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Burgert Senekal*

PhD in Literature, Research Fellow

University of the Free State

9301, 205 Nelson Mandela Ave., Bloemfontein, Republic of South Africa

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1385-9258>

Divide and conquer: Russian information operations in South Africa

Abstract. Understanding the pervasive and evolving nature of Russian disinformation campaigns is crucial for safeguarding democratic processes and information integrity globally. The purpose of this study was to dissect Russia's multifaceted disinformation strategies, specifically examining their global reach and distinct impact on South Africa. For this, the study employed a qualitative analysis of Russian information operations, tracing their historical roots in Soviet-era "dezinformatsiya" and investigating contemporary methods such as the dissemination of false narratives, conspiracy theories, and social media manipulation. Furthermore, the study included case studies detailing Russian interference in various geopolitical contexts, including the United States, Europe, and Ukraine, to illustrate the scope and intensity of these operations. Subsequently, the study focused on Russia's escalating engagement in Africa, with a particular emphasis on analysing its growing investment and targeted disinformation activities within South Africa's unique historical and political landscape. The study found that Russia strategically exploits existing societal divisions and historical ties within target countries, including leveraging racial tensions in South Africa to propagate pro-Russian and anti-Western viewpoints through carefully crafted narratives. The analysis of global case studies revealed consistent patterns in Russia's disinformation tactics, highlighting a deliberate effort to undermine Western institutions and advance specific geopolitical objectives through the strategic manipulation of the information environment. Ultimately, the present study underscored the intricate and adaptive nature of Russian disinformation campaigns, demonstrating their capacity to exploit vulnerabilities in diverse political landscapes. The findings of this study offer valuable insights for policymakers, media organisations, and civil society groups in developing effective countermeasures and fostering resilience against manipulative information tactics both in South Africa and across the international arena.

Keywords: conspiracy theories; disinformation, hybrid warfare, media literacy, propaganda

Introduction

In 2024, understanding Russian information operations, particularly their impact on South Africa, is critical as these campaigns actively seek to destabilise democratic processes and exacerbate societal divisions. The strategic manipulation of information landscapes not only undermines the integrity of political discourse but also influences public opinion and electoral outcomes, making it a direct threat to national sovereignty and social cohesion. Considering South Africa's geopolitical significance and its complex historical context, it serves as a crucial testing ground for understanding how such operations are tailored and deployed in diverse settings. Practically, identifying and countering these disinformation tactics is essential for safeguarding democratic institutions, ensuring fair elections, and fostering a resilient information environment.

Various studies have considered Russian disinformation operations in the West as well as in Africa. The report

by E. Treyger *et al.* (2022) detailed Russian disinformation efforts on social media using an analysis of Russian military literature, investigative reports, and expert interviews, finding that Russia viewed social media as both a threat and a weapon, had conducted wide-reaching but modestly resourced disinformation campaigns, and was likely to continue evolving its tactics. R. Cohen & A. Radin (2019) examined Russian hostile measures in Europe through analysis of Russian objectives, strategies, and influence in the Baltics, Southeastern Europe, and other parts of Europe, utilising open sources and interviews, finding an inverse relationship between Russia's means of influence and its ability to achieve its interests.

L. Doroshenko & J. Lukito (2021) investigated Russia's Internet Research Agency's (IRA) online informational warfare against Ukraine during the Donbas military conflict using computational and qualitative content

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*Corresponding author



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analyses, time series modelling, and a historical framework of reflexive control, revealing how the IRA employed multiplatform disinformation strategies to manipulate public opinion and grow their online following. The report by B. Bianchi *et al.* (2022) discussed Russia's growing influence in Africa, particularly through security measures, soft power initiatives, and economic activities, using analysis of open sources and events, revealing that Russia was exploiting vulnerabilities and offering "regime support packages" to gain influence while Western nations faced increasing competition. M. Blankenship & A.U. Ordu (2022) studied the prevalence and effects of Russian disinformation on Twitter (X) regarding the war in Ukraine and its effects on Africa using a computational analysis of over 3.5 million tweets, finding that while disinformation existed and was spread by Russian sources, most tweets blamed Russia for food insecurity and countered Russian narratives about Nazism in Ukraine.

A. Miniailo (2023) explored Russia's disinformation strategy in Africa, focusing on its impact on the perception of the Ukraine war and relations with the West, using analysis of open sources and reports, and found that Russia aimed to shift global power dynamics by exploiting colonial history and promoting pro-Russian narratives while undermining Western involvement, particularly France. C. Clifford & S. Gruzd (2022) examined Russia's use of state-owned media and social media campaigns to exercise soft power in Africa by analysing open sources and events, finding that Russia leveraged anti-imperialist narratives and partnerships with local actors to spread its messages, often countering Western narratives, despite operating with a limited budget and facing challenges in digital influence. This use of local actors was emphasised in the report by the Centre for Information Resilience (2023), which examined the "#IStandWithPutin" and "#IStandWithRussia" campaign on X/Twitter in South Africa using a network analysis of over 221,000 tweets, revealing that Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma, daughter of former South African President Jacob Zuma, was a key influencer who amplified pro-Russian narratives through both organic and potentially artificial means. The report by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022) analysed the prevalence and tactics of disinformation campaigns in Africa, including those sponsored by Russia, using publicly documented instances and expert analysis, finding that disinformation was widespread, increasingly sophisticated, undermined democracy, and social media platforms were inadequately addressing the issue. J. Seekings & C. Saunders (2022) analysed South Africa's response to the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine through examination of UN voting records, government statements, and civil society reactions, revealing South Africa's "non-alignment" to be biased towards Russia, raising concerns about its commitment to democracy and potential negative impacts on its democratic future.

By analysing the strategies employed and the vulnerabilities exploited, the purpose of the present study was to elucidate the challenges posed by Russian disinformation and the significance of building resilience against these threats. The study had two objectives:

- ◆ to examine Russia's multifaceted disinformation campaigns, focusing on their global reach and specific impact on South Africa;

- ◆ to highlight the challenges posed by Russian disinformation and the relevance of developing resilience against these threats.

Materials and Methods

The theoretical framework underlying the study was rooted in understanding information warfare as a component of hybrid warfare, emphasising the "divide and conquer" strategy. This framework drew on the concept of "dezinformatsiya", which originated from Soviet-era practices and was adapted to the contemporary information age. The study primarily employed a literature review and analysis approach to examine Russian information operations.

Initially, the study set the global context by reviewing existing literature on Russian information operations targeting the US, EU, and NATO. This involved defining key terms like "disinformation" and identifying various actors involved. This stage relied on synthesising existing reports of Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022), Centre for Information Resilience (2023), and African Digital Democracy Observatory (2024) to establish the breadth and nature of the problem. Subsequently, the study delved into concrete case studies of Russian interference in the US, Europe, and Ukraine. These sections involved detailed examinations of reports, academic studies, and news analyses of these events, focusing on the tactics used, such as social media manipulation and the spread of false narratives. This involved a review-based method, collating and comparing findings from multiple sources.

Subsequently, the study broadened its scope to discuss general tactics employed by Russian disinformation campaigns. This involved drawing upon the previous case studies and other studies to identify common patterns, such as the use of conspiracy theories and the portrayal of Russia as a defender of traditional values. This phase used a comparative analysis of various sources to abstract general principles. Finally, the study narrowed its focus to South Africa. This section involved analysing reports, news articles, and academic studies related to Russian investment and disinformation activities in the region. A key aspect was examining how Russia exploited racial tensions and historical narratives, which required careful interpretation of various source materials. This stage was characterised by a focused application of the review and analysis method to a particular geographic context.

Results and Discussion

Background of information operations. Russian strategic documents define information warfare as a component of modern, or hybrid, warfare, which integrates political, military, technical, diplomatic, economic, informational, and psychological tools (Čížik, 2017). Quoting NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg from a speech in 2015, F. Splidsboel Hansen (2017) writes that hybrid warfare can be viewed as "the dark reflection of (the) comprehensive approach". While designed to stabilise vulnerable states through combined kinetic and non-kinetic operations, including "winning hearts and minds", the comprehensive approach can be inverted and used for destabilisation, exploiting vulnerabilities rather than mitigating them, which is a key tactic of hybrid warfare. Disinformation is therefore a core element of hybrid warfare.

Disinformation can be defined as “the intentional and coordinated spread of false, inaccurate, or misleading information designed, presented, and promoted to achieve a political communication goal” (Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021). Analogous definitions can be found in C. Johnson & W. Marcellino (2021), A. Nitszke (2022), and S. Jeon (2024). The term, “dezinformatsiya”, of Russian origin, entered common English usage in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Brantly, 2020). A. Abrams (2016) and A.F. Brantly (2020) showed how the concept originated in 19th century Russia, was developed under Soviet rule, and eventually adapted to the Information Age. The use of disinformation by the current Russian state is therefore a continuation of Soviet-era attempts to disorient its adversaries, tarnish the reputation of their political opponents, and ultimately erode faith in their political systems (Yablokov, 2022).

From the Chechen wars (1994 and 1999) and the 2008 Russia-Georgia war onward, influencing global public opinion regained relevance in Moscow’s foreign policy (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017). As quoted by J. Duberry (2022), in 2011, the Russian Ministry of Defence made it clear that it intended to use information as a weapon in conflicts, “...inflicting damage to information systems, processes and resources, critical and other structures, undermining the political, economic, and social systems, a massive psychological manipulation of the population to destabilise the state and society, as well as coercing the state to take decisions for the benefit of the opposing force”.

In the 2020s, the Russian disinformation apparatus consists of a variety of institutions, including state, state-affiliated, and non-state-affiliated institutions (Karlsen, 2019; Treyger *et al.*, 2022). State intelligence institutions include the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVR), the Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation (FSB), and Main intelligence Directorate, Military of Russia (GRU) (Brantly, 2020). The news and information channels owned or sponsored by the Russian state include Fort Russ News, Global Research, New Eastern Outlook Journal, News Front, One World Press, Redfish, RT (formerly Russia Today), Sputnik, the Strategic Culture Foundation, and Tass (Matthews *et al.*, 2021). Particularly prominent is RT, which with the slogan “Question more” came to present itself “as an underdog truth-teller that takes on the elites of the Western world” (Yablokov, 2022). Russia also utilises social media extensively, including locally popular platforms such as VKontakte (VK) and Odnoklassniki (OK), along with global platforms such as Instagram, Reddit, YouTube, Tumblr, 4chan, 9GAG, and Pinterest (Mueller, 2019; Treyger *et al.*, 2022). Just as Soviet disinformation efforts were highly coordinated and integrated (Brantly, 2020), so too are the contemporary Russian disinformation campaigns seemingly coordinated (Treyger *et al.*, 2022).

Until recently, a prominent player in the Russian disinformation network has been the “Агентство интернет-исследований”, known in the West as the Internet Research Agency (IRA), which commenced its operations in St. Petersburg in 2013 (DiResta *et al.*, 2019). Founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, who headed the Wagner Group until his death in 2023, the IRA was known to have close ties with the Russian government (Weiss & Vaux, 2020; Treyger *et*

al., 2022; Jeon, 2024). Although the company officially disbanded in 2016, it is currently operating under a different name, Glavset, according to E. Treyger *et al.* (2022).

The Kremlin’s disinformation campaigns are not uniform but rather customised to target specific countries and population segments, with distinct campaigns tailored for regions like Georgia, Ukraine, the Baltics, Nordic countries, and Central Europe (Čížik, 2017). Nevertheless, most Russian disinformation campaigns aim to divide societies, as is discussed in the following sections.

United States of America. In 2016, the IRA interfered in the US presidential election under the name Project Lakhta (Mueller, 2019; Treyger *et al.*, 2022). The intention was to spread discord in American society, with the focus on later supporting President Donald Trump as a presidential candidate (Treyger *et al.*, 2022). With an extensive network of social media profiles and websites, left- and right-wingers, as well as Black Americans, were targeted with supportive messages in an attempt to exacerbate existing differences and thus divide American society (DiResta *et al.*, 2019; Mueller, 2019; Walter *et al.*, 2020). R. DiResta *et al.* (2019) investigated this campaign in detail, analysing a large dataset of social media posts from the IRA and revealing their tactics for targeting and influencing American citizens, including creating fake personas, spreading disinformation, and exploiting social divisions. The key takeaways from this study were that the IRA’s influence operations were extensive, ongoing, and targeted specific communities with tailored messaging, utilising various platforms and tactics to sow division and influence American politics. Analogously, M. Bastos & J. Farkas (2019) used a mixed-methods approach to analyse 826 X/Twitter accounts and 6,377 tweets from the IRA, finding that the IRA employed distinct propaganda strategies tailored to specific campaign targets, such as conservative patriots, Black Lives Matter activists, and local news outlets. E. Treyger *et al.* (2022) also highlighted Russia’s approach to social media-based information warfare, including its theoretical underpinnings, practical implementation, and the responses of other countries. Importantly, this study indicated that Russia viewed social media as both a threat and a weapon, employing it in information warfare to spread disinformation, influence foreign politics, and undermine the West, while adapting its tactics and techniques to evade countermeasures.

Russian disinformation campaigns aim to divide Western societies across a range of topics. As early as 2015, the IRA disseminated both pro- and anti-vaccination messages, according to D.A. Broniatowski *et al.* (2018), in an effort to sow discord within American society. Building on the findings of D.A. Broniatowski *et al.* (2018), D. Walter *et al.* (2020) found that IRA X/Twitter accounts supporting Trump also promoted anti-vaccination messages, while those supporting H. Clinton advocated for vaccinations (see also the analogous findings by I. Alieva *et al.* (2022)). This theme became more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as is discussed later.

Apart from focusing on American society, one of the IRA’s primary goals was to erode trust in the mainstream media (DiResta *et al.*, 2019; Ślufińska, 2022). This anti-Western media stance later became a prominent feature of Russian propaganda during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine

(see below), with H.W.A. Hanley *et al.* (2022) finding that attacks on Western media constituted the fourth largest theme in their dataset of Russian propaganda messages on X/Twitter. Incidentally, Donald Trump has also been known for his attacks on the media (Chirwa & Manyana, 2021).

The investigation by R.S. Mueller (2019) into the Russian interference in the 2016 US Presidential election identified multiple contacts between Trump campaign officials and individuals linked to the Russian government but ultimately found no conclusive evidence of coordination. Despite this report's findings, the Russian support for Trump is interesting, considering the allegations that Trump was recruited to work for the Committee for State Security (KGB) during the 1980s (Unger, 2019; 2021). In 2025, these allegations resurfaced amidst Trump's support for Russia in the Russian war in Ukraine, e.g., by calling Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky a "dictator", and on 24 February 2025, the United States voted with Russia, North Korea, Belarus, and others against a Ukrainian resolution at the UN, which was backed by key US allies like the UK and most of Europe (Most, 2025; Spector, 2025). Such allegations of ties between Trump and Russia have not been proven.

Information operations in Europe. According to Western intelligence services, Russia is currently considered the foreign power that most actively seeks to influence European politics and decision-making (Karlsen, 2019). This influence extends to disinformation campaigns aimed at weakening NATO and the EU. In Europe, Russian disinformation campaigns follow the same pattern as in the US, where differences between communities are amplified to divide societies (Karlsen, 2019; Mölder, 2021). G.H. Karlsen (2019) analysed approximately 40 annual reports from 15 Western intelligence services, revealing Russia's "divide and conquer" strategy in Europe through the exploitation of various societal divisions, including minorities, refugees, and extremists, alongside disinformation campaigns and cyber operations, to weaken NATO and the EU. In 2016, Russian media outlets spread a false claim alleging that a 13-year-old Russian girl had been raped by immigrants in Germany, triggering protests (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017; Karlsen, 2019; Treyger, *et al.*, 2022). Sputnik also targeted various groups with tailored articles exploiting pre-existing anti-establishment, anti-NATO, and anti-EU sentiments, aiming to amplify these views through strategic "nudging" (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017).

Russia often targets right-wing groups in the EU (Čížik, 2017), such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) in Germany (Ramos & Raab, 2022). Russia supports the AfD to advance its strategic goal of destabilising the EU by empowering anti-liberal, anti-institutional views, targeting Germany as a key pillar of both the EU and NATO, and appealing to groups marginalised by global trends and mainstream politics (Ramos & Raab, 2022). In March 2015, a Russian International Conservative Forum, featuring European neo-fascist parties with swastika-like symbols, was held in St. Petersburg, sparking public outrage due to its timing near the 70th anniversary of the victory over fascism and the Kremlin's tacit acceptance (Ramos & Raab, 2022). J.M. Ramos & N. Raab (2022) remarked, "The Kremlin was in an awkward position because it supported the Far-Right wing parties abroad for

their ability to destabilise the West but was less interested in the same message at home". A.V. Bohr (2024) also discussed how Russia uses local partisan groups, specifically the Swedish far-right, to disseminate malignant information by mimicking their narratives.

The IRA also took part in campaigns favouring the UK's departure from the EU during the Brexit referendum (Bastos and Farkas, 2019; Nitszke, 2022; Treyger *et al.*, 2022). It also sought to influence the French presidential election in 2017 in favour of Marine Le Pen (Karlsen, 2019; Geissler *et al.*, 2022; Treyger *et al.*, 2022). As in the US, Russian disinformation in Europe seeks to undermine trust in the mainstream Western media, as for instance happens in the Visegrad countries (Slovakia, Czech Republic, Poland, and Hungary) (Čížik, 2017). This strategy aims to create an information vacuum where Russian-backed narratives can more easily take hold. Furthermore, Russian media often depicts the EU as a failing or dying organisation (Kragh & Åsberg, 2017), while at the same time depicting NATO as a threat to Russia. M. Kragh & S. Åsberg (2017) noted the inconsistency: "The West is portrayed as weak, but at the same time a near existential threat to Russia".

Therefore, in Europe, information operations are manifested as part of broader strategies of influence aimed at shaping public sentiment, manipulating public opinion, and weakening trust in democratic institutions. They include a wide range of actions, from spreading disinformation to using digital platforms to exacerbate social tensions. Such processes are becoming increasingly technologically sophisticated, requiring European countries to strengthen their capacity to detect, analyse, and counter these challenges.

Russian "dezinformatsiya" in Ukraine. One of Russia's most extensive disinformation campaigns occurred in the lead-up to and during its 2014 annexation of Crimea and support for separatists in Ukraine's Donbas region (Donetsk and Luhansk) (Treyger *et al.*, 2022). In the aftermath of the Maidan revolution, which concluded in early 2014, Russia initiated a campaign to discredit Ukraine's new government under Petro Poroshenko, following the ousting of the pro-Russian Viktor Yanukovich (Treyger *et al.*, 2022). To accomplish this discrediting, pro-Western political leaders in Ukraine were labelled as Nazis (Fortuin, 2022; Nitszke, 2022). Russian media also made claims that Ukraine was responsible for human rights violations in Donbas, including genocide (Fortuin, 2022). L. Doroshenko & J. Lukito's (2021) research demonstrated that the IRA's disinformation strategy against Ukraine was a multi-platform campaign using news websites and social media to distort, distract, dismiss, and deny Russia's involvement, mirroring Cold War tactics to manipulate perceptions and decision-making. The IRA created a facade of active online news aggregators and opinion leaders to blur the lines between fact and fiction, news and propaganda, exploiting the vulnerabilities of the media system through a strategic, deliberate campaign, rather than simply "flooding" social media (Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021).

In 2022, the Russian disinformation network largely recycled the same narratives about the Russia-Ukraine-West relationship that it had been using since the annexation of Crimea to justify its new invasion of Ukraine (Alyukov, 2022). Using previous research, B.A. Senekal (2023)

singled out the following seven false narratives spread by Russia regarding the war in Ukraine:

- 1) anti-NATO and NATO expansion;
- 2) the representation of Novorossiia, which considers Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts to be part of Russia;
- 3) that Ukrainians in Crimea welcomed the Russian annexation, the accompanying view that Russia is liberating Ukrainians, and that the Ukrainian government is violently (even genocidally) oppressing people in the Donbas region, and the accompanying view that Russia is helping separatists;
- 4) the fall of Viktor Yanukovich was a fascist coup, and the new government is neo-Nazi;
- 5) the Ukrainian government is corrupt, and Ukraine is a failed state;
- 6) the establishment of biological weapons laboratories by the West in Ukraine;
- 7) the Western media is not trustworthy.

While X/Twitter was one of the main platforms for disseminating disinformation during this campaign, the other two main avenues were Facebook and TikTok (Sánchez del Vas & Navarro, 2024). Although there are increasing concerns about Artificial Intelligence (AI) generated deep-fakes, no significant evidence of them was discovered by R. Sánchez del Vas & T. Navarro (2024) in their examined material. However, Large Language Models (LLMs) such as those underlying ChatGPT, are being utilised for information warfare, with Russian intelligence agencies leveraging LLMs to subtly manipulate Western news articles and spread disinformation that includes fabricated negative war developments, false quotations from Western leaders, and harmful pronouncements about Ukrainian leadership (Diesen *et al.*, 2024). While some of these attempts are clumsy and leave traces of the English instructions used to create the fake text, this manipulated content is being automatically spread across numerous websites to undermine Western support for Ukraine.

Russian information operations in the West: General context. One of the tools employed to divide societies most often in Russian disinformation campaigns is conspiracy theories. Between 2015 and 2017, the IRA promoted various conspiracy theories, including those related to vaccinations, the “globalist agenda”, George Soros, the claim that Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was black, the assertion that Shakespeare’s works were written by a black woman, and the idea that the Statue of Liberty was originally intended to depict a black woman (DiResta *et al.*, 2019). I. Alieva *et al.* (2022) observed a multitude of conspiracy theories in Russian disinformation on X/Twitter during the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, specifically noting those involving George Soros and Pfizer.

Tying in with the above is what J.A. Granados Samayoa *et al.* (2022) called the “gateway conspiracy theory” because of its ability to open people up to beliefs in other conspiracy theories: False information around COVID-19. Russian disinformation spread fake news specifically regarding COVID-19 (Duberry, 2022; Ginossar *et al.*, 2022; Nitszke, 2022). P. Ślędz (2020) analysed the anti-Western disinformation campaigns of China and Russia during the COVID-19 pandemic, finding that both countries employed “divide and conquer” tactics by exacerbating existing societal tensions and undermining trust in

Western institutions, with China attacking the US, and Russia spreading conspiracy theories to fuel anti-vaccine movements and distrust in public health measures. M. Matthews *et al.* (2021) also analysed COVID-19-related malign and subversive information efforts by Russia and China, finding that Russia particularly employed a “divide and conquer” strategy by amplifying existing sociopolitical divides within the US through varied disinformation and propaganda targeting different segments of the population, such as claims that COVID-19 restrictions were a socialist agenda to take away rights, or that the US health system’s failures indicated the inferiority of capitalism.

As COVID-19 vaccines became available, Russia spread further disinformation about their side effects and questioned their efficacy (Nitszke, 2022). In contrast, the Russian vaccine, Sputnik V, was portrayed as effective (Horawalavithana *et al.*, 2022). Interestingly, M. Novotná *et al.* (2023) reported a strong correlation between pandemic and vaccine denial and support for Russia, a link which was also found by R. Sánchez del Vas & T. Navarro (2024) and B.A. Senekal (2023).

While Russia uses societal issues, conspiracy theories, and pandemics to divide Western societies, Russian propaganda also attempts to portray Russia as a champion of traditional Christian values, as opposed to the decadent West: “The Putin administration builds its image vis-à-vis a declining Europe as a meaningful alternative, a strong empire, promoting conservative and traditional values” (Mölder, 2021; Ramos & Raab, 2022). For this reason, Russian disinformation campaigns particularly target conservative and right-wing audiences (Cohen & Radin, 2019). These campaigns, which have been gaining traction since around 2011, include portraying Russia as the leader of a white, conservative, and patriarchal Europe (Keating & Schmitt, 2021). The message seems to find favourable ground, with J.M. Ramos & R. Raab (2022) remarking, that “the Far Right parties, whether in Europe, Latin America, Asia, or the U.S., look to Russia as a beacon of hope, enticed by various Russian messaging on carefully curated social media platforms”. Meanwhile, across Russia, the Kremlin is fostering an environment of religious tolerance by encouraging the presence of diverse religious spaces, including mosques and synagogues, which goes against right-wing views in the West (Ramos & Raab, 2022). Many people close to Putin are Jewish or represent other minorities, which would be incompatible with far-right sentiments. Furthermore, Russia suppresses right-wing extremism internally, while encouraging it externally. This issue is particularly pertinent with regards to South Africa, as is discussed below. Research found that conservative and right-leaning individuals believe false information more easily (Soares *et al.*, 2023). This creates a nexus point where belief in Russia as the champion of conservative values and belief in a variety of conspiracy theories and disinformation – as spread by Russia – intersects.

South Africa case. Russia has increasingly invested in Africa over the past decade, mainly through the supply of weapons and private military contractors (Weiss & Vaux, 2020; Bianchi *et al.*, 2022; Neethling, 2023). This investment in Africa comes alongside Russia’s renewed disinformation campaigns worldwide, which seek to destabilise other countries and to create support for Russia’s

perspective. Russia is the leading source of disinformation in Africa, responsible for approximately 40% of all such campaigns on the continent (Schmidt, 2024). Russian disinformation campaigns have targeted at least nineteen African nations, contributing significantly to the decline of democracy across the continent (Schmidt, 2024). Disseminating disinformation in Africa serves Russia's geostrategic goals by weakening democratic institutions, encouraging coups, fuelling anti-Western and anti-UN sentiment, and creating doubt about issues such as climate change and pandemic science (Schmidt, 2024). Much of the Russian disinformation in Africa can be traced back to the late Yevgeny Prigozhin and his Wagner Group (Minaiilo, 2023). Following Prigozhin's death, it appears that Russian disinformation efforts in Africa are transitioning to the Russian Africa Corps, a new special branch of the Russian military, and the Africa Initiative News Agency, which has ties to Russian intelligence and is overseen from Moscow (Schmidt, 2024).

D. Geissler *et al.* (2022) showed that Russian disinformation campaigns particularly target the US, India, and South Africa, while other sources specifically highlight the targeting of South Africa (Blankenship & Ordu, 2022; Schwikowski, 2022; Schmidt, 2024). Analysing 349,455 tweets posted by 132,131 X/Twitter accounts between February and July 2022, D. Geissler *et al.* (2022) attributed this targeting of the US, India, and South Africa to Russia's attempts to undermine public support for Ukraine in the US, while India and South Africa had both abstained from voting for UN Resolution ES-11/1 and therefore might be more receptive to the Russian perspective. Analogously, I. Yablokov (2022) noted that Russian "troll farms" appear to be using bots to disseminate pro-Kremlin messaging about the war in Ukraine to the populations of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) nations, as these countries may be more receptive to such narratives. Operating in local languages, Russian media channels exploit local political issues and disseminate anti-US or anti-UK memes, which resonate with many BRICS nation citizens, occasionally posting and sharing Russia-Ukraine war-related content designed to promote pro-Moscow viewpoints.

South Africa has special significance for Russia, since the country acts as a key point of leverage for Russia to increase its influence across Africa (Schmidt, 2024). During the presidency of Jacob Zuma (2009-2018), there was a notable strengthening of ties between Russia and South Africa, though this was complicated by inconsistent leadership and corruption allegations (Seekings & Saunders, 2022; Jeon, 2024; Schmidt, 2024). Connections were also discovered between certain ANC politicians and elites, and Russia (Schmidt, 2024). These connections translate to support for Russia on foreign policy issues. In the vote in the UN General Assembly on March 2, 2022, 141 countries approved Resolution ES-11/1, 5 countries voted against it (including Belarus and North Korea), and 35 countries abstained (including India, South Africa, and Pakistan) (Geissler *et al.*, 2022). As a member of the BRICS countries, and against the backdrop of a long historical alliance between the ruling African National Congress (ANC) and Russia, South Africa's refusal to vote against the invasion was expected. On the day of the

Russian invasion of Ukraine, 24 February 2022, South African Defence Minister Thandi Modise attended a Russian military celebration at the Russian Ambassador's residence, which the opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) later likened to toasting the German army at the German embassy on the day Adolf Hitler invaded Poland in 1939 (Seekings & Saunders, 2022). Current South African President Cyril Ramaphosa also blamed the conflict on NATO expansion and used Russia's term, "Special Military Operation", to refer to the invasion (Seekings & Saunders, 2022). There were rumours that South Africa will even hold military exercises with Russia and China (Schmidt, 2024), and there are rumours that South Africa has also supplied Russia with weapons (Du Plessis *et al.*, 2023).

South African support for Russia comes primarily from political parties associated with the liberation struggle and their offshoots, and represent the black majority: the ruling ANC, the uMkhonto weSizwe party (MKP) (which is associated with former president Jacob Zuma and the third largest party), and the Economic Freedom Fighters (EFF) (the fourth largest political party known for their anti-Western stance) (Seekings & Saunders, 2022). Both the EFF and MKP are offshoots of the ANC. Like the ANC, the EFF also blamed the conflict on NATO expansion, with EFF leader Julius Malema stating, "there is absolutely nothing wrong with the Russian Federation averting what is a patent and clear security threat to Russian territory and people by NATO forces, and particularly the US" (Seekings & Saunders, 2022). A spokesperson for the EFF also said, "South Africans have not forgotten that it was Russia that supported us during the dark and unnatural days of oppression" (Rosen, 2023).

On the other side, the DA, which is the second largest political party and draws its support largely from the white minority, unequivocally condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine, banned Russian officials from all DA events and expressed solidarity with the Ukrainian ambassador (Seekings & Saunders, 2022). DA leader John Steenhuisen also visited Ukraine in May 2022 (Rosen, 2023). Mzwanele Manyi of the EFF accused the DA of being "another outpost of Europe in South Africa, so they support anything that panders to the West" (Rosen, 2023). Another party that draws its support from the white minority, the Freedom Front Plus (FF+), also sided with Ukraine (Prince, 2023). Notably, the white minority is composed of the Afrikaner, an Afrikaans speaking population from north European descent, and the South African English, from British descent.

In South Africa, Russia's disinformation strategy is primarily top-down, leveraging historical ANC ties to influence party members and leaders who then promote anti-Western and pro-Russian narratives online (Schmidt, 2024). The Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022) identified 16 separate Russian disinformation campaigns in Africa from 2014 to 2022. In South Africa, in 2019, local social media influencers were financially supported by Prigozhin to spread anti-Western sentiments and to garner support for the ANC, and in 2020, X/Twitter was used to encourage xenophobic violence. B. Bianchi *et al.* (2022) and C. Clifford & G. Gruzd (2022) obtained analogous findings. In 2024, Russia again paid social media influencers to try to influence the South

African elections on the side of Russia-aligned parties (Allen & Le Roux, 2024).

With the invasion of Ukraine, former South African President Jacob Zuma's daughter, Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma, played a significant role in the spread of Russian propaganda, according to the Center for Information Resilience (2023). M. Blankenship & A.U. Urdu (2022) also investigated Russian propaganda on X/Twitter specifically targeting Africa and found that most tweets were retweets from RT, pro-Russian anonymous conspiracy accounts, and other news sites that support the Kremlin. B. Bianchi *et al.* (2022) also found that Russian propaganda and disinformation activities in Africa are being outsourced to local users of Facebook, X/Twitter, WhatsApp, and Telegram, making Russian messages more credible and more challenging to detect. At the same time, the popularity of RT and Sputnik specifically is increasing across the African continent (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022). Russia also uses institutions such as the Russian World Foundation and the Russian Orthodox Church to forge ties, e.g., by offering courses in the Russian language (Sukhankin, 2019a) or to let students study in Russia (Bianchi *et al.*, 2022; Klyszcz, 2024).

In terms of the content of Russian propaganda specifically targeting Africa, these campaigns are aligned with Russian propaganda campaigns in the West by seeking to divide societies. S. Sukhankin (2019b) argues, "It is quite clear that Moscow – despite its optimistic rhetoric (...) – is determined to inflame existing race-driven frictions within African societies and has been actively engaging in such an information campaign for years. Aside from internal goals (showing domestic audiences examples of deep malaise in other societies), Moscow pursues a "divide and conquer" strategy in Africa, seeking to weaken and undermine internal unity and (already rather fragile) cohesion among African states it wishes to engage on its own terms. This attempt "to weaken and undermine internal unity and (already rather fragile) cohesion" is also highlighted by the Africa Center for Strategic Studies (2022) as a strategy that, "amplifies grievances and exploits divisions within a targeted society, fostering fragmentation and inaction".

Russian media channels, on the one hand, emphasise Russia's historical connection with Black liberation movements, to whom they provided support during the Cold War (Clifford & Gruzd, 2022; Del Re, 2022; Schwikowski, 2022). Leveraging historical narratives of Soviet Russia's interactions with African nations and Cold War support for resistance movements in Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau, Moscow exploits its lack of a colonial past or present-day colonial behaviour by building upon existing narratives (Del Re, 2022). In the Russian media, the scapegoat for Africa's problems is usually the US, and to a lesser extent – the EU (Sukhankin, 2019a; Blankenship & Ordu, 2022; Clifford & Gruzd, 2022). In large parts of Africa, Russia's anti-Western stance is primarily anti-French, where Russia promotes false narratives of French ambitions to dominate Africa, and depicts French forces as feeble (Miniailo, 2023). In doing so, Russia taps into historical grievances related to the colonial era. As A. Miniailo (2023) argued, "Ultimately, Russia is weaponising the traumatic legacy of European colonialism in Africa as a means of propelling itself to the position of a trusted outsider".

The same is true of Russian disinformation campaigns in South Africa. During the 2024 South African election, Russia paid social media influencers to undermine the DA (Allen & Le Roux, 2024), which is the official opposition to the ruling ANC and is widely regarded as a party representing liberal white values. One influencer told researchers that he was paid to highlight "brutalities that the blue party (DA) was doing to Black people", mostly because the DA supports US foreign policy and takes a pro-Ukraine stance (Allen & Le Roux, 2024). On the other hand, accusations were made that the MKP received financial aid from Russia (Allen & Le Roux, 2024). There were many social media posts – particularly those by Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma – that expressed support for both MKP and Russia (African Digital Democracy Observatory, 2024). K. Allen & J. Le Roux (2024) also mentioned the proliferation of Russian flags on social media accounts during the 2024 election in South Africa. Duduzile Sambudla-Zuma's pro-Russian tweets during the war in Ukraine, e.g., reinforce these narratives, with various anti-Western, anti-Western media, and pro-Putin content (Center for Information Resilience, 2023).

Russia's targeting of the Black African population around issues of anti-colonialism and anti-Western narratives finds fertile ground in an increasingly militant anti-colonial zeitgeist. In recent years, Black students across South African campuses have violently called for transformation and the decolonisation of education, removing statues of Europeans in an iconoclastic process that seeks to remove European remnants from daily life. Considering Russia's anti-colonial stance, it comes as no surprise that several commentators noted that there are South Africans who agree with the Russian position regarding Ukraine (Ndzendze, 2022; Oosthuizen, 2022). In terms of political leadership, J. Seekings & C. Saunders (2022) discussed a clear dividing line: black political parties support Russia, white political parties support the West.

While Russia on the one hand targets Black supporters by emphasising their anti-colonial credentials, on the other hand, Russia is also targeting conservative white audiences worldwide around South African issues. For instance, an article in *Nya Dagbladet* (a Swedish far-right news outlet), sourced to RT, raises alarm about white South African farmers facing land expropriation without compensation (a real issue), using it as a cautionary tale for Sweden regarding the dangers of white minority status (Bohr, 2024).

Since 2016, Russia has depicted ongoing developments in South Africa as a reverse apartheid, with Topwar.ru even referring to "black Nazism" (Sukhankin, 2019b). Pro-Kremlin sources such as Tsargrad.tv, for instance, claim that "everything South Africa has today (...) was achieved exclusively due to the up-to-date agro-technological achievements of the whites", whose potential exclusion will lead to the "Zimbabweisation [zimbarwizatsiya] of South Africa" (Sukhankin, 2019b). Newizv.ru argued it was "... the white people who brought civilisation. South Africa used to be one of the best-developed countries in the world. And where is it today? The dream of the Blacks has come true. Now, the power is in the hands of their tribesmen" (Sukhankin, 2019b).

Since 2018, Russian media has claimed that tens of thousands of Afrikaners will move to Russia after the South

African government announced it was investigating land expropriation without compensation (Sukhankin, 2019b; Mölder, 2021). Versia.ru claimed that up to three million Afrikaners are considering moving to Russia (Sukhankin, 2019b), Russia-24 referred to Afrikaners as “brothers in faith” (Mölder, 2021), and the media were also supported by physical outreach to Afrikaners (Ferris-Rotman, 2018; Thamm, 2019). The right-wing Afrikaner vlogger, Willem Petzer, travelled through South Africa with a team from Russian State Television 1 in November 2018, after which a report about farm murders was broadcast in Russia (Thamm, 2019). According to M. Thamm (2019), Petzer is also an admirer of Vladimir Putin and Alexander Dugin. Sputnik has also published sympathetic reports about the Afrikaner, for example by D. Bolotsky (2018). Russian media channels further propagated the myth of a white genocide in South Africa (Sukhankin, 2019b), including on RT (Sukhankin, 2019a). The X/Twitter dataset analysed by S. Jeon (2024) also contained fabricated claims about widespread poverty among white South Africans, and falsely alleging a government-orchestrated “white genocide”. Interestingly, Donald Trump has made analogous claims: in 2018, he posted about land expropriation on X/Twitter, saying that the “South African Government is now seizing land from white farmers” (Chirwa & Manzana, 2021; Kohnert, 2025), and in 2025, he offered asylum to persecuted Afrikaners, referring to the ANC government’s “land grabbing” and “doing things that may be far worse than that” (Kohnert, 2025; Spector, 2025). This is a half-truth: The ANC government did threaten to seize the properties of white South Africans in 2018 and tried to amend the Constitution to do so, but failed to pass the legislation (Senekal, 2020; Zille, 2025); in 2025, the ANC government passed legislation to this effect, although as of writing, the law is still being challenged (Zille, 2025); and farm murders have been a concerning issue over the past three decades (Clack & Minnaar, 2018). While farm murders and ANC attempts to undermine property rights are a reality, along with anti-white hate speech by ANC officials (Senekal, 2020), the issue of large-scale race-based evictions or government-orchestrated killings of whites has not materialised. Both Trump and Russia, however, appeal to white South Africans with exaggerated claims, and in doing so, gain support amongst right-wing populations in Europe, and in South Africa.

Since the Afrikaner is generally more conservative and religious than Western populations in Europe (Vestergaard, 2001; Finlayson, 2019), the Russian proposition that they are the bastion of conservative Christian values – unlike the decadent West – resonates with some Afrikaners. Several commentators noted support for Russia from some Afrikaners (Biehl, 2022a; 2022b; Oosthuizen, 2022; Pretorius, 2023). B. Senekal (2023) noted that a large number – albeit a minority – of Afrikaans reader comments at the bottom of news reports and opinion pieces about the Russian invasion of Ukraine express pro-Russian views, and with arguments found in Russian disinformation campaigns. For instance, in July 2014, Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17, traveling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur, was shot down over Ukraine by Russian-backed separatists using a Russian surface-to-air missile. Despite an investigation confirming Russian and Russian-backed

separatist responsibility, Russian disinformation efforts attempted to shift the blame to Ukraine (Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021; Erlich & Garner, 2023). This event is referred to in one of the Afrikaans pro-Russian comments as follows: “Ukraine has completely fallen into decline since its independence and the leaders, one after the other, have only served themselves. Instead of developing their country, they have instead wanted to grab more land and become involved with foreigners like Hunter Biden and NATO’s plans. What are the biolabs doing there? Russia has provided evidence that Ukraine shot down the Dutch flight, but the West refuses to believe it. Zelensky is playing the Pope, and everyone is paying him big time for his cunning role” (Senekal, 2023). B. Senekal (2023) also mentioned tracing Russian propaganda material posted on an Afrikaans Telegram channel to a post on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ official Telegram channel (Russian MFA). While the Telegram user is not named for ethical reasons, this particular user is widely known in Afrikaner right-wing circles, showing a direct link between Afrikaner and Russian information channels.

In other words, Russian propaganda is clearly targeting Africa and South Africa, following the same pattern as in the US and EU, by seeking to amplify differences between population groups. On the one hand, Russia creates the impression that their current government’s policies are a continuation of the Soviet Union’s pro-Black liberation movement policies, and they blame the West for problems in Africa, but on the other hand, white audiences are told that Black people are causing Africa to fail, Russia is a friend to the white minority in South Africa, and Russia is the bastion of conservative Christian values. In South Africa, as elsewhere, Russia plays both sides.

Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to examine Russia’s multifaceted disinformation campaigns, focusing on their global reach and specific impact on South Africa, and to elucidate the challenges these operations pose to democratic societies. This purpose was addressed through an extensive review and analysis of existing literature, reports, and case studies.

The study began by establishing the broader context of Russian information operations targeting the US, EU, and NATO. It defined key terms and actors involved, before delving into concrete instances of interference, such as the 2016 US election and Russian actions in Europe and Ukraine. General tactics like conspiracy theories and the portrayal of Russia as a champion of traditional values were then discussed. Finally, the focus narrowed to South Africa, examining Russia’s growing investment and disinformation activities, particularly the exploitation of racial tensions and historical narratives. This analysis relied on a broad range of sources, including academic papers, reports, and news articles.

The findings revealed a consistent pattern of Russian disinformation campaigns aimed at dividing societies and undermining Western institutions. Russia utilises a variety of tactics, from social media manipulation and spreading false narratives to supporting extremist groups and exploiting existing societal fissures. In South Africa, this strategy involves leveraging historical ties with the ANC

and exploiting racial tensions to promote pro-Russian and anti-Western narratives. Russian disinformation in South Africa is often top-down, influencing political elites who then disseminate these messages. This approach is tailored to different segments of the population, with one narrative targeting black South Africans by emphasising anti-colonialism and another targeting white South Africans with claims of “white genocide” and Russia as a defender of conservative Christian values. These findings are valuable as they improve the understanding of how Russia adapts its disinformation tactics to specific national contexts, exacerbating existing divisions and influencing political outcomes. The strategic significance of South Africa to Russia as a leverage point for influence across Africa was also highlighted.

A limitation of this study was the reliance on publicly available information, which may not fully capture the

extent of Russian operations due to the clandestine nature of such activities. Further research could explore the specific mechanisms of influence and the impact of these campaigns on public opinion in South Africa through primary data collection and in-depth case studies. Examining the effectiveness of countermeasures and the role of local actors in countering Russian disinformation would also be valuable areas for future investigation.

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Conflict of Interest

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