

## **Impact of Russian Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in Sub-Saharan Africa: Shaping Influence in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape**

**Dr. Noufou OUEDRAOGO, PhD; Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso**  
*Communication Sciences, Independent Researcher*

**Abstract:** This research examines the impact of Russia’s public diplomacy and soft power Sub-Saharan African countries. Methodologically, a combination of narrative research and ethnographic research designs has been applied. This includes both primary and secondary data collected from interviews, participant observation, case studies, comparative explorations, and archive data analysis. In so doing, the study looks into how Russian soft power affects views, influences policy choices, and promotes a favorable perception of Russia on the African continent. The study analyzes the historical evolution of Russia’s engagement with African countries; before assessing the contribution of the media outlets on diplomatic, economic, educational and cultural activities. Eventually, the study demonstrated that the media outlets contribute significantly in creating a positive perception of Russia in Sub-Saharan Africa, eliminating the biases related to African societies, and ultimately increasing trust in the bilateral cooperation process.

**Keywords:** Bilateral Relations, Media, Russia, Soft Power, Sub-Saharan Africa.

### **1. Introduction**

The African continent consistently participates more actively in the international system and takes on a bigger role on the world stage in terms of attractiveness, which helps it draw in new foreign powers. Many nations and investors have been drawn to the rapidly rising Continent in recent years due to its geopolitical weight and economic and commercial potential. In the last two decades, under Putin administration, the Russian Federation has increased its bilateral cooperation with African countries through various public diplomacy and soft power mechanisms. Thus, several Sub-Saharan African states find Russia a mighty, promising, and attractive provider of security services and political assurance; a useful ally with whom they can diversify their policy options and prevent overdependence on the US, China, or the former colonizing states such as France and the UK.

Comparatively to the ancient Western colonial powers such as France, Belgium, England, etc. – and also against other global competitors like the USA, China, and Turkey – Russia addresses an attractive discourse to African countries; which gives the impression of privileging ‘win-win partnership’ relations with its African peers. Hence, the Russian leader ostensibly pronounces an ‘anti-imperialist’ discourse in Africa by claiming that his country does not carry any “stain of imperialism” or colonialism (Siegle, 2021). In doing so, Vladimir Putin is portrayed in Africa as a powerful leader – a new challenger to Western “imperialist rivals” (Ambrosetti, 2022) – without a colonial past like France which has exploited Africa for several decades.

After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and the West imposed sanctions, it boosted efforts to sell arms, extract resources and established new bilateral partnership across the African continent. In this regard, it is crucial to evaluate the dynamics of the bilateral ties that African governments establish with their new partners, especially Russia in this case, in order to determine Africa's place in global politics. For Russia, the conflict in Ukraine further intensified the need for partnership diversification in order to maintain both geostrategic and geopolitical stance in the global order. Subsequently, following the conflict in Ukraine, the BRICS+ member states and the African partners adopted both pragmatic and sympathetic approach based on *realpolitik* with the aim of not disappointing their Russian ally.

In this context of geopolitical clashes, this article circumnavigates the implications of Russian engagements with Sub-Saharan African countries; analyzing especially the impact of Russian public diplomacy and soft power in strengthening the bilateral cooperation between the two parties.

## **2. Strategic Combination of Public Diplomacy and Soft Power**

A savvy combination of compelling public diplomacy's policy and soft power mechanisms is crucial for projecting a positive image of a state. Russia has recently implemented this strategy in order to strengthen its ties with Sub-Saharan African countries. Before discussing in details the Russian approach, it is necessary to cast a glance at the implications of the notions '*public diplomacy*' and '*soft power*'.

### **2.1. Public Diplomacy**

When former US diplomat Edmund Gullion first used the word '*public diplomacy*' in the mid-1960s, it was partially intended to set foreign government communication operations apart from the term '*propaganda*', which had come to mean something negative. Thus, 'State-to-public' and 'public-to-public' are the two primary frameworks within which public diplomacy operations are carried out. 'State-to-public' initiatives seek to inform the public about the state's policies and actions by using official resources and avenues.

The impact of public opinion on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy is the subject of public diplomacy. It covers aspects of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy, such as the development of foreign public opinion by governments, the intercultural communications, the interactions between private organizations and interests in different nations, the reporting of foreign affairs and its influence on policy, communications between foreign correspondents and diplomats, etc. Fractal globalization, preemptive military invasion, time and space shrinking ICTs, and the emergence of global non-state actors – such as terror networks, bloggers, (web)activists, etc. – that oppose state-driven policy and discourse are the main trends shaping public diplomacy in the twenty-first century (Snow, 2020).

Simply articulated in a different way of thinking, public diplomacy is the way in which governments manage their relations with other countries by using public communications channels and interacting with a variety of nongovernmental organizations (political parties, businesspeople, trade associations, labor unions, educational institutions, religious institutions, ethnic groups, powerful individuals, and so forth) in an effort to sway their policies and those of other governments.

According to Alan K. Henrikson (2005), public diplomacy refers to government-sponsored programs intended to inform or influence public opinion in other countries; its chief instruments are publications, motion pictures, cultural exchanges, radio and television channels, and today the social networks. This process is strategically significant since the idea of partnership diversification brings about a disruption in the initial order of a state. That is why it is often worth blending public diplomacy approach with a well-structured soft power apparatus.

## 2.2. Soft Power

Harvard University professor Joseph S. Nye, one of preeminent theorists of international relations, introduced the notion of “soft power” in his 1990 book entitled “Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power,” which was published in *Foreign Affairs*. Nye's definition of soft power includes “the ability of a country to persuade others to do what it wants without force or coercion” (Nye, 1990). Initially, Nye created the concept of soft power in response to the argument that American influence has been diminishing since the 1970s and had already started to decrease significantly. First and foremost, Nye contends that one should not solely evaluate the military might of the United States of America, but also its economic and cultural might; because, for him, the US's soft power is the primary source of its hegemonic strength.

Furthermore, Joseph Nye argued that the US's universal principles, alluring way of life, institutions, laws, culture, and philosophy make up its soft power. Articulated in a different way, he defines soft power as “the capacity to influence others to achieve desired results through attraction as opposed to coercion or payment” (Nye, 2004). Therefore, the resources of a nation's culture, values, and policies form the basis of its soft power. Yet, sometimes, hard and soft power resources are combined in a smart power strategy. This is typically the case with Russia (this will be developed later), when it comes to discussing the dichotomic combination of soft and hard power mechanisms in Sub-Saharan Africa.

A nation's soft power has traditionally been enhanced by public diplomacy, which was crucial to winning the Cold War (Nye, 2008). In simple terms, soft power can also be considered as “the ability to get what you want via soft mechanisms instead of resorting to the use of physical force or economic power” (Nye, 1990). It refers to a state's capacity to impose its political will and policies on another state “without using force or sanctions” (Ibid, 1990). This can be accomplished by influencing the other party with reasoned arguments, persuasive narratives, and sensible ideas. Here, the key components of soft power are attractiveness, persuasiveness, trust and credibility.

Therefore, powerful nations use excessively public diplomacy and soft power to exert cultural and ideological influence over the inhabitants of the regions they seek to cooperate with in order to continue assuring their standing as superpowers and respected states in the international arena. The following passage is related to the theoretical framework in line with the impact of Russian soft power in Africa.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

Several social theories can be used to provide a thorough study of this research on the impact of Russia's soft power in its bilateral relations with Sub-Saharan African countries. Thus, it is possible to apply, amongst other theories, a) the social exchange theory, b) the comparative advantage theory, c) the cultural hybridization theory, d) the cultural imperialism theory, and e) the media hostile effects theory.

### a) Social Exchange Theory

Every durable relationship is grounded on a successful social exchange. According to its pioneer, George Homans (1958), the social exchange theory examines social relations and interactions as resource exchanges, stressing the costs (sacrifices) and advantages (rewards) that people weigh in their connections. Arguing alongside, the significance of the “social context” in which economic and trading principles are implemented was extensively expounded upon by Peter Blau in 1964. He pointed out that social exchanges are different from commercial transactions in that the parameters of the former are left up to the discretion of the individual involved. Costs change in value in the same way as rewards do. According to Blau (1964), when we choose to invest time in one connection, we miss out on the chance to invest time in another, possibly more fulfilling relationship.

This entails weighing the benefits and drawbacks of a particular connection (either existing or future) against those of other possible partnerships. Partners are inclined to abandon a

relationship for the alternative if they believe it has the potential to yield higher profits than their existing one. The British academic Mark Redmond (2015) put it as it follows:

We assess the future of our relationships, evaluating the potential rewards and costs. If we are happy with a given relationship's profits and forecast that they remain the same, we are likely to continue the relationship; but if we predict the costs might come to exceed the profits, we are likely to deescalate the relationship (Redmond, 2015).

The author contends that in order to maximize outcomes, people must assess the possibility of achieving a particular relationship's good or bad results; this is process he refers to as determining the "anticipated outcome value" (Redmond, 2015). Yet, in this process it is worth taking into account the existence of other alternatives; and thus, applying the comparative advantage theory would be necessary to apprehend this aspect.

### **b) Comparative Advantage Theory**

According to the theory of comparative advantage, nations will trade with one another, exporting the items in which they are relatively superior in terms of production and importing other products in return. The comparative advantage theory was first proposed by British economist and political scientist David Ricardo in his 1817 book "*On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*". Adam Smith's (1776) absolute advantage theory contrasts with the theory of comparative advantage. In fact, the ability to generate more or better goods and services than someone else is referred to as "absolute advantage". However, the phrase "comparative advantage" describes the capacity to generate goods and services at a reduced opportunity cost, rather than always at a higher volume or caliber. According to David Ricardo (1817), nations can gain from trade by concentrating on producing the goods they are greatest at producing and importing the ones they are not as excellent at producing.

Interestingly, the interchanges of goods and services worldwide, made possible by the opening of international markets due to the globalization, entail the idea of cultural hybridization.

### **c) Cultural Hybridization Theory**

Homi K. Bhabha, a 1949-born literary theorist and academic, coined the term hybridity to discuss the cultural blending of identity within colonial interactions. After the release of his book "*The Location of Culture*" in 1994, the author rose to prominence in the fields of postcolonial theory and criticism, culture theory, and cultural identity in the globalized world. Although the term "hybridity" was first used mostly in relation to colonialism, cultural theorists and sociologists have since embraced it to analyze a variety of topics, including globalization, migration, imperialism, and neocolonialism (Bhabha, 1994; Hall, 1990; Said, 1978; Schiller, 1976).

According to Homi K. Bhabha's thesis, the term "hybridization" describes the formation of new mixed identities as a result of the blending of many cultures. Clearly, the interaction between two or more cultures can lead to the process of hybridization. The application of the theory of cultural hybridity seeks to investigate, within the framework of Russia's involvement in Sub-Saharan Africa, the role that media play in the establishment of cultural hybridity. Thus, this theory will shed light in the analysis of the intercession, embedding, and integration of many cultural aspects through narratives and representations in the media contents. In fact, Homi Bhabha's views have actually changed and impacted the conversations and discourses surrounding international relations, globalization, and cultural imperialism.

### **d) Cultural Imperialism Theory**

This theory aims at considering the role of media in cultural exchanges and, more specifically in the context of the current study, the potential impact of the Russian media outlets on the cultural landscape of Sub-Saharan African nations. Contextually speaking, this theory explores how Russian media contents (including traditional media, news agencies, and social media platforms)

influence cultural perceptions and values. According to the definition given by Herbert Schiller – in *Communication and Cultural Domination* (Schiller, 1976) – cultural imperialism is:

The sum of processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system; and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced, and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to, or even to promote, the values and structures of the dominant center of the system (Schiller, 1976: P.9).

This implies that Schiller's (1976) cultural imperialism was not specific to nation-states, but could be applied to any relationship based on dominance and hegemonic subordination, such as those in international commercial exchanges between developed countries to less developed states, educational and cultural systems, class relations between groups, or international media flows (Zhang, 2011).

The global economy is today organized by multinational corporations, and communications and information are essential to the system of governance and management. It must be acknowledged that communication entails considerably more than just sending and receiving messages along well-known routes. As a result, there will undoubtedly be a growing national and international cultural communications conflict in the near future between those who want to end dominance and those who want to hold onto it. This cultural communication conflict was somehow described by Samuel Huntington as a “Clash of Civilization” (Huntington, 1993); however since the concept of ‘civilization’ *per se* is controversial, it is preferable to talk about ‘*cultural conflicts*’ or ‘*clash of cultures*’ between nations and regions of the globe.

In this process, communications through the media outlets play a crucial role. Therefore, understanding the perception of global media contents by the public is essential.

#### **e) Hostile Media Effects Theory**

The hostile media effects theory can be defined as the way of interpreting mainstream media messages in the light of one's social background or the interest of their community. This theory was elaborated by scholars Robert Vallone, Lee Ross and Mark Lepper in 1985; based on data collected from pro-Israeli, pro-Arab and neutral groups' perceptions of TV programs dealing with the Beirut massacre which happened in 1982.

Robert Vallone et al.'s (1985) research offers a powerful illustration of how partisans often see media coverage of contentious events as unfairly biased and antagonistic to the viewpoints they support. The authors came to the conclusion that accusations of media bias might be more than just self-serving attempts to gain preferential treatment.

In fact, the way the audiences interpret, comprehend, or think about social and political issues is greatly influenced by the media contents. According to Kaid et al. (1991), mediated information actually falls into three different categories: constructed reality (the messages disseminated through media), subjective reality (the desired facts), and objective reality (the real facts). Subsequently, the media is regarded as a conduit for ideologies (Gitlin, 1980).

Furthermore, according to some contemporary scholars like Valkenburg (2000), Scheufele (1999), and Gamson (1993), the media framing is the process by which communication professionals work, consciously or unconsciously, to create a narrative that emphasizes facts about a particular social or political situation, enabling people to interpret it differently.

The following paragraphs will give more clarifications on the research context and its methodology.

#### **4. Research Context and Methodology**

This section presents the context in which the study was conducted and set a clear methodology used throughout the investigations.



#### 4.1. Contextualization of the Study

In Africa, we are witnessing a paradigmatic shift in colonial tectonic plates. Western countries' (especially France's) reputation is further stained in the eyes of their former African colonies. This leads most African countries to seek to diversify their bilateral relations with other foreign powers such as Russia, China, or Turkey, which do not have a colonial past on the continent. But this shift of paradigm in terms of foreign policy, marked by partnership diversification and openness policies, does not seem to please Western governments which are looking forwards to modifying/adjusting their approach to (re)gain the old 'friendly partnership' of their African ex-colonies.

Indeed, at the end of the year 2020, a survey of young people from several African countries, conducted by a South African organization known as *Ichikowitz Family Foundation*, indicated that 58% of Togolese, 60% of Malians, 68% of Senegalese and 71% of Gabonese had a negative opinion of France's presence in their respective countries. Thus, what is commonly referred to as the 'anti-French sentiment', 'francophobia', or 'gallophobia'<sup>1</sup>, which is growing all over African francophone countries, is a signal that the diversification of partnership is more than a necessity for France's African former colonies.

In this regard, new emerging countries like Russia, China, Turkey, etc. are now presenting themselves as new partners to many Sub-Saharan African states. Each of these new partners constitutes an alternative to Western powers and pronounces rather soft, seductive and reassuring discourses supposedly based on mutually beneficial friendship. These soothing speeches are delivered via their new transnational media channels – such as the Russian RT (Russia Today) and Sputnik channels, the Chinese CCTV channel, and the Turkish global media group TRT World, Natural TV, Anadolu Agency, etc. – which opened their representative offices in several Sub-Saharan African countries.

The research methodology will provide extensive details regarding the objectives and main questions of the study, as well as the data collection techniques.

#### 4.2. Research Methodology

In terms of geographical scope, this study focuses on Russia's bilateral relations with Sub-Saharan African countries. Therefore, it is an explorative study which combines both ethnographic and narrative research designs. Put differently, this investigative study is essentially a case study, a type of research defined as an in-depth study of a phenomenon. As a result, for the research to be accomplished, the qualitative research method was used. Indeed, qualitative data made it possible to explain the phenomena by collecting opinions and analysis of experts regarding the research topic. This type of research is used for phenomenology, ethnography, case studies and narrative research (Creswell, 2009). Thus, the qualitative research method provides rigorous and in-depth information about human attitudes regarding an issue or the functioning of a phenomenon. It seeks to answer the questions "how" and "why" a phenomenon functions in a specific way; or "why" do people behave in such a particular manner.

As part of the data collection techniques, it was necessary to proceed through interviews, personal experiences, focus groups discussions, and opinions based on participant observation. As a matter of fact, the interviews were conducted with some of the target audience (Russian businesspeople, Sub-Saharan African citizens, and diplomats from both parties), political analysts, critics in international relations, as well as interviews with key political actors involved in this process – such as resource persons, political leaders, and geopolitical experts, etc. – and eventually, interviews with media professionals, web-activists, social media practitioners, and managers of digital news agencies favorable to the Kremlin.

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<sup>1</sup> The fear, prejudice, discrimination, or hostility directed against France, the French people, their culture, the French government, or the Francophonie is known as 'anti-French feeling' or 'anti-French sentiment', sometimes known as 'Francophobia' or 'Gallophobia'.

Regarding the importance of interviews in qualitative research, the researchers Serge Théophile Balima and Véronique Duchenne (2005) specified that:

The purpose of the so-called “qualitative survey” is to allow the interviewees to express their point of view, their experience, their own logic, even their own questions, while being free to choose their vocabulary and mode of expression in the way they wish (Balima & Duchenne, 2005).

In the end, the principal objective with the interview is therefore to collect information and qualitative data to complement the data obtained through field research with the target public in order to objectively carry out the analyses and interpretations of the findings. Further details regarding this factual situation are provided by the research purposes.

This research pursues several main purposes. Among others, the study aims to:

- (i) show the impact and implications of Russian public diplomacy and soft power in Sub-Saharan African countries;
- (ii) shed light on how the Kremlin’s narrative affects views, influences policy choices, and promotes a favorable perception of Russia on the African continent;
- (iii) demonstrate that the Russian media outlets contribute in portraying a positive image of the Kremlin to African audiences, and in showing the African potentialities to the Russian businessmen and investors.

In order to achieve this, the historical evolution of Russia’s engagement with Sub-Saharan African countries will be analyzed and also the various public diplomacy and soft power initiatives employed by Russia in Africa will be carefully examined. Subsequently, the sub-purposes consist in assessing the impact of Russian soft power on diplomatic, economic, and cultural fronts. Ultimately, the role of Russian media outlets, including the activities of web-activists, digital news agencies, and social media platforms, will be closely assessed in a broader global system.

As a reminder, this academic work follows a rigorous ethnographic and narrative research methodology. It is therefore a case study, a type of research defined as an in-depth study of a phenomenon. As a result, for this study to be accomplished, the qualitative research design has been essentially applied.

In doing so, Max Weber (1949) reminds us about applying axiological neutrality in scientific research. This implies the distancing from one’s own value judgments in epistemological investigations in order to reduce biases. The ‘value-relevance’ of a scientific knowledge – which depends primordially on the ‘value-neutrality’ – can only be attained by approaching the issue with axiological neutrality (Weber, 1949). Indeed, Weberian social action theory claims that every human action is subjective, insofar as it derives from human behavior. Thus, Weber distinguished two types of axiological rationalities: formal rationality and substantial rationality.

- The formal rationality is applied to quantitative research in order to reach a result no matter the cost.
- The substantial rationality is used in qualitative research designs and considers the social, religious, and cultural values in the interpretation of data.

As a matter of fact, this study follows the substantial rationality’s principles. This increased significantly the scientific interest of the research.

In order to apprehend the research background, it is necessary to cast a critical glance at the historical evolution of the Russian foreign policy.

## **5. Historical Reminder of Russian Foreign Policy**

Russia’s strategic culture serves as a major foundation for its foreign policy. Indeed, a nation’s geographical location, history, and common narratives all contribute to its strategic culture,

which in turn shapes the national security establishment's dominant perspective and directs its responses to threats and problems. Strategic culture, by definition, gives its foreign and security strategy a long-lasting foundation. Therefore, in many ways, the foreign policy of the Kremlin is referred to as the fundamental component of Russia's strategic culture. Interestingly, there is a striking amount of continuity between the Soviet past and the present in Russia's threat perceptions, which are based on its strategic culture.

The interests, important ties with other countries, and foreign and security strategies of the modern Russian state have all been centered on Europe since the middle of the sixteenth century. In other words, Europe has mostly dominated Russia's foreign policy history as a modern state. Due to revolution and civil war, Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 and ceded most of what is now Finland, the Baltic states, Belarus, Ukraine, parts of Poland, and Moldova. Subsequently, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and the Baltic, South Caucasus, and Central Asian states became independent in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Due to NATO expansion, the border between Russia and the rest of Europe – nearly all of which are NATO members or partners – is now roughly where it was following Russia's ratification of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in 1918. All three Baltic nations – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – have NATO forces stationed there. The Gorbachev era in Russian foreign policy was short – perhaps only ten years – and the adversarial ties between Russia and the West progressively returned. Control over the periphery and stopping other nations from gaining a foothold there have long been key components of Russia's national security strategy.

The deployment of substantial anti-access/area-denial assets in the Baltic region has sparked more debate in Western media and policy circles than few other Russian military operations in Europe. The allies stated that they would not have to conduct “permanent stationing of substantial combat forces” on the territory of new members “in the foreseeable security environment” in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act (NATO, 2009). This act stipulates it as it follows:

NATO has no intention, no plan, and no reason to deploy nuclear weapons on the territory of new members, nor any need to change any aspect of NATO's nuclear posture or nuclear policy – and do not foresee any future need to do so (NATO, 2009)<sup>2</sup>.

This statement was known as the “three NOs” that were spelled out in the NATO-Russia Founding Act. That was altered by the 2014 invasion of Ukraine.

Ambrosetti (2022) argues that Russia was the country that did the most to defeat Nazi Germany. As a founding member of the United Nations, a major nuclear power, and a “country-victor” in World War II, which gave rise to the current international order, Russia is held particularly accountable for the war's legacy, according to the Kremlin's narrative. The conquest and consolidation of a massive empire that encompassed all of Eastern Europe and even East Germany, along with the victory in World War II, signified the apex of the Russian state's power and influence on the continent, according to the Soviet leadership.

This framing is particularly true in areas like colonial acquisition, where Russia has traditionally had a smaller role than its European equivalents. Putin has adopted the anti-colonial narrative in Africa, encouraging nations that are said to have nothing in common with the West and should attempt to forge their own “own paths” (Siegle, 2021).

## **6. Consolidation of Russia-Africa Bilateral Relations**

Africa offers Russia a convenient and alluring platform to further its objectives with little political or financial expense because of its weak governments, wealth of natural resources, colonial legacy, close proximity to Europe, and fifty-four votes in the UN General Assembly. Under the theme “*For Peace, Security, and Development*”, the inaugural Russia-Africa summit

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<sup>2</sup> NATO (2009). The NATO Russian Founding Act. Available online at the following link: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm).



and business event took place in Sochi from October 22–24, 2019. The most well-known of these was the October 2019 Russia-Africa Summit in Sochi, where Vladimir Putin hosted 43 African heads of state. Putin pledged to quadruple commerce with Africa over the next five years and to cancel debts during the summit.

A dozen Sub-Saharan African nations, including South Africa, Tanzania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia, etc. are home to Russian cultural institutions, which are active in more than 80 countries worldwide. For example, the Russo-Malian cultural Day was celebrated on August 24, 2024 in Bamako, Mali. In addition to sharing classical literature in both Russian and the target language, these centers offer Russian language classes free of charge. The Kremlin uses language and cultural promotion as a tactic to exercise soft power overseas, particularly in Africa.

During his February 2023 visit to ten African nations – Egypt, the Republic of the Congo, Uganda, Ethiopia, Mali, Mauritania, Sudan, South Africa, Eswatini (formerly Swaziland), Angola, and Eritrea – Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov discussed issues pertaining to food and energy security, African integration processes, defense, financial matters (such as the establishment of the BRICS currency), and significant infrastructure projects involving Russia. Most of the topics discussed in bilateral talks were the same. Russia-Africa ties are valued in the following ways by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov:

In the context of global turbulence caused by the neo-colonial policies of the historical West towards achieving world domination, the demand for Russian-African cooperation is only increasing. We share the rejection of the rule-based order imposed by the former colonial powers, within which it is allowed to do only what is beneficial to Washington and its satellites. We are firm supporters of democratization of international life (Lavrov, 2023)<sup>3</sup>.

Lavrov emphasized in his speech that Russia saw Africa as a continent of the future, one that is distinct and rapidly evolving. As a result, Russia continuously promotes the expansion of its position within the multipolar framework of the global order. “We want Africa's strong, independent voice to be heard and taken into consideration on a global scale (...) Everything is in place to make this happen”, Lavrov stated. According to him, African nations are making great economic progress and progressively increasing political clout.

More than 40 African presidents and chiefs of state attended the second Russia-Africa summit in July 2023 in St. Petersburg, which followed the same logic of deepening diplomatic ties with the continent. As a result, Russian commercial and public diplomacy on the continent became even more intense.

## **7. Intensification of Russian Public Diplomacy in Africa**

Only with Vladimir Putin's ascent to power in the early 2000s did Russia start its covert return to the continent. In recent years, this comeback has become more popular, to the point where Russia has attempted to regain some of the Soviet Union's soft power as part of its arsenal to progressively regain influence throughout Africa.

Russia bases its African strategy on geostrategic and opportunistic calculations. It is opportunistic in that, like Moscow in Syria, it is not afraid to take chances and swiftly send mercenary forces to crisis situations when the opportunity arises. In order to increase Russia's power projection, including over major chokeholds in the eastern Mediterranean and the Suez Canal, which might influence NATO military deployments during emergencies, it is calculated. Moscow also considers Equatorial Guinea as a strategic point of access to the Gulf of Guinea.

Because Russia views Africa as a means of balancing Western influence through asymmetric tactics, it is predicated on geostrategic calculations. Therefore, Russia gains more influence over Europe by controlling the spigot that controls refugee flows from Africa. Actually, Moscow's

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<sup>3</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made this statement during his visit in eleven African countries in February 2023. In fact, one of the goals of Lavrov's trips was to demonstrate that Russia remains a great power capable of competing with the United States or China across the Global South.

isolation after annexing Crimea and its forays into eastern Ukraine have sparked Russia's interest in Africa and presented a chance to further Putin's vision of a post-liberal global order.

Furthermore, the goal of Russia's elite-based diplomacy is to support and coopt favorable governments. Official African sources rarely offer criticism. In 2019, Russian Ambassador Alexander Bregadze stated that "Constitutions are not the Bible, the Koran, or dogma" (Ambrosetti, 2022). He claimed that instead of reality adapting to constitutions, constitutions must adapt to reality.

"A friend in need is a friend indeed", as the proverb goes. Russia is seen as a support system during difficult times, a place to turn to when things get desperate. There are real security issues in nations like Sudan, Mali, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic. These nations might be tempted to make an agreement with Moscow to send Wagner if they believe that their security threats are out of control and that they have no other choice. Russia has blocked attempts to restrain Ethiopia's government in a civil war against rebels from its northern Tigray area at the United Nations (UN).

Africa has three of the fifteen-member Security Council's rotating seats, or the "A3". The so-called A3 (Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, and South Africa at the time) supported Russia in thwarting a request by opposition leaders in the Democratic Republic of the Congo to have the Security Council look into the widely perceived rigged presidential election in January 2019. Similar to this, in April 2019, the A3 backed Russian attempts to use the principle of non-intervention to thwart a declaration denouncing the coup in Sudan. That same month, the A3 joined Russia in blocking a resolution sponsored by the UK that called for a ceasefire in Libya and denounced the conduct of Khalifa Haftar, the Libyan warlord.

## **8. Triumph of Russian Business Diplomacy on the African Continent**

According to The Economist (2022), Russia's annual commerce with Africa is only tiny, at about \$20 billion (about a tenth of China's annual trade). Russian exports of food and weapons to Africa account for a large portion of Russia's \$20 billion annual trade with Africa (Ibid, 2022). Russian parastatals like Rosneft and Lukoil usually negotiate contracts for minerals, diamonds, and oil. In addition to selling its oil to China, Angola also works with a Russian miner named Alrosa to extract diamonds. Russia contributes financial resources and technical know-how to this industry. About 20 African nations have natural resource agreements with Russia.

Additionally, Russia has tried to negotiate agreements on nuclear power across the continent. In 2020, Egypt started building its first nuclear power station, a \$60 billion project, with a \$25 billion loan from Rosatom, the Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation (Siegle, 2021). Russia has preliminary nuclear project agreements in Ethiopia, Rwanda, Sudan, Burkina Faso, and Zambia and is negotiating with seventeen African nations at various stages.

Gazprom Bank has expressed interest in a project in Ethiopia's eastern Somali region as part of their desire to invest in Africa. Another African nation that is disproportionately reliant on Russia for business diplomacy is Guinea. Rusal, a major Russian aluminum manufacturer with three mines in Guinea, has ceased operations at its Ukrainian refinery that uses Guinean bauxite.

The Russian media outlet Sputnik declared in March 2024 that Russia would waive \$26.7 Million in debt from Bissau Guinea, along with interest that has accumulated since 2010 but has not yet been paid. Guinea-Bissau promises to utilize the funds to fund initiatives that would increase public access to important resources, fortify the country's educational and health systems, and guarantee the availability of items that are socially necessary.

The businesses involved in the projects will be chosen by the Bissau-Guinean authorities through a competition in the upcoming weeks. It is anticipated that Russian businesses would enjoy the same advantageous circumstances as domestic and foreign businesses. In mid-February 2024, Russian deputy foreign minister Bogdanov met with the African country's minister of natural resources, Sambu, to discuss trade and economic ties between the two nations.

Russia is the largest supplier of military hardware to Africa, accounting for 49% of the continent's total arms market. Russia frequently uses its weapons as leverage in “arms-for-resources” agreements (Ambrosetti, 2022). The top African countries that purchase Russian weapons include Algeria, Angola, Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, Sudan, Senegal, and Zambia. Russian weapons are regarded as dependable, reasonably priced, and simple to maintain. African consumers are more inclined to buy more advanced Russian weapons, such as fighter planes, helicopters, tanks, and air defense systems.

Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, the president of Egypt, has purchased Russian fighter jets as part of his efforts to diversify his military arsenal. Additionally, Russia allegedly purchases smuggled gold from Port Sudan on the Red Sea and has long coveted a military presence there. Still in the scope of business diplomacy, the President of Equatorial Guinea, Teodoro Obiang Nguema, visited Moscow in September 2024 with the ambition of convincing Russian giant multinational companies Lukoil and Gazprom to invest in his country. President Teodoro Obiang Nguema also stated that his country was ready to host the upcoming 2026 Russia-Africa Summit. This gesture could further strengthen the bilateral ties between the two parties.

## **9. Bilateral Cooperation Grounded Partly on Educational Diplomacy**

Russia and Africa continue their educational and cultural connections. An estimated 15,000 Africans, primarily from Nigeria, Angola, Morocco, Namibia, and Tunisia, attend Russian colleges. This is a consistent increase that Moscow claims will go on. A significant part of Russia's soft-power strategy is education. In the 2020–2021 academic year, more than 27,000 African students attended Russian universities, approximately quadrupling the number from the 2010–2011 academic year. The attempt to sway elites through education is another example of the Soviet legacy. Due to Soviet scholarships, more than 50,000 African students studied in the USSR during the Cold War, which probably affected the political inclinations and worldviews of the alumni.

Russian educational diplomacy also expands from formal education scholarships to military trainings, as well as the capacitation of media professionals. On July 2024, the Russo-Malian School of Journalism welcomed three dozens of journalists for training. According to the responsible of the school, the three best students will benefit of a free trip to Russia and will be hired by African Initiative<sup>4</sup>, a new news agency created in 2024. Interestingly, the students also learn the Russian language once a week as a subject in the school's curriculum.

These groups of former students who are currently serving as government officials in several African nations are dedicated to enhancing their nations' bilateral relations with the Russian Federation. This situation seems to be perfectly exemplified by the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Confederation.

## **10. Bilateral Cooperation between the AES Authorities and Russia to Face Terrorism**

In the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Confederation, as in several French-speaking West African countries, we are increasingly witnessing mood movements calling for a break in cooperative relations with France, the former colonizing power of these states.

As a matter of fact, the bilateral cooperation between the three countries forming the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Confederation – namely Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger – and the Russian Federation is essentially based on the commercialization/purchase of weapons and ammunitions, the increase of military officers to be trained in Russia, and other subsidiary aspects of bilateral cooperation such as technological support, the provision of cereals, the revitalization of cultural links, etc. just to name few.

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<sup>4</sup> According to the private investigation platform *All Eyes on Wagner*, African Initiative receives sponsorship from Loby Invest, a Russian Company close to the Kremlin. More details on the following link: <https://alleyesonwagner.org>.

In November 2022, the Prime Minister of Burkina Faso, Apollinaire Joachimson Kyelem de Tambela, declared before the deputies that Burkina Faso is committed to diversifying its partnership relations and wanted “*sincere and frank*” cooperation in the fight against terrorism. The head of the Burkinabe government was speaking in his general policy declaration to the Transitional Legislative Assembly. He stressed that in terms of foreign policy, Burkina Faso “remains a friendly country for all countries which accept its friendship. Our ambition is to strengthen the bonds of friendship with all countries for the happiness of people who only seek to know each other better” (RTB, 2022).

In order to effectively fight against the terrorist hydra in the AES Confederation, the military regimes of Ouagadougou, Bamako and Niamey requested support from Moscow to meet this challenge. Russia accepted this request and the two parties are working jointly in a form of minilateral diplomacy to create a road map to combat terrorism. Thus, they are committed to work collaboratively for their partnership aimed at combating terrorism in the AES Confederation. The Russian Ambassador to Burkina Faso, Alexei Saltykov, declared on January 12, 2023, that “Russia is committed to help fight against terrorism in the region”<sup>5</sup>. This declaration was made in the context of the move towards expanding bilateral cooperation between Russia and the AES countries.

Besides the diplomatic initiatives, the media outlets also play a starring role in the establishment and consolidation of Russian Soft Power in Africa.

### **11. Media Battle in Favor of Russian Soft Power**

Russia has used social media and mercenary tactics to assist isolated leaders or proxies in the countries where it has had the greatest impact: Algeria, Senegal, Cote d’Ivoire, Congo Brazzaville, Mauritania, Madagascar, Mozambique, Mali, the Central African Republic (CAR), Sudan, and Libya. This serves as the sharp tip of a more traditional series of interactions that are intended to promote a favorable perception of Russia and give it a forum to further its elite-based diplomacy. Peace Data, a Russian operative news outfit affiliated with the Internet Research Agency (Агентство интернет-исследований), commonly referred to as Glavset (Главсеть), was able to hire journalists abroad to provide information on important subjects.

From 2019 to 2023, 22 agreements have been signed between RT and Sputnik and number of African local media outlets. As an illustration, the Cameroon-based panafricanist and anti-imperialist media, Afrique Média, concluded an agreement with RT in December 2022 in Moscow in order to counter “western propaganda” in Africa (RFI, 2024). Similarly, several African media consortiums – such as Mediacongo, Bamada.net, Radio Lengo Songo, Radio MalibaFM, etc. – have recently started collaborating with Russian transnational media in the aim of fighting against western narrative. This media collaboration, often considered by western countries as “media content laundry” (Ibid, 2024), consists in giving free access to Russian international news agencies as opposed to western news agencies such as AFP, Reuters, or Associated Press which are sometimes expensive. This strategy was implemented after the 2019 Russia-Africa Summit. The same strategy, which consists in releasing important chunks of free media contents, is also used by China and Turkey.

Statistically, 20 to 30% of Sputnik and RT’s digital contents<sup>6</sup> are related to issues on the African continent (Ibid, 2024). In addition the media collaborations, there are thousands social media accounts and Web TV that contribute significantly in disseminating the “anti-western” narrative.

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<sup>5</sup> This statement was made following his interview with Burkinabe Prime Minister Apollinaire Kyélem de Tambèla. They also discussed the possibilities of formalizing technical and economic cooperation between their countries. The Russian diplomat assured that his country was ready to support them in the acquisition of emerging technologies and to establish the modalities of economic cooperation.

<sup>6</sup> Between February 2022 and November 2024, a total of 491 news articles related to Africa were published by Sputnik with an anti-colonial narrative. The platform Sputnik Afrique – formerly Sputnik France – comes first with 180 articles, followed by Sputnik Africa and Sputnik International with respectively 160 and 154 news articles.



A number of African Web activists regularly advocated for Russia's involvement in the AES problem on social media platforms between 2021 and 2024. As a result, it was common to witness demonstrators brandishing Russian flags, pictures of Vladimir Putin, and letters expressing gratitude to Russia for its assistance in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali. Given that Russia has no close historical, cultural, or bilateral ties to these African nations, the scene was noteworthy.

Additionally, anti-French messaging appeared on social media in CAR after the signing of a security cooperation agreement with Russia. Beginning in January 2019, criticisms of the United Nations, the West, and the UN-backed Government of National Accord became common on Libyan social media networks, while the same pages and users praised Russia's role as a stabilizing actor. Social media sites also blamed the former colonial power, France, and called for France to withdraw its troops it had deployed to help combat the terrorists.

Regarding the situation in Libya, Pro-Russian social media platforms argued that all sides were accountable for human rights abuses, while mainstream news agencies highlighted the claims of systematic human rights crimes by Haftar's forces, including the targeting of hospitals and migrant centers. The presence of Russian media, primarily through Sputnik and RT (formerly Russia Today), is a relatively new aspect. Both Kremlin-funded media outlets, which publish and broadcast in English, French, and Arabic, are commonly accused of spreading pro-Russian narratives and were even banned from broadcasting in the European Union on the 8th of March 2022. RT was thus dropped from Multichoice's African satellite television lineup.

Common RT and Sputnik storylines about the African backdrop range from Russia as a friendly nation bringing peace and prosperity to Africa to a more general Western criticism of former colonizer nations that continue to act imperialistically. According to a 2018 assessment commissioned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Defense, the majority of new subscribers to RT France are from sub-Saharan Africa and the Maghreb region, and Kremlin-sponsored media are increasingly being re-displayed on African online news sites. For example, seneweb.com, the fourth most popular website in Senegal with more than 1.5 million Facebook subscribers, frequently features Sputnik's news about Africa.

## **12. Efficiency of Russian Public Diplomacy Worldwide**

Following the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, the geopolitical balance of power changed, and certain major countries and blocs launched an effort to isolate Russia from the rest of the world. Sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and attempts to remove Russian influence in international institutions resulted from this. Russia has created a very practical and forward-thinking foreign policy to combat these issues. It is primarily focused on preventing further international isolation and bolstering its positions through aggressive diplomacy and international engagement.

The primary aspect of Russian policy in its interactions with the rest of the world has been an effort to reestablish a position in the elite states' societies. The fact that Russia has organized a number of international events serves as evidence of this. One such occasion was the World Youth Festival in 2024, where President Vladimir Putin spoke and took part in the closing ceremony, emphasizing Russia's desire to engage with young people and engage in dialogue with representatives of other nations' youth. This involvement served as a platform to not only advance Russia's diplomatic stance on the Syrian war but also to show that Russia is open to engaging in international negotiations.

In addition to the youth forums, Russia has subtly established itself in mainstream business forums. The St. Petersburg International Economic Forum (SPIEFF) 2024/2024 and the Eastern Economic Forum 2024 are the two occasions this year where Russia has used the occasion to demonstrate its willingness to welcome economic cooperation and investment. It is an annual event that brings together corporate executives, economists, and leaders to debate the course of the global economy. A similar symposium with the theme *"Russia-Africa: Power and Capabilities of NGOs in Strengthening Youth Cooperation"* was held in November 2024 by the



Global Youth Network Platform. Each of them has been crucial in demonstrating Russia's importance to the global economy and its capacity to contribute to the economic development of non-Western nations.

The International Youth Forum "Eurasia Global" is one of the significant forums that is anticipated to garner attention in 2024. The Federal Agency for Youth Affairs hosted this yearly event in the Russian city of Orenburg from September 24 to 29, 2024. Together with them, this event was organized by the Federal Agency for Youth Affairs of the Russian Federation, the Government of the Orenburg Region and the Directorate of the World Youth Festival. It was a major international gathering with the goal of encouraging constructive communication and engagement amongst a number of young people worldwide.

The primary goal of these international forums is to provide a lively opportunity for discussion on viable future plans that young activists and leaders might put into action. These forums cover a wide range of subjects, including national sovereignty, religion, culture, and diplomacy, with an emphasis on intellectual interchange. These forums provide an excellent opportunity for participants to learn, hone, and practice some of the crucial activities that include elements of intercultural conversation and carry out youth-based projects on a global scale.

Russian authorities also responded with a proactive geopolitical policy as a result of the post-Russia-Ukraine war rearrangement of the diplomatic and political landscape. Today, thanks to these high-profile events, Russia is once again in the business of a more confident international stature and stronger diplomatic and commercial ties with a number of non-Western nations. With clear guidelines for utilizing its position as a key participant in international negotiations and collaboration, this further elucidates the strategic considerations surrounding Russia's efforts to maintain and strengthen its influence in a world that is becoming more complex.

On the other side of the spectrum, Russia has struggled to develop itself as a soft power due to its emphasis on hard power tools with private security firms like the Wagner Group.

### **13. Dichotomic Combination of Soft and Hard Power**

When compared to its hard power initiatives in Africa, particularly the Kremlin's ties with the Wagner Group and the company's support of despotic regimes, Moscow's soft power initiatives are asymmetrical. One example is Mali, where, even after the invasion of Ukraine necessitated the deployment of some of these mercenaries to the Donbass region, Russia has mostly kept a force of roughly 1,000 Russian officials and instructors from the Wagner Group. In a same vein, Russia's deputy UN ambassador, Anna Evstigneeva, stated in May 2022 that Russia was currently training nine police officers and 200 Malian soldiers.

In recent years, Russia has inked almost two dozen agreements for security cooperation in Africa. Russia's attempt to get access to ports and bases in order to support naval operations in the Mediterranean and Red Sea is one concrete result of these accords. The ports of Massawa and Assab (Eritrea), Port Sudan, Berbera (Somaliland), and other facilities in Libya have received special attention. In the northern CAR, an estimated 400 Wagner troops were sent. Touadéra's national security advisor was Valery Zakharov, a Russian diplomat.

This implies a desire to deploy troops along the Suez Canal, the eastern Mediterranean, and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait (Djibouti-Yemen), which are important maritime chokeholds. Additionally, Russia has undertaken joint naval maneuvers with South Africa and investigated port access in southern Africa with Mozambique. About 500 African service members are trained annually by Russia's modest professional military education program for African military personnel. Even though they are few in number, these initiatives give Russia a forum to share how it views civil-military relations on the continent.

Russia supported longstanding ruler Omer al-Bashir in Sudan. In order to assist the Sudanese military and obtain access to gold mines in the country's west, Wagner soldiers were deployed. Wagner reportedly deployed to help the Mozambican government combat the threat posed by the

fast growing militant Islamist organization in the north. In addition, the area contains liquefied natural gas reserves and a multibillion-dollar gem mining industry.

#### **14. Repercussions of the Russo-Ukrainian Conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa**

The African Sahel region risks being the new geopolitical battleground between pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainians. In fact, following intense combats between Malian armed forces backed by the Russian Paramilitary groups Wagner and the CSP Tuareg rebels (presumably assisted by Ukrainian intelligence services) at the Northern border with Algeria in Tinzaouaten, both Mali and Niger cut their diplomatic ties with Kyiv with immediate effect. Furthermore, Niger intends to ask the UN Security Council to debate what they consider as “Ukraine’s aggression”. Kyiv rejected the allegations and condemned the decision of Mali to put an end to their diplomatic relations.

According to Malian authorities, Ukrainian ambassador to Senegal, Yurii Pyvokarov, openly supported international terrorism, especially during the three days attack perpetrated by the CSP Tuareg militia and the JNIM terrorist movement in the North of the country. Local and international media reported that heavy weaponry was used by terrorists; including drones and explosive vehicles, causing important losses within the Malian armed forces and Russian Wagner group. The videos of propaganda released by the CSP rebels claimed that 84 Russian Wagner elements (including their commander in chief Serguei Chevtchenko) and 47 Malian soldiers were killed during the battles.

As a result, Malian military regime criticized vehemently the implication of Ukrainian intelligence services into the massacre which, for them, is a blatant violation of international sovereignty and an apology of terrorism. Earlier, Senegalese authorities have summoned the Ukrainian ambassador about a video shared on the Facebook page of the Embassy to support the actions of the CSP Tuareg rebels. The Burkinabe authorities also reacted through their Ministry of Foreign Affairs to condemn the video shared on Social media by Ukrainian Embassy to Senegal.

Although Ukraine rejected what they qualified as “allegations”, there are several unofficial statements on behalf of Ukrainian authorities which fuel the controversy. “The fact that the rebels received the necessary intelligence data allowing them to conduct an operation against Russian criminals of war was observed worldwide. Of course, we are not going to reveal details”, commented the Ukrainian intelligence services’ spokesperson Andriy Yusov. In parallel, a chief officer of the Tuareg CSP affirmed in a propaganda video that the “CSP and Ukraine are facing the similar Russian threat and they must support each other”. It is also known that Ukraine has previously supported rebels in the intervention against the Russian paramilitary group Wagner in Soudan. By supporting the rebels, in both Soudan and Mali, Ukrainian authorities want to stop the Russian progression in the Sub-Saharan African region.

Following these developments, Russia accused Ukraine of opening a “second front” in the war between them in Africa. “Unable to defeat Russia on the battlefield, the criminal regime of Volodymyr Zelensky has opened a second front in Africa,” commented Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova.

#### **15. Competition between Russia and Western Countries in Africa: Discussions, Suggestions, and Perspectives**

The United States is significantly more involved in Africa than Russia is, with \$45 billion in foreign direct investment, \$65 billion in commercial trade, \$10 billion in development, \$600 million in security, and cultural ties to the continent (The Economist, 2022). Many people think that Russia has been trying to take over the continent's leadership role in recent years after Western partners, notably the United States and European countries, failed to do so.

Western nations portray themselves as champions of democracy and human rights movements in an effort to counter Russian influence on the African continent. They also continue to step up the efforts of their cultural institutions, including the British Council, Institut Français, and the

Goethe-Institut, to mention a few. The West may successfully refute Russia's anti-Western narrative by bolstering democratic institutions in the area and maintaining its relationship with the West. In order to refute the Kremlin's narrative in Africa, this seems to be crucial.

Through its involvement on the continent, the West must continue to be transparent about the existing atrocities in Africa, which is still felt today and may cause some governments to look to work with other actors. This was recently underlined by several African governments. As a matter of fact, the Burkinabe Prime Minister Apollinaire Joachim Kyélem de Tambèla put it in the following terms:

We expect each of our partners to be loyal to us. We, therefore, hope for sincere and frank cooperation. We believe, perhaps wrongly, that certain partners have not always been loyal (...) Where do they [the terrorists] find the weapons, the ammunition, the fuel, the money that they have in abundance? How can countries that have the control of space, with modern means of detection, not, if they are our true friends, give us the necessary information on the actions and movements of these terrorists? (RTB, 2022).

Burkinabe Prime Minister concluded that they will try, as much as possible, to diversify their partnership relations until they find the right formula for the interests of Burkina Faso. He insisted that there will be no question of letting themselves dominated by a partner, whoever that partner might be.

Therefore, it is worth equilibrating the forces. For instance, expanding the G20 to include the African Union will allow more African voices in international discourse, which is currently only represented by South Africa. This would be one way to balance the forces. But in the end, protecting African interests from outside disruptors is the responsibility of African governments, media professionals, civil society, and corporate actors.

## 16. Conclusion

This study, which investigated the impact of Russian public diplomacy and soft power in Sub-Saharan Africa, shed light on how the Kremlin's narrative affects views, influences policy choices, and promotes a favorable perception of Russia on the African continent. The analytical investigations examined the significance of Russian soft power in the larger framework of world politics; providing a thorough understanding of the changing dynamics between Russia and its new African partners. As a matter of fact, the study analyzed the historical evolution of Russia's engagement with African countries. This helped to assess the impact of the country's public diplomacy and soft power on the diplomatic, economic, security, educational, and cultural fronts.

The study also demonstrated that the Russian media outlets – especially Sputnik, RT (Russia Today), and many digital news agencies including social media platforms – contributed significantly in portraying a positive image of the Kremlin to African audiences, and in showing the African potentialities to the Russian diplomats, businesspeople, and investors. Eventually, the critical analysis evaluated the impact of Russian soft power in competition with other foreign powers' on the African continent.

Consequently, the study demonstrated that officials throughout the African continent notably embrace Russia's professed political values of non-interference, anti-imperialism, and multilateralism. The nation's historical and contemporary anti-Western sentiment is the primary subject of this story. Russia's most potent soft-power tool in Africa is its reputation as an independent, practical, and forceful operator. Moscow's appeal stems from its reputation as a major actor on the world stage who can resist the West, defends its own principles from outside intervention, and is willing to do business with any nation, regardless of its form of government or degree of democracy.

Overall, it can be argued that Russia's African foreign policy has the potential to appeal to certain social groupings or elites, particularly those who are hostile to the West and/or its democratic conditionality. It is clear that self-interest, not history or philosophy, is the primary factor influencing Africa's relations with Russia. In the Central African Republic (CAR), Wagner

forces prevent insurgents from overthrowing President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Likewise, Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, since their respective coup d'état in 2021, 2022, and 2023, have also turned to Wagner groups to assist in handling their security issues.

However, there has been a great deal of disagreement among academics, critics, and political observers regarding the impact of Russian public diplomacy and soft power in Africa. While some believe that Moscow's soft power in Africa is actually very powerful, others consider that it is either nonexistent or very limited. To shed light on this situation, a comparison of Russian soft power with that of western nations (or China) would be required.

## 17. Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article and its supplementary materials. Some raw data can be accessed through different platforms such as the African Center For Strategic Studies (<https://africacenter.org/experts/joseph-siegle/russia-strategic-goals-africa/>), All Eyes on Wagner (<https://alleyesonwagner.org>), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization ([https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_25468.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_25468.htm)), Foreign Affairs ([https://www.guillaumenicaise.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/huntington\\_clash-of-civilizations.pdf](https://www.guillaumenicaise.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/huntington_clash-of-civilizations.pdf)), Springer (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/657009>), Radio France Internationale (<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20241124-influences-russes-en-afrique-un-syst%C3%A8me-en-phase-de-duplication>), Sputnik (<https://en.sputniknews.africa/20240320/russia-exempts-guinea-bissau-from-payment-of-267-million-in-debt-1065645836.html?ysclid=m3qd60u7yx86649999>), The Economist (<https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/03/12/why-russia-wins-some-sympathy-in-africa-and-the-middle-east>), Radiodiffusion Télévision du Burkina (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tRi49SBSnsk>), Cultural identity and Diaspora (<http://www.rlwclarke.net/Theory/PrimarySources/pdf>), Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/charm-anti-westernism-russias-soft-power-africa-34913>), English Technical Reports and White Papers (<https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/128976015.pdf>), and the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology (<https://users.ssc.wisc.edu/~jpiliavi/965/hwang.pdf>). The data is also available from the corresponding authors mentioned in the reference list below upon reasonable request. Due to privacy concerns, data related to sensitive participant information are not publicly available but can be provided under appropriate conditions.

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