted significant pressure on Western diplomats, particularly the UN and Germany, who were leading the Berlin Process at the time.

Moreover, the agreement created a de facto division of Libya, benefiting Russia by solidifying its presence in the eastern and central/southern regions. Moscow maintained its relationship with Haftar, leveraging control over Libya’s military bases and attempting to expand its naval presence in the Mediterranean, particularly in Tobruk and Benghazi. These strategic locations would enable Russia to deploy anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) devices and electronic warfare and jamming systems, potentially posing a significant threat to NATO in the western Mediterranean basin.¹²⁵ This development served not only as a bargaining chip against Western influence but also as a crucial tool for Russia to gain significant control in the region.

3. Moscow’s Textbook Hybrid War: Information Warfare and the Power of Narratives

Moscow’s increased use of hard power in Libya after 2018 laid the foundation for a more complex, multifaceted strategy in the following years. Adapting its approach to serve different objectives in different circumstances, Russia employed a well-coordinated mix of diplomatic engagement, economic partnerships, and media influence, demonstrating its ability to navigate and shape the complex Libyan landscape.

Since the onset of the conflict in 2011, Russia has maintained relations with various Libyan factions, implementing a strategy that pragmatically adapts to fluid and evolving alliances. The launch of the UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) in November 2020 prompted Moscow to deepen its focus on Libya’s fragmented political sphere. The prospects of a presidential election scheduled for December 2021 called for increased activism in support of potentially favorable candidates to Russian interests.

3.1. Information warfare: Undermining UN mediation and influencing elections

Information warfare, as a strategic tool utilized by states to influence, disrupt, or manipulate the information environment of target populations, took up a central role in Russia’s strategy in Libya from 2019 onwards. Russian support, both to Khalifa Haftar and to Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, involved a robust information campaign utilizing social media and disinformation tactics to shape public opinion and political dynamics.

Russia’s information warfare construct is deeply rooted in its historical approach to state competition but has undergone significant modernization to address contemporary conflicts, particularly in light of Russia’s extensive military engagement across various fronts over the past years. This has prompted Russia to develop advanced strategies that integrate less conventional warfare tools, enhancing its ability to achieve its geopolitical objectives through multifaceted approaches. As such, information warfare has been strengthened as a “war-winning strategy that avoids attribution, inhibits enemy reactions, and minimizes expenses”¹²⁶.

124 Author interview, WhatsApp, 17 April 2024.

125 Igor Delanoë and Nour Hedjazi, “La Libye : une crise à la croisée des ambitions globale et régionale de la Russie,” *Hérodote* 182, no. 3 (2021): 129-147.

126 Stephen Blank, “Cyber War and Information War à la Russe,” in *Understanding Cyber Conflict: Fourteen Analogies*, ed. George Perkovich and Ariel E. Levite (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2017), 81-98.

Libya is particularly vulnerable to information warfare due to its fragmented social and political landscape, compounded by a historically suppressed media environment. Prior to 2011, Libyans had little access to independent news, relying exclusively on state-controlled sources under Gaddafi's regime. This lack of a tradition of press independence and freedom has left the populace ill-equipped to critically assess information from diverse sources. Today, with over two-thirds of the country depending on Facebook for their news, the existing divisions among multiple governments, tribal affiliations, and shifting armed factions create a fertile ground for the spread of disinformation.¹²⁷ Since 2019, Russian information operations have promoted figures like Haftar and Saif al-Islam, aligning with Kremlin interests and bolstering their political positions.

A key player in these operations is the Internet Research Agency (IRA), founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin. The IRA engages in grey propaganda operations, such as funding and acquiring majority ownership in local news stations which then broadcast pro-Russian content, but it also conducts covert operations using fake social media accounts and front media properties. These efforts blur the lines between authentic and inauthentic behavior, making it difficult to attribute activities directly to the Kremlin.

Russian operators employ Libyan consultants to spread disinformation by tapping into local grievances and bringing contentious issues to the forefront. These consultants tailor their disinformation campaigns to specific targets or objectives, utilizing popular social media platforms prevalent in Libya.¹²⁸ Wagner has also integrated itself into Libyan national media by funding and supplying content for pro-LAAF messaging. This includes support for Aljamahiria TV, one of Libya's oldest and most-watched television stations with six million viewers, as well as contributing to the daily distribution of 300,000 copies of the LAAF's *Voice of the People* newspaper.¹²⁹

In 2019, the arrest of Russian sociologist Maksim Shugaley and his translator, Samir Seifan, in Libya on accusation of espionage, provided Russia with an opportunity to craft

a compelling narrative serving its interests. Following Shugaley's extended detention, Russia released a two-part film titled *Shugaley*, strategically designed to cast the Libyan government in a negative light. The film dramatizes several serious allegations, including torture in Mitiga prison, alleged connections between terrorists and the government of Fayez al-Sarraj, misconduct by pro-government militants, and the exploitation of Libyan resources by a privileged elite. Additionally, it highlights the militia-led conflict between forces loyal to the GNA and the LAAF.¹³⁰

Russia's information strategy has shown remarkable organization and efficiency, particularly through its online operations. According to a September 2019 Daily Beast report and internal Wagner documents, the group established a robust online presence targeting Libyan audiences. By March 2019, Wagner had created 12 Facebook pages with specific aims: backing Khalifa Haftar, generating news content for Libya's key regions, and supporting Saif al-Islam Gaddafi.¹³¹

These Facebook pages were not only numerous but also strategically managed. Most pages were created on December 25, 2018, with additional ones following shortly after. They were largely administered by individuals based in Egypt, with some managed from Italy and other countries, but none from Libya itself. The content on these pages—patriotic posts and memes featuring Gaddafi—was designed to evoke nationalistic feelings and promote pro-Russian narratives.¹³² Posts were frequently cross-posted across multiple pages, a hallmark of Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior.

Among the pages, four specifically supported Khalifa Haftar: "Knights of Libya," "Libya First," "Libyan National People," and "Voice of Libya." These pages highlighted Haftar's military successes, shared updates from the Libyan National Army press conferences, and disseminated pro-Haftar poetry. They also pushed anti-Qatar and anti-Turkey narratives, criticizing these governments for their support of the rival GNA. In contrast, other pages focused on Muammar Gaddafi nostalgia, including "Libya Gaddafi" and "Falcons

127 Nabih Bulos, "Libya's Two Wars: One on the Battlefield and One on Facebook," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 June 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-libya-facebook-20190617-story.html>.

128 Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "A Light in Libya's Fog of Disinformation," *Africa Center for Strategic Studies*, 9 October 2020, <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/light-libya-fog-disinformation/>.

129 Shelby Grossman, Khadeja Ramali, and Renee DiResta, "Blurring the Lines of Media Authenticity: Prigozhin-Linked Group Funding Libyan Broadcast Media," *Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 20 March 2020, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/libya-prigozhin>.

130 *The Arab Weekly*, "Film on Work and Arrest of Russian NGO Worker in Tripoli Comes to TV," 8 May 2020, <https://theArabweekly.com/film-work-and-arrest-russian-ngo-worker-tripoli-comes-tv>.

131 Shelby Grossman, Daniel Bush, and Renée DiResta, "Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa," *Stanford Internet Observatory*, 29 October 2019, https://fsi-live.s3.us-west-1.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/29oct2019_sio_-_russia_linked_influence_operations_in_africa.v1.pdf.

132 Grossman, Bush, and Di Resta, 2019.

of the Conqueror.” These pages primarily shared old photos of Gaddafi and portrayed his era in a positive light, occasionally featuring posts intended to bolster his son’s political prospects.¹³³

Additionally, four pages were set up as “news networks”: “Libya News Network,” “Fezzan News Network,” “Cyrenaica News Network,” and “Tripoli News Network.” Despite their neutral appearance, these pages consistently posted content with an anti-GNA bias. Initially more neutral, their tone shifted to become increasingly pro-Haftar as 2019 progressed. These pages, which averaged more than two posts per day, rarely linked to external sources, focusing instead on brief descriptions and political commentary.¹³⁴

During the LPDF in Tunis, UNSMIL was informed that the meeting had become the target of an organized and weaponized social media disinformation campaign aimed at disrupting and sowing doubt about the Forum. One theme that was seized upon and amplified was corruption of the Forum.¹³⁵

When Saif al-Islam Gaddafi announced his candidacy for the presidential election of 2021, Moscow identified him as a strategic asset to achieve a twofold objective: disrupt or postpone the electoral process and cultivate more contacts and consensus among Libyan factions that still support him, in lack of a better alternative.

“I personally don’t think that Seif is the sweetheart of the Russians in Libya. I think Seif is a card. If you go back to the story of Qadhafi’s sons, Seif is the son of the West, he has western mentality, western training. In contrast to his brothers Khamis or Mu’tasem who entered the military scene. The narrative built by Russia regarding the injustice of which the Gaddafi regime has been victim, the social leadership still present... they wondered: what are the available tools for us on this? This is why they used Seif. At the same time, by doing this, they are using an American card. And therefore, even Russia, they did not oppose the elections. They opposed them when Seif decided to be a candidate. I don’t think Russia is dreaming of having Gaddafi’s son in power. Not at all. Even if one day Russia comes to dominate the political scene, the people in power will

be different from the ones we are seeing today. They don’t want the former regime to come back. They are using this narrative because it is useful for them, it is a way to gain support for their strategy.”¹³⁶

3.2. The appeal of the concepts of “World Majority” and “Civilizational Proximity”

The war in Ukraine, initiated in 2022, has significantly impacted Russia’s foreign policy priorities, compelling it to seek broader international support. In this context, Libya presents an opportunity for Russia to leverage its influence and gain backing from various international actors. By positioning itself as a strong player within the Libyan landscape, Russia has aimed to enhance its international legitimacy and overcome the geopolitical isolation imposed by Western powers since the invasion of Ukraine. This strategy seems to have borne fruits, as a significant portion of the Libyan population reportedly supports the invasion of Ukraine.

“Approximately 80% of Libyans expressed support for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. While not all may fully comprehend the underlying reasons behind the invasion, they have consistently viewed Russia as a benevolent figure and champion of humanity. There exists no history of animosity between Russia and Libya. Libyans perceive Russia’s intervention in Ukraine as a confrontation against the US and the West, advocating for a shift away from a unipolar world order. Even those who aligned with the February revolution and subsequently joined NATO anticipate the collapse of the US and NATO through Russian actions. A survey would likely reveal that Libyans support Russia against Ukraine without being aware of the background of the conflict, simply because they perceive Ukraine as aligned with the West. Libyans are tired with the unipolar system and desire change.”¹³⁷

In this context, Russia’s Foreign Ministry published its report on “Russia’s Policy Towards World Majority”,¹³⁸ introduced this concept to refer to the developing countries of the southern hemisphere. This term diverges from the economic connotations associated with the “Global South,”

133 Grossman, Bush, and Di Resta, 2019.

134 Grossman, Bush, and Di Resta, 2019.

135 Stephanie Williams, forthcoming, Hurst Publishers.

136 Author interview, WhatsApp, 17 April 2024.

137 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

138 Sergey Karaganov et al., *Russia’s Policy towards the World Majority* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and Russia in Global Affairs, 2023).

emphasizing instead the political ties that unite countries resisting Western ideology. While claiming that the concept is not inherently anti-Western, the report explains that it advocates for liberation from powers seeking to universalize humanity based on a globalist model. This discourse undoubtedly resonates with Libya's proud sense of exceptionalism.

Religion has also proven to be a powerful tool in Russia's efforts to further discredit the Western world. A significant move in this direction was Russia's attainment of observer member status at the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in 2005, making it the first non-Muslim country to achieve this status. Subsequently, the "Russia-Islamic World" Group of Strategic Vision was created to strengthen large-scale partnerships between Russia and Muslim-majority countries. While officially framed as an initiative to harmonize cross-cultural relations and promote what Russia calls the "dialogue of civilizations," it is yet again a strategy aimed at rebalancing the global order.

At the Russia-Islamic World Forum held in Kazan in 2023, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the eastern-based Libyan government, Abdulhadi Al-Hawij stated that the partnership between Russia and Islamic countries is a transformative force aimed at establishing a new and equitable world order that prioritizes the interests of smaller nations like Libya. He added that collective will and fruitful partnerships will challenge the existing world order built on exploitation.¹³⁹ While Western countries, particularly in the EU, have been passing restricting legislations against public display of religion, Russia has intensified its efforts to court the Muslim community, signaling a notable shift in its opportunistic strategy of capitalizing on Western missteps for its benefit. Examples of this strategy include Russia's recent allowance of wearing the veil in pictures on identity cards and the export of Russian halal food to Libya.¹⁴⁰

"The Deputy Minister of Defense, who is Muslim, visited Libya five times and shared images of himself praying in African mosques, signaling clear intentions: to forge an alliance with fundamentalist Islamists, escalate conflict in Europe, fragment the European Union, and assert control over the Sahel region."

(...) Libyans previously held negative views toward the Soviet Union, perceiving it as an atheist country that opposed religion. However, perceptions have shifted, largely due to Putin's changing position. He condemns anti-Islamic acts, such as the burning of the Quran in Sweden or depictions of the Prophet, in contrast to the West, which often defends such actions as freedom of speech. Last year, Putin acknowledged Islam as the second religion in Russia, although he has been accused of employing double standards.

(...) Religion holds significant influence in Libya. If the West fails to adjust its policies and consider the sentiments of populations, it risks fostering increased animosity towards Western nations."¹⁴¹

The conflict in Gaza has presented Russia with another opportunity to build trust, capitalizing on the particular resonance of the Palestinian cause, which holds significance not only to Libyans but also for the broader Arab and Islamic community.

3.3. Russia's accelerated diplomatic and economic engagement with both sides of the conflict

Since the second half of 2023, Russia has significantly intensified its diplomatic activities in Libya, as shown by the growing number of meetings between Libyan institutional actors and Russian representatives in both the west and east of the country.¹⁴² In the East, meetings between the Haftar clan and representatives of the Russian Ministry of Defense focused on security issues related to the future of the Wagner group and the establishment of the new Africa Korps, as well as agreements to improve bilateral military cooperation. In the West, for the first time since 2019, Russia has engaged in high-level diplomatic discussions involving representatives from various ministries, notably education and economy.

This proactive engagement represents an important strategic decision by the Russian establishment. However, it can also be seen as an attempt to catch up with other foreign powers that actively re-engaged in Libya through multi-sector cooperation activities following the formation of the Government of National Unity (GNU) led by

139 The Group of Strategic Vision "Russia - Islamic world," "Libyan Foreign Minister: Russia and Islamic Countries Can Create a Just Multipolar World", 15 May 2024, <https://russia-islworld.ru/main/libyan-foreign-minister-russia-and-islamic-countries-can-create-a-just-multipolar-world-2024-05-15-41387/>.

140 The Group of Strategic Vision "Russia - Islamic world," "Russian Ambassador to Libya Confirms Work on Attracting Russian Halal Products to the Country", 6 February 2024, <https://russia-islworld.ru/en/novosti/russian-ambassador-to-libya-confirms-work-on-attracting-russian-halal-products-to-the-country-2024-02-06-39347/>.

141 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

142 Author interview, WhatsApp, 25 February 2024.

Abdelhamid Dabaiba in March 2021. Russia, far from having a strong presence in western Libya, lags significantly behind Turkey, France, Italy, Spain, and Germany in developing substantive diplomatic relations with Tripoli. Yet the profile and background of the new Libyan Prime minister, who belonged to a family known for its tight links to the Jamahiriya and who enjoyed strong personal and family social connections, including within business and economic circles,¹⁴³ likely contributed to gaining Moscow's confidence that they could benefit from his appointment.

Against this background, in February 2024, Moscow reopened its embassy in Tripoli¹⁴⁴ and announced the future opening of a consulate in Benghazi. The nomination of Ambassador Aydar Aganin, a diplomat of Tatar descent and former journalist, illustrates Moscow's effort to promote diplomatic personnel with Islamic backgrounds as part of its soft power strategy. This is how *The National Interest* described Aganin upon his appointment:

*"Aydar Rashidovich Aganin is one of Russia's best Arabists. He has served in Jordan, Iraq, Palestine, and the United States. From 2007 to 2011, he ran Russia Today's Arabic edition, which is today one of the most influential news outlets in the entire Arab world. He was one of Vladimir Putin's close advisors on the Middle East in the Russian Foreign Ministry's Policy Planning Department. As of last month, he is the Russian ambassador to Libya."*¹⁴⁵

In fact, Aganin's reputation has rapidly grown across Libya and among stakeholders from all political leanings. Described as "incredibly active" by numerous interlocutors, Moscow's representative in Tripoli seems to have done a remarkable job in promoting Russia's image so far, even among those holding negative views of Russia's political vision.

"I have personally met the Russian ambassador, who previously served in Jordan and Iraq and is fluent in Arabic. He demonstrated a deep understanding of the societal and tribal dynamics of the region, being

*a Muslim himself. Russia strategically appointed this experienced ambassador, who also had close ties to Putin. The ambassador worked closely with the president and minister of foreign affairs, promptly acting on instructions from the regime based on his reports. In contrast, in the West, it could take up to a year to act on a report from an ambassador due to bureaucratic complexities, including changes in government and convoluted chains of command."*¹⁴⁶

A key moment in the development of this new Russian strategy towards Libya was the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit that saw the participation of Libyan Presidential Council's head Mohammed Al-Menfi.¹⁴⁷ According to a Libyan government official, the summit was important for two reasons. Generally, because it was the first time a high-level Libyan western representative met with Putin. Secondly, because it paved the way for the reopening of the Russian-Libyan committee.¹⁴⁸ The Committee, headed at the time by the Minister of Oil and Gas Mohamed Aoun and tasked with increasing cooperation between the two countries, resumed its work after a three-year hiatus. Most importantly, its work focused on finalizing discussions on debt and legal settlements from the Gaddafi era between the two countries, a matter considered as a top priority for the Russians.¹⁴⁹

In addition to economic agreements, the Kremlin has increasingly invested in cultural and educational partnerships to further extend the influence of its soft power in Libya. Over the past year, several agreements have been signed with the University of Tripoli and the University of Benghazi to promote the teaching of the Russian language, as well as projects for the establishment of joint scientific centers in close cooperation with Haftar. Scholarships have also been initiated for Libyan students wishing to study in Russia. Concurrently, joint cultural projects are underway to mark the 70th anniversary of Russia-Libya diplomatic relations in 2025.

When the Russian news television Channel 360 reported on these agreements, it emphasized that Russia's initiative stems from a desire to participate in Libya's renaissance

143 These included important families and entities with long-established links to the Libyan state in key sectors, such as the oil industry and telecommunications.

144 Russia's Embassy in Tripoli was shut down in October 2013 and relocated to neighbouring Tunisia. The position of Ambassador remained vacant between November 2018 and July 2020, when Jamched Boltaev was appointed as chargé d'affaires.

145 Burak Bilgehan Özpek, "For Russia, Libya is a Land of Opportunity", *The National Interest*, 10 July 2023, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russia-libya-land-opportunity-206190>.

146 Author interview, WhatsApp, 18 April 2024.

147 Mohamed Ahmed, "Libya's Menfi calls for African economic integration at Russia-Africa Summit", *The Libya Observer*, 28 July 2023, <https://libyaobserver.ly/news/libyas-menfi-calls-african-economic-integration-russia-africa-summit>.

148 Author interview, WhatsApp, 25 February 2024.

149 Author interview, WhatsApp, 25 February 2024.

following the bloody civil war, which, according to the report, Western countries have plunged Libya into. The anti-Western narrative in Russia's foreign policy is not a new phenomenon and has been a consistent feature in its geopolitical agenda. However, the case of Libya presents a particularly receptive environment for such discourse to resonate, due to the dismal failure of Western intervention in the country since 2011.

“Personally, I’ve observed that wherever the UN operates, conflicts seem to arise. In countries where the UN is present, economic and political stability is often elusive. Despite their substantial budgets and human resources, their actions on the ground often contradict their stated mission of fostering stability and aiding displaced populations.

The Libyan conflict started with the UN resolutions 70 and 73, which established a no-fly zone, a measure that was never fully implemented. Ironically, the same countries that supported these resolutions acted in opposition to their mandates. In the Geneva conference that facilitated the establishment of the Government of National Unity [in February 2021], 75 individuals were selected without regard for whether they truly represented the Libyan people or whether they enjoyed popular support. As a people committed to peace, dignity, and sovereignty, Libyans desire stability and self-governance, with qualified individuals capable of steering the nation. However, among the 75 chosen by the UN, some do not even reside in Libya and lack awareness of the country’s social fabric and ground realities. How can such individuals be entrusted with making crucial decisions for Libya? The UN asserted that the formation of the new government would bring about stability and halt the wars. This implies that the UN possesses the capability to end conflicts. If so, why have conflicts persisted?

(...) Yes, there are doubts about whether Russia’s involvement could be positive, but many believe that at the very least, Russia’s role will not be negative. Personally, I think it’s likely to be positive because Russia’s intervention doesn’t seem driven by greed, unlike the countries involved in the 2011 intervention.”¹⁵⁰

Conclusion

Russia’s strategy, both in Libya and globally, reflects a distinct interpretation of soft power, one that contrasts sharply with Western approaches—and with the traditional conception of soft power in the Nye sense. Russian policymakers often blur the line between ‘attraction’ and ‘pressure,’ treating soft power less as a tool for cultivating genuine cultural or ideological appeal and more as a way to exert influence in a competitive, zero-sum context against the West. This is particularly evident in regions where Russia perceives Western influence to be waning or inconsistent. Using a combination of formal and informal means—including private military companies, financial interventions, and disinformation—the Kremlin has steadily positioned itself as a significant player and a possible alternative to Western states in contested areas such as the MENA region and the Sahel.

In the Libyan context, this approach has proven particularly effective. Since 2014, Russia’s policies seem to have been driven more by pragmatic opportunism than by a coherent “Grand Strategy.” While Libyan perspectives in our study varied on Moscow’s true objectives and its potential role in resolving the ongoing crisis, they consistently framed Russian policies in contrast to those of the West. In their views, this opposition has deepened over time, as the political deadlock has intensified, and Western governments’ stances have become increasingly unclear, inconsistent, and ineffective in influencing developments on the ground.

Initially struggling to identify entry points for influence within the Libyan landscape, Russia has gradually capitalized on increasing violence and instability, presented as the direct consequence of the West’s military intervention against Gaddafi’s regime in 2011. Although our interviews indicate that this viewpoint is not universally held among Libyans, they reveal that Moscow has adeptly leveraged this narrative to forge partnerships with individuals and communities—especially those from former regime constituencies—who have been stigmatized and marginalized since 2011. This strategy has allowed Russia to align itself with perceived shared grievances against the West, securing local allies in an increasingly polarized environment. Additionally, Moscow has effectively mobilized the theme of counterterrorism to justify its multi-faceted support for Haftar’s coalition after 2016, gaining further backing among Libyans. Our interviews with individuals linked to the former regime and Haftar’s forces clearly underscored this point.

150 Author interview, WhatsApp, 23 April 2024.

Unexpectedly, despite military setbacks in the 2019-2020 war—where Wagner forces fought alongside Haftar’s troops—and documented war crimes involving Russian elements, Russia’s standing among Libyans, regardless of political affiliation, does not appear to have been significantly damaged. Interviews revealed that Libyan perspectives on Russian policies were largely shaped in comparison to Western actions. Libyans consistently evaluated Russia’s behavior based on the alignment between its rhetoric and actions. Many interviewees described Moscow as adhering to its stated objectives, demonstrating loyalty to local partners even when it was not always advantageous, and focusing on consolidating its military and diplomatic influence in Libya. In this context, all interviewees regarded Russian policies as successful. However, it is important to highlight a key nuance. Libyan perceptions of Russia’s policy consistency are likely more a result of effective strategic projection than genuine coherence in its actions. This ability to project confidence and decisiveness, even when displaying opportunism, appears to be the foundation of Russia’s soft power influence in Libya.

Russia’s strategic narratives—depicting Moscow as the leader of a “World Majority” and a defender against Western imperialism—appear to resonate deeply with Libyans. Interviewees frequently referred to what they viewed as the failures of the West, particularly the United States, in enforcing political transitions through military interventions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, and beyond. They often characterized Western policies as neo-colonialist, selfish, and duplicitous, contrasting them with what they perceived as Russia’s lack of a similarly negative historical legacy. In the ongoing battle of narratives, Moscow seems to have gained the upper hand in Libya.

Does this imply that, in the eyes of Libyans, Moscow has already triumphed over the West in the competition for influence and power in Libya? None of our interviewees went so far as to claim this. On the contrary, most expressed a clear sense of the fluidity and volatility of the situation in the ongoing competition between Russia and the West, including in Libya. Several interviewees who supported the 2011 revolution and are actively promoting political pluralism and democratic governance strongly called for a renewed, more forceful commitment from European countries in Libya. They also emphasized the urgent need for Western and European nations to reflect on long-term political strategies toward Libya, rather than prioritizing reactive, uncoordinated, and frequently changing policies. There is a call for clarity and consistency.

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Russia's Strategic Narrative in Mali: Enhancing Soft Power via Informative Influence

3

Luca Raineri

Introduction: Exploring Russia's Soft Power in Africa

Over the past few years, Russia has vigorously reasserted its presence in Africa. After the first forays into Libya in 2016, then Central African Republic (CAR) in 2017-18, the string of coup d'états in the Sahelian belt has paved the way to the strengthening of Russia's influence in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Sudan and potentially Chad. The most remarkable outcome of this process has been the rapid build-up of Russian military operatives deployed in Africa – formerly known as Wagner, and now being integrated under Russia's Ministry of Defense¹⁵¹.

Interestingly, these developments have been often accompanied or preceded by intense social (and) media campaigns, bashing the West for its alleged neocolonialism and moral corruption, and advocating to turn to Russia for security partnerships. Pro-Russia informational campaigns have been observed in African countries such as the CAR, Sudan, and Madagascar since 2017-18¹⁵²; they subsequently spread to the Sahel, calling for Russia's aid in reclaiming local "sovereignty" against alleged "interference" of France, including in Mali¹⁵³ and Burkina Faso¹⁵⁴. These initiatives

have arguably contributed to paving the way to Russian entities in Sub-Saharan Africa, which puzzlingly seem to enjoy broad public support.

Although many Western observers were initially caught off guard, such initiatives have in fact long been part of Russia's repertoire. Russian authorities have made no mystery of their ambition to leverage informational influence and (social) media campaigns in order to bolster Moscow's soft power, which Joseph Nye¹⁵⁵ famously defined as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment". This approach can be traced back to the Gerasimov doctrine of 2013¹⁵⁶ and has subsequently featured in major Russian foreign policy and security policies, including Moscow's 2014 military doctrine, 2015 national security strategy, and 2016 informational security doctrine¹⁵⁷. Lately, the 2023 strategic orientation report "Russia's policy vis-à-vis the world majority" from Moscow's HSE University and Sergei Karaganov's Council for Foreign and Defense Policy further reiterates the objective of boosting Russia's public diplomacy and media influence, with particular emphasis on the Global South¹⁵⁸. While the Russophone regions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia have traditionally been the primary focus

151 Andreas Heinemann-Grüder, "The Wagner Group after Prigozhin," *Russian Analytical Digest* 303 (Zurich: ETH Center for Security Studies, 2023).

152 Marc Audinet, *Le Lion, l'Ours et les Hyènes: Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l'influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone* (Paris: IRSEM, 2021); Jason Blazakis et al., *Wagner Group: The Evolution of a Private Army* (New York: Soufan Centre, 2023); and Jason Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon and Julian Rademeyer, *The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa* (Geneva: Global Initiative Against Transnational Organised Crime, 2023).

153 Jean Le Roux, *Pro-Russian Facebook Assets in Mali Coordinated Support for Wagner Group, Anti-Democracy Protests, Digital Forensic Research Lab Report* (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, 2022); and Marc Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, *A Foreign Policy by Proxies? The Two Sides of Russia's Presence in Mali* (Paris: IRSEM, 2022).

154 Tim Eckles, "The Consequences of Russian Disinformation: Examples in Burkina Faso," *Wilson Center Africa Programme Blogpost*, 22 January 2024, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/consequences-russian-disinformation-examples-burkina-faso/>

155 Joseph S. Nye, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008), 94.

156 Thomas Schnauffer, "Redefining Hybrid Warfare: Russia's Non-linear War against the West," *Journal of Strategic Security* 10, no. 1 (2017): 17-31.

157 Audinet, 2021.

158 Marlène Laruelle, "Dés-Occidentaliser le monde: la doctrine Karaganov," *Le Grand Continent*, 20 April 2024, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/04/20/desoccidentaliser-la-majorite-mondiale-la-doctrine-karaganov/>

of Moscow's soft power efforts¹⁵⁹, in fact, Sub-Saharan Africa is emerging as a crucial front in this struggle for influence¹⁶⁰.

Noting these developments, this study examines the strategic narratives Russia employs to enhance its soft power in Africa, and how these narratives are received by the target audience. It looks in particular at the case of Mali, which proved especially momentous to Russia's entrenchment in Africa. Unlike in CAR, Sudan and Madagascar previously, where the West's ostensible reluctance to engage left room to Russia's intervention, in Mali Russia had to wrestle its (s) way against the wishes – and the warnings – of the West, particularly France. In addition, the strong partnership between Mali's military junta and their Russian aides eventually set an example for the broader Sahel region: in 2022 and 2023 Burkina Faso and Niger respectively went through military coup d'états, cheered by local supporters waving Russian flags, resulting in the ousting of the French¹⁶¹. One could therefore argue that Mali provides a quintessential case of Moscow's aggressive tactics to enhance its soft power in Africa though the savvy leveraging of informational influence.

The study proceeds as follows. The next section provides an overview of pro-Russia media and social media campaigns in Mali. A brief methodological discussion outlines the analytical framework and data collection methods used. The main empirical sections deal with the data analysis and findings regarding, respectively, Russia's strategic narrative in Mali, and the latter's reception by the Malians. The conclusion summarizes the main findings and suggests avenues for further research.

1. The Genealogy of Pro-Russia (Social) Media Campaigns in Mali

In Mali, calls for greater security cooperation with Russia have been observed since 2017. Mali was then grappling with a persistent jihadist insurgency, with the efforts of the

Malian government and international support spearheaded by France proving largely ineffective. In this context activists praised Russia for its perceived capacity to resolutely mount muscular counterinsurgencies and support vulnerable regimes against emboldened jihadist organizations, just as Moscow did with Syria's al-Assad against the so-called Islamic State. Accordingly, the *Groupe des Patriotes du Mali* (GPM) launched campaigns featuring Russian flags and symbols, engaged the Russian ambassador Alexei Doulian in their events, and championed political sovereignty and traditional values against alleged Western, particularly French, interference¹⁶². At that time, however, Moscow appeared more sympathetic than proactive, although reports suggest that “Russian trolls” reverberated and amplified GPM's campaigns online since 2018¹⁶³.

Pro-Russia social (and) media activism intensified leading up to the legislative elections initially scheduled for late 2018, but then repeatedly postponed until spring 2020. New civil society organizations emerged in 2019 and 2020, celebrating Mali's patriotic and martial virtues while advocating for the withdrawal of French and UN troops. “Within this context, the DFRLab identified a coordinated network of five pages that shared narratives that promoted Russian interests while disparaging the West, and France in particular”¹⁶⁴. This network amassed tens of thousands of followers, while exhibiting suspicious coordination with almost simultaneous cross-posting. Meta's subsequent investigation revealed that many of these Facebook and Instagram accounts were linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin¹⁶⁵. By 2021, these pages began endorsing Wagner security services as an alternative to the French military¹⁶⁶.

Russia's presence in the Malian (social) media landscape further intensified in 2020 and 2021, coinciding with civil society protests against the alleged corruption of Mali's leaders. These dynamics eventually led to the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita in August 2020, and the establishment of a “transitional” military junta led by Assimi Goita since May 2021. Amidst social and political turmoil, observers noticed the growing ties between at least one

159 Michael Gorham, “Virtual Russophonia: Language Policy as ‘Soft Power’ in the New Media Age,” *Digital Icons: Studies in Russian, Eurasian and Central European New Media* 5 (2011): 23-48; and Marlene Laruelle, *The “Russian World”: Russia's Soft Power and Geopolitical Imagination* (Washington, D.C.: Center on Global Interests, 2015).

160 Kevin Limonier and Marlene Laruelle, “Russia's African Toolkit: Digital Influence and Entrepreneurs of Influence,” *Orbis* 65, no. 3 (2021): 452-473.

161 Héni Nsaibia and Caleb Weiss, “Oil on the Jihadi Fire: The Repercussions of a Wagner Group Deployment to Burkina Faso,” *CTC Sentinel* 16, no. 1 (2023): 1-13.

162 Le Roux, 2022.

163 Gonzalo Soto-Mayor, Admire Mare and Victor Onanina, “Comprendre la désinformation en Afrique,” *Le Grand Continent*, 26 October 2023, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2023/10/26/comprendre-la-desinformation-en-afrique/>

164 Le Roux, 2022.

165 Elian Peltier, Adam Satariano, and Lynsey Chutel, “How Putin Became a Hero in African TV,” *The New York Times*, 13 April 2023.

166 Le Roux, 2022.

Malian broadcaster – the webpage MaliActu – and RIA FAN – the flagship outlet of the Prigozhin-owned conglomerate Patriot Media Group¹⁶⁷: MaliActu’s citations of RIA FAN’s dispatches increased, while RIA FAN amplified its coverage of Mali, often sourcing news from MaliActu. This does not imply that MaliActu, or any other Malian media, was entirely or even partially controlled by Prigozhin, let alone by the Russian state. It is however in line with the call that Russia’s special representative for Middle East and Africa Mikhail Bogdanov made at the 2019 Russia-Africa summit in Sochi to step up interaction, cooperation and exchanges between African press agencies and Russian state-owned media agencies RT and Sputnik.

In late 2021, Goita’s junta eventually requested Russia’s security cooperation. Moscow dispatched “military instructors”, whom Western observers promptly identified as Wagner operatives. Facing growing hostility, Paris decided to recall its substantial military contingent stationed in Mali since 2013 as part of operations Serval, Barkhane, and Takuba. In February 2022, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine only hastened the withdrawal of French forces and other Western contingents contributing to the UN stabilization operation in Mali MINUSMA. The last French troops left Mali in August 2022.

The international polarization resulting from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led to significant reconfigurations in the global media landscape and Moscow’s informational influence within it. The Russian state-owned media outlet RT – funded in 2005 and subsequently become the most prominent actor of Russia’s informational influence worldwide – was targeted by Western sanctions designed to inhibit the spread of Moscow’s war propaganda. RT’s headquarters in the West were shut down and banned from broadcasting, including the Paris-based RT France. Since its inauguration in 2017, RT France had however managed to considerably increase its audience and followers in French-speaking North and West Africa¹⁶⁸. One could therefore argue that it was a combination of political needs and market opportunities that prompted the RT leadership to seek Africa-based alternatives for its French-speaking outlet. Mali appeared to be the primary target. According to Audinet and Dreyfus’s report¹⁶⁹, top managers, anchormen and anchorwomen of RT France visited Mali first in March

2022, when they met the boss of MaliActu, and then in April, when they spoke with the junta strongman and Defense Minister Sadio Camara. There is however no indication that these talks have resulted in any formal agreement.

The choice of RT executives appears instead to have befallen on a Cameroon-based broadcaster, Afrique Média TV (<https://afriquemediatv.com>), which has reportedly formalized a partnership with the French-speaking Russian media since December 2022¹⁷⁰. Founded in 2011, Afrique Média TV stands out as an all but obvious option of RT’s efforts to enlarge its footprint in French-speaking Africa. Since before its partnership with RT was confirmed, observers noticed how “Afrique Média has produced an array of content targeting ‘foreign influences’ portrayed as eager to ‘destroy Africa’. Overall, the outlet’s editorial stance can be described as verging on conspiracy theory with a patina of radical pan-Africanism that blames Westerners – especially the French – for every problem facing the African continent”¹⁷¹. Notably, Afrique Média TV was once headed by pan-Africanist activist Kemi Séba, who repeatedly praised Putin’s efforts against French “neocolonialism” in Africa and was an honorary guest at the 2023 Russian-African interparliamentary session; and it was supported by Luc Michel, a self-described Afrique Média TV anchor well known in French-speaking pro-Russian nationalist networks. Based on these observations, Limonier and Laruelle¹⁷² argue that “he [Michel] and Afrique Média are de facto echo chambers for Russian narratives”: this arguably makes of the latter the perfect unit of analysis of this study, and even more so since the establishment of a formal partnership between Afrique Média TV and RT.

2. Methodology: Unit of Analysis and Data Sources

Many analyses of Russia’s informational influence often diverge in focus. While they aim to explore Russia’s soft power, their empirical emphasis frequently rests on social media campaigns promoted by non-state actors, such as Russian oligarchs Yevgeny Prigozhin, Konstantin Malofeev, and Konstantin Pikalov, or pro-Russian non-Russians like Kemi Séba and Nathalie Yamb.

167 Audinet, 2021; and Marc Audinet and Emmanuel Dreyfus, *A Foreign Policy by Proxies? The Two Sides of Russia’s Presence in Mali* (Paris: IRSEM, 2022).

168 Limonier and Laruelle, 2021.

169 Audinet and Dreyfus, 2022.

170 Peltier, Satariano, and Chutel, 2023.

171 Limonier and Laruelle, 2021, 413.

172 Limonier and Laruelle, 2021, 414.

Of course, one could argue – as the investigative networks *Bellingcat* and *Proekt* have persuasively done¹⁷³ – that such individuals and their networks are mere proxies of the Kremlin, who exploits informal ties to operate under a veneer of plausible deniability¹⁷⁴. On the other hand, though, Limonier and Laruelle¹⁷⁵ highlight the agency of independent African media entrepreneurs, who “(mis)appropriated Russia-produced informational content to advance their own political agendas, which were often quite remote from Moscow’s interests and strategic preoccupations”, and more attracted to sensationalistic (and royalty-free) clickbait content for revenue-generation purposes. Concurring with this view, Soto-Mayor¹⁷⁶ underline that “influencers and local media, and not Russia (which only supported them), were the main producers and spreaders of fake news in Mali”. Audinet¹⁷⁷, too, admits that the action attributable to the formal foreign intelligence of Moscow remains difficult to document, while Russian authorities have repeatedly disavowed “externalized initiatives” led by “non-state actors”. Consistently with this view, the 2021 Africa policy paper of the Russian Foreign Ministry features an explicit distancing from “Russian hybrid actors”¹⁷⁸.

In light of these complexities, this study shifts its focus from non-state social media campaigns to official Russian state media targeting African audiences. Since formalizing a partnership with French-speaking RT in December 2022, Afrique Média TV can in fact be assumed as a de facto Russian-state proxy, targeting French-speaking African audiences to enhance Moscow’s informational influence and soft power in the region. Analyzing Afrique Média TV’s content thus provides a valuable approach to address an enduring gap in the extant research.

In particular, the analysis examines a sample made of all the written articles tagged “Mali” which have been published on the website <https://afriquemediatv.com> in 2023. This is the first year in which Russia state-owned media have attempted to establish and enlarge their footprint

among French-speaking African audiences. It is therefore plausible that pro-Russia media narratives would stand out more clearly over this period. 2023 was also a momentous year for the Sahel region in particular: Burkina Faso’s junta severed its ties with France since January, and strengthened its cooperation with Russia subsequently, while in Niger a military putsch toppled the elected President Bazoum in July, brought to power a military junta and ousted French forces, leading to the creation of an alliance of like-minded pro-Russia military regimes in the region – the *Alliance des Etats du Sahel* (AES). The query of Mali-tagged articles on Afrique Média TV website in 2023 yielded 207 articles providing a sufficiently large sample to detect trends and critical junctures while remaining manageable for qualitative analysis by a context-competent human agent.

The analytical framework for so doing is provided by Coticchia and Catanzaro’s conceptualisation of strategic narrative¹⁷⁹. Stemming from the view that the public makes sense of security issues through the use of stories, strategic narratives can be defined as “compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn”¹⁸⁰ or, more simply, “framework for interpreting war-related events”¹⁸¹. Accordingly, strategic narratives abide by the rules of storytelling: they are performed to create empathy, identification and (per-)suasion in a target audience; they federate different events through (selective) emplotment, with a view to pooling a diverse repertoire into a compelling, unified storyline; and they tend to “connect to grand, deeply culturally embedded, views of history” that a specific audience “in broad terms, readily understands, identify with, or feel little need to question” because “they ‘resonate’ or ‘ring true’”¹⁸². Building on this, the analysis identifies the main narrative traits of each article, including protagonists, antagonists, and their respective objectives and attributes.

The subsequent empirical section focuses on the reception of Russia’s strategic narrative by the Malian audience. To

173 See Audinet, 2021.

174 Mark Galeotti, “Hybrid, Ambiguous, and Non-linear? How New Is Russia’s ‘New Way of War?’” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 282-301.

175 Limonier and Laruelle, 2021, 410.

176 Soto-Mayor, Mare and Onanina, 2023.

177 Audinet, 2021, 43.

178 cited in Audinet and Dreyfus, 2022, 61.

179 Fabrizio Coticchia and Andrea Catanzaro, “The Fog of Words: Assessing the Problematic Relationship between Strategic Narratives, (Master) Frames and Ideology,” *Media, War & Conflict* 15, no. 4 (2022): 483-503.

180 Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation in Strategic Affairs* (London: Routledge, 2006), 22.

181 Vera Tolz and Stephen Hutchings, “Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine, and Russia’s Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 5 (2023), 349.

182 Jeffrey Halverson, H. L. Goodall and Steven Corman, *Master Narratives of Islamist Extremism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 13.

this end, it analyses data collected through a purposefully designed survey, featuring a 44-item closed-ended questionnaire on relevant aspects of Russia's strategic narrative. Mali-based research assistants have administered the survey in person to a sample of 100 respondents, 50% of which based in the capital city of Mali, Bamako, and 50% in Youwarou, a mid-sized town in the Malian central region of Mopti. This sampling was designed to help explore the oft-repeated yet seldom tested view that ethnic and regional identities may affect Malians' perception of Russia and reception of its strategic narrative: on the one hand, in fact, pro-Russia activism is remarkable in Bamako's rallies and nationalist networks, yet much less visible elsewhere in the country; on the other hand, there is no shortage of reports indicating that Malians living in the region of Mopti, including in the Youwarou area, tend to see Bamako's policies as discriminating, jihadists as potential protectors, and government agents as abusive (Raineri 2018), a view that might arguably extend to the latter's allies from Russia. Data collection has taken place in March and April 2024. Two methodological caveats apply: firstly, the small size of the survey's sample is clearly non-representative, yet hopefully capable of providing valuable indications which could be further ascertained in subsequent studies; secondly, and in line with Li Ji's approach to soft power¹⁸³, this study limits itself to ascertaining whether and to what extent Russia's strategic narratives and Malians' perception align, but it steers away from hard-to-substantiate claims of causality.

3. Russia's Strategic Narrative in Mali: A Content Analysis of Afrique Média TV Articles

The 2023 "Mali"-tagged publications on Afrique Média TV's website comprise 207 articles, unevenly distributed throughout the year: approximately 40% in the first quarter, 20% in the second, 17% in the third, and 23% in the fourth. Interestingly, the tempo of the publications doesn't appear to align closely to what arguably amount to the international breaking news on Mali: June and July only feature 25 articles combined, although during these two months the withdrawal of MINUSMA was requested and initiated, Prigozhin-led mutiny occurred in Russia, and the Russia-Africa Summit was held in Saint-Petersburg.

Most articles are news reports with a few op-eds. The most recurring thematic clusters deal with the withdrawal of MINUSMA (37 articles), Malian government initiatives –

such as the celebration of the "day of regained sovereignty", reception of weapons, inspection of troops, participation to summits, etc. (33 articles); jihadists' attacks (25 articles); and Mali's relations with foreign countries, including Burkina Faso and/or Niger (30), Russia (28), France (22), Ivory Coast (7) and the Economic Community of West Africa States – ECOWAS (6).

The main protagonist is the Malian government, appearing in 110 articles (53% of the sample), either as a unified entity or through specific members, predominantly President of the Transition Col. Assimi Goita. The Malian armed forces (FAMA) appear as protagonists in 21 articles, and a few more articles feature other "security forces" and/or their leaders. Other less prominent protagonists include the United Nations, including MINUSMA (18 articles), and Russia (14 articles).

Some articles feature one or more helper(s), who support(s) the protagonist in achieving its goal. Among the helpers of the Malian government, one finds Russia in 23 articles (that is, slightly less than half of the articles featuring the Malian government as protagonist), and "Wagner" in 5 articles. Among the helpers of the FAMA, one finds Wagner in 9 articles, and Russia in another one. When Russia is the protagonist, the Malian government serves as a helper in 5 articles. MINUSMA, when featured as a protagonist, generally lacks external helpers.

Afrique Média TV articles also depict an array of different antagonists. The most frequently cited are "terrorist armed groups", generically referred to in 24 articles, and more specifically as JNIM (that is, the Al-Qaeda affiliated Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin) in another 7 articles. France is the antagonist in 15 articles, with its government, military, or media being highlighted. The third sizeable group of recurrent antagonists refers to the Tuareg rebel armed groups (19 articles), more often designated as the umbrella coalition of the *Cadre Stratégique Permanent* (CSP), sometimes with the name of specific groups or simply as "Tuaregs". ECOWAS and MINUSMA feature as antagonists in 15 and 13 articles respectively. Lastly, the "West" is the antagonist of 5 articles.

Looking at the helper(s) of the antagonists, the widespread conspiracy that terrorist groups would receive help by France is only obscurely alluded to in the sample, but hardly ever explicitly mentioned. However, France, the UN, ECOWAS, and occasionally the US or "the West" appear to assist each other in opposing the narrative's protagonists.

183 Li Ji, "Measuring Soft Power," in *The Routledge Handbook of Soft Power*, edited by Nicholas Chitty, Li Ji, and Gary Rawnsley (London: Routledge, 2023), 101-114.

Moreover, approximately one-third of articles depicting Tuareg rebels as antagonists suggest they are supported by terrorist groups or religious leaders.

The dyads of protagonist and antagonist roles also help clarify the strategic narrative. When the Malian government is the protagonist, the main antagonist is France, featuring in more than one quarter of the relevant articles; then come the UN (with MINUSMA), Tuareg rebel groups, and terrorist groups. When the protagonist is Assimi Goita specifically, the main antagonists are terrorist groups and ECOWAS. When the FAMA are protagonist, the main antagonists are Tuareg rebel groups and terrorist groups. In the few cases when Russia is the protagonist, the antagonist is often framed as “foreign forces”, the “West”, “the French government” or MINUSMA.

Adjectives and objectives further characterize the narrative’s main figures. The Malian government is often characterized by the semantic fields of sovereignty (“sovereignty”, “autonomy”, “liberation”), power (“in power”, “hierarchy”, “authority”), and militarism (“junta”, “putschist”, “military”, “colonels”). Its actions are typically presented as assertive and focused on protecting the Malian population from France interference and terrorist attacks. Confirming this narrative with a peculiar celebratory tone, President Goita is defined as “determined”, “strong”, “pan-Africanist”, but also as “the liberator of Africa” and “the man who contributed to Mali’s renaissance”. Mali’s armed forces are described through qualifiers combining a sense of pride (“republican army”, “bulwark of sovereignty”, “safeguards territorial integrity”, “loyalist”, “yearning for peace”), strength (“protector”, “reassuring”, “smart”), but also weaknesses (“targeted”, “unprepared”, “lacking equipment”, “dependent”, “vulnerable”).

Non-state armed groups, including jihadists and Tuareg rebels, are characterized as “enemies”, “bandits”, “militants” and “threats”. The narrative often blurs the distinction between jihadist and Tuareg groups, with occasional references to Tuaregs as “terrorists” or colluding with them.

Russia is characterized as the right-hand-man of the narrative’s protagonist Mali. Russia’s epithets shape a coherent semantic field, including “friend”, “ally”, “reliable”, “present”, “supportive”, “reassuring”, and “constructive”. Russia’s undertakings consist of “supporting”, “helping” and “cooperating with” Mali; “decorating”, “congratulating” and “meeting with” the Malian authorities; as well as “confirming” and “strengthening” the partnership between the two countries. This contrasts sharply with France’s portrayal. References to colonialism abound, repeatedly stressing that

France is Mali’s “former colonial power”, yet still featuring a “colonial mentality” and a “neocolonial force”. Adjectives describing France and its attitude include “nefarious”, “biased”, “treacherous”, “fraudulent”, “unfriendly”, “envious”, “exploitative” and overall intent on conspiring to destabilize Mali and the Sahel; criticizing Mali, its government and its (Russian) allies; and fueling disinformation campaigns.

Looking at international and regional organizations, MINUSMA’s qualifiers invariably convey feelings straddling across impotence and impudence, such as “ineffective”, “constraint”, “incapacity”, “pushed beyond its limits”, “failure”, “disappointment”, “undesirable”, “detrimental”, “manipulative”; in a few cases, it is also described as “manufactured by France” or “adhering to the French strategy”. ECOWAS is described as “biased”, “threatening”, “uncompromising”, “assertive”, “criticized” and “concerned”.

Overall, the analysis of Afrique Média TV articles reveals a coherent strategic narrative promoted by Russia in Mali. The main themes of the articles highlight a great interest in matters of domestic security and foreign policy (while incidentally overlooking issues of economic development and rule of law). The main protagonist of this narrative is the Malian government. This is sometimes presented as a unified entity, sometimes it is personified through its most prominent leader, the President of the Transition Col. Assimi Goita. A variant of this master narrative puts the Malian armed forces in the limelight. Irrespective of what specific character is at the centre of the narrative stage, the adjectives and objectives used immerse the protagonist in an aura of strength, unity, dignity, resoluteness and exceptionality. These features contribute to defining the main traits of the Malian regime in terms of sovereignism, populism and militarism.

The protagonist, Mali, confronts two primary categories of foes, or antagonists. The first includes non-state armed groups – jihadist terrorists and Tuareg rebels – threatening Mali’s sovereignty and security. Russia’s strategic narrative tends to conflate these groups, and flirts with conspiracy theories implying that they are supported by malevolent foreign state actors, notably France. The second antagonist category consists of an alleged coalition of foreign state actors and international organizations threatening the stability of Mali and the Sahel. This coalition is purportedly led by France, with ECOWAS, MINUSMA, the US and “the West” as supporting actors. The ultimate aim of this alliance is allegedly the perpetuation of “colonialism”, be it the legacy of a former colonial power mentality, or the ambition of neocolonial domination.

To counter these formidable threats, Mali is presented as flanked by a strong and reliable partner, Russia. This is described as a loyal right-hand-man – more akin to Lancelot than to Sancho Panza: generous, supportive, encouraging. Russia and its government stand by Mali and its President, just as much as Wagner forces stand by Malian armed forces: the former confront France and its “colonial” alliance, while the latter mainly confront “the terrorists”. Importantly, Russia does not position itself at the center of the narrative; instead, Mali remains the hero. Russia is proactive and supportive, but doesn’t want to (appear to) take the driving seat. It is depicted as standing in the background, ready to assist Mali in achieving its goals. One may argue that this smart narrative device helps prevent and deflect the very same charges of paternalism and hidden colonial agenda directed at the antagonist.

4. Malians’ Perception of Russia’s Strategic Narrative

The small-scale survey underpinning this study, albeit non-representative, provides valuable insights into Malians’ perceptions of Russia’s strategic narratives. The sample comprises 100 respondents: 53% men and 47% women, mostly aged 26-40 (47%) and 41-60 (38%), with a minority aged 18-25 or over 60. With a view to capturing urban-rural and center-periphery divides, half of the respondents are from Bamako, the other half from Youwarou, a mid-sized town in the conflict-ridden Mopti region. In Bamako, respondents include 44% Bambara/Mandé, 18% Fulani, and 14% Dogon, with other minorities. In Youwarou, 94% are Fulani and 6% Tuareg. Occupations vary, with public servants, employees, and traders prevalent in Bamako, while farmers and herders dominate in Youwarou. Education levels are higher in Bamako, while in Youwarou, 86% have informal or no education. Despite these differences, most respondents consider themselves poor or very poor.

Looking at security perceptions, the overall majority of the respondents believe security has improved over the last two years – though less markedly so in Youwarou, where none see significant improvement (versus 48% in Bamako), 46% see slight improvement, and 46% see no change. The main security threats are clearly represented by armed attacks (52%) and banditry (20%), largely attributed to jihadist groups, especially in Youwarou. In both localities, the main bulwarks of protection of the population include state authorities (47%) and security and defence forces (42%). The latter, in particular, are largely perceived as protectors (62%) and helpers (28%), and only very seldom depicted as racketeers, coercive or abusive.

The survey indicates broad support for Goita’s military regime and its ideology. Respondents claim to endorse pan-Africanism (90% agree, 65% strongly so), and appear to believe that post-coups, Sahelian countries are freer (85% agree, 70% strongly so), more respected internationally (86% agree, 50% strongly so), and less corrupt (81% agree, 37% strongly so).

The majority of respondents consider instead democratic governance (48%), the Algiers agreement (73%) and economic capitalism (75%) as Western impositions, especially in Youwarou. This view echoes the strategic narrative underpinning *Afrique Média TV* articles – with the notable exception of capitalism, which doesn’t stand out as a central feature of today’s anti-imperialist rhetoric. Human rights, women’s rights, and secularism show a divergence: Youwarou’s respondents mainly view these as Western impositions, while Bamako’s see them as “guarantees of freedom and peace”. This divergence arguably reflects the different social milieus in which respondents are enmeshed, whereby Youwarou’s pre-existing social conservatism and Bamako’s urban cosmopolitanism outweigh the influence of state propaganda.

The surveyed perceptions about foreign policy and security cooperation matters, however, reveal a more complex picture. Some leading themes resonate with the pro-Russia strategic narratives featured in *Afrique Média TV* articles. Two thirds of the overall respondents consider France as the main culprit of neocolonialism in Africa, followed by (and possibly in complicity with) “transnational corporations” (20%), “African corrupted elites” (10%) and international financial institutions (3%). Interestingly, Russia, China, or even the United States are never mentioned in this regard. Accordingly, the main reason explaining France’s military intervention in Mali is seen as resource exploitation (80%), and the ambition to strengthen its geopolitical influence (12%). Many respondents also view France as the main international accomplice of jihadists (43%) and Tuareg rebels (52%), followed by Algeria (31% and 45% respectively). The malicious role attributed to France resonates with the strategic narrative of *Afrique Média TV* articles. Algeria’s enduring prominence in the Malians’ perceptions, however, contrasts with it, and is arguably the legacy of historic patterns and pre-existing narratives (Keenan 2009; Lecocq 2010). It is also noteworthy that hardly any respondents support the idea that there is no main international accomplice worth mentioning either in the case of the jihadists or the Tuareg rebels, although the questionnaire offered the opportunity of so doing. The disregard for local agency highlights how conspiracy theories are widespread in Mali.

Russia, instead, is perceived by the overall majority of the respondents (58%) as the main international actor capable of helping Africa achieve its goals, followed by China (34%) – while France is mentioned just twice in this regard, the UN and the EU once each, and the US never. Accordingly, Russia’s military intervention is primarily seen as aiding Malian forces against jihadists (88%), with few citing geopolitical ambitions (6%) or resource exploitation (5%). An overwhelming majority (95%) see Russia as Mali’s most effective security partner and the preferred partner should Mali authorize a foreign military base on its territory (82%). The identification with Russia, moreover, transcends Mali’s and Africa’s borders. Asked to position themselves in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, 73% of the respondents claim to stand in solidarity with Russia, half of which strongly so.

The survey results feature, however, a few conflicting observations that contribute to cracking the otherwise flat dichotomy which, in both Afrique Média TV’s narratives and Malians’ perceptions, depicts Russia as the champion and France as the villain. Locality-based data disaggregation makes these contrasts more apparent. In Bamako, the Russian security partners of Mali’s forces are mainly seen, consistently with the dominant narrative, as protectors (50% of local respondents) and helpers (36%). In Youwarou, though, they are predominantly viewed as aggressors (42%) and racketeers (36%), while only a small minority (16%) sees them as protectors. Similarly, the French security partners of Mali’s forces are mostly considered coercive (44%) and aggressors (18%) by Bamako respondents; in Youwarou, they are mostly viewed as protectors (44%) but also racketeers (42%). Perceptions of the UN also differ: in Bamako, the UN is seen as driven by resource exploitation (48%) and seeking geopolitical influence (20%); in Youwarou, instead, it is viewed as helping fight jihadists (46%) and supporting peacebuilding (38%), while only 14% cite resource exploitation. Furthermore, the majority of Bamako respondents unsurprisingly consider that among all of Mali’s security partners Russia is the most respectful of Mali’s sovereignty, the least corrupted, and the most concerned about local people’s rights. By contrast, Youwarou respondents consider the UN (54%) and even France (38%) as more respectful of Mali’s sovereignty than Russia (4%); Russia, instead, is viewed as the most corrupted of Mali’s partner (56%), before France (44%), as well as the least concerned about local people’s rights – ranking last with zero mentions, after the EU (48%), the UN (40%) and France (12%).

Overall, these observations indicate that, while France remains largely discredited across Mali, and stigmatized for allegedly being self-servient and ineffective, Russia is far from being unanimously appreciated. Moscow is largely viewed as a strong and loyal partner, determined at helping Mali restore security and effective at fighting jihadists. However, closer to the theater of combat operations and deployments, Russian forces are also viewed as violent, exploitative and disrespectful of Malians’ rights and sovereignty. By contrast, the UN’s respectful attitude features a higher appreciation than previously expected. These findings contribute to questioning the reception of Russia’s strategic narratives as well as the impact and coverage of its informational influence.

Conclusion

Noting the puzzling rise of Russia’s popularity among African audiences in the past few years, this article has addressed the interrelated questions of what are the strategic narratives promoted by Russia to enhance its soft power, and how these are received by the target audience, focusing in particular on the key case of Mali.

The first question is answered by analyzing a sample of 207 articles posted over the year 2023 on the website of Afrique Média TV, a Cameroon-based broadcaster which has become the official partner of RT French-speaking channel since December 2022. The findings point to a coherent strategic narrative emerging from the sample and its emplotment. It portrays the Malian military regime as a hero fighting for national security and sovereignty against non-state armed groups, including jihadist terrorists and Tuareg rebels – sometimes overlapping and fused together – and a malevolent coalition of foreign states and Western-backed organizations. France is cast as the primary antagonist, obscurely conspiring with jihadists and Tuareg rebels to destabilize Mali for (neo-)colonial purposes. In contrast, Russia and Wagner forces are depicted as loyal allies, supporting Mali (’s regime) in achieving its goals. Not occupying the centre of the narrative stage helps deflect the impression of the paternalism attributed to colonial powers.

Interestingly, these observations echo the findings of recent studies on this topic. Scholars have demonstrated that the narrative of (neo-)colonialism, however distorted, is at the heart of Russia’s public diplomacy and informational influence efforts to enhance its soft power abroad, and

especially in Africa¹⁸⁴ (Abrahamsen 2020; Tolz and Hutchings 2023; Marangé 2024). Building on this, one may argue that Russia's strategic narrative is successful precisely because it taps into the repertoire of (neo-)colonialism and its enduring legacy in Africa (Tull 2021): it "feels true" because it resonates with "deeply culturally embedded, views of history", as Halverson et al. (2011, 13) observed.

The second question driving this research has contributed to assessing the truthfulness of such a claim. The findings of a small-scale security perceptions' survey run in Bamako and Youwarou suggest a considerable alignment between Russia's strategic narrative targeting Mali, and Malians' perceptions. Malians appear by and large supportive of the incumbent regime, its leader, and its ideology combining militarism, sovereignism and pan-Africanism. They tend to consider Russia as a loyal partner, and very effective in addressing Malians' concerns about security and territorial integrity. By contrast, France is viewed as fostering neocolonialism, driven by the greedy exploitation of Mali's natural resources, and complicit with jihadist groups and Tuareg rebels.

Locality-based data disaggregation, however, reveals considerable divergences in the Malians' security perceptions, cracking the apparent consensus on Russia's strategic narrative in the country. Perceptions of safety and trust in the regime are considerably lower among respondents in the region of Mopti. Unlike in the rest of the country, here Russian forces are predominantly perceived by the respondents as aggressors and racketeers, widely corrupted and disrespectful of Malians' rights and sovereignty. By contrast, security cooperation by the UN, the EU and even France is viewed more favorably.

The study acknowledges the limitations of its methodology, noting that its findings are indicative rather than representative. Nonetheless, it suggests that ethnic and regional identities significantly shape Malians' perceptions of Russia's (soft) power: its strategic narrative appears more persuasive among politicized nationalist networks active on social media and in the capital but less convincing among those who are less exposed to (social) media yet live in conflict-affected regions like Mopti. Further studies might corroborate and consolidate these findings by surveying larger and more generalizable samples of Malians' perceptions, with a view to provide a better understanding of how public opinion is influenced and polarized amidst the fog of (hybrid) war.

184 Tolz and Hutchings, 2023; Rita Abrahamsen, "Internationalists, Sovereignists, Nativists: Contending Visions of World Order in Pan-Africanism," *Review of International Studies* 46, no. 1 (2020): 45-64; and Camille Marangé, "Un nouvel impérialisme masqué: Poutine et le retour de la rhétorique 'anticoloniale,'" *Le Grand Continent*, 10 March 2024, <https://legrandcontinent.eu/fr/2024/03/10/un-nouvel-imperialisme-masque-poutine-et-le-retour-de-la-rhetorique-anticoloniale/>

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Russia's Soft Power Strategies in the Mena Region and Africa: The Case of Algeria

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Introduction

In the last few years, North Africa has become a battleground for intense competition among great powers, with growing rivalry playing out in both the geopolitical and the geo-economic fields. Russia has emerged as one of the leading actors in this struggle, proactively exploiting opportunities to enhance its interests and often securing significant strategic gains with limited resource investment. Moscow has often succeeded in bolstering its influence by leveraging local dynamics through deployment of hard and soft power.

This has been particularly true in the case of Libya, a country that since the fall of the Gaddafi regime has been ridden by conflict and instability. But similar strategies have been deployed in more stable nations, where great power competition has primarily been of an economic and strategic nature. In these countries, Russia's aim has been to secure, consolidate, or disrupt strategic alignments, in ways that would further its position vis-à-vis the West. Algeria is probably the most significant example of such countries.

Moscow often describes the relationship between the two nations as a “long friendship that must be cemented.” Conversely, Algeria views its strategic relationship with Moscow as a key component of its foreign policy. Algiers remains a strong supporter of Russia's role in the international arena, and the positions of the two countries are often closely aligned. At the same time, Algeria is a historical leader of non-alignment and recently advocates for multi-alignment in its international relations¹⁸⁵. This pursuit of strategic autonomy occasionally leads to disagreements

between the two countries, as has recently been the case on issues related to the security of North Africa and the Sahel.

In the economic realm, the Russia-Algeria relationship is characterized by a mix of historical path-dependence and emerging divergent dynamics. Capitalizing on Algeria's historical dependence in the military sector, Russia has attempted to deepen economic ties by expanding partnerships to other sectors. However, the results have been limited so far, as Algeria is more interested in attracting partners that can assist in modernizing its economy and diversifying it away from hydrocarbons. Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has heightened Algeria's role as a competitor to Russia in oil and gas production, increasing Algeria's strategic importance as an alternative supplier of gas to Italy and Europe. The combination of these factors points to a Russian-Algerian relationship that is strong but nuanced and non-exclusive.

While Moscow feels relatively confident about Algeria's pro-Russia stance, consolidating this historic partnership remains an important strategic goal, with soft power being a key instrument to achieve it. Against this backdrop, Algeria represents an interesting case study to explore the role of Russian soft power in North Africa.

In the initial part of this chapter, we will focus on analyzing the role of discursive practices and how they contribute to the formation of strategic narratives and diplomatic postures. We will examine the strategic narratives embedded in official statements and speeches during state visits between Algiers and Moscow. These narratives are

185 Like other countries of the “Global South”, particularly regional and middle powers, Algeria is in a phase of adapting and consolidating its foreign policy doctrine for its strategic repositioning on the international scene. In this context, Algeria seems to be seeking to expand its spheres of influence and leverage its agency, engaging with multiple global powers without being tied to any single bloc. See: Chikhaoui, Arslan (2022). “The Non-Alignment Paradigm of Algeria's Foreign Policy”. The Institute of New Europe. <https://ine.org.pl/en/the-non-alignment-paradigm-of-algerias-foreign-policy/> and Ishmael, Len (2023). “The New South in a Multipolar World Multi-Alignment or Fence Sitting?” Policy Paper, Policy Center for the New South, <https://www.policycenter.ma/publications/new-south-multipolar-world-multi-alignment-or-fence-sitting>

crafted to influence perceptions and build favorable images, aligning with broader strategic objectives. Next, we will test these discursive practices by examining the actual state of the Russia-Algeria relationship, aiming to understand why it scores well below its announced potential. Finally, the chapter will focus on the human dimension, analyzing the informational and cultural tools that Russia utilizes in Algeria and assessing their actual impact on the perceptions of ordinary citizens.

Soft power is hard to measure. Culture, media, education, tourism, and possibly migration are often used as proxies to assess soft power activities. New unconventional measures of soft power are emerging, such as those that study the impact of digital streams of communication. To assess the Russian hold on Algerians' hearts and minds, we make use of a blend of these proxy measures. Nevertheless, the close control that Algerian authorities exert on the traditional and social media landscapes limits freedom of expression and make it challenging to measure public opinion, particularly on sensitive subjects such as foreign policy. These limitations have affected the study.

The chapter has however been enriched with a series of informant interviews. These include diplomats, businessmen, researchers, and journalists, both based inside and outside Algeria, who have extensive expertise on the country's domestic affairs and foreign policy.

1. The Discourse on Russia and Algeria: A Shared Strategic Vision, a Close Relationship

Joseph Nye defines soft power as “the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment”¹⁸⁶: this resource-based approach puts emphasis on the impact of factors such as culture, values, and foreign policy to enact change and enhance influence¹⁸⁶. Additional soft power instruments such as informational means, strategic communication and (social) media campaigns have recently attracted attention and become a battleground of intense operational confrontations in the international arena.

Russia strategic and military thinking has been particularly sensitive to the potential of information and communication tools, from the so called “Gerasimov doctrine” on informational warfare to the more recent “Karaganov report” on Russian new foreign policy posture. Strategic

narratives, cultural diplomacy, media presence, and public diplomacy efforts have been considered particularly helpful for Russia to bolster its influence without recurring to the use of force. A significant aspect of the informational policy has also been to counteract adversarial narratives, particularly those from Western countries that may portray Russia in a negative light. This involves debunking misinformation and presenting Russia's perspective on global issues.

1.1. Russia's and Algeria's strategic postures

The widespread regional instability that followed the Arab uprising has allowed Russia to skillfully exploit local crises to project power in many MENA countries. This has been particularly true since Moscow's 2015 intervention in the Syrian conflict, which shifted the balance of forces in favor of Bashar Al Assad's regime and secured key Russian strategic objectives, such as control over naval and air bases in the Mediterranean. In its aftermath, Moscow has strategically strengthened military, diplomatic, and economic ties with numerous countries of the region, concluding important agreements and increasing trade flows and arms sales.

Opportunistic and adaptive, Russia has been able to design and implement effective strategies to further its interests, constantly adapting its tools and approaches to the local context. Hard power and the willingness to use force are widely considered key components of Russia's penetration strategies as well as key determinants of its perceived success in the MENA region and Africa. However, Russia's rising influence is also explained by its capacity to effectively manage soft power instruments in support of its strategic objectives.

Through the successful use of strategic narratives, for instance, Russia has been able to construct and consolidate an image of a strong and reliable partner, respectful of its partners' independence and sovereignty, and in sync with the views and interests of local political elites and regimes. This image was largely built in opposition to the West, depicted as unreliable, hypocritical, prone to meddling in the internal affairs of its partners, and driven solely by neo-colonial projects and self-interest.

In turn, Algeria has promoted self-determination, anti-imperialism, and non-alignment since its independence. For decades, these values have earned Algeria recognition among countries of the Third World and the Non-Aligned Movement and have enhanced its capacity to act as a

186 Mario De Martino, “Soft Power: Theoretical Framework and Political Foundations,” *Przegląd Europejski* 4 (1010): 11-24, <https://doi.org/10.31338/1641-2478pe.4.201>

‘middle power’ with an ambitious international agenda¹⁸⁷. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and Algeria’s descent into a bloody civil war from 1992 to 1999 reduced the space and available resources to engage on regional and international issues¹⁸⁸. Consequently, Algeria substantially withdrew from world affairs and its foreign policy entered a sort of diplomatic hibernation¹⁸⁹.

The multiple regional crises that followed the 2011 Arab Uprising have brought Algeria back to the fore. The country is currently going through what some experts have described as the most critical period in its diplomatic history since the 1990s¹⁹⁰. The transformations occurred in the immediate neighborhood have underscored the need for a more proactive and assertive foreign policy, while the major crisis of legitimacy that the Algerian regime has been facing in recent years has highlighted the importance of the regional context in its struggle for survival¹⁹¹.

The recent sharp increase in oil prices has given the regime economic breathing room¹⁹², while regional developments such as the French withdrawal from the Sahel, the surge in armed conflict in the region, and Morocco’s military cooperation with Israel have further justified Algeria’s diplomatic comeback.¹⁹³

The new environment, however, has also produced a shift in Algiers’ diplomatic posture. On the security front, the North African giant must now adapt to Russia’s growing influence along its borders, while tensions with Morocco over the long-standing Western Sahara issue have heightened. The new situation carries the risk of military escalations

and might at some point draw Algeria into war, puts into question its principles of non-interventionism¹⁹⁴. It is worth mentioning that in the Sahel, with which Algeria shares long borders, Algeria has long rejected American and French calls to intervene militarily – even if this came at the cost of exclusion from Western-led regional security initiatives, such as the G5 Sahel¹⁹⁵.

1.2. The partnership beyond military cooperation

By and large, the Algerian and Russian leaderships seem to agree on world visions. The Algerian discourse, with its focus on sovereignty, anti-imperialism, and non-alignment, and the Russian discourse, promoting multipolarity, traditional values, and self-determination, seem to converge. Both leaderships emphasize this convergence in every possible occasion. When divergences emerge occasionally, both parties are always ready to resolve differences through dialogue.

Algeria and Russia consider each other “truest, long-standing and reliable friends”¹⁹⁶. The two have long stated interest in taking the strategic partnership beyond military cooperation¹⁹⁷. While this aspiration has never fully materialized, both sides have recently emphasized a growing reciprocal importance of the relation.

In June 2023 President Tebboune visited Putin at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum titled ‘Sovereign Development as the Basis of a Just World: Joining Forces for Future Generations’. During his speech he defined existential

187 Jeffrey J. Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution. Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2019).

188 Anouar Boukhars, “Algerian Foreign Policy in the Context of the Arab Spring,” *CTC Sentinel* 6, no. 1 (2013): 17-21.

189 Michael J. Willis, “Algeria and the Outside World: Foreign Policy and Relations in a Transformed Regional Environment,” in *Algeria: Politics and Society from the Dark Decade to the Hirak* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 335–402, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197657577.003.0009>

190 Vasilis Petropoulos, “Algeria’s Foreign Policy: Facing a Crossroads,” *Fikra Forum Papers* (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2022), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/algerias-foreign-policy-facing-crossroads>

191 As argued by many Algerian specialists, the regime has a discursive focus on security that links Algeria’s survival to the need of domestic stability and the notion of external complots. The country’s foreign policy is also arguably closely linked to the personal traits of the president; the Algerian presidency being the alpha and omega of everything in the country, its functioning impacts all policy areas. See: Dalia Ghanem, *Understanding the Persistence of Competitive Authoritarianism in Algeria* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-05102-9>, and Rasmus Alenius Boserup, Luis Martinez; and Ulla Holm, “Algeria after the Revolts: Regime Endurance in a Time of Contention and Regional Insecurity,” *DIIS Report 2014:15* (Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies, 2014), https://www.diis.dk/files/media/publications/import/diisreport_2014-15.pdf and Yasmine Ketfi, “Le Maghreb face au dilemme ukrainien : Le cas de l’Algérie,” *Notes de l’Observatoire du Maghreb*, (Paris: IRIS, 2023), https://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/4_ObsMaghreb_Kefti_Maghreb-face-au-conflit-ukrainien.pdf

192 Francisco Serrano, “Higher oil prices are giving Algeria’s regime breathing room,” *Middle East Institute* (blog), 25 May 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/higher-oil-prices-are-giving-algerias-regime-breathing-room>

193 Francis Ghilès, “Algeria’s cautious return to the world stage,” *CIDOB notes internacionals 284* (Barcelona: CIDOB, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.24241/NotesInt.2023/284/en>

194 *The New Arab*, “How shifting geopolitical sands are driving Algeria’s new military doctrine,” 13 January 2022, <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/shifting-geopolitics-and-algerias-new-military-doctrine>

195 Yahia H. Zoubir, “A Giant Afraid of its Shadow: Algeria, the Reluctant Middle Power,” in *Unfulfilled Aspirations: Middle Power Politics in the Middle East*, edited by Adham Saouli (London: Hurst Publisher, 2020), 67-90. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197521885.003.0005>

196 Russian Government, “Dmitry Medvedev held talks with Prime Minister of Algeria Abdelmalek Sellal,” *Media statements*, 27 April 2016, <http://government.ru/en/news/22833/>

197 Zoubir, 2024.

the ties with Moscow, particularly as Russian support was deemed to be key to join the BRICS grouping. He also acknowledged the mutual benefits of their collaboration on international issues, especially in countering Western policies that both countries view as discriminatory against their interests. Before to the visit, the Algerian Ambassador had stated that in the changing geopolitical situation, Algeria could become Russia's outpost in North Africa and a partner in the global gas market¹⁹⁸.

From his side, Putin described Algeria as "our key partner in the Arab world and in Africa."¹⁹⁹ This wording differs slightly from that used in 2019 in a meeting with then Acting President Abdelkader Bensalah, when Algeria was addressed as "one of Russia's leading trade and economic partners in Africa and the Arab world."²⁰⁰ The new wording underscores that in Russia's eyes Algeria has grown in strategic importance in both regions. Indeed, Moscow has used the relationship with Algeria to break the image of isolation that Western sanctions, enacted after the invasion of Ukraine, had produced. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that the Algerian president was the only head of state present at the event.

References to shared perceptions of the changes occurring in the international system are recurrent in the official speeches. President Tebboune for instance, while highlighting what is at stake for Algeria's relations with Russia also stresses his support for the de-dollarization narrative, a theme particularly dear to the Russian President.²⁰¹:

"We have almost agreed – even before we started the talks – on all items related to the international situation, a very tense situation, as you know. It is necessary to accelerate the process of Algeria joining the BRICS group so that we no longer accept dollars and euros. This will be to Algeria's benefit."

This found echo in the Russian counterpart, who highlighted that²⁰²:

"Efforts to expand mutual transactions in national currencies are crucial. They will shield mutual trade from third countries' impact and adverse developments on international foreign exchange markets."

Russia has made de-dollarization a top priority and lobbied to make it key also for the BRICS bloc –in which Russia plays a leading role. This stance seems to find some receptive audiences in North Africa.

Historical narratives are also central to both Algiers' and Moscow's discourses, and memory and symbols play a role in shaping the relations. In meeting with Putin in 2023, for instance, the Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune reiterated his gratitude for the support provided by the USSR in his country's struggle for independence. President Tebboune has also thanked the Russian army for helping to clean up nuclear test sites²⁰³ –tests which were undertaken by France during the 1960s, and which still poison French-Algerian relation. Reference to the colonial legacy and to the country's struggle for independence are part and parcel of widely used strategic narratives in Algeria. These references take part in the process of memorialization and in the education system²⁰⁴ and are largely reflected by the state-owned media.

1.3. Political support: A blind eye for a blind eye

Both countries have recently been amid important political crises: domestic in the case of Algeria during the Hirak protest in 2019-20 and international for Russia in the aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine. Algeria's neutral stance on the Russian-Ukrainian war mirrors Russia's benevolent attitude on the Algerian Hirak. During the latter, Russian officials expressed support for Algerian governments, backing its plan for talks with opposition. They also carefully avoiding comparisons between the Algerian mass protests and the Arab Spring, thus making the Hirak a homegrown phenomenon and not the result of an unacceptable foreign plot to destabilize the region and of "interference in the

198 Kester K. Klomegah, "A New Era for Russia – Algeria Partnership," Modern Diplomacy, 16 June 2023, <https://moderndiplomacy.eu/2023/06/16/the-new-dawn-of-russia-algeria-partnership/>

199 Office of the President of the Russian Federation, "The President of Russia and the President of Algeria made statements for the press," Media statements, 16 June 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71437>

200 Office of the President of the Russian Federation, "Meeting with Head of the Republic of Algeria Abdelkader Bensalah," Media statements, 19 October 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/countries/DZ/events/61895>

201 Office of the President of the Russian Federation, "Russia-Algeria talks," Press release, 15 June 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/71436>

202 Office of the President of the Russian Federation, "The President of Russia and the President of Algeria made statements for the press," 2023.

203 Office of the President of the Russian Federation, "The President of Russia and the President of Algeria made statements for the press," 2023.

204 Zine Labidine Ghebouli, "Algeria's foreign policy: Between hope and reality," Middle East Institute (blog), 4 October 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/algerias-foreign-policy-between-hope-and-reality>

internal affairs of sovereign states”²⁰⁵. The Hirak was therefore portrayed as an Algerian internal affair and while Russia had no interest in the success of the movement and a strong preference for regime survival²⁰⁶, it kept a neutral stance (probably to avoid running the risk of alienating any new national leadership emerging from the protests).

Conversely, and despite Western criticism and threats of sanctions, Algiers has maintained a consistent neutral posture on the Ukraine war, culminating in with the above-mentioned three-day visit to Russia. This visit has also offered Algiers an opportunity to project itself as a country with an independent foreign policy – as reiterate in various statements, including the Algerian President’s declaration that “Algerians were born and will remain free”²⁰⁷.

A few important disagreements exist. Russia’s growing influence in Libya and the Sahel, for instance, complicates Algeria’s foreign policy calculus and, according to several sources, makes Algeria uncomfortable²⁰⁸. But disagreements do not emerge in the open and the two countries continue to seek solutions through dialogue. As early as 2019, the Russian foreign minister suggested to his Algerian counterpart the establishment of a high-level working group to coordinate their approaches to regional and international issues²⁰⁹. In February and April 2024, during two senior officials’ meetings of the so-called “Russian-Algerian interdepartmental consultations on African issues,” Algeria had confidential exchanges with Russia, seeking to overcome disagreements and explore avenues of collaboration²¹⁰.

In the global stage, the BRICS rejection of Algiers’ membership application has also arguably caused friction between Russia and Algeria. “The [BRICS] dossier is closed, and the page is turned,” stated the Algerian President a few months following the unsuccessful bid²¹¹. For Algiers,

the long-awaited accession to the grouping was a matter of prestige and could have helped the country in restoring its diplomatic status. The possibility of joining at a later stage, however, contribute to freezing the issue reducing the impact on Algeria-Russia relations as reported by a key informant familiar with the Algerian inner circles²¹².

Economically, Algeria’s strategy involves a delicate balancing act: fostering new relationships with European capitals and pursue trade and investment relations with countries that might help the country to diversify and modernize its economy while simultaneously maintaining and even strengthening ties with Russia which are important for political and military reasons²¹³. In the face of these complex challenges, Algeria has so far “compartmentalized” its international relations and the now-popular strategy of multi-alignment appears to be the guiding principle.

2. From Discourse to Reality: Russia-Algeria Relation in a Snapshot

2.1 The historical background

The special relationship between Moscow and Algiers traces back to Algeria’s war of independence. During this conflict, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), driven by its anti-colonial and pro-self-determination ideology, provided significant aid to the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) and its military operations . By 1960, the USSR had de facto recognized the provisional Algerian government, with formal recognition of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria occurring in 1962, just months before Algeria officially declared its independence.

205 Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2019). Op. cit.

206 Ghilès, Francis (2019). “Russia and France wary of Algeria’s Hirak six months after onset,” 24 August, The Arab Weekly, <https://theArabweekly.com/russia-and-france-wary-algerias-hirak-six-months-after-onset>

207 Middle East Monitor (2023). “Algeria president: ‘Algerians were born and will remain free,’” 17 June, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230617-algeria-president-algerians-were-born-and-will-remain-free/>

208 Zoubir, Yahia H. (2024). “Algeria-Russia Ties: Beyond Military Cooperation?” Issue Brief, January, Middle East Council on Global Affairs, <https://mecouncil.org/publication/algeria-russia-ties-beyond-military-cooperation/>

209 See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2019). “Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s statement and answers to media questions during the joint news conference following talks with Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the People’s Democratic Republic of Algeria Ramtane Lamamra,” March 19, 2019, https://mid.ru/en/press_service/photos/meropriyatiya_s_uchastiem_ministra/1456520/

210 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2024). “On Russian-Algerian consultations on African issues,” Media release 691, 14 April, <https://www.mid.ru/tv/?id=1944232&lang=ru>

211 Ouali, Aksil (2023). “Algérie-Brics : “Le dossier est clos”, affirme le président Tebboune,” 6 October, Anadolu Ajansı, <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/alg%C3%A9rie-brics-le-dossier-est-clos-affirme-le-pr%C3%A9sident-tebboune/3008912>

212 Author interview, Webex, 5 May 2024.

213 Henneberg, Sabina; Rumley, Grant; and Yavorsky, Erik (2023). “Algeria-Russia Relations After the Ukraine Invasion,” PolicyWatch 3740, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/algeria-russia-relations-after-ukraine-invasion>

In the following years, the relationship between Algeria and the Soviet Union strengthened considerably. The Soviets proved to be a valuable partner in support of Algeria's efforts to build the nation and its national armed forces, helping the country to counteract France's reluctance to aid as well as the U.S. distrust and military support to Morocco. In the early 1960s, Algeria and the USSR signed their first military agreements, resulting in significant supplies of Soviet military equipment and training of Algerian forces. By the late 1970s, about 90% of Algeria's military equipment was of Soviet origin. Simultaneously, the USSR played a crucial role in establishing Algeria's national industrial base and advancing various sectors, including energy, mining, metallurgy, mechanical engineering, and water supply. This cooperation extended significantly to the formation of the Algerian elite. Over the years, many members of Algeria's ruling class, including executives, engineers, and particularly military officers, received their education in the Soviet Union. This exchange fostered inter-marriages and deepened cultural ties, further solidifying the bond between the two nations.

With the breakup of the USSR and the Russian political and economic crisis in the 1990s, relations between the two countries cooled. The halt to the repayment of Algeria's debts to the Soviet Union and Algiers' participation in NATO's "Mediterranean Dialogue" further strained the relationship.

The presidency of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, which followed the bloody 1990s civil strife, and the beginning of Putin's era marked a fresh start. During President Bouteflika's visit to Moscow in April 2001, the two countries signed a "Declaration of Strategic Partnership" "the first of its kind between Russia and an Arab or African state". The agreement aimed at strengthening cooperation in the economic and commercial fields, including through the establishment of a Joint Commission on Trade, Economic, Scientific, and Technical Affairs. In March 2006—more than 30 years after the last visit of a Soviet leader, Nikolai Podgorny—Vladimir Putin visited Algiers. This visit can be considered a cornerstone of Russia's new strategy to reassert its international status and increase influence in the Mediterranean region and Africa. Moscow agreed to forgive the Soviet-era debt (\$4.7 billion) in exchange for Algeria's purchase of Russian industrial goods and armaments. Several high-level summits and annual meetings of the Joint Committee on Economic Affairs followed in the 2000s and 2010s.

Since then, three features became particularly important in the new Algeria-Russia relations: a historically strong but increasingly declining military cooperation, some difficulties in consolidating bilateral trade, and a certain ambiguity in the energy sector.

2.2. The centrality of the military partnership: Gradually questioned?

Algeria has the largest defense budget on the African continent. The overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, a major client of the Russian arms industry, and continued instability in Libya have increased Algeria's relative importance as a client of the Kremlin. During the period from 2016 to 2020, Algeria accounted for around 14% of Russia's arms market, behind India (approximately 23%) and China (approximately 18%).

Since the early 2000s, the country has embarked on a military modernization effort, using proceeds from its vast energy exports to fund significant arms purchases. Between 2018 and 2022, Algiers purchased 73% of its weapons from Moscow in all major categories of weapons, featuring some of the most advanced systems..

However, it should also be noted that starting in the early 2010s, Algeria initiated a diversification in arms imports, purchasing European weapon systems and leading to Russia's progressive loss of market shares. Additionally, the complicated international context and the Ukrainian conflict resulted in an overall reduction in Russia's arms export: between 2014-2018 and 2019-2023 Russian arms imports by African states fell by 52%. This decrease is primarily due to significant reductions in two major North African importers: Algeria (down 77%) and Morocco (down 46%) . Furthermore, Russian arms sales have been redirected to other countries. Between 2019 and 2023, countries in Asia and Oceania received 68% of total Russian arms exports, with India accounting for 34% and China 21%.

It is probably too soon to say with some certainty whether this trend indicates a diminishing role of Russia as supplier of weapons to Algeria. The Kremlin has indeed attempted to reassert its role as Algeria's main arms supplier concluding contracts for the sale of advanced systems, though delivery is slow due the above-mentioned factors. In recent years, the two countries have also conducted joint military exercises in North Ossetia at the Tarski military base in 2021, and in 2022, the Command and General Staff "Vostok-2022", stressing both parties' willingness to deepen military cooperation.

2.3. A lackluster trade relationship

The Russia-Algeria balance of trade is particularly skewed towards Moscow. Since mid-1990s, Russian exports to Algeria have increased at an annualized rate of 12.1%, from \$75.7 million in 1995 to \$1.48 billion in 2021. Russia is the only trade partner that has increased its exports to Algeria (+133% between 2010 and 2021); in the same period other key Algeria's partners have lost relative importance or remained stagnant: Italy -53.1%, United States -49.5%, France -46.1%, Spain -41.4%, with the only exception of China +30.1%.

Furthermore, since the start of the conflict in Ukraine, Algerian grains imports from Russia have almost quadrupled. Algeria features among the world's leading wheat importers. Until 2021, EU countries, especially France, were the main suppliers but since 2022 this role has been taken by Moscow, which supplied 1.3 million tons of wheat, compared to 330 thousand tons in the previous year²¹⁴. According to the Russian Minister for Economic Development Maxim Reshetnikov, the volume of bilateral trade increased by almost 70% in 2022²¹⁵. In addition, dairy products experienced a significant increase in trade volume. In 2022 Algeria's agricultural and agri-food trade balance showed a deficit of €9.5 billion²¹⁶. However, Algeria's exports to Russia are not particularly significant and have declined at an annualized rate of 7.54%, from \$132 million in 1995 to \$17.3 million in 2021, primarily tropical fruit.²¹⁷

As part of its economic diversification efforts and to attract investment, Algiers has tried to expand economic cooperation with Moscow and other major partners such as Turkey, Italy, and China. Since 2022 the Algerian government has initiated a reform of investment regulations and activated its investment promotion institutions. During the 2023 state visit to Moscow, the Algerian President has offered "government's support for investors" and "sufficient guarantees to Russian friends."²¹⁸

According to a key informant familiar with Algeria business climate²¹⁹, despite this call, there are no concrete indications of Russian investments scaling up. Russian FDI in Algeria

remain insignificant and have experienced a drastic decline in recent years, with the COVID-19 pandemic worsening the situation. While multiple sectors offer opportunities for long-term growth in Algeria, the relatively low growth of the Russian economy have led to a general decrease in outward FDI (OFDI), which tend to focus on former Soviet countries, China, and the UAE and which remains very low across Africa²²⁰.

Despite the emphasis given by both parties to the potential provided by economic cooperation to further enhance Algeria-Russia ties, the reality of trade and investments between the two shows a different picture. Economic relations have not developed to the same extent as political and military ones. And they are not likely to do so in the future. The structural similarity of the two economies, where exports are strongly dominated by hydrocarbons, explains the poor Algerian performance in the Russian market. But lack of preferential trade agreements, puts Algeria at a disadvantage vis-à-vis countries that have more established trade relationships with Russia or that can offer similar goods at more competitive prices. Other important factors that make it difficult to also due to structural the weakness of the Russian economy, compounded by the problems that the Russian economy is facing due to western sanctions. The political dimension of strategic partnerships is therefore likely to continue to take precedence over the economic one.

2.4. An ambiguous energy cooperation

After the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine, Algeria has been one of the primary alternative suppliers and a key partner in Europe's efforts to move away from Russian gas. According to the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, already at the end of 2023, Algeria overtook Russia, and become the second largest supplier of gas to Europe (20%), behind Norway (54%)²²¹. It is also important to stress, however, that Algeria gas output is limited and growth in production is constrained by outdated equipment and many years of underinvestment. This makes it difficult for the country's gas export to meet Europe's demand beyond the current levels.

214 Data available on FAO's website: <https://www.fao.org/giews/countrybrief/country.jsp?code=DZA&lang=ar>

215 Zoubir, 2024.

216 Data available on: <https://agriculture.gouv.fr/algerie>

217 Data exported from OEC's website: <https://oec.world/en>

218 Permanent Mission of Algeria to the UN - New York, "President of Republic calls on investors from Russia, world over to invest in Algeria," 17 June 2023, <https://pmnewyork.mfa.gov.dz/news-and-press-releases/president-of-republic-calls-on-investors-from-russia-world-over-to-invest-in-algeria>

219 Author interview (anonymous), Webex, 5 May 2024.

220 Alex Irwin-Hunt, "Russian outward FDI goes sanctions-jumping into non-OECD countries," *FDI Intelligence*, 22 May 2022, <https://www.fdiintelligence.com/content/news/russian-outward-fdi-goes-sanctions-jumping-into-nonoecd-countries-83802>

221 Gas Exporting Countries Forum, "Monthly Gas Market Report," October 2023, <https://www.gecf.org/resources/files/mstgmr/mgmr-october-2023.pdf>

Given the geopolitical context, Russia has not been able nor willing to publicly oppose this trend. Avoiding the risk of straining the relation with Algeria has probably played a role too in shaping Russia's position on this matter. Interestingly, though, different forms of collaboration between the two actors are taking shape in this sector. In May 2020, Algerian state-owned company Sonatrach signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Russia's Lukoil for a production and exploration partnership in the North African country²²². In addition, since 2000, Gazprom has been operating the El Assel project in Algeria, where the Russian company carried out the prospecting phase leading to important discoveries. The regulator has approved a joint development plan for the gas and condensate fields (Rourde Sayah and Rhourde Sayah Nord) with production scheduled to begin in 2025. The project is being implemented as a joint venture between Gazprom (49%), and Sonatrach (51%)²²³.

Russia has also bet on export of facilities and expertise in the field of civil nuclear power throughout the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. Rosatom (Rosatom State Atomic Energy Corporation is 100% owned by the Russian state and has become increasingly active in the international nuclear energy market as a cost-effective partner for newcomers to the nuclear industry. Rosatom competitive advantages have allowed Russia to launch a global nuclear energy diplomacy campaign in which the company and Russian government institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs work in tandem²²⁴. This potentially gives Russia the ability to use the extensive network of international projects and the direct control over reactors and strategic energy infrastructure to exert political pressure and project power globally.

In recent years, Rosatom and the Algerian Atomic Energy Commission have signed a series of memoranda of understanding to strengthen cooperation. In September 2023²²⁵, the parties agreed "to develop long-term, efficient and mutually beneficial cooperation in the implementation

of joint projects in the field of non-energy nuclear technologies in the health sector, including the development of nuclear medicine centers".

3. What About the People? Russian Influence in Algeria Through Media, Culture, and Education

3.1. The media landscape

State-owned media and the narratives they promote play a central role in Russia's soft power approach²²⁶. Moscow makes extensive use of media communication, both mainstream and social, which are increasingly consumed on the African continent. Other possible sources of soft power, such as literature, classical music, ballet do not seem to be particularly influential in Africa, possibly owing to the diversity of culture and language, as well as to geographical distance.

Moscow has recently reiterated its interest in conveying its narrative to the international public, to counter the highly negative coverage of Russian affairs by Western media²²⁷. Already in 2014, despite economic problems, the Russian government announced a substantial increase in funding for state media. Between 2014 and 2024, Russia Today's (RT) budget has almost doubled, from 13.2 to 28.4 billion Russian rubles. Mike Pompeo the previous director of the CIA, recognized that Russia has increased its influence in foreign countries using its²²⁸ information tools, among which RT and Sputnik²²⁹.

In the MENA region, starting in November 2023, RT Arabic has launched several campaigns aimed to challenge the way "mainstream Western voices sought to shut down RT's access to platforms and out of conversations, including on

222 Reuters, "Algeria's Sonatrach signs MOU with Russia's Lukoil," 4 May 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-energy-lukoil-idUSKBN22G1JC/>

223 Data exported from Gazprom's website: <https://www.gazprom-international.com/operations/algeria/>

224 Kacper Szulecki and Indra Overland, Russian nuclear energy diplomacy and its implications for energy security in the context of the war in Ukraine, *Nature Energy*, 8, no. 2 (2023): 413-421, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41560-023-01228-5>

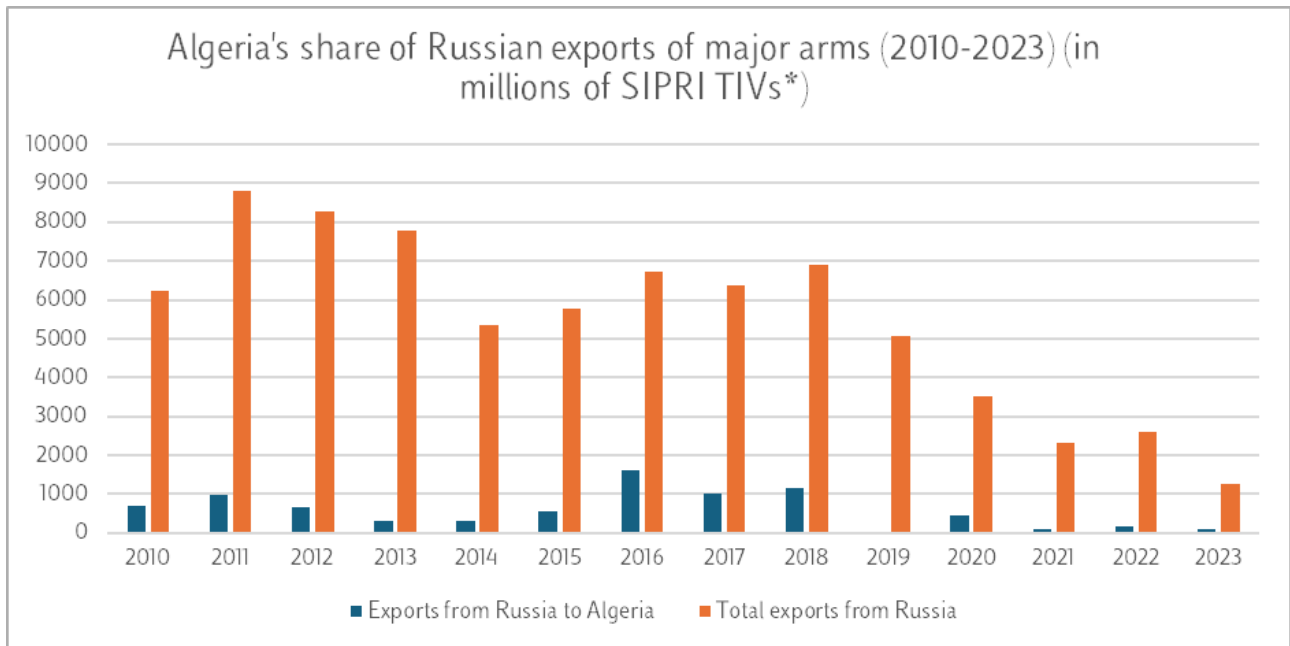
225 ROSTAM, ROSATOM and Algerian Commission of Atomic Energy have agreed to develop non-energy nuclear technologies, Press release, 25 September 2023, <https://www.rosatom.ru/en/press-centre/news/rosatom-and-algerian-commission-of-atomic-energy-have-agreed-to-develop-non-energy-nuclear-technolog/>

226 See for example Cayley Clifford and Steven Gruzd, "Russian and African Media: Exercising Soft Power," *Policy Insights* 125, (Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, 2022), <https://saiia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Policy-Insights-125-clifford-gruzd.pdf> and

227 Gabrielle Tetrault-Farber, "Looking West, Russia Beefs Up Spending on Global Media Giants," *The Moscow Times*, 23 September 2014, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/23/looking-west-russia-beefs-up-spending-on-global-media-giants-a39708>

228

229 Sputnik, "CIA Chief Claims Russia's 'Soft Power' on Rise Due to RT, Sputnik Effectiveness," 21 July 2017, <https://sputnikglobe.com/20170721/cia-rt-sputnik-pompeo-russia-1055752849.html>



social media and TV broadcasting platforms in Arabic²³⁰. Around this same period, RT has announced the opening of its regional bureau in Algeria. In the accreditation process RT received a favorable treatment by Algerian authorities, that greatly differed from what other international media have experienced in the country. According to Reporters Without Borders, only few foreign media outlets are still allowed to operate in Algeria and foreign reporters work under close government control. The arbitrary nature of accreditation decisions is compounded by a very political and discriminatory approach to freedom of information²³¹.

Algeria media, largely state-owned, have increased cooperation with Russian counterparts. In July 2023, the Algeria Press Service (APS) agency signed a MoU with the Russian news agency Tass on the exchange of content, experiences, and media expertise.²³² A few months later, Tass launched a news feed in Arabic, TASS Arabic News Service²³³. Particular attention is paid to the Russian Federation’s interaction with the Arab world, and news about political, foreign policy and economic events in MENA and other countries of the Islamic world.

Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, in March 2022 the EU banned RT and Sputnik from broadcasting in its territory. Since then, RT has focused more determinedly on Africa while Sputnik launched its French-language platform “Sputnik Afrique”, which offers extensive news coverage from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Sputnik has two correspondents in Algeria²³⁴. In the African context, common Russian media narratives range from Russia as a friendly country and a force for peace and prosperity in Africa, to more general attacks on the West and on former colonizers. According to a 2018 report commissioned by both the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defense, most new RT subscribers in France are from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. African online news websites are increasingly relaying content from Kremlin-sponsored media²³⁵.

The role of influencers on new and social media is also important, although it is more difficult to investigate in a systematic way. In a recent interview (March 2024), given to Sputnik Africa, Algerian blogger Ibrahim Ben Aissa expressed his admiration for Russia and his desire to learn from the Russian experience with the aim of potentially replicating in Algeria the World Youth Festival (WYF),

230 Arab News, “RT Arabic launches MENA ad campaign to promote right to news access,” 9 November 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2406071/media>

231 Reports Sans Frontières, “RT moves its pawns in Africa, opening a bureau in Algeria,” 4 April 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/rt-moves-its-pawns-africa-opening-bureau-algeria>

232 Algeria Press Service, “APS, Russia’s “Tass” seal MoU,” 27 July 2023, <https://www.aps.dz/en/algeria/48391-aps-russia-s-tass-seal-mou>

233 Russian Embassy in Algiers, “TASS Launches Arabic News Feed,” 14 November 2022, https://algerie.mid.ru/ru/press-centre/news/tacc_zapuskaet_novostnuyu_lentu_na_arabskom_yazyke/

234 Reports Sans Frontières, 2023.

235 Jean-Baptiste Jeangène Vilmer et al. *Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies* (Paris: French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018), https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/information_manipulation_rvb_cle838736.pdf

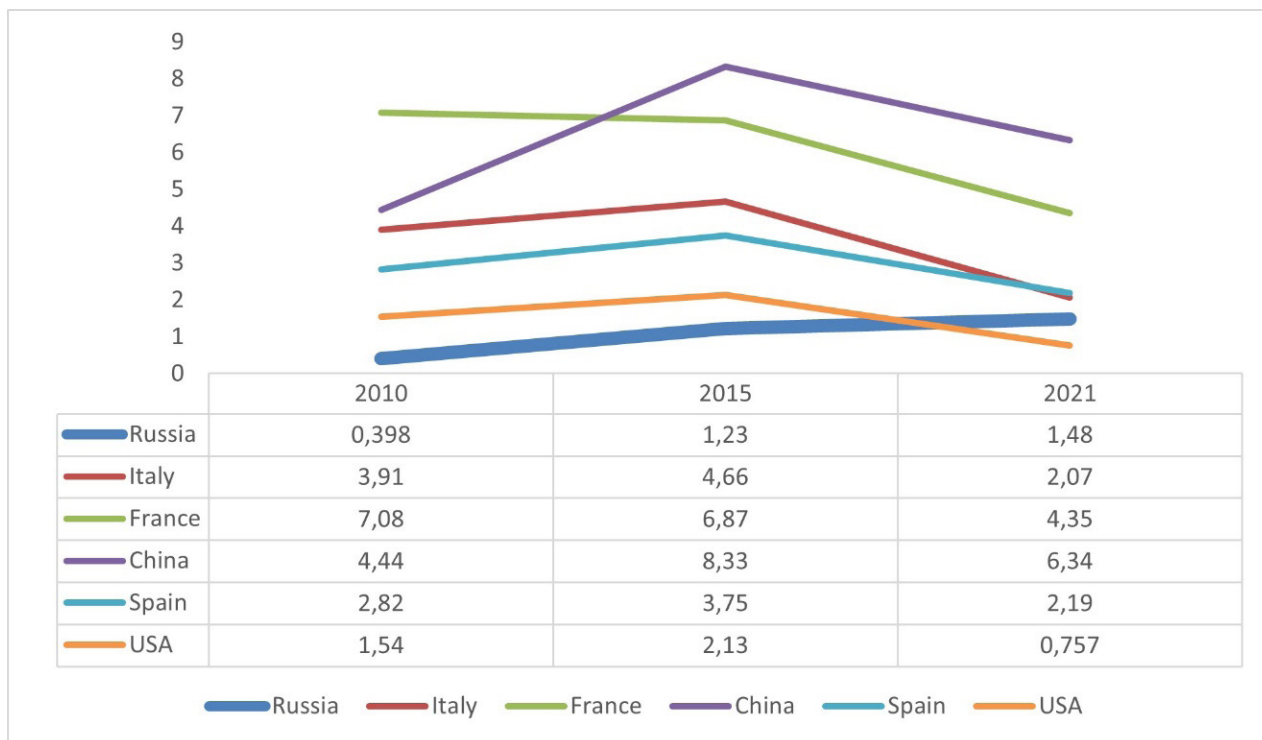


Figure 2. Algeria's main economic partners by volume of exports (billion \$). Source: Observatory of Economic Complexity.

which took place in Russia. The blogger added that there are misconceptions about Russia's international isolation, and portrayed Russia as a dynamic player on the global stage²³⁶. Sputnik has also posted a testimony of Fahem Mohamedi, an Algerian entrepreneur who moved to Russia for “the cultural similarities between the Algerian and Russian communities.” He stated that he moved “driven by his passion for the Russian language and the desire to continue his academic and entrepreneurial efforts,” and that “Although he initially considered moving to Europe, he found a sense of belonging in Russia thanks to the alignment of shared traditional values” between the two countries. The article was published after Putin’s statements on facilitating relocation for foreigners who share Russia’s traditional values²³⁷. Though it is difficult to ascertain how much these interviews reflect commonly shared views among the Algerian youth, these opinions might nevertheless be indicative of views across the region.

3.2. The education landscape

Algeria and Russia have a long history of educational cooperation. The Soviet Union established important centers of technical education in Algeria the 1960s, and thousands of Algerians also received their education in prestigious Soviet universities – with their numbers increasing from only a few dozens of students to over a thousand per year in the 1980s. Algerian ministries or public companies, such as Sonatrach, financed student enrolment in specific fields (e.g., civil aviation at the Kiev Aviation Institute and engineering at the Slavyansk Technical School). Over the years the technical nature of this cooperation has remained unchanged, but its format has evolved through the introduction of a state scholarship system (“boursiers d'état”)²³⁸. On return, these graduates held high offices, served in educational institutions or played a prominent role in the fields of arts and culture²³⁹. The number of Soviet teachers in Algeria, not counting engineers and other experts involved in development projects, reached nearly a thousand (935) in 1980.

236 Muhammad Osman, “‘Russian Method’: Algerian Blogger Shares Impressions of World Youth Festival in Russia,” *Sputnik Africa*, 4 March 2024, <https://en.sputniknews.africa/20240304/russian-method-algerian-blogger-shares-impressions-of-world-youth-forum-in-russia-1065380722.html>

237 Muhammad Osman, “Algerian Entrepreneur Finds Home in Russia: A Tale of Shared Values,” *Sputnik Africa*, 22 February 2024, <https://en.sputniknews.africa/20240222/algerian-entrepreneur-finds-home-in-russia-a-tale-of-shared-values-1065211607.html>

238 Constantin Katsakioris, Arab Students’ Training in the Soviet Union during the Cold War (1956-1991), *Revue Européenne des Migrations Internationales* 32, no. 6 (2016): 13-38, <https://doi.org/10.4000/remi.7758>

239 Constantin Katsakioris, Algeria and the Eastern bloc: Educational cooperation and students’ training, history and legacies, *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 63, no. 3-4 (2022): 743-766, <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.13318>

Today, however, this trend has changed. As of 2021, Russia attracts less 2% of Algerians studying abroad (about 550 in 2021), ranking fifth after France (23,177), Turkey (1095), Canada (1053), and the UK (746)²⁴⁰. This change is not only limited to Algeria. While the number of African students in Russian higher education institutions has increased fourfold over the past decade, reaching over 27,000 students²⁴¹, it is still far from catching up with other destinations like Turkey (60,000) and France (100,000). While most of these students' self-fund their studies in Russia, there is also an increase in support from the Russian government. In recent years, the Russian Embassy in Algiers has been promoting scholarships to study in Russia, noting that the numbers of Russian scholarship for African students will double as of 2024²⁴². In 2023, Russia has already offered a record 4,700 scholarships to African students, a considerable increase from the 1,900 scholarships awarded in 2019²⁴³. In addition, a group of Russian state universities called RACUS has been touring Algeria and promoting the idea of studying in Russia²⁴⁴.

Russian culture and language are almost insignificant in Algeria. In primary and secondary education, language learning is limited to Arabic, French and English. At university level, up until the inauguration of a Russian language center in Algiers in September 2023, no Algerian university offered Russian language programs²⁴⁵ –although the universities Algiers 2 and Oran had small Russian language sections since the 1970s.

3.3. The cultural landscape

According to the Russian Minister of Culture Olga Lyubimova, cooperation with Algeria is one of Moscow's cultural priorities. However, to date, there is no Russian

cultural center in the country, and discussions about founding one started only in late 2023. In 2022, Algeria hosted the “Journées de la culture russe” [Days of Russian culture] – timed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two states – as part of the international symphonic music festival which also included a concert by the Academy of Russian Music. A round table discussion dedicated to the cooperation of Moscow with compatriots living abroad was held in March 2023 in Algiers²⁴⁶. In addition, the Russian Embassy has organized a traveling exhibition of reproductions of paintings dedicated to the contribution of Soviet servicemen to the demining of Algerian territory (1963-1964) and the Algerian Revolution (1954-1962), as well as photo documents on the topic “Cooperation between Moscow and Algeria”²⁴⁷. The diplomatic representation also organizes an annual Russian cinema week.

3.4. Tourism: A limited people-to-people connection

In 2021, the tourism industry contributed approximately \$7.2 billion to Algeria's gross domestic product (GDP). Compared to other neighboring countries, the development of the tourism sector in Algeria has encountered many difficulties and the sector has not been adequately promoted in recent decades. Despite the country's potential, there is no strong presence of Russian tourists. In a recent interview, the CEO of Air Algérie, Yacine Benslimane, expressed expectations for greater collaboration between Algeria and Russia in the field of tourism²⁴⁸. To date, the two countries are connected directly through flights operated by Air Algérie with a triweekly frequency to Moscow (in both directions) and triweekly to St. Petersburg (in both directions).

240 Campus France, “Fiche mobilité: Algérie,” 2023, https://ressources.campusfrance.org/publications/mobilite_pays/fr/algerie_fr.pdf

241 Eleonora Tafuro Ambrosetti, “Russia's Soft-Power Sources in Africa,” *Policy Insights* 126 (Johannesburg: South African Institute of International Affairs, 2022), <https://saiia.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Policy-Insights-126-ambrosetti.pdf>

242 The State Duma of the Federal Assembly of Russia, “Address by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin at the plenary session “Russia-Africa in a Multipolar World,”” 20 March 2023, <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/56652/>

243 Mohamed Hasan Sweidan, “From periphery to priority: Africa as a key arena for Russia's ambitions,” *The Cradle*, 2 August 2023, <https://new.thecradle.co/articles-id/6761>

244 RACUS, “Tournée des expositions de l'enseignement supérieur en Algérie « Etudier en Russie – 2023 »,” 2023, <https://www.edurussia.ru/fr/news/tournee-des-expositions-de-l-enseignement-superieur-en-algerie-etudier-en-russie-2023>

245 Algeria Presse Service, “Université d'Alger 2 : ouverture du Centre d'enseignement de la langue russe en collaboration avec l'université russe «Naberejnye Tchelny»,” 18 September 2023, <https://www.aps.dz/sante-science-technologie/160213-universite-d-alger-2-ouverture-du-centre-d-enseignement-de-la-langue-russe-en-collaboration-avec-l-universite-russe-naberejnye-tchelny>

246 Russkiy Mir Foundation, “Russians in Algeria discussed projects to promote Russian language with representatives of Moscow,” 13 March 2023, <https://russkiymir.ru/en/news/311240/>

247 Moscow Center for International Cooperation, “Supporting Russian compatriots in Algeria,” 15 October 2023, <https://ano-mcims.ru/en/activity/supporting-russian-compatriots-in-algeria/>

248 Dzair Tube, “Sputnik Afrique: CEO of Air Algérie expresses high expectations for increased collaboration between Algeria, Russia,” 14 June 2023, <https://www.dzair-tube.dz/en/sputnik-afrique-ceo-of-air-algerie-expresses-high-expectations-for-increased-collaboration-between-algeria-russia/>

4. Algerian Public Perceptions of Russia

As mentioned, media freedom and freedom of expression in Algeria are very restricted²⁴⁹, making it challenging to measure public opinion, particularly on sensitive subjects such as foreign policy. Algerian foreign policy is also predominantly controlled by the country's politico-military elite and, as Maghreb specialist Michael Willis describes it, "divisions between key political players involved in [its] formation and practice have never been very visible and the interplay between external relations and internal politics has never been very obvious."²⁵⁰ Combined, these factors make understanding Algerian public perceptions of a specific country, such as Russia, a difficult task.

Despite these methodological restrictions, available indices suggest that the general perception of Russia among Algerians is relatively positive. This favorable view extends beyond the historical ties between the two countries, reflecting deeper affinities that are influenced by Algerians' perceptions of the 'West.' According to Arab Barometer 2022, two-thirds of Algerians have favorable views of Russia and 55% want to strengthen economic ties with the country, a steep twenty-point increase from 2019²⁵¹. While the survey provides no explanation to this increase, a key informant suggested this could be related to the positive image that state media paint of Russia, including about expanding economic ties beyond arm sales to sectors such as energy and agriculture²⁵². Another informant argued that this perception is reinforced by Algerians' appreciation of Russia's 'disruptive' power to the Western-led international order and NATO. Algerian public opinion is critical of Western military interventions and supportive of national sovereignty, a key tenet of Algeria's foreign policy.

The very cautious public stance adopted by Russia on Algeria's 2019 political crisis also played a positive role in strengthening pro-Moscow views. However, during the Hirak protests, two incidents provoked public reactions

that were indicative of the ambivalent Algerian public perceptions of Russia. The first incident relates to the visit by Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lamamra to Moscow where he tried to "assure that what is happening in Algeria is a purely internal matter" and during which his Russian counterpart referred to the protests as "ongoing attempts to destabilize the country," which many Algerian activists and analysts received negatively²⁵³. Another incident was during the visit of Algerian interim President Abdelkader Bensalah to Moscow, a few months later, to reassure his counterpart that "the situation in Algeria is under control". This stance was described by observers as "laborious and humiliating", as the Algerian leader gave the impression of being accountable to the Russian President²⁵⁴. This sentiment was reflected in the hashtag #عار_عليكم_الإستقواء_بالخارج which translates to 'Shame on you for seeking foreign support [for regime survival]', which gained traction on social media.

In addition, a statement by then Russian ambassador Igor Beliaev which called for rapid presidential elections has also caused controversy among Hirak supporters²⁵⁵. The diplomat's statement was seen as an interference and undue support for the military against the protest movement which opposed elections²⁵⁶. Slogans in the streets at the time were: "No to elections organized by gangs", "Civil state, not military", "Forget the elections, there will be no vote."

The 2023 Gaza War further improved Algerian views on Russia. The Palestinian cause holds a special status in the Algerian psyche, deeply resonating due to Algeria's own history of resistance against colonial powers. Russia's pro-Palestinian stance during this war, including its call for a ceasefire at the UN Security Council, have not passed unnoticed by Algerian public, according to key informant who is an Algeria specialist²⁵⁷. This stance was seen as aligning with Algeria's long-standing advocacy for the Palestinian cause and as counteracting perceived Western double standards, particularly those of the European Union and United States.

249 Reports Sans Frontières, "Country profile: Algeria," 2023, <https://rsf.org/en/country/algeria>

250 Willis, 2023.

251 Arab Barometer, "Arab Barometer VII: Algeria report," 2022, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Algeria_Report-EN.pdf

252 Author interview (anonymous), Webex, 9 April 2024.

253 Le Monde, "Le chef de la diplomatie algérienne fait escale à Moscou, en quête de soutien," 19 March 2019, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2019/03/19/le-chef-de-la-diplomatie-algerienne-fait-escale-a-moscou-en-quete-de-soutien_5438299_3210.html

254 Adlene, 2021.

255 Ryad Hamadi, "Ambassadeur russe à Alger : une sortie qui fait jaser," TSA, 29 August 2019, <https://www.tsa-algerie.dz/ambassadeur-russe-a-alger-une-sortie-qui-fait-jaser/>

256 TV5Monde, "Algérie-Russie : Poutine soutient-il Gaïd Salah et le pouvoir militaire ?," 12 September 2019, <https://information.tv5monde.com/afrique/algerie-russie-poutine-soutient-il-gaid-salah-et-le-pouvoir-militaire-32038>

257 Author interview (anonymous), Webex, 9 April 2024.

However, this broad positive sentiment is tempered by the mixed feelings among the public of Russia's special relationship with the Algerian regime. According to a key informant, Moscow's clear – although silent – preference is for a status quo that preserves its privileged ties with the politico-military elite and its so-called “common military culture”.²⁵⁸ Given the limited public legitimacy of the regime this preference could in time become problematic.

Another key informant²⁵⁹ explained this dynamic creates a dual perspective: one that recognizes the historical and strategic benefits of the relationship, and another that is wary of the potential reinforcement of the regime's repressive measures. For instance, Russia's provision of advanced military equipment to Algeria is seen as bolstering the regime's ability to maintain internal control, which can stifle dissent and further limit political freedoms. This awareness tempers the otherwise favorable view of Russia, adding a layer of skepticism and concern about the broader implications of the bilateral relationship.

Algerians' perceptions of Russia have also been influenced by how the post-Hirak government portrayed Moscow as the go-to partner, especially as the government sought support for its bid to join the BRICS grouping. President Tebboune courted Russian and Chinese counterparts and pledged \$1.5 billion to the grouping's New Development Bank. The regime also embarked in months-long mediatic campaigns, hinting at a secure admission. Algeria's hopes were shattered by the BRICS' rejection in August 2023. According to local media, this setback produced significant disappointment in government quarters and President Tebboune announced that “the BRICS dossier has been permanently closed”²⁶⁰. Running for a second term in 2024, securing the country the BRICS membership would have been an important foreign policy achievement for Tebboune²⁶¹. Instead, it turned into an opportune moment for regime opponents to remind the public, through social media and blogs, about Algeria's poor economic performance and how this should push the country leadership to question its traditional friendships, including Russia, in an increasingly competitive and interest-driven world²⁶².

Conclusion

Given Algeria's deep ties with Russia, one might expect Algeria to play a pivotal role as a testing ground for soft power, informational influence and strategic narratives developed for further deployment in other more uncertain contexts in the MENA region or the Sahel. However, as this study has demonstrated, this does not appear to be the case, leading to unexpected conclusions regarding the centrality of these tools in Russia's foreign policy, at least in the case of Algeria.

All in all, the perception of Russia in Algeria seems to be shaped by a complicated mix of historical ties, contemporary geopolitical dynamics, and intricate relationship between the Algerian regime and its Russian counterpart. While there is a generally positive view of Russia among Algerians, it is tempered by an awareness of the political implications of this relationship, as Russia is clearly a staunch supporter of the status quo. The mixed reactions during the Hirak protests and Algeria's BRICS rejection highlight some of the tensions within these relations.

Conversely, despite ongoing military and economic cooperation, Algeria does not appear to be a significant focus of Russia's broader soft power or strategic communication efforts. This observation runs counter to the hypothesis that Russia would experiment with soft power instrument, narrative, and informational influence in countries where it has nurtured stronger relationships. Instead, the hypothesis that emerges is that Russia invests more heavily in these areas where the stakes and uncertainties are higher, such as in conflict zones or countries with pronounced geopolitical confrontation with the West. Russian media and strategic narratives have been more visibly active in regions like Syria and Mali, states experiencing turmoil, where the aim is to counter Western influence and gain strategic advantages.

In summary, Algeria's case illustrates the selective, even limited, nature of Russia's soft power capacities. It also hints that the extent of Russia's soft power efforts is contingent upon geopolitical stakes and the level of uncertainty in its relations with different countries. Thus, while Algeria maintains a robust relationship with Russia, it does not

258 Le Monde, “Le pari de Poutine sur les généraux algériens,” 8 September 2019, <https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/filiu/2019/09/08/le-pari-de-poutine-sur-les-generaux-algeriens/>

259 Author interview (anonymous), Webex, 27 March 2024.

260 Aksil, 2023.

261 Akaram Khariad, “Algerian BRICS Dream Could Come True,” 17 August 2023, Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, <https://www.rosalux.de/en/news/id/50900/algerian-brics-dream-could-come-true>

262 RFI, “L'Algérie non-retenue par les Brics: «Un mal pour un bien afin qu'on prenne conscience de nos retards»,” 25 August 2023, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230825-l-alg%C3%A9rie-non-retenue-par-les-brics-un-mal-pour-un-bien-pour-qu-on-prenne-conscience-de-nos-retards>

serve as a primary arena for Russian soft power initiatives
– at least not yet, highlighting the strategic pragmatism
underlying Russia’s foreign policy.

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Russia's Expertise in the Mena Region: Changes and Continuities

5

Carolina de Stefano

Introduction and Findings

This chapter delves into the developments of the expert community and evolving narratives on the MENA region in Russia under Putin, with a focus on the period immediately preceding and following the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. As part of this e-book's joint and broader research on Russia's soft power in the MENA region and the African continent, the research looks at the production of knowledge and the shaping of a narrative to exert and increase Russia's influence in the region. The main aim of the research is to see whether the ongoing war in Ukraine had an impact on Russia's political discourse about the MENA region and to what extent this reflects institutional changes of the existing academic and intellectual circles to the new open conflict between Russia and the West. In turn, the answer to these questions aims to add new evidence and provide insights into larger ongoing changes in Russia's strategy of soft power (with particular, but not only, reference to the MENA region and the African continent) and cultural environment. The first part examines the existing and evolving landscape of academic institutions and think tanks dealing with the MENA region. Also, it identifies some key figures and experts within these bodies that arguably contributed to the construction or institutionalization of the Kremlin's official narrative, either through the theorization or clarification of concepts that are now used at the official level or by operating as an echo chamber of the official discourse over the MENA region. In the second part, the chapter looks at some of the initiatives on the MENA region Russian research institutions put forward since the war. Also, it analyzes specific developments in the official discourse on the MENA region by analyzing the content of public speeches and research articles on the region by centers and people mostly identified in the first part. This final section focuses on the emergence of a new concept in the official discourse since the beginning of the Ukraine war, the one of "World Majority" (*global'noe bol'shinstvo*) as a preferred alternative to the one of "Global South" (*global'nyi*

yug). Scholars, think tankers near the Kremlin and the Russian President Vladimir Putin made an increasing use of the concept and its origins can be traced to a university institution in Moscow, the Higher School of Economics (HSE).

The research findings reveal changes in the institutional academic and expertise landscape since the beginning of the conflict. The article shows that the war and parallel tensions with the Western countries sparked a renewed and strengthened interest in the MENA region and the African continent within Moscow's academic and university institutions. This interest is reflected in the expansion of academic and research bodies or projects on Africa since 2022, which are viewed in Moscow, and serve as, a tool of Russia's soft power to increase its influence abroad against the West as well as to shape and institutionalize an official narrative on Russia's role in the world addressed to a domestic audience. Regarding soft power strategies, recent research projects this article cites demonstrate a specific interest in the study of both communication strategies addressed at African countries and in the perception of local populations of the countries of the continent which other contributions in this e-book deal with with reference to specific case-studies. Also, other projects and proposals reveal the willingness – at least on paper, while their feasibility has to be seen on the ground - to develop projects to foster the Russian language and culture locally, in line with the traditional idea within some of Russia and previously Soviet intellectual circles of the building of a "Russian World", or *Rusky Mir*.

With regard to key experts on the MENA region and international relations more in general, the research shows that several figures that were influential in previous years still occupy key positions within academia and think tanks. The most prominent and nationally recognized scholars on international relations or the African continent who did not leave the country nor lost their positions as a consequence of the war (and, in most cases, their opposition to it), continued after February 2022 to actively participate in the public

debate to legitimize and reinforce the official discourse of the Kremlin. On the other hand, a generational renewal of the elite is also underway, and this is particularly visible when looking at initiatives launched after the beginning of the war, which created the scope for younger experts and researchers to head new programs in line with the Kremlin's foreign policy line. Overall, the process of the renewal of the elite within research institutions reflect and correspond to a broader and natural generational change underway in Russia also at the level of the state's bureaucracy, where people who were born in the 1950s-1960s and studied in Soviet times, pursuing their career paths during perestroika and in the nineties under Yeltsin, are sided by those who started their career under Putin. In terms of ideas on the MENA region, the research landscape is increasingly becoming an echo chamber and a machine in the hands of the Kremlin to support its domestic and foreign policy, which strongly recalls the way the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CC CPSU) and research bodies worked in Soviet times until perestroika, where an even slight deviation from the position of the full support of the Kremlin's line an current large-scale war is not allowed and is severely sanctioned. The research shows in particular how intellectual circles are called to make a collective effort to reshape the official discourse and potentially to create an alternative, non-Western toolkit of concepts able to attract on Russia's side countries of the MENA region and the African continent, next to Latin America and Asia. In turn, the study of the evolution of expertise on the MENA region and the case of the concept of "global majority" enables to make broader conclusions about recent developments in the relationship of the Kremlin with academia and think tank and show how the war accelerated the dependence of research institution on presidential politics.

1. The Landscape of Russia's Research Institutes on Africa and the Middle East Before and After the 2022 War

Under an authoritarian regime, the impact of experts and technocracy on the policy-making process is limited compared to democratic settings.²⁶³ Due to the overall lack of transparency of the decisional process, it is also more difficult to assess the impact of experts on political decisions and the formation of an official discourse in an authoritarian regime, as well as to know through which channels academic and think tank's recommendations and research reach, influence, and shape the center's decisions. Among authoritarian regimes, Russia is no exception. Most recently, scholars have argued and showed in some cases compellingly how Putin, particularly but not only in the sphere of foreign policy, has increasingly made decisions alone while the influence of his inner circle and the country's governmental structures has been steadily decreasing.²⁶⁴ The decision to invade Ukraine in February 2022 can be seen as the latest and more radical proof of the Russian president's growing isolation.²⁶⁵

In Russia, a varied landscape of academic bodies and renowned influential experts dealing with foreign policy in general and with the MENA region in particular nonetheless exists. While it is difficult to prove the exact impact experts have on the policy-making process, the mapping of bodies and people dealing with a specific geographical area or issue of global relevance helps to identify the Kremlin's priorities and foreign policy agenda, the evolution of a discourse as well as of a policy, and, in some cases, to trace back to intellectual circles the origin of concepts that have later become widespread in the official discourse. Besides, there is a specific interest and significance in mapping Russia's expertise and knowledge production on the MENA region more specifically. Russia has a long-standing and solid tradition of expertise on Africa and the Middle East, both within research and governmental institutions, beginning with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), where diplomats are traditionally trained with a specific and diversified

263 On the limited influence of expertise in democratic settings, see: Johannes Lindvall, "The real but limited influence of expert ideas," *World Politics*, 61, no. 4 (2009): 703-730, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0043887109990104>; Gliberto Capano and Anna Malandrino, "Mapping the use of knowledge in policymaking: barriers and facilitators from a subjectivist perspective (1990-2020)," *Policy Sciences* 55, no. 3 (2022): 399-428, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-022-09468-0>; Jonathan Craft, Brian Head, and Michael Howlett, "Expertise, Policy Advice, and Policy Advisory Systems in an Open, Participatory, and Populist Era: New Challenges to Research and Practice," *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 83, no. 2 (2024): 143-155, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8500.12630>

264 Mark Galeotti, "Twilight of the technocrats and the triumph of autocracy in late Putinism" in *War changes everything: Russia after Ukraine*, Research paper 28, edited by Marc Ozawa (Rome: NATO Defense College, 2023), 49-57, <https://www.ndc.nato.int/news/news.php?icode=1798>

265 Owen Matthews, *Overreach: the inside story of Putin's war against Ukraine* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2022).

knowledge of foreign languages.²⁶⁶ Against the backdrop of the decolonization process in the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union under Khrushchev pushed for increased influence in what was then called the Third World. With this goal, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) actively involved experts and promoted the creation or expansion of research centers dealing with non-European continents.²⁶⁷ In the years preceding the war, Russian academia and think tanks have produced an extensive number of research devoted to the Middle East and Africa.

Before focusing on specific existing institutions dealing with the region, it is important to stress the specificity of studies of on North Africa, the Middle East, and the African continent in Russia compared to Western tradition. In particular, there can be found a traditional distinction between Arabic studies as part of the broader field of Oriental studies (which goes from the Middle East to to Far East and includes Russia's "inner East" of Siberia) and the African continent as a whole.²⁶⁸

On key research institutions, since the 1980s the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Soviet/USSR (later Russian) Academy of Sciences (Institut Vostokovedeniya Rossiyskoy Akademii Nauk, further on, IOS RAS) represents an important case of a research institution that had, and still has, direct and privileged relations with the Kremlin.²⁶⁹ Next to the Middle East and the Asian continent, the institute deals with Arabic and/or Muslim countries. The Institute's advising role to the country's leadership has been institutionalized and strengthened especially since the mid-1980s, when the influential Middle East expert Yevgeny Primakov ran the Institute. Later on, Yevgeny Primakov was to become Russia's Foreign Intelligence Chief (1991-1996), Foreign minister (1996-1998) and Prime Minister (1999) under the

presidency of Boris Yeltsin. Primakov supported the idea of shifting Russia's foreign policy from a mostly "pro-Western" direction embodied by his predecessor at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Andrey Kozyrev to a more assertive policy that aimed to be "multi-vectorial" and focus on the former Soviet republics (what the Russian elite since 1992 called its "Near Abroad" "*blizhnee zarubezhe*") and the rest of the world next to the West.²⁷⁰

Today, the IOS RAS still occupies an important place among institutions dealing with the Arabic countries and the Middle East. Currently, it is headed by Alikberov Alikberov and his president is Vitaly Naumkin.²⁷¹ Akberov (born 1964) has been working at IOS since 1993 and he is member of various governmental expert groups. Naumkin (born 1945) is a prominent figure among experts of Arabic studies since the 1980s and very active and outspoken in the public debate regarding Russia's policies in Africa. Naumkin joined the IOS in 1984 and was appointed head of the Center for Arabic studies already in 1994.²⁷² After the beginning of the war, he made several public speeches providing not only background but clear lines of action for increasing Russia's influence in Africa, such as creating a "Russian speaking zone" through the organization of ad hoc "public movements" locally (further in the next section of the article).²⁷³

Within the IOS, two centers are focused on the MENA region, namely the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies, headed by the Deputy Director of IOS Vasily Kuznetsov (born in 1983), who deals with the history of Maghreb in the Middle Ages, and the Centre for the Studies of the Countries of the Near and Middle East directed by Vyacheslav Belokrenitsky (born 1941), an expert on Pakistan and Afghanistan.²⁷⁴ On the occasion of the 200th anniversary of IOS, President Vladimir

266 On the importance of the study of foreign languages within the Russian MFA see: Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's video message to the participants in the 6th BRICS+ Young Diplomats' Forum," 28 August 2024, https://mid.ru/en/press_service/video/view/1966801/

267 Among others, see Oded Eran, *Mezhdunarodniki: An Assessment of Professional Expertise in the Making of Soviet Foreign Policy* (Ramat Gan, Israel: Turtledove Publisher, 1979); Chris Miller, "Georgii Mirskii and Soviet Theories of Authoritarian Modernization," *The International History Review* 41, no. 2 (2017): 304-22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2017.1402803>; Andreas Hilger, "Communism, Decolonization and the Third World," in *The Cambridge History of Communism*, edited by Norman Naimark, Silvio Pons, and Sophie Quinn-Judge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 317-40, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316459850>; Alessandro Iandolo, "The Rise and Fall of the 'Soviet Model of Development' in West Africa, 1957-64," *Cold War History* 12, no. 4 (2012): 683-704, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682745.2011.649255>.

268 On the development and characteristics of Oriental Studies in Russia see: Alexander V. Lukin, "Oriental Studies as an Academic Field and Its Prospects in Russia," *Vestnik of Saint Petersburg University Asian and African Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 234-52, <https://doi.org/10.21638/spbu13.2023.202>.

269 Mikhail Roshchin, "Evgenii M. Primakov: Arabist and KGB Middleman, Director and Statesman," in *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, edited by Michael Kemper and Stephan Conermann (London: Routledge, 2011), 115-123; E. M. Primakov, "Current Tasks of Soviet Oriental Studies," *Soviet Anthropology and Archeology* 23, no. 1 (1984): 39-65, <https://doi.org/10.2753/aae1061-1959230139>.

270 E. M. Primakov, *Vstrechi na Perekreskakh* [Meetings at Crossroads] (Moscow: Litres 2015).

271 See IOS RAS's website: <https://www.ivran.ru/en/persons/alikberov>

272 See IOS RAS's website: <https://www.ivran.ru/persons/VitalyNaumkin>

273 GOSZAKAZ TV - jekonomika i obshchestvo, "PMJuF 2023: Novyj Miroporjadok: Pravovoe Modelirovanie I Prognozirovanie. Naumkin Vitalij, RAN," YouTube, 30 July 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AwsoTzkcS_k.

274 <https://ivran.ru/oibsv>.

Putin emphasized the Institute's serious contribution to the training of qualified specialists and the development of international humanitarian cooperation.²⁷⁵

Next to the IOS, within the Russian Academy of Sciences, there is the Institute for African Studies (Institut Afriki Rossiiskoj Akademii Nauk, IAS RAS) directed by the well-known scholar on African studies Irina Abramova (born 1962). According to a presidential telegram upon the 60th anniversary of the IAS already back in December 2019, the Institute provides “invaluable regional expertise and analytics to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and various government departments (including the Federation Council and the State Duma, the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, and the Security Council, the latter having become increasingly relevant since the beginning of the 2022 war) and assists in addressing important issues of foreign policy and trade, and establishing a new dialogue between Russia and the African continent”²⁷⁶. Both President Putin and the MFA Sergey Lavrov underscored the Institute's contribution to the preparation and holding of the most important event on Russia-African relations in decades: the Russia-Africa Summit, whose first edition was held in October 2019 and the second in July 2023.²⁷⁷ Similarly, the IAS facilitates the organisation of international events with African partners at the parliamentary level.

As for university institutions, there exist a vast series of more and less institutionalized bodies and networks that aims to strengthen the cooperation with the African continent, and several were created or expanded after the beginning of the Ukraine war. The Russian African Club of the Lomonosov Moscow State University (MSU) is a case in point.²⁷⁸ It brings together Russian and African diplomats, politicians, public figures, representatives of the business community, science, education and culture. Its official goal is to strengthen “friendly relations and comprehensive ties between the

African continent and Russia”²⁷⁹. The club assists in the preparation of the Russia-Africa partnership summits, interacts with African diasporas, holds Russian-African scientific conferences, and assists in the development of academic relations between African and Russian universities.²⁸⁰

Next to the MSU, a prominent university for the study of international relations is the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO). The university is directly dependent on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and formed generations of diplomats and influential political and expert figures. It regularly and traditionally provides expertise on Russia's foreign policy. Two research departments deal with the MENA region and Africa: the Centre for Middle Eastern Studies, founded in 2004 and directed by Andrey Fedorchenko (born 1958), and the recently institutionalized Centre for African Studies directed by the expert on African culture and Swahili language Maya Nikoliskaya (graduated in 2010).²⁸¹ The latter was opened as a structural division of the university only on March 1, 2024. Since March 2024, the staff of the centre has become an active part of the Expert Council on Development and Support of Comprehensive Partnership with African Countries under the Deputy Chairman of the State Duma of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation.²⁸² Last but not least, the National Research University “Higher School of Economics” (HSE), has undergone major developments over recent years and has increasingly become a key laboratory of ideas for as well as an echo chamber for the Kremlin. The HSE, formerly considered one of the most liberal-minded universities in post-Soviet Russia - especially but not only in the economic field - is now the central institution for the proposal and implementation of state projects and programs.²⁸³ The director of the HSE's Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs (WEIA) is the well-known and

275 The International Affairs Journal, “Institut Vostokovedeniya RAN – 200 let” [The Institute of Oriental Studies of the RAS turns 200], 6 November 2018, <https://interaffairs.ru/news/show/20914>

276 Federal State Budgetary Scientific Institution - Institute of African Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, “Vysokiye otsenki truda kollektiva Instituta Afriki” [High marks for the work of the team of the Institute for African Studies], 6 December 2019, <https://www.inafran.ru/node/2092>. For a short summary of the evolving role of the Security Council, Carolina de Stefano, “Gli uomini del presidente. Chi guadagna peso in Russia, all'ombra di Putin” [The President's men. Who's gaining weight in Russia in Putin's shadow], *HuffPost Italia*, 12 March 2024, https://www.huffingtonpost.it/esteri/2024/03/12/news/presidenziali_russia_putin-15345688/

277 On the official website (<https://summitafrica.ru/en/about-summit>), the first edition of the summit is described as the “largest event of that kind in the history of Modern Russia”. The event saw the participation of 43 heads of state of African countries, while only 15 attended in 2023. In 2023, Yevgeny Prigozhin made his first public appearance after the “March on Moscow” he organized in June 2023.

278 See the website: www.rusafroclub.ru.

279 See the website: <https://rusafroclub.ru>.

280 See the website: <https://rusafroclub.ru>.

281 See the website: <https://mgimo.ru/people/fedorchenko/>.

282 See the website: <https://mgimo.ru/about/news/departments/zasedanie-soveta-partnerstva-so-stranami-afriki/>.

283 Meduza, “Dazhe v sovetskoe vremya takogo stesnyalis” [Even in Soviet times, they would have been shy about it], 17 April 2023, <https://meduza.io/feature/2023/04/17/dazhe-v-sovetskoe-vremya-takogo-stesnyalis>.

influential scholar *Sergey Karaganov*, who regularly writes strongly anti-Western newspapers articles and supports Russia's increased influence in the MENA region and Africa. Other well-known scholars at the WEIA are the Former Moscow Carnegie Centre Director 2008-2022 Dmitry Trenin, currently Head of the Institute of World Military Economics and Strategy of WEIA; the Editor-in-chief of the review and website "Russia in Global Affairs" [*Rossiya v global'noi politike*] Fyodor Lukyanov since its foundation in 2002 and Academic Director of the International Discussion Club "Valdai"; Timofey Bordachev, Program Director of the International Discussion Club "Valdai" and Head of the Sector "BRICS Expert Council-Russia".

Next to a specific expertise on the MENA region, the African continent and the Middle East is studied through the prism of Russia's relations and soft power strategies with BRICS countries, particularly since January 2024, when four new members joined the bloc. All new member-states are African or Middle Eastern countries (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates).²⁸⁴ A BRICS-Russia expert council was created in March 2024 as a structural HSE division by Russia's MFA and Ministry of Finance, and by order of the Government of the RF to "provide information, analytical, and expert support for Russia's participation in BRICS, particularly for preparing expert events held as part of Russian BRICS chairmanship in 2024". The council is headed by Victoria Panova, Director of the Expert Council and Vice-President for International Relations at HSE, Russia's Sherpa in W20, and Member of the Russian International Affairs Council. Among think tanks on international affairs, it's worth mentioning the Russian International Affairs Council (*Rossiiskii sovet po mezhdunarodnym delam – RSMD/RIAC*) - headed since 2023 by *Ivan Timofeev* -, the Council for Foreign and Defence Policy (*Sovet po vneshnei i oboronnoi politike – SVOP*), the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (*Rossiiskii institute strategicheskikh issledovaniy*), established in 2020 by a Presidential Decree; [the Gorchakov Fund](#) (*Fond Gorchakova*) fund for the support for public diplomacy (headed by Leonid Drachevsky), and the *Russkii Mir* Foundation of the Russian Academy of Sciences.²⁸⁵

2. Moscow's Laboratory of Soft Power Evolving Discourse in the Mena Region and the Push to Give Birth to an African "Russky Mir"

The above sketching of the main research institutions dealing with the MENA region in Moscow and whose activities were in most cases expanded or more publicized since February 2022 is the starting point to look at some of the most relevant projects, public initiatives that are part of Russia's soft power toolkit in the African continent.

A first strand of activities *in fieri* regards the proposals by prominent regional experts of promoting the "Russian World" (*Russky Mir*) in the MENA region and Africa more in general. In one of his speeches, the scholar and public figure Vitaly Naumkin proposed in 2023 to create a "Russian speaking zone" in the African continent through the organization of ad hoc "public movements" locally.²⁸⁶ On the same token, the head of the key agency for Russia's foreign policy soft power activities, *Rossotrudnichestvo* (the Federal Agency for the Commonwealth of Independent States Affairs, Compatriots Living Abroad, and International Humanitarian Cooperation) Yevgeny Primakov (namesake, and grandson, of the aforementioned Primakov), declared at a press conference in February 2024 that the agency continued to restructure and increase its work to promote Russia's cultural influence in the world since the beginning of the war, thanks to agreements on the [opening] of "Russian houses" in Sudan, Mali, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Sierra Leone, Central African Republic," Primakov sais, as well as in Angola.²⁸⁷

A second strand of initiatives consist in the organization of international and national conferences or development of new research projects. A case in point is the conference held in November 2023 by the School of International Regional Studies, the WEIA, the HSE University together with the Gorchakov Fund, IOS of RAS organisedon "The World Majority in New Realities: the Regional Dimension".

Among other participants, the conference was attended by the aforementioned Sergey Karaganov (Academic Supervisor of WEIA); Anastasia Likhacheva (Dean of WEIA) as the honorary Chairman of the Organising Committee; Dmitry

284 Argentina, too, initially expressed its willingness to join the bloc, but the newly elected president Milei withdrew in 2024.

285 See the websites: <https://russiancouncil.ru>; <https://riss.ru>; <https://gorchakovfund.ru>; <https://svop.ru/>; <https://russkiymir.ru/>.

286 GOSZAKAZ TV - jekonomika i obshhestvo, "PMJuF 2023: Novyj Miroporjadok: Pravovoe Modelirovanie I Prognozirovanie. Naumkin Vitalij, RAN," 2013. Further details above (2.1.)

287 Vedomosti, "Rossotrudnichestvo rasskazalo ob jekspansii v Afrike i na Blizhnem Vostoke" [Rossotrudnichestvo spoke about expansion in Africa and the Middle East], 1 February 2024, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2024/02/01/1017826-rossotrudnichestvo-rasskazalo-ob-ekspansii-v-afrike-i-na-blizhnem-vostoke>

Trenin holding a speech at the session “Russia’s Policy Towards World Majority”; Victoria Panova as a Vice-Rector of HSE, Head of BRICS Expert Council-Russia; Andrei Rudenko, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary spoke on behalf of the Russian MFA; Vitaly Naumkin as Academic Supervisor, Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS; Sergey Orlov (Acting Deputy Director of the Gorchakov Fund); Grigory Lukyanov (Deputy Head of Joint Department with RAS Institute of Oriental Studies and HSE University) reporting on “Concept of Greater Eurasia and its Perception in the Countries of the Middle East and North Africa”; Fyodor Lukyanov (Chairman of the Presidium of the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy, Research Professor at WEIA); Timofey Bordachev (Professor at WEIA) speaking on “Western Politics and Institutions in New Reality”; Vasily Kuznetsov (Deputy Director of the Oriental Institute of RAS) and Irina Zvyagelskaya (Head of the Sector for Middle Eastern Studies of Primakov’s IMEMO RAS). The conference was attended by 200 speakers and panellists, including Russian and foreign scholars from MGIMO, MSU, MSLU (Moscow State Linguistic University), St. Petersburg University, the Institutes of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, National University of La Plata, National University of Mongolia, University of Belgrade, Polytechnic University of Madrid, Autonomous University of Barcelona, and other representatives of academic and expert circles from 20 states in Asia, Africa, Europe and Latin America.

In parallel, several projects have been developed within research institutions. Recently, the above-mentioned Center for African Studies has developed two projects directly related to Russia’s soft power strategies in Africa, the first on “Russian-African interaction in the perception of the African partners” and the other, directed by Nikoliskaya, being the information-analytical portal [Embrace Africa](#) (ObnIMI Afriku), which produces analytical content and aims officially to provide a roadmap to shift from the phase of “getting to know Africa” to the implementation of “mechanisms of long-term and comprehensive economic and cultural cooperation”.²⁸⁸ More in general, since its

creation, the centre regularly conducts conferences and round tables, with the Russian International Affairs Council, the Valdai Club, IAS RAS, the Gorchakov Foundation, and the RUDN University.

3. The “World Majority” as Russia’s Discourse’s Anticolonial Alternative to the West’s “Global South”

In his article “Russia and Africa: Uniting Efforts for Peace, Progress and a Successful Future”, written on the eve of the Russia-Africa July 2023 Summit, President Putin affirmed how Russia.

*“consistently supported the African peoples in their struggle for liberation from colonial oppression, assisted in the formation of statehood, in strengthening sovereignty and defence capability” [...] “We are confident that the new, multipolar world order, the contours of which have already been outlined, will be more fair and democratic. And there is no doubt that Africa, along with Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, will take its rightful place in it, and will finally free itself from the heavy legacy of colonialism and neocolonialism”.*²⁸⁹

At his annual address to the Federation Council on February 29, 2024, President Putin discussed Russia’s evolving relations with the MENA region. He described the Russia-Africa summits that were launched in 2019 (the third summit is planned to take place in 2025) as “a real breakthrough. The African continent is increasingly declaring its interests and its right to true sovereignty. We wholeheartedly support all these aspirations.”²⁹⁰

On the one hand, Putin’s and the Russian leadership’s words reproduce a traditionally Soviet discourse that aims to portray Russia as an essentially anti-colonialist country in opposition to former Western colonialist countries such as France and the United Kingdom, and this notwithstanding deep ambiguities of this position scholars have repeatedly stressed, considering Russia’s imperial and Soviet history.²⁹¹

288 See the website: <https://africaportal.ru/>.

289 On the same token, see also Putin’s speech at the Second International Parliamentary Conference Russia-Africa held in March 2023 in Moscow, on this website: <http://duma.gov.ru/en/news/56646/>.

290 Moskovskij Komsomolets, “Poslaniye prezidenta: Nazvany prostyye istiny dlya Global’nogo Bol’shinstva” [Presidential Address: Simple truths for the World Majority revealed], 29 February 2024, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2024/02/29/poslanie-prezidenta-nazvany-prostye-istiny-dlya-globalnogo-bolshinstva.html>. For Putin’s assessment of France’s policy and position in Africa see also this website: <https://www.fontanka.ru/2024/03/13/73328072>.

291 Among many, Selbi Durdiyeva, “Not in Our Name: Why Russia is Not a Decolonial Ally or the Dark Side of Civilizational Communism and Imperialism,” *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 29 May 2023, <https://saisreview.sais.jhu.edu/not-in-our-name-why-russia-is-not-a-decolonial-ally-or-the-dark-side-of-civilizational-communism-and-imperialism/>.

On the other hand, Russia's anticolonial discourse has been fostered and experienced an evolution as a consequence of the Ukraine war, which led to an explicit willingness to reinforce Russia's influence in the MENA region and Africa through, among others, the support of soft power initiatives.²⁹² Russian research centers and regional experts have been actively promoting and gradually defined more precisely the contours of this evolving narrative addressed to the MENA region, the African continent, and the non-Western world more in general, which is arguably there to stay in the following years. Against this backdrop, this article focuses on the emergence of the term "World Majority" (*global'noe men'shinstvo*, WM) in contrast with the one of "Global South", which has become increasingly popular in recent times mostly, but not exclusively, in the Western political debate.²⁹³ In his Annual Address to the Federation Council on February 29, 2024 Putin affirmed that "we and our new (and traditional) partners are forming a new world of the Global Majority, where there is no place for state arrogance, the dictates of "third countries", interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, but there is respect for national sovereignty, recognition of the right of each state to independently choose its path, the priority of traditional spiritual values."²⁹⁴

During President Putin's meeting with the leaders of the fraction of the State Duma, the leader of the Liberal-Democratic Party of Russia-LDPR (since 2022) Leonid Slutsky, who also participated in the recent 2024 presidential elections as a candidate and received only over 3 per cent of votes, said the following:

"Russia is becoming a forward, a centre of gravity for the countries of Latin America, Africa, a significant number of countries in Eurasia [...] which are against a unipolar world based on blood - what the United States is trying to do and all the BRICS countries, without

*exception, are opposing. [...] And it is precisely those who today advocate a multipolar world, where each country, its people, national culture, traditions, history, language, and religion will become a separate pole of power and influence in the new world architecture of the 21st century - balanced, stable, safe, with a single and indivisible security space - this is the new Global Majority, and it is grouped around Russia, which is why they are drawn to our forums, including parliamentary forums."*²⁹⁵

In his article "Russia: Path to the 'World Majority'", RIAC General Director Ivan Timofeev pointed to the origins of the term "World Majority". According to the author, the policy was designed by Yevgeny Primakov in the 1990s: "The ideas about developing ties with the non-Western world appeared in the Russian international affairs community before [...] at the political level. A similar course began to take shape back in the 1990s, starting from the views of Yevgeny Primakov [...] Later, Timofeev notices how the 'sanctions tsunami' against Russia following the invasion of Ukraine and the impasse in relations with the West have become a stimulus for changes. Also, he pointed out that Russia faces challenges and a number of obstacles in the path to the "world majority" [...] "a hard work ahead that will take decades".²⁹⁶ According to Timofeev, the World Majority framework is in its formation stage, and thus, Russia should encourage the following: 1) The formation of centres of power that are relatively independent from the US and its allies and that possess high political subjectivity; 2) The creation of reliable opportunities for modernization through interaction with the non-Western world; 3) Ensuring security on the Western vector.²⁹⁷

On his side, the head of the journal "Russia in Global Affairs" Fyodor Lukyanov's comment to Business Journal "Profile" added new thoughts to define the concept of World Majority

292 For the analysis of concrete initiatives in the MENA region in this sense and the way they are perceived in the recipient countries, see the other contributions in this e-book.

293 See for example India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi's introductory speech at the "Voice of Global South" in November 2023: Narendra Modi, "Voice of Global South stands out as a distinctive platform in the evolving landscape of 21st century," 17 November 2023, <https://www.narendramodi.in/text-of-prime-minister-narendra-modis-opening-remarks-during-the-2nd-voice-of-global-south-summit-576088>; On the ambiguities of the concept of Global South, see Andrea Graziosi, "Vedi alla voce ambigua colonialismo. Un saggio" [See under See under the ambiguous dictionary entry "colonialism." An essay], *Il Foglio*, 29 April 2024, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/cultura/2024/04/29/news/vedi-alla-voce-ambigua-colonialismo-un-saggio-6498151/>.

294 Moskovskij Komsomolets, "Poslaniye prezidenta: Nazvany prostyye istiny dlya Global'nogo Bol'shinstva [Presidential Address: Simple truths for the World Majority revealed], 2024.

295 Office of the President of the Russian Federation, "Meeting with the leaders of the State Duma factions," 15 December 2023, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/73000>.

296 Ivan Timofeev, *Can Russia Really Break Away from the West?* (Moscow: Russian International Affairs Council, 2023), <https://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/rossiya-put-k-mirovomu-bolshinstvu/>.

297 Ivan Timofeev, 2023.

in relation to the 2022 Ukraine War.²⁹⁸ He affirmed that “the concept of World Majority, which became entrenched in the Russian political lexicon this year, appeals to the parallelism between processes in individual countries and at the global level. The West plays the role of the global establishment. There is no one “populist” force opposing it. But there is a large environment (the very “world majority”) that believes that the minority (the West) is abusing power. The year 2022 was a turning point because for the first time, the ruling minority was directly challenged.”²⁹⁹

A report by the HSE’s WEIA faculty, HSE’s Centre of Comprehensive European and International Studies, Foreign and Defence Policy Council (SVOP) and “Russia in Global Affairs” Journal, defines the World Majority as “the totality of non-Western countries of the world that are not included in binding relations with the United States and the organisations it patronizes.”³⁰⁰ The report has been written by Sergey Karaganov and Dmitry Trenin, who state in the text that the definition was born within the walls of the HSE and, having become a general idea of Russia’s Foreign policy course, is now commonly used by the Russian President and his Administration. Moreover, Karaganov contrasts the term “World Majority” with the “Global Majority”, arguing that the first one is preferable since, according to him, “Global” refers to the neo-liberal definition of globalisation.³⁰¹

Further, in a Report of February 2023 entitled “*The Middle East and the Future of a Polycentric World*” Vitaly Naumkin and Vasily Kuznetsov noticed how “the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century turned out to be extremely dramatic. The COVID-19 pandemic, the armed conflict in Ukraine, the growing confrontation between Russia and the West, the rapid strengthening of the global role of the World Majority states (countries outside the Western alliance), the general food crisis and worsening environmental threats - all this has accelerated the long-begun process of the collapse of the world political system, leaving out of sight what is coming to replace it”.³⁰²

Finally, the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies published this year’s (2024) the first issue of the “National Strategy

Issues” (Problemy natsional’noi strategii) journal in March. The issue came under the name of “Non-West: Global Majority at the Crossroads of History” and primarily focused on addressing the formation of a new architecture of international affairs amid the context of the rise and strengthening of the Global South.³⁰³

Overall, an analysis of Russia’s research on and definitions of the concept of the World Majority is a relevant case to trace and assess the evolution of the official narrative and intellectual environment about the MENA region and Africa. While the study is worth continuous and future research, a provisional conclusion is that this debate reflects an intellectual movement underway that is the more and more pushing for a cultural shift away from a Western toolkit of concepts and ideas that were present in post-Soviet Russia in the 1990s but also during the two first Putin’s presidencies (2000-2008) and Medvedev’s one (2008-2012). Also, it reflects how intellectuals of both older and younger generations actively contribute to shaping Russia’s anti-Western discourse and are called to collectively try to ensure a cultural shift, like was the case under Khrushchev and Brezhnev during the Soviet Union. To spread this narrative in the MENA region, many soft power initiatives are being proposed and developed, beginning with developing the media landscape and a “Russian-speaking” zone in African countries. While there is some reason to doubt that the idea of Russia – a country, it should be noted, with only 140 million inhabitants – will manage to become a “civilizational” guide of an anti-Western “global majority” made of billions of people in the world, a constant and increasing financing of research centers and projects dealing with the MENA region must be expected in future years.

298 Fyodor Lukyanov, “Bol’shinstvo bol’shinstva” [Majority’s majority], *‘Profile’ Business Journal*, 17 April 2024, <https://profile.ru/columnist/bolshinstvo-bolshinstva-1432908/>.

299 Lukyanov.

300 Sergey Karaganov et al., *Russia’s Policy towards the World Majority* (Moscow: Higher School of Economics, Council on Foreign and Defense Policy and Russia in Global Affairs, 2023), <https://www.mid.ru/upload/medialibrary/c98/cjmfdf73760bme0y99zqlj5lzzllrvs/Russia%E2%80%99s%20Policy.pdf>.

301 Karaganov et al., 2023.

302 Vitaly Naumkin, Vasily Kuznetsov, *Doklady: Blizhnii Vostok i budushchee polittsentrichnogo mira* [Reports: The Middle East and the Future of Polycentric World] (Moscow: International Discussion Club ‘Valdai’, 2023), <https://ru.valdaiclub.com/a/reports/blizhnii-vostok-budushchee-polittsentrichnogo-mira/>.

303 Sosnov Georgiy Ivanovich et al., “Nezapad na perekrestke istorii: Blizhnievostochnaya dinamika” [Non-West at the Crossroads of History: The Middle Eastern Dynamics], *National Strategy Issues*, 82, no. 1 (2024), 12–41, <https://riss.ru/en/journal/archive/648/>.

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Russia's Use of Soft Power in the MENA and Sahel Regions: Key Takeaways from the Case Studies

Virginie Collombier and Luigi Narbone

Since its military intervention in Syria in 2015, Russia has reasserted itself as a significant player in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and Sahel regions. This resurgence is part of Moscow's broader strategy to reestablish its status as a global power, with these regions serving as critical arenas for its geopolitical ambitions. Through a combination of military, diplomatic, and economic initiatives, Russia has steadily increased its influence, securing a foothold in countries like Syria, Libya, and Mali. By positioning itself as a counterbalance to Western powers, Moscow has also deepened its relationships with key regional actors, like the Gulf countries and Egypt, leveraging energy agreements and arms deals to forge strategic partnerships.

Against this backdrop, the four case studies presented in this eBook—examining Russia's use of soft power and information tools in Syria, Libya, Mali, and Algeria—offer valuable insights into how Moscow projects power and builds influence. Despite the differing local contexts, these cases highlight several consistent strategies that Moscow employs to advance its objectives.

Main Take Aways

1. **Theory plays a pivotal role in shaping Russia's strategies in the MENA and Sahel regions, particularly through the influence of "hybrid warfare" concepts (гибридная война)** developed by Russian strategic thinkers and the defence establishment. These theories emphasize the coordinated use of soft power and information tools to achieve strategic objectives and have structured Russia's interventions in these regions. Soft power and information tactics are seen as cost-effective alternatives to traditional military methods, aiming to secure the allegiance or manipulation of

governmental elites, while also winning over the broader populace. These non-military tools are weaponized and systematically deployed to gain influence in the geopolitical struggle against the West.

2. **The collapse of regional and local orders offers Moscow favourable opportunities for intervention.** Conflict-ridden countries provide fertile ground for Russian involvement, as the fragmentation of authority and deep polarization between rival forces create greater room for manoeuvre. While hard power remains central to Russia's power projection, soft power and information tactics also play a critical role. Additionally, the growing push for multipolarity in these regions, granting local actors more strategic autonomy and opportunities for multi-alignment, is eagerly and skilfully exploited by Moscow.
3. **Russia employs an opportunistic and selective approach in prioritizing both the locations and tempo of its engagements across various regions.** Its policies have demonstrated adaptability and responsiveness to shifting developments on the ground. Rather than adhering to a clearly defined long-term strategy, Moscow capitalizes on emerging opportunities as they arise. However, as the case studies of Syria, Libya, and Mali illustrate, Russia's actions frequently align with broader strategic objectives, such as expanding its military presence and securing access to natural resources and markets. In contrast, in more stable countries, like Algeria, Russia's policy appears less coherent and effective, which can be attributed to its limited interest, resources, and leverage in addressing the specific demands of these partner states.

4. **Russia has cultivated its soft power by positioning itself as a capable counter-terrorist actor and a staunch defender of local states' sovereignty.** In all the case studies analysed, Moscow builds on the local regimes' and segments of the population's labelling of the opposing camp or the insurgents as "terrorists." The Russian narrative emphasizes the threats these groups pose to state sovereignty, as well as to national stability and prosperity. By depicting such threats as existential and requiring a decisive securitised approach, Moscow can effectively promote its offer of a long-term military presence.
5. **Russia's soft power strategies have leveraged longstanding discontent and historical grievances against the West, framing its narrative around anti-Western and neo-colonial themes.** In constructing these narratives, Russia exploits both real and perceived failures of Western countries, attributing traits such as self-interest, duplicity, inconsistency, and double standards to them. These criticisms resonate with local perceptions. Moscow seizes every opportunity to undermine the West, making anti-Western narratives a cornerstone of its strategic concept of the "World Majority." This rebranding of the "Global South" aims to foster a shared identity between Russia and nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, united by common opposition to what is described as "minority dominance" by the West. This approach seeks to reshape Russia's foreign policy, positioning it as the leader in an emerging international order based on "civilisational powers" and regionalised systems.
6. **Information tactics are central to Russia's soft power strategies in the MENA region and the Sahel.** Several factors contribute to Moscow's effectiveness in this domain. First, Russia focuses on constructing a positive narrative about its actions by mobilising various information tools to highlight its achievements on the ground, in real time. This approach is meant to convey a sense of transparency and authenticity, as illustrated by the case of Syria. Second, Russia strategically crafts new narratives that emphasize simple yet impactful messages resonating with local audiences. Themes such as defending the state against existential threats posed by insurgents and resisting Western neo-colonialist policies frequently recur in Russia's messaging. Third, rather than positioning itself as the main protagonist, Russia presents itself as a strong, reliable, and committed partner supporting local authorities. Finally, Russia's communication strategies deliberately omit controversial aspects of the local conflicts in which it is involved, such as the violent repression of civilians and the hostility faced by central governments from oppressed constituencies.
7. **Russia's information tactics systematically employ both mainstream and social media to shape favourable narratives, spread disinformation, and promote some local actors over others.** While Moscow relies on Russian oligarchs and pro-Russian local figures to enhance its informational influence, the cases of Syria, Libya, and Mali suggest concerted efforts and a notable level of coordination in information operations to promote pro-Russian messages.
8. **These information tactics are further reinforced by Russia's restrictions on free speech and the circulation of information, as well as military policies that limit international journalists' access to conflict zones.** In Syria, for instance, only Russian war correspondents were granted unrestricted access. This allowed them—without challenge—to emphasize their local presence, control the narrative, and shape public perception both in Russia and internationally.

Policy Responses

The four case studies analysed in this eBook provide valuable insights into Russia's soft power strategies and information narratives. They reveal a well-articulated and multifaceted approach in which soft power and information tactics are not merely adjuncts to broader hard power strategies but are instead carefully deployed to exploit new opportunities while accounting for local specificities.

Russia conceptualizes soft power quite differently from the Western perspective, as articulated in Joseph Nye's well-known definition. Rather than viewing soft power as a means to enhance cultural or ideological appeal, Moscow sees it as a tool for projecting influence in a competitive, zero-sum environment, particularly in opposition to the West. This perspective explains Russia's focus on countries where it perceives Western influence to be declining or where Western policies are criticized as inconsistent.

In this context, Western policymakers who are focused on developing potential responses to Russia's actions are particularly concerned about the effectiveness and long-term sustainability of these strategies. Just how effective is Russia in projecting its soft power? How capable is it of securing the allegiance of local elites and winning the hearts

and minds of local populations?

The general assessment—largely supported by our research—is that Russia has significantly increased its foothold and influence in several areas of the MENA and Sahel regions over the past decade. However, a more careful analysis reveals important limitations to Moscow’s appeal, showing that local perceptions of Russia as a central and influential actor are far more nuanced. These limitations should be considered by Western governments when shaping their strategies and policy responses.

While Russia operates as a pragmatic and opportunistic actor—capitalizing on its rivals’ failures and prioritizing simple, positive narratives about its actions—local elites and populations in the MENA and Sahel regions should not be seen as passive or naïve.

The case of Algeria illustrates that, in a relatively stable country with a structured foreign policy agenda, Russia’s soft power has limited appeal. Moscow is just one of many international players, and Algiers has strongly defended its policy autonomy while actively seeking to benefit from the emerging multipolar order. For example, following the onset of the war in Ukraine, Italy has positioned Algeria at the centre of its energy diversification strategy. This move has been positively received in Algiers, which appreciated Europe’s recognition of its strategic importance.

This example underscores the importance of developing policies centred on shared objectives that are mutually beneficial for both partners. Too often, Western policies are formulated in isolation, with limited or no engagement with counterparts in the MENA and Sahel regions and tend to overly prioritise Western interests—often short-term—over local needs or desires. While Russia positions itself as a strong and reliable partner to local authorities, **European governments would benefit from more constructive engagement and meaningful exchanges with their counterparts in the MENA and Sahel regions when designing key policies.**

Our research also indicates that, even in countries plagued by conflict and violence, local elites tend to hold realist views regarding Moscow’s motivations behind the façade of its narratives. Russia’s appeal is less about the attractiveness of a so-called Russian model or its achievements and more about a deep disillusionment with Western policies, failures, inconsistencies, and duplicity. This disillusionment seems to drive the acceptance of Russia as the lesser of two evils.

In this context, Europeans could work to reverse negative perceptions of themselves in the MENA and Sahel regions by making a sustained effort to identify mutually beneficial

strategic and political priorities and develop coherent, consistent, and impactful policies to translate those priorities into action.

While political developments within the European Union and at the member-state level make the formulation of a common grand strategy unlikely, European states could take steps to address some of the most damaging aspects of their current approach to relations with the MENA and Sahel regions: short-termism, inconsistencies, reactivity, and often short-sighted self-interest (such as the overemphasis on migration management). One way of doing this could be to focus efforts and resources on a few “win-win” priority objectives. These objectives should arise from meaningful dialogue with local partners and be clearly communicated to the public both in the region and at home, effectively conveyed to local populations through targeted communication campaigns.

Just as Russia has prioritized building a positive narrative around its actions in the region, Europeans also have several highly valuable assets they could leverage, including the appeal of economic ties with the EU and its member states—through investments, technology transfers and strategic partnerships—as well as the quality of Europe’s educational systems—through scholarship programs, academic exchanges and participation in joint research projects. Moreover, Western values such as political pluralism and democratic governance continue to resonate with populations in the MENA and Sahel regions.

A stronger, more deliberate, and confident commitment from European countries to promoting and protecting these values could significantly help restore the West’s credibility—provided it is paired with consistent, long-term political objectives and concrete actions on the ground.

Russia has, to a large extent, emerged *by default* as the preferred partner in several MENA and Sahel countries, while the West still possesses valuable assets it can mobilize to improve its standing in this increasingly contested landscape. However, to effectively restore its image and credibility, European public diplomacy must avoid replicating the shortcomings for which it is often criticised. It should neither be reactive nor defensive, and it must not overly focus on its own short-term interests. Moreover, for many decades, the EU has exerted significant gravitational power in the neighbourhood and beyond, thanks to its soft power. Italy and Europe should double down on soft power initiatives, making them more effective and geopolitically targeted, rather than attempting to engage in hard power strategies for which the continent is ill-suited.

The most effective strategy for countering Russian narratives and disinformation campaigns is to develop a positive communication approach focused on European objectives and achievements in specific priority areas, rather than simply debunking Russian misinformation. Instead of sacrificing core values and principles to regain influence in the MENA and Sahel regions, European nations should concentrate on identifying pragmatic political priorities that align with these values while also addressing the interests of their local partners. This approach can strengthen European credibility while fostering mutually beneficial relationships with countries that are vital to the future of the broader region.

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Mediterranean Platform

Founded in 2022, and directed by Prof. Luigi Narbone, the Mediterranean Platform is a research, dialogue, and educational programme at the School of Government, Luiss Guido Carli. It offers a space for collective reflection on the opportunities and challenges of the Mediterranean region and promotes informed policymaking and advocacy at the national and transnational levels.

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