

More-Troll Kombat

French and Russian Influence Operations
Go Head to Head Targeting Audiences in
Africa



A Joint Report by
Graphika & The Stanford Internet Observatory



12.2020

Takedowns

More-Troll Kombat

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Executive Summary

On December 15, Facebook [announced](#) that it had taken down three separate networks that it had discovered for “coordinated inauthentic behavior” that targeted communities across Africa. One, centered on the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, was linked to individuals associated with the French military. The other two, centered respectively on CAR and Libya, were connected to the business and influence operations of Russian oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin, founder of the mercenary organization Wagner Group and the Internet Research Agency “troll farm.” The French and Russian operations in the CAR tried to expose each other, and repeatedly clashed in groups, comments, and cartoon wars.

We have documented the first of the Russian operations in a joint report with Stanford University entitled “Stoking Conflict by Keystroke”; this report focuses on the French and Russian operations that targeted CAR. For the sake of brevity, the operation linked to individuals with ties to the French military will be referred to as the “French operation” in this report, while the Russian operation attributed to individuals associated with past activity by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and previous operations attributed to entities associated with Russian financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin is referred to as the “Russian operation” in this report. It is worth highlighting that Facebook did not attribute the operation directly to the French Government or the French military, and that this report similarly does not offer evidence of institutional involvement from French governmental and military entities.

Facebook’s takedown marks a rare exposure of rival operations from two different countries going head to head for influence over a third country. It underscores how geopolitical sparring on

the ground in Africa is playing out in parallel across social media - not just Facebook, but also Twitter, YouTube, and long-form news articles written by the operations. Before the takedown, Facebook shared assets with Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory for independent analysis.

The clash between the two troll operations in CAR sets this exposure apart. From January 2020 through to the moment of the takedown, the rival influence operations posted in the same groups, commented on each other's posts, called each other out as "fake news," conducted basic open-source analysis to expose each other's fake accounts, friended each other, shared each other's posts, and even, according to one source, tried to entrap each other with direct messages. This report is a case study in a battle between rival influence operations; for that reason, we have called this report exposing both operations and their overlap "More-troll Kombat."

The rivalry in CAR was a significant part of both operations' activity, but it was by no means the only part. Overall, the Russian operation was focused on Southern Africa and CAR; according to Facebook's statement, it "relied on local nationals from Central African Republic and South Africa." This is in line with earlier Prigozhin-related operations similarly exposed by Facebook, ourselves and others that co-opted locals, often unwitting, in [Ghana](#), [Nigeria](#), and the [United States](#). The operation posted heavily about local politics and the forthcoming CAR elections, and praised Russia's engagement in CAR. It also attacked France and the local United Nations mission. A few Russian assets posted about an alleged "coup attempt" in Equatorial Guinea in July-August 2020.

The French operation was focused on Mali and CAR, and to a lesser extent on Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Cote d'Ivoire and Chad; according to Facebook's statement, it was linked to "individuals associated with French military." In CAR, it posted almost exclusively about Russian interference and Russian trolls. Unlike the Russian operation, it did not post systematically about electoral politics and avoided commenting on the upcoming election and its candidates. In Mali, the French assets mainly posted about the security situation, praising the Malian and French armed forces and attacking the jihadist groups they are [combatting](#).

The operations showed significant differences, notably the Russian operation's reliance on local nationals (wittingly or unwittingly) and the French operation's avoidance of electoral topics. However, when they clashed in CAR, they resembled one another. Each side trolled the other with insulting videos and memes; each side made false accusations against the other; each side used doctored evidence to support their accusations. Some Russian assets posed as news outlets, while some French ones posed as fact-checkers. Both used stolen profile pictures (and in the case of the French network, AI-generated profile pictures) to create fake personas for their networks.

This underscores the key concern revealed by Facebook's latest findings. To judge by its timing, content and methods, the French operation was, in part, a direct reaction to the exposure of

Prigozhin's troll operations in Africa in 2019 by Facebook. However, its tactics were very similar. By creating fake accounts and fake "anti-fake-news" pages to combat the trolls, the French operators were perpetuating and implicitly justifying the problematic behavior they were trying to fight.

This is damaging in (at least) two ways. For the operators, using "good fakes" to expose "bad fakes" is a high-risk strategy likely to backfire when a covert operation is detected, [as noted](#) in a ground-breaking 2018 French diplomacy report on information manipulation. More importantly, for the health of broader public discourse, the proliferation of fake accounts and manipulated evidence is only likely to deepen public suspicion of online discussion, increase polarization, and reduce the scope for evidence-based consensus.

Covert influence operations like those that targeted CAR are a problem for the health and credibility of democratic debate. Setting up more covert influence operations to counter them is not a solution.

Troll vs. Troll

Out of the more than 100 takedowns Facebook has published since mid-2017, this one was unique for its display of rival operations interacting with one another.

On other occasions, it has been possible to observe rival influence operations working in the same space, and to infer that they may have encountered each other: for example, it is known that [Iranian](#), [Egyptian](#) and [Russian](#) operations have all targeted communities in Sudan or in Syria, raising the possibility that they may have intersected in some way. In the case of CAR, however, there is direct evidence that the French and Russian operations were not only operating in the same contested space, they were explicitly trying to counter one another, arguing with one another, and possibly even trying to entrap one another, in the first documented case of direct "troll-on-troll" engagement at scale.

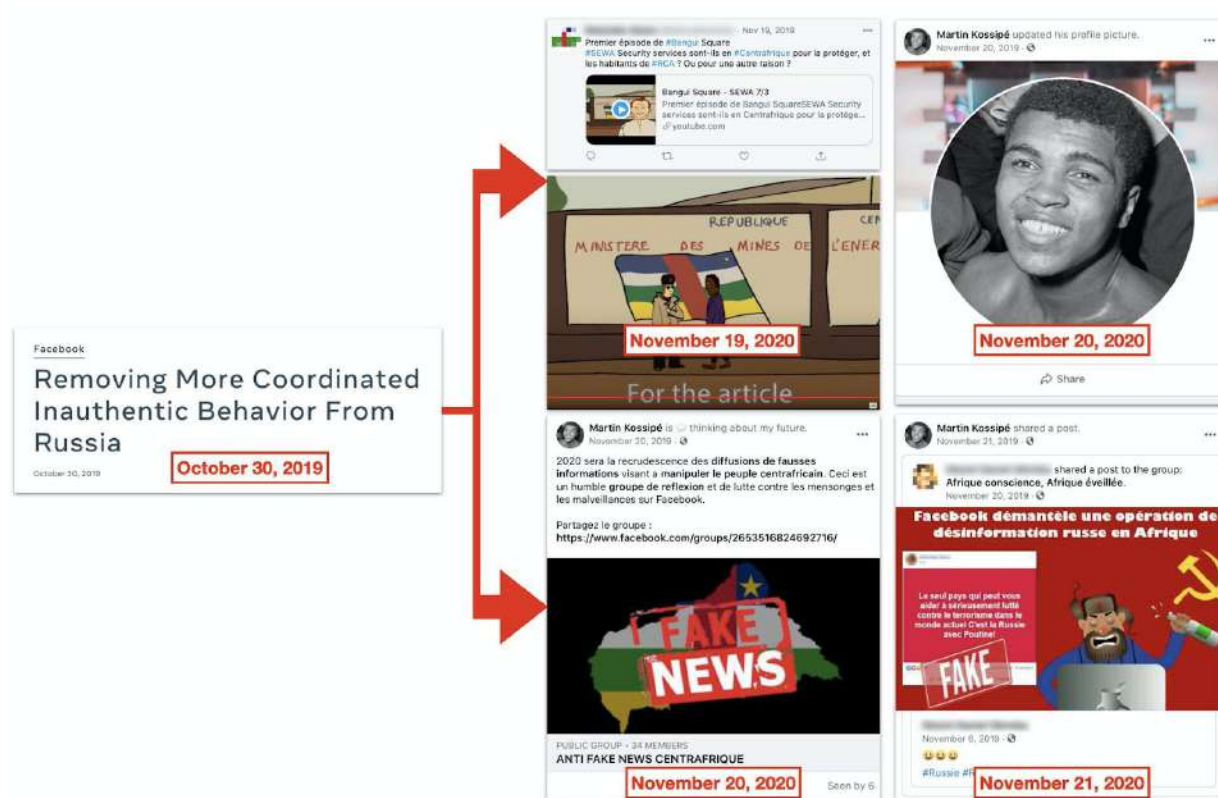
Reaction to Prigozhin

The French operation in CAR was fundamentally shaped by the presence and operations of various business entities funded by Russian oligarch Yevgeniy Prigozhin, founder of the Internet Research Agency and Wagner mercenary group. Prigozhin's information operations have repeatedly been [exposed](#), [taken down](#), and even [sanctioned](#). Despite these efforts, the operations remain persistent and evolve over time, having focused on manipulating online conversations across the globe, notably in [Ukraine](#), the [United States](#), several countries in [Africa](#), and in [Russia](#) itself.

When it began in the first half of 2019, the French operation posted on a range of subjects, notably French and EU contributions to peace and stability, and the progress made by the CAR

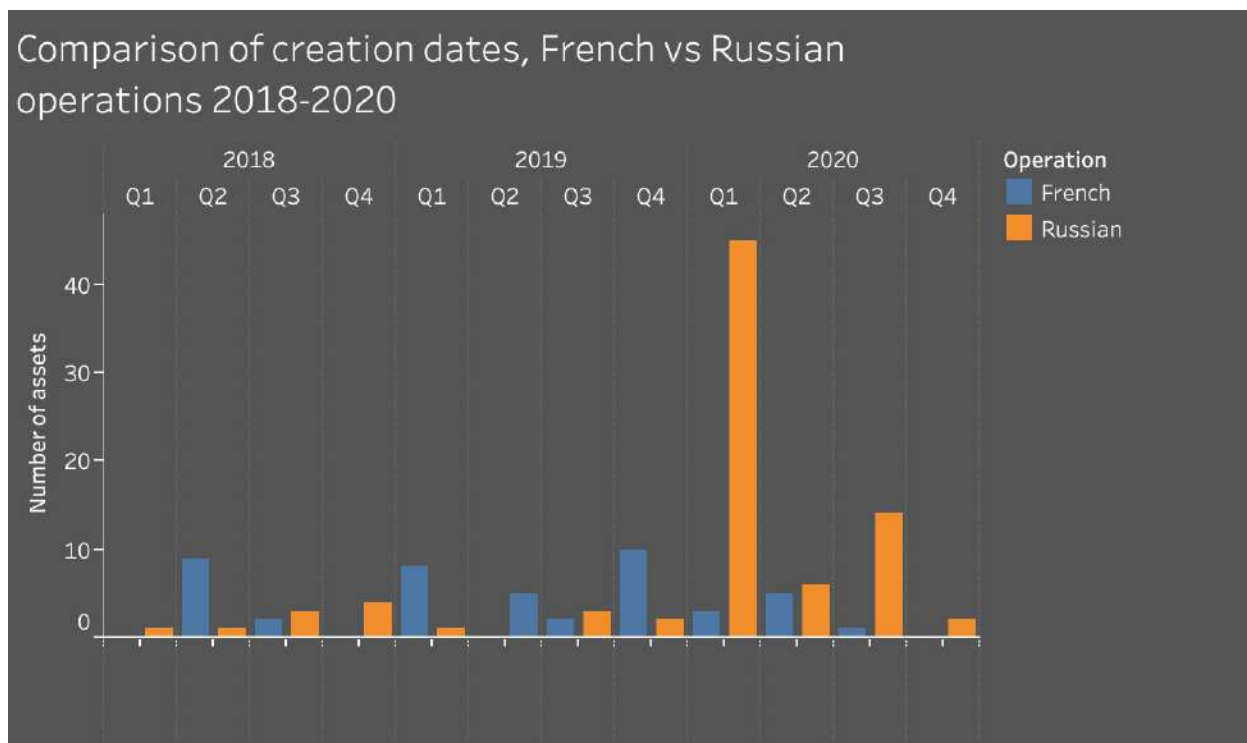
armed forces. Some posts also commented on Russian business interests in Africa, especially diamond and gold mining, and the presence of the Wagner mercenary group. However, on October 30, 2019, Facebook [exposed](#) a number of Prigozhin-linked troll networks that operated in Africa, and the French operation appears to have found a new *raison d'être*. In the weeks after the exposure, the French operation launched a series of fake assets explicitly aimed at exposing “fake news,” and focused almost exclusively on accusations about “Russian trolls.”

On November 19, 2019, the operation launched its first video from a YouTube channel called Bangui Square, featuring a parody of a Russian in fur hat, greatcoat, and red star paying for a news article, and amplified it on Facebook and Twitter. The following day, the operation upgraded one of its fake accounts with the profile picture of Muhammad Ali, and used that account to create a group called “Anti fake news Centrafrique.” The fake account then posted a meme to the group that described the Facebook takedown and portrayed another Russian with the same parodic features, plus a beard, red nose and bottle of alcohol.



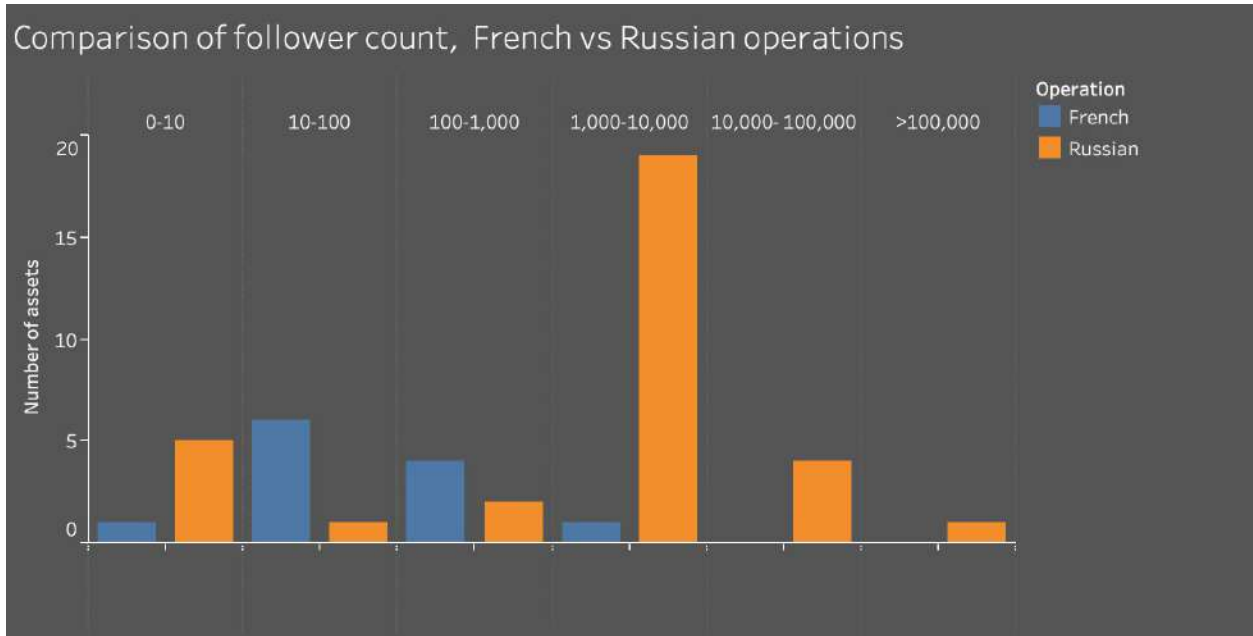
Timeline of the operation. Left, Facebook takedown announcement, October 30, 2019. Top left, YouTube and Twitter assets post video of Russian “troll,” November 19. Top right, upload of the Muhammad Ali photo to a fake account, November 20. Bottom left, the fake’s first post to the “anti-fake-news” group it created, warning that 2020 would see the “resurgence of false information aimed at manipulating the Central African people,” November 20. Given that the account posting it was fake, this was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Bottom right, the same account sharing an anti-Russian meme on the Facebook takedown, November 21. NB: YouTube and Twitter assets cited in this report have also been removed by the platforms at time of publication.

To begin with, the CAR-focused French operation enjoyed slight numerical superiority: most of the Russian troll assets focused on CAR had been removed in the Facebook takedown, and the Russian operation had not yet created new ones. However, between January and March 2020, the Russian operation spun up over 40 new accounts and pages focused on CAR, giving it a relatively far stronger presence in CAR-focused forums (although 40 assets still represent a small cluster, not a large-scale operation).

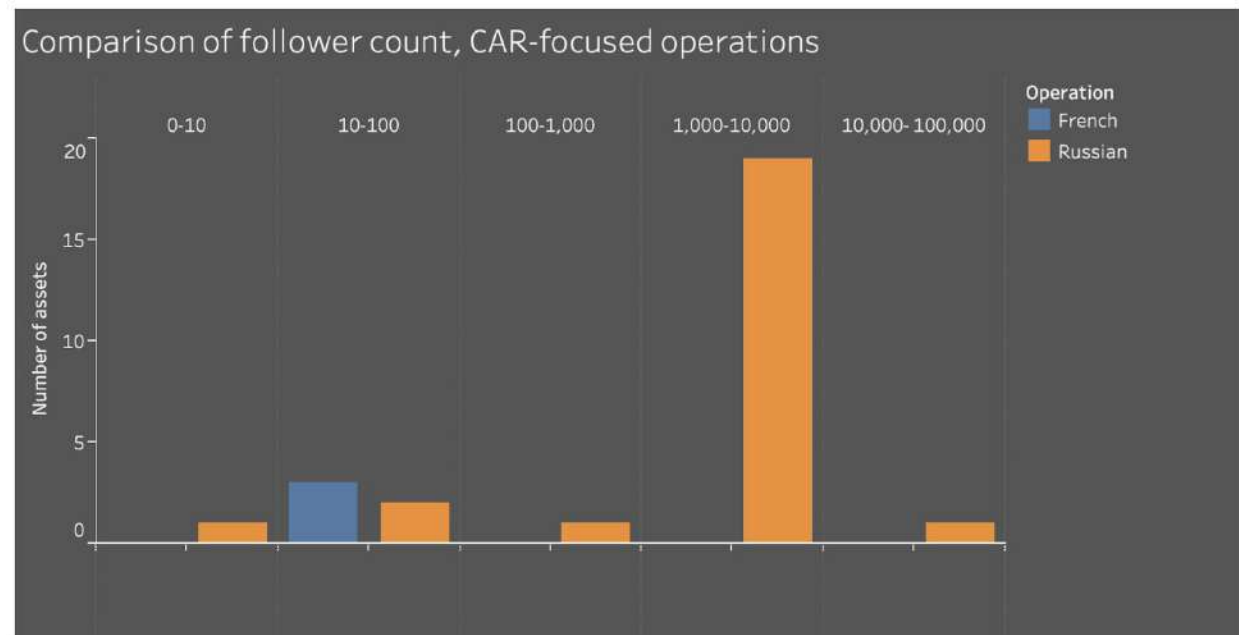


Comparison of the creation dates of French and Russian groups and pages, and the dates on which their accounts posted their first profile pictures. The Russian surge in early 2020 likely constitutes an attempt to rebuild their presence after the Facebook takedown, not a reaction to the French operation.

Across the two operations, only one French asset assembled over 4,000 followers; this was focused on Mali. The best-performing Russian page, focused on South Africa, had over 140,000 followers. In CAR itself, the best-performing Russian page, which was dedicated to President Faustin-Archange Touadéra (referred to by the page’s URL as “President FAT”), had 50,000 followers. Nineteen different pages and groups had over 1,000 followers each. By contrast, the best-performing French asset focused on CAR, the group called “anti fake news Centrafrique,” had 34 followers.



Followers of French and Russian operation pages and groups, compared. This graphic shows the full geographical spread of the operations.

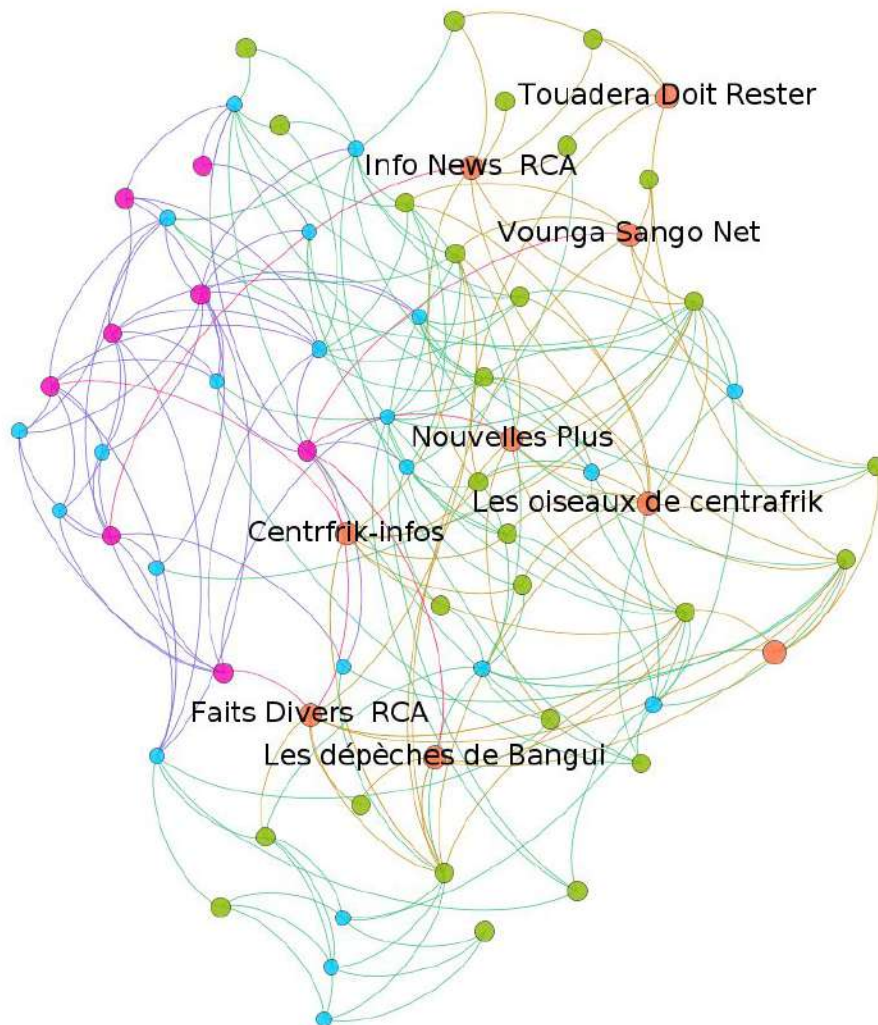


Followers of the CAR-focused pages and groups on Facebook, compared.

Phase One: Tug of Words

The duel between the two sets of fake personas and groups went through a number of phases. Initially, they appear to have identified online communities, especially Facebook groups, that were important loci of discussion about Central African politics and diplomacy, and to have posted

their own content there. This is typical behavior for influence operations: first identify the target audience, then insert the desired messaging through inauthentic personas. In this case, the French and Russian operations identified and posted to the same communities.

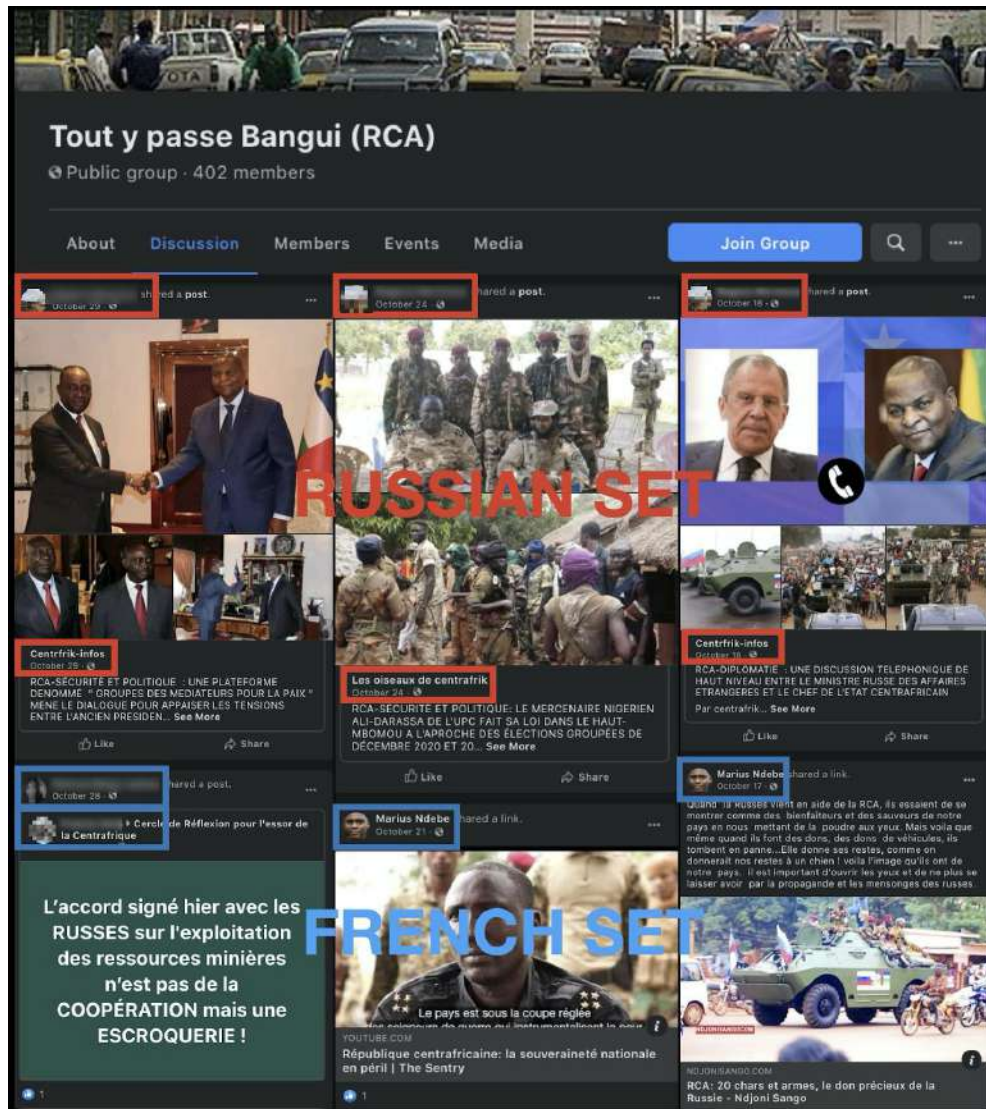


Network diagram of page likes by the two operations' assets. Pink nodes are French accounts, green nodes are Russian accounts, red nodes are Russian pages, and blue nodes are pages that did not form part of either takedown set and that were targeted by the operations. Note that accounts from both operations like the same pages, and that French assets liked six Russian pages.

In the case of the Russian assets, posting activity primarily consisted of accounts sharing posts from the Russian operation's main pages, notably pages called *Centrfrik-Infos* and *Les oiseaux de centrafrik*, also described below. The French operation primarily consisted of accounts

cross-sharing one another's posts, sharing links to news websites, or sharing memes and other anti-Russian content.

This phase of the duel effectively constituted a tug of war. Each was trying to pull the target audience in a diametrically opposite direction.

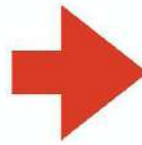


Assets from both the Russian (red) and French (blue) sets posting content into the same groups. In this case, the group was called "Tout y passe Bangui (RCA)" (Everything goes in Bangui (CAR)), where assets from both sets posted their own content. Note the lack of engagement on the posts, which typically had a binary reaction of zero or one like.

Phrase Two: Expose the Exposers

The French operation focused on CAR audiences was designed to counter the Russian one; with time, the Russian trolls responded in kind. As time went by, both operations increasingly began to

respond to one another's posts, calling each other out as "fake news" and even suggesting that the other side were trolls from France or Russia - with complete accuracy and utter hypocrisy.



Top left, a Russian page arguing that French-speaking African countries are drawing closer to Russia; the photos show Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. Top right,, a French account calling out the article as "propaganda, disinformation, manipulation." Bottom, a Russian operation account replying to the French account of to accuse it of "contradicting the truth."



Left and right, French asset Martin Kossipé - apparently the operation's lead persona in "fighting" disinformation - calling out posts by Russian assets as fakes.

The French operation paid particular attention to a remarkable children's cartoon - [published](#) on YouTube in July 2019 and [flagged](#) by the New York Times in September 2019 - that was sponsored by Prigozhin's CAR mining company, Lobaye Invest (since [sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury](#)). The cartoon, narrated in a childish French voice, told of a commune of hard-working animals in Africa whose farm was raided by hyenas. A noble lion (standing for CAR) tried to fight off the hyenas (US and France), but was outnumbered. He called for help to his old ally the bear, "in a far-off northern country called Russia," and the bear woke up from hibernation and ran to CAR in time to save his friends.

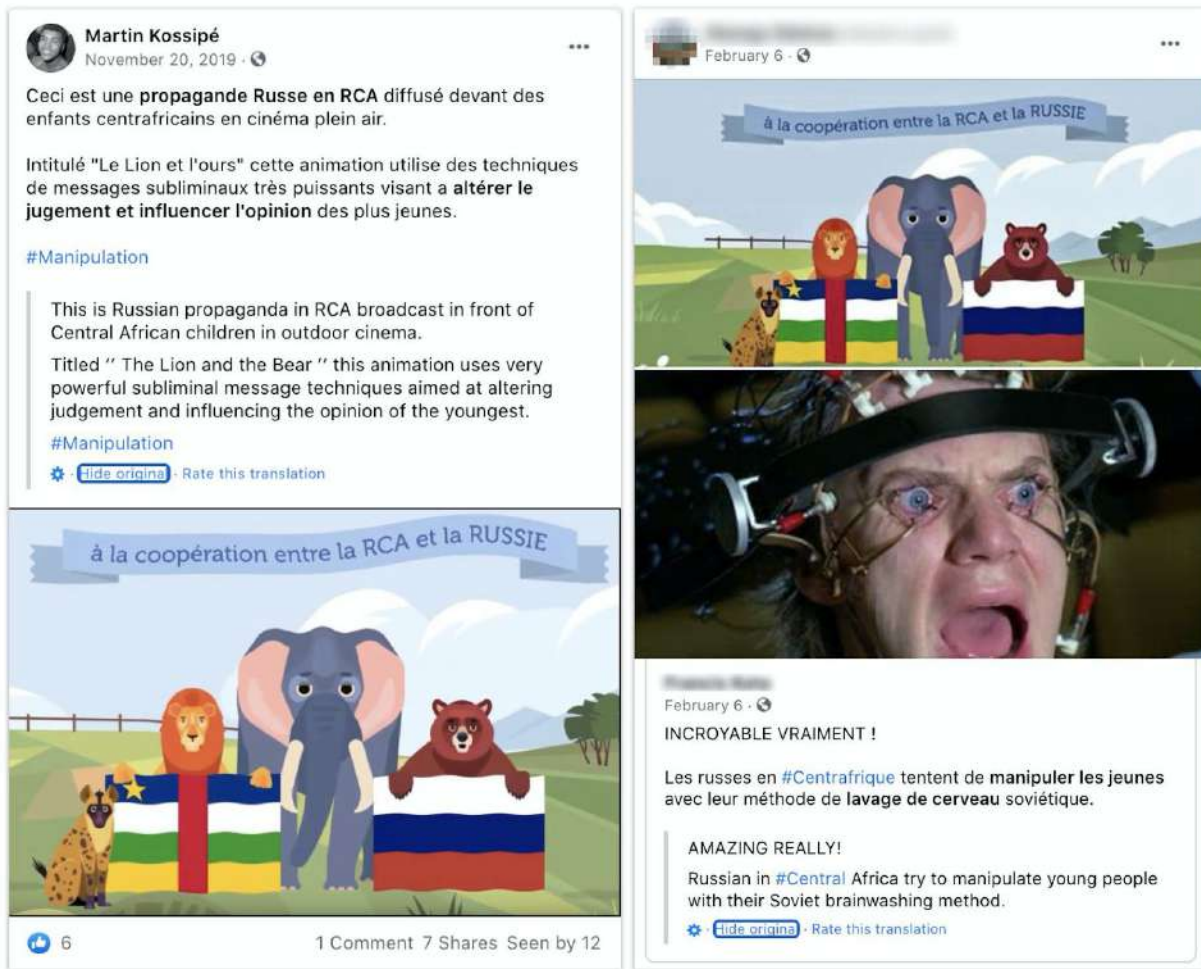
The video existed in two language versions, French and English. Unusually, the French version as preserved on the YouTube channel mentioned above was four seconds shorter than the English

version, which was posted in October by Prigozhin-linked South African Facebook page JHB24. It missed out one crucial scene: the hyenas gathering under the French and American flags.



Top, screenshot of the French version, July 2019, showing the lion and bear with the flags of CAR and Russia. Bottom, screenshot from the English version, showing the hyenas. Note the difference in lengths, caused by the omission of the flag-bearing hyenas in the French version.

The French troll operation seems to have taken particular offense at this video. On the very first day of their reaction to the Prigozhin operation, French inauthentic account “Martin Kossipé” posted about it, accusing it of using “powerful subliminal message techniques aimed at altering judgement and influencing the opinion of the youngest.” French assets were still commenting on the video in February 2020, comparing it with a “Soviet brainwashing technique” targeting the children of CAR.



Posts by French operation assets on the cartoon.

In an even more direct case of tit-for-tat trolling, the French operation ran its own cartoon that featured a caricature of the Russian one, in an apparent attempt to create a “counter narrative” directly focused on the Russian origin of the cartoon. This featured its own range of anti-Russian stereotypes, including a “beautiful blonde” (as described in the accompanying Instagram post) called Tatiana working on the cartoon, and an apparently alcoholic manager called Anatoli. To add sexism to racism, the French cartoon portrayed “Russian troll” Tatiana as not even knowing what country she was working on, calling it “L’Afrique du centre” instead of “Centrafrique”

(captioned as “Central of Africa”) and saying she did not even know where the country actually was.



Screenshots from the Bangui Square video, December 23, 2019. Note the title screen (“The story of how Russia helped Africa”), which echoed the name of the Lobaye cartoon, and the shot from the Lobaye cartoon on Tatiana’s screen.

On other occasions, both operations called out assets that were not part of the takedowns and do not appear to have played any role in either operation, seemingly accusing authentic users and bystanders of being trolls themselves. This mis-attribution points to one of the most insidious and ultimately damaging effects of troll operations such as this: spreading unwarranted suspicion about real users, thus undermining the credibility of authentic online conversations more broadly.

The Russian assets had particular scorn for a CAR-based publication called Corbeau News, which to date shows no sign of having been part of this operation, but was highly critical of Russia. Multiple Russian accounts accused it of being “fake news;” in March, one asset run by the Russian operation claimed to have been a Corbeau News journalist who had seen the error of their ways - apparently an attempt to smear the outlet by providing a false confession. Other Russian accounts amplified it. Fake accounts posing as journalists to undermine the credibility of media outlets are routinely observed in information operations, posing grave concerns for press freedom globally.



Left, the “confession” by an account run by the Russian operation. Right, another Russian asset amplifying it with the warning to “always check the information.”

As time passed, the claims grew increasingly elaborate, with different French and Russian assets conducting basic open-source verification on each other’s contents, including reverse searching imagery. As early as January 28, the French asset Martin Kossipé labeled a page called Futurs Leaders Africains (“future African leaders”) as “fake news,” and argued that it was “administered by RUSSIAN TROLLS.” The page has since been taken down, but [cached versions](#) show it was created in 2014, registered to a Russian phone number, and accused France of staging murders, coups d’état and other crimes in Africa. It is unclear how this was connected to the current operation, but the fake French account Martin Kossipé expended some effort to pose as an open-source researcher and present his evidence for his claim.

Martin Kossipé
January 28 · 🌐

ATTENTION, ***Manoeuvre de désinformation RUSSE*** en cours en CENTRAFRIQUE.

Cette page est en fait administré par des TROLLS RUSSES chargé de diffuser des ***fake news*** pour influencer les plus plus vulnérables.

La page en cause dispose d'un numéro de téléphone RUSSE, ils ne prennent même plus la peine de cacher leurs bots pour partager, les photos de profils sont issues d'une banque d'images gratuites.

WARNING, *** RUSSIAN MISINFORMATION MANOVER *** IN THE MAKE IN CENTRAFRICA

This page is actually administered by RUSSIAN TROLLS to spread *** fake news *** to influence the most vulnerable.

The page in question has a RUSSIAN phone number, they don't even bother hiding their bots to share, the profile pictures come from a free image bank.

🔧 [Hide original](#) · [Rate this translation](#)

Futurs Leaders Africains
@FLA.startup

Accueil
À propos

Futurs Leaders Africains a ajouté 2 photos du 26 janvier.

ALERTE INFO: LA FRANCE PRÉPARE UN ENÉMIÉ COUP D'ÉTAT AVEC ASSASSINAT EN AFRIQUE. CIBLE FAUSTIN ARCHANGE TOUADERA, PRÉSIDENT CENTRAFRICAIN.

La situation politique en République Centrafricaine n'est plus à présenter, de coup d'état en révolutions générale. La France ne fait qu'apporter malheur à ce pays d'Afrique centrale aux potentialités de développement incommensurables, mais qui souffre encore à couper le cordon ombilical.

Nouvellement nommé attaché de défense à l'ambassade...
Afficher la suite

À propos

INFORMATIONS DE LA PAGE

Création en janvier 2014

Fourchette de prix
Sans objet

Mission
Informer, Innover, Révolutionner

COORDONNÉES

Appeler +7 952 009-59-33

in.me/FLA.startup

facaf.office@gmail.com

http://futursleadersafricains.over-blog.com

PLUS D'INFORMATIONS

The post by Martin Kossipé, 1: calling out the page as fake because of its Russian phone number (the Russian flag is a cute touch, and was added by the fake French account in the screenshot it shared, not by us).

Martin Kossipé
January 28 · 🌐

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Richard Mavode · Journalistes Centrafricains

Chers collègues, vigilance, vigilance double vigilance: La France prépare la déstabilisation et un prochain coup d'état avec assassinat en Centrafrique: Cible Faustin Archange TOUADERA, l'assassinat d'ex président BOZIZE pour la CPI, soyez vigilants pour sauver la vie de nos proches et innocentes. Plus jamais ça encore en Centrafrique.

gettyimages

The post by French fake account Martin Kossipé, 2: calling out an amplifier as having a profile pic from Getty Images.

Russian trolls took similar pains. On October 5, 2020, a Russian account posted a lengthy expose of “FAKE NEWS!” This time, the controversy focused on the claim that Russia had shipped a billion dollars in cash to CAR; this claim seems to have come from an individual who was not affiliated with either operation. Like Martin Kossipé, the Russian persona appended open-source evidence to its comment, in the shape of a series of screenshots: several pictures of the individual’s post, and the results of a reverse image search to show that one of the pictures was stolen.

On this occasion, however, the Russian operator appears to have overreached himself: the screenshots showed that “his” browser was set to Cyrillic, as the timestamp on the screenshots read “3ч”, i.e. 3 hours ago (3 часа назад). This appears likely to have been an inadvertent slip, but it provides a further open-source indication that the operator behind this persona was connected to the Russian-language world.



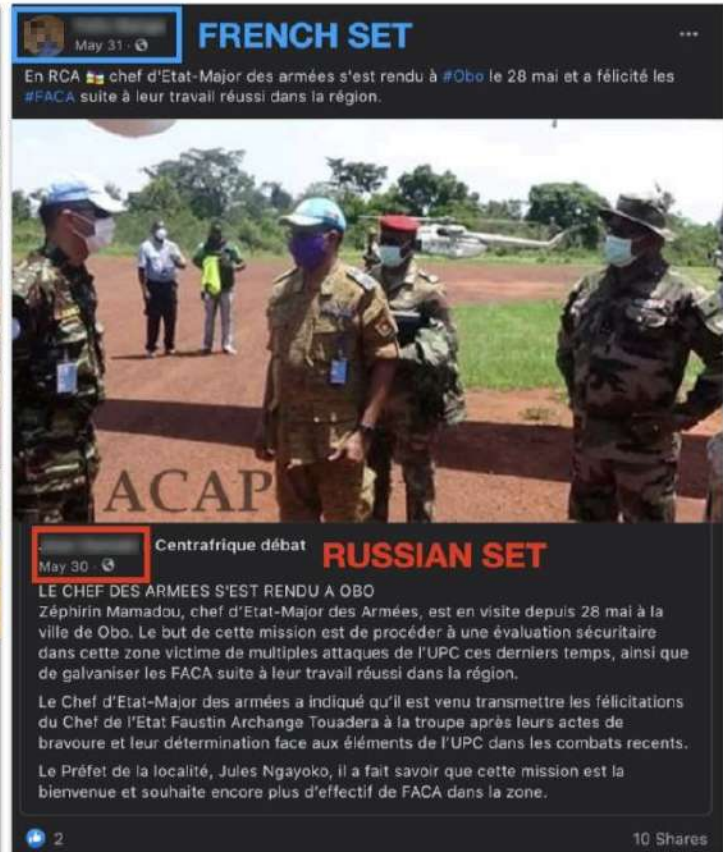
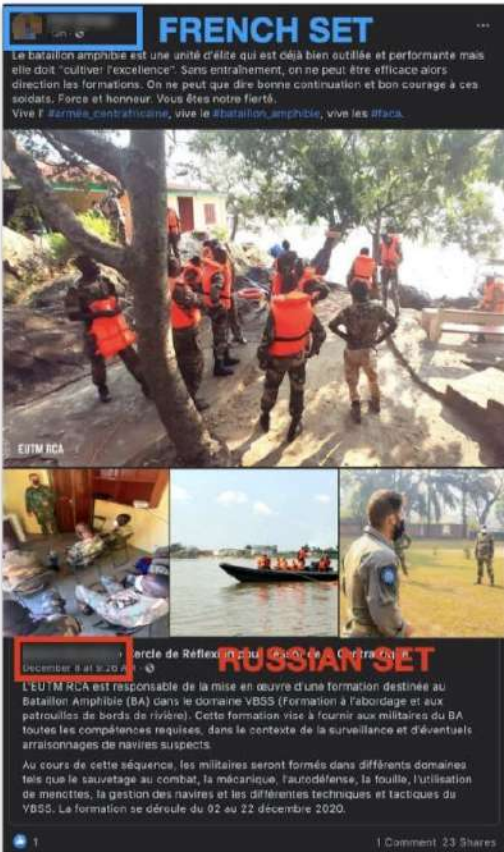
Left, post by the Russian account calling out as “fake news” an accusation of Russian interference by a Facebook user (right) who does not appear to have belonged to either operation. Bottom right, the Russian account’s screenshot of the offending post, with the timestamp in Cyrillic.

Phase Three: Just Good friends

At some point in this cycle of recrimination, a strange thing happened: the French and Russian trolls began amplifying one another's posts, sharing them into different CAR-focused groups. It's unclear - and somewhat puzzling - why this happened. This may have been intended to portray the trolls as reasonable users who were able to see both sides of the story, or to polish their *bona fides* as fake-news exposers; the French persona Marius Ndebe even shared the Russian post immediately above, although the French account took the opportunity to point out that one of the armored vehicles donated by Russia to CAR had already broken down.



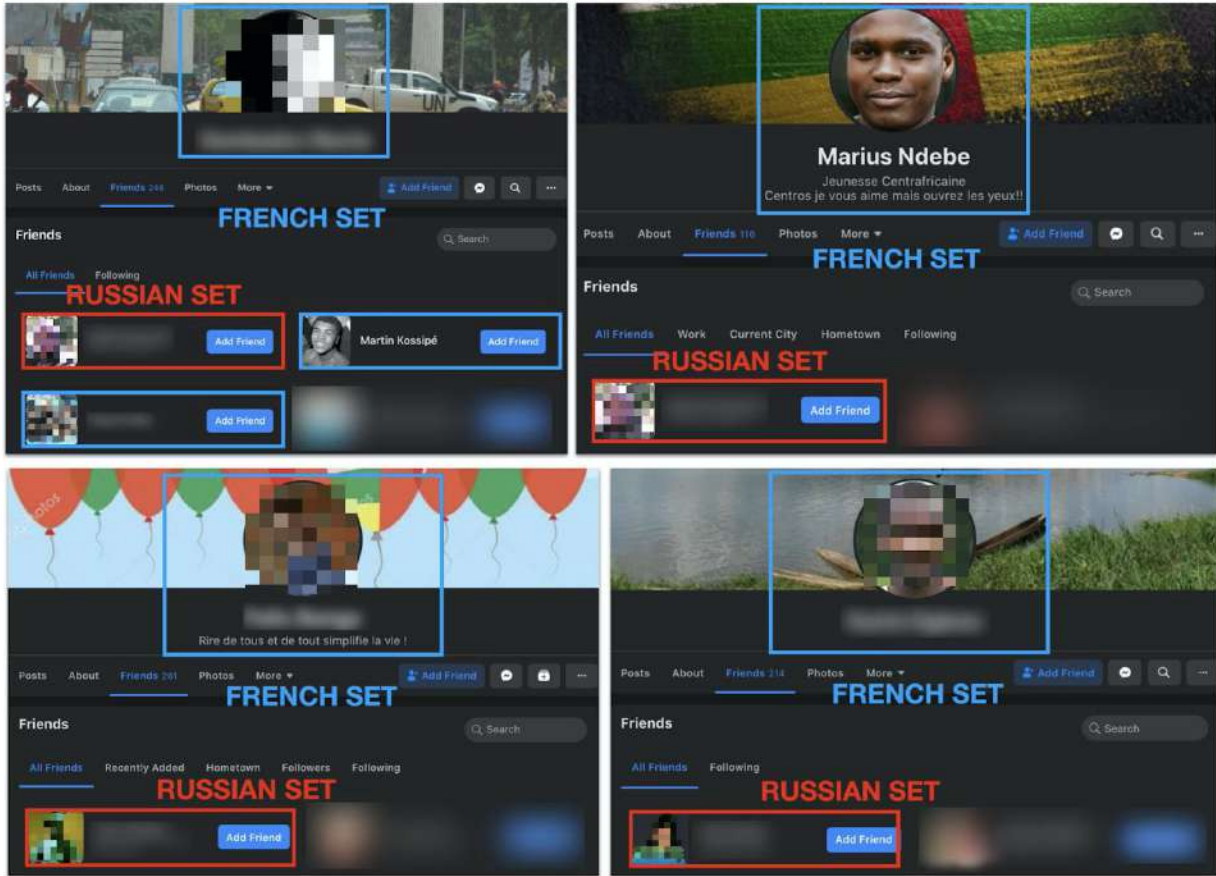
Left, Marius Ndebe (French set) sharing the Russian account's post; right, the original.



French account sharing Russian accounts.

However, it is also possible that this was a prelude to the next step, because at some time during the first half of 2020, the French and Russian accounts started making friends (at least in the social-media sense). By the time our teams reviewed the network in late 2020, at least four of the French accounts had friended at least three of the Russian accounts, including one of the most outspoken Russian critics of the French operation..

It is unclear whether this was intended as a crude form of camouflage (“If I were a troll, I wouldn’t befriend you”), a type of reconnaissance, or even a form of meta-trolling (“I can see your mouse from here”). However, as events were to show, it may also have been the precursor to even more direct action.



At least four pro-French assets befriended assets from the pro-Russian set.

Phase Four: Who's Trolling Whom?

Perhaps the most remarkable post of this entire cluster of operations came from Russian account Eric Humez (whose profile picture was taken from a Nigerian user on the Russian platform VK) on May 15. The lengthy text post exposed what he called a group of “fakers, probably financed from abroad,” who wrote articles and social-media posts “to destabilize the situation in the country and discredit CAR’s foreign partners.” It went on:

*“The story starts with a message from a certain Martin Kossipé, who contacted me via Facebook direct message. As an author and journalist, I was interested by the proposal of cooperation with a group of pan-Africanists, because my position is clear: I am in favor of true information and the cohesion of the people of CAR. After a brief exchange, Martin proposed that I write articles and work with his ‘team of journalists.’ I was flattered, he described the objective of their work, they are against colonialism, they fight for the rights of Africans. But then the list of enemies of Africa was reduced to a single partner of CAR: against Russia. And I thought he was probably a French agent, because the Russian presence is hindering this country’s projects for a new colonization. Nobody else hates the Russians in CAR. **Martin may be a French agent paid to recruit Central African***

journalists, and his page is a fake account, because there's nothing there but a few posts against Russia.” (emphasis ours)

The post by the fake Russian account then went on to accuse three accounts of being French assets. Two did indeed feature in the takedown; the third did not. The Russian account further accused them of threatening “one of my journalist friends for publishing an article that criticized France and its neocolonial policy.”



Eric Humez
May 15 · 🌐

Malgré les mesures prises par le Haut conseil de la communication de la RCA dans la lutte contre les Fake News, l'espace d'information de notre pays continue de se remplir par les intox. Dans ce cas, je parle d'un groupe de personnes qui distribuent des Fakes, d'ici « les fakers ». Probablement financés à l'étranger, ils écrivent des articles provocateurs et des publications sur Facebook dans le but de déstabiliser la situation dans le pays et de discréditer les partenaires étrangers de la RCA.

L'histoire prend son but par le message d'un certain **Martin Kossipé qui m'a contacté via des messages privés sur Facebook**. En tant qu'un jeune auteur et journaliste, j'ai été intéressé par la proposition de coopération avec le groupe des panafricanistes, car ma position est claire: je suis en faveur de l'information véridique et de la cohésion du peuple de la RCA.

Cependant, après une brève communication, Martin m'a suggéré d'écrire des articles et de collaborer avec son « équipe de journalistes ». J'ai été flatté, il a décrit l'objectif de leur travail, ils sont contre le colonialisme, ils se battent pour les droits des africains. Mais puis, la liste des ennemis de l'Afrique a été réduite à un seul partenaire de la RCA : contre la Russie. Et je pensais que c'était probablement un agent français, car la présence russe empêche les projets de ce pays pour une nouvelle colonisation, il n'y a personne d'autre à haïr les russes en RCA. Martin est peut-être un agent français payé pour recruter des journalistes centrafricains, et sa page est un compte faux, car il n'y a rien d'autre que quelques postes contre la Russie. En tant que journaliste, j'ai décidé de mener ma propre enquête et il s'est avéré que c'est un groupe des fakers.

Screenshot of the opening salvos in the Eric Humez post.

Given the limitations of open-source investigation, and the necessity of never taking a fake account's words at face value, this post raises more questions than it answers. Did the French operators really contact their Russian counterparts to enroll them in their own anti-Russian operation? If so, was it because they did not realize they were contacting a troll operation, or because they were attempting some form of double bluff or entrapment? Who, in short, was trolling whom?

While those questions cannot be answered, the post does fit into a broader pattern of increasing engagement with, and amplification of, each other's content. The longer the French and Russian troll operations went on, the more they came to resemble one another, mirroring each other's accusations, trading the same insults, and even producing videos to attack one another with stereotypes. It is an object lesson in the danger of trying to fight fake news with more fake news. Whatever the French operation's motivation may have been in countering the Russian operation, it ended up mimicking it.

The Russian Operation

As it announced the takedown of the Russian operation in December 2020, Facebook said, "We identified several clusters of connected activity that relied on local nationals from Central African Republic and South Africa. This network used a combination of fake and compromised accounts – some of which had been already detected and disabled by our automated systems – to comment, amplify their own content, drive people to off-platform domains and run Groups and Pages posing as news and civic-focused entities. They also solicited content from local journalists. The people behind this activity took operational security steps to conceal their location and identity. ... Although the people behind this activity attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with past activity by the Internet Research Agency (IRA) and previous operations we attributed to entities associated with Russian financier Yevgeniy Prigozhin, who was [indicted](#) by the US Justice Department."

As noted above, the Russian operation was larger and more followed than its French counterpart: one of its South African pages had over 140,000 followers, while one of its CAR-focused pages had over 50,000. It was also more politically engaged, posting a large volume of content about Central African politics, and running pages that explicitly supported President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in his re-election bid, while attacking his main rival, Francois Bozizé.

It is worth noting that while the French operation mimicked the tactics of the Russian one in its attempt to counter Russian messaging in CAR, a key difference is that our teams could not find any evidence of the French accounts discussing electoral politics and candidates in CAR. In short, the French operation stopped short of electoral interference, which seemed to have been a key goal of the Russian set.

Size, Scale and Scope

The takedown of this Russian operation included 63 Facebook accounts, 29 Pages, 7 Groups and one Instagram account.

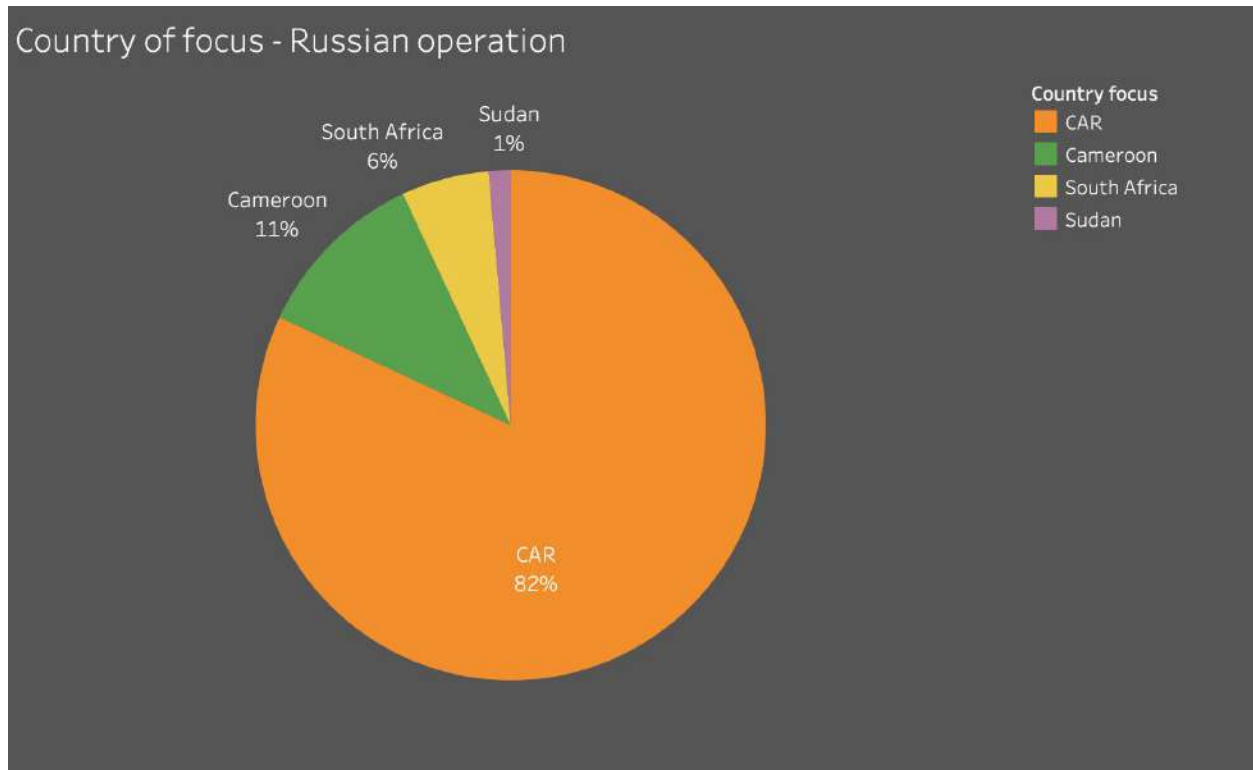
The Russian takedown set primarily focused on the CAR and appears to have been an attempt to rebuild the network after the 2019 takedown: almost all the CAR-focused assets were created from January-March 2020. A cluster of three pages focused on South Africa; these were created in November 2018 and masqueraded as news outlets. A set of eight accounts were created in July 2020 and claimed identities in Cameroon, but seemed to post exclusively about tensions and a possible coup in Equatorial Guinea, even advertising for staff to work on a “mission” there. A few assets focused on more regional or general issues.

Each cluster of country-focused assets largely worked independently, but some open-source indicators pointed to a connection between them, such as mutual shares and likes, and at least one real individual who moved between the different clusters. At critical moments, they also focused on the same themes -- notably defenses of Prigozhin’s various activities in Africa and claims of a possible coup in Equatorial Guinea in July 2020.



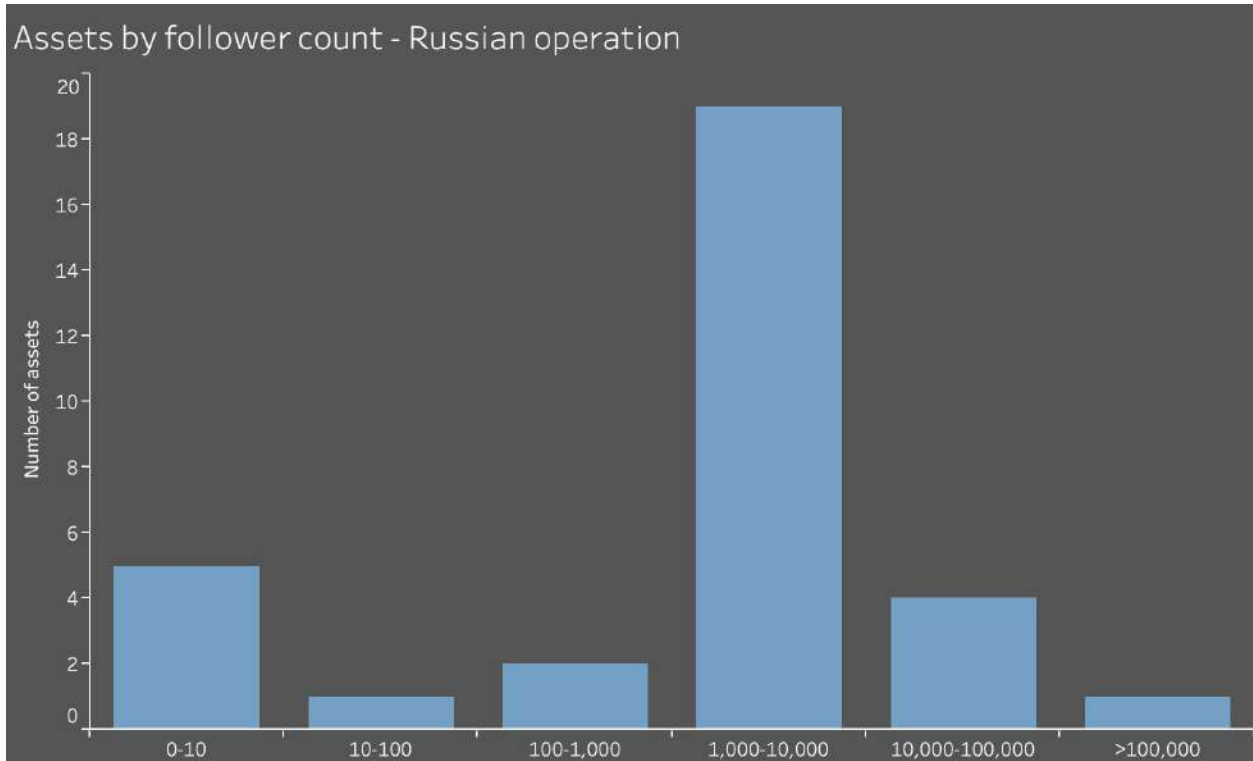
Dates of creation (pages and groups) or dates of the first profile picture (for accounts) of Facebook assets in the Russian takedown set. Note the country clustering: South Africa, November 2018; CAR, January through March, 2020; Cameroon, July 2020. It is perhaps significant that South Africa held its election in May 2019, while CAR is to hold national elections and Cameroon is to hold local elections in December 2020.

Of the assets that focused on one particular country, rather than focusing on regional or general issues, over 80 percent dealt with CAR. These included a clutch of pages that posed as news outlets, pages focused on local issues, and accounts that masqueraded as CAR citizens. Some of the accounts used stolen profile pictures, described below. The Cameroon / Equatorial Guinea assets made up a small proportion of the operation. Only one asset appeared focused on Sudan, but it had not made any visible posts by the time of the takedown.



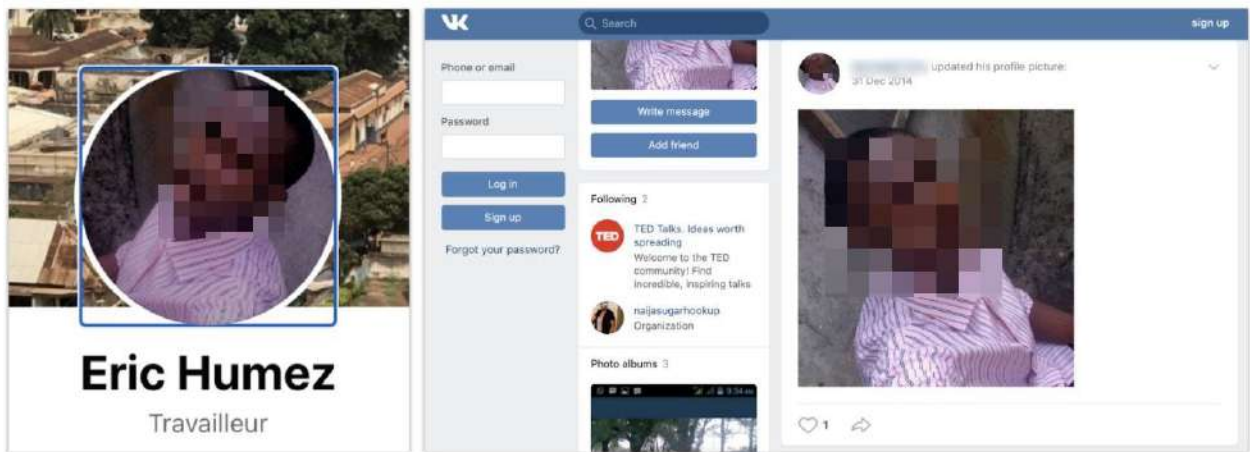
Breakdown of Facebook assets (pages, groups, and accounts) by the primary country they focused on, when this was clear. Some other assets took a regional approach.

The pages appear to have had some success in building an audience (although audience numbers can be inflated by artificial means, and therefore should not be taken as a definitive indicator). One page, SADC News, that focused on Southern Africa, had over 140,000 followers by the time it was taken down. Another, dedicated to CAR's President Touadéra, had over 50,000. The bulk of the network's pages and groups had followings or memberships in the low thousands.

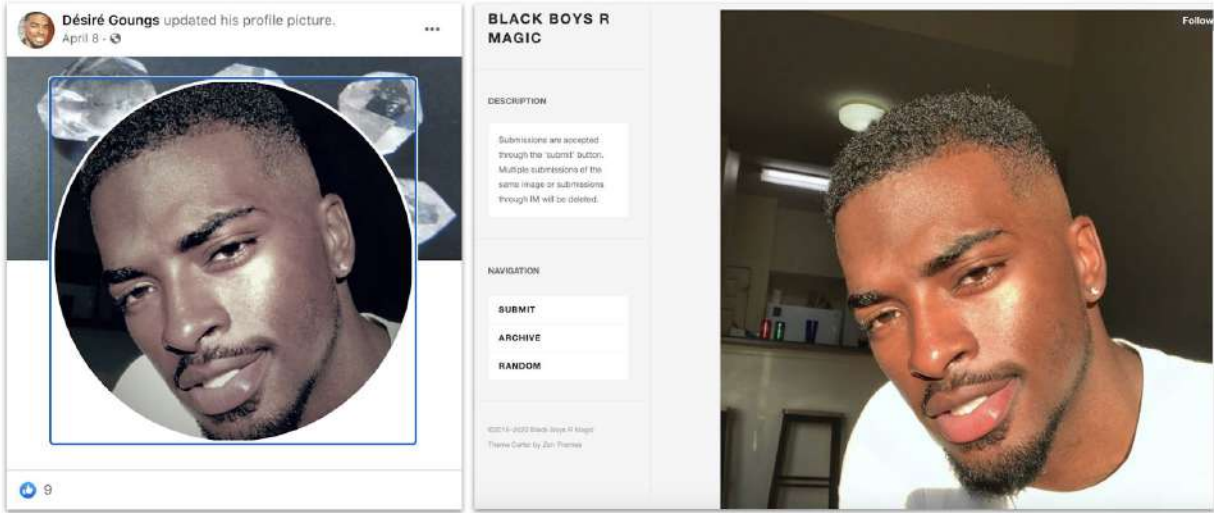


Followings for the Facebook pages and membership numbers of the Facebook groups in the Russian operation.

Around these groups and pages, the Russian operation wove a network of fake accounts that served as administrators, amplifiers, and defenders (as described above). Some of these assets featured profile pictures that were stolen from a range of sources, including the profile pictures of social media users unconnected with the operation. Some of the photos were altered, cropped or reversed, presumably to make detection harder.

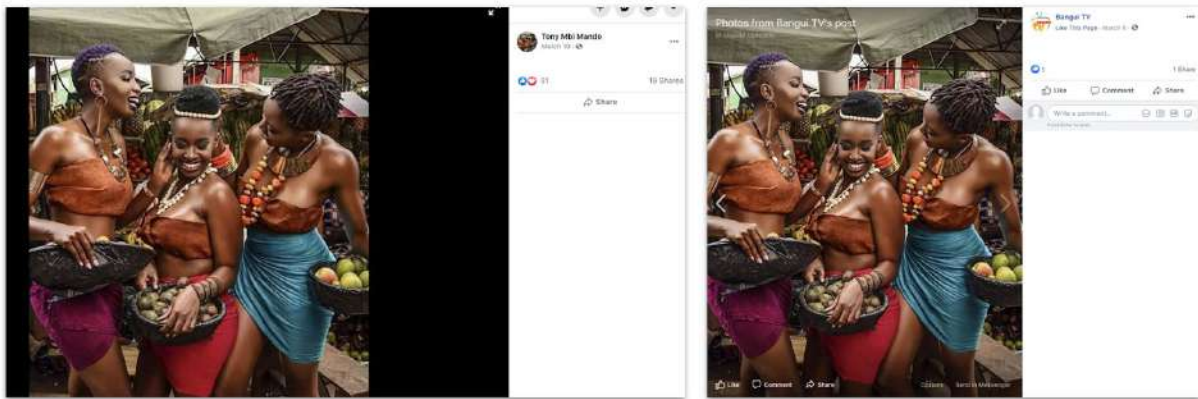


Left, asset Eric Humez. Right, profile picture of a Nigerian user on VK, uploaded in 2014.

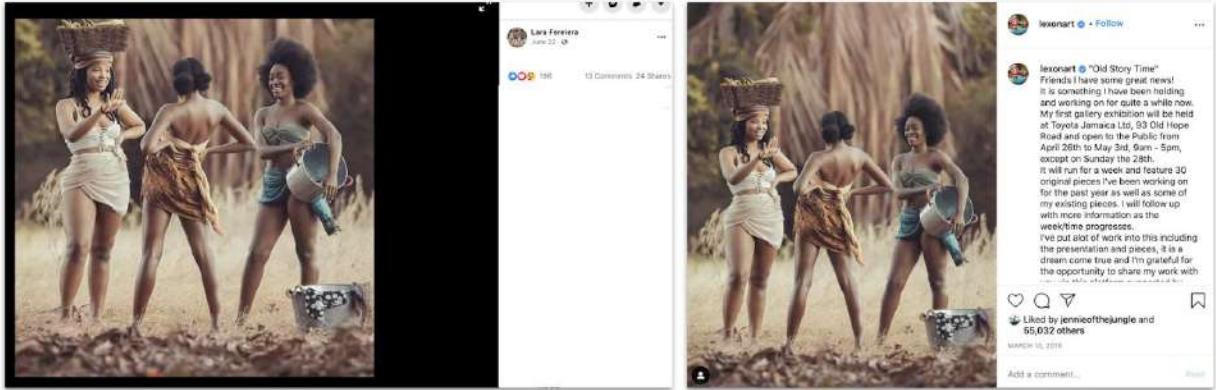


Left, profile picture of asset Désiré Touns, uploaded on April 8, 2020. Right, [Tumblr post](#) from November 2017.

Other profile pictures featured small groups. Again, these originated from a range of sources, including TV shows and social-media posts; some were widely shared online before the operation came to them.

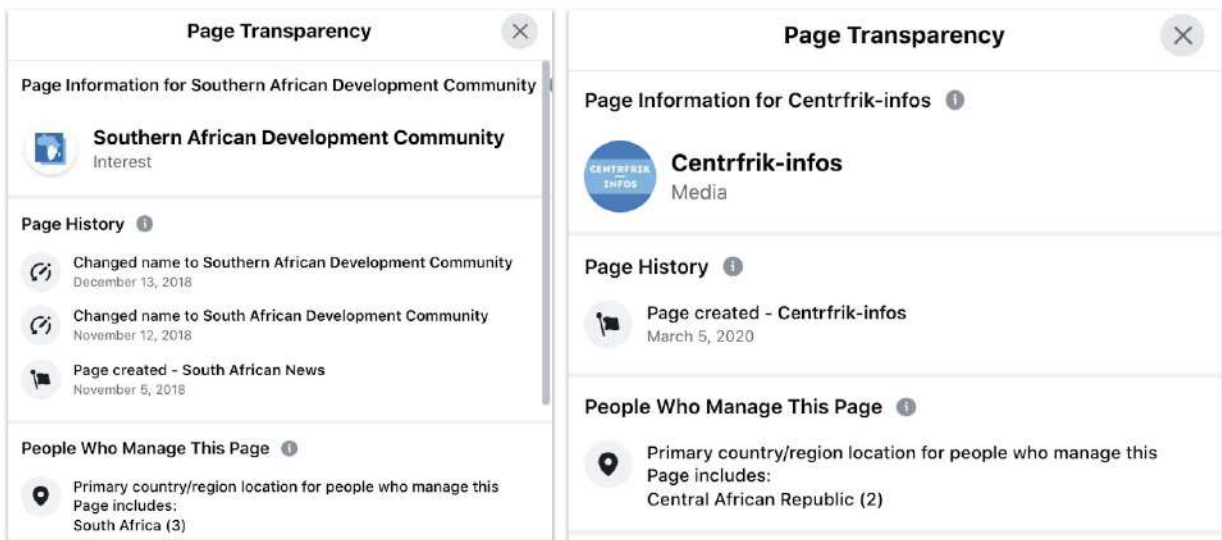


Left, asset Toby Mbi Mando. Right, post from [Bangui TV](#) four days earlier.



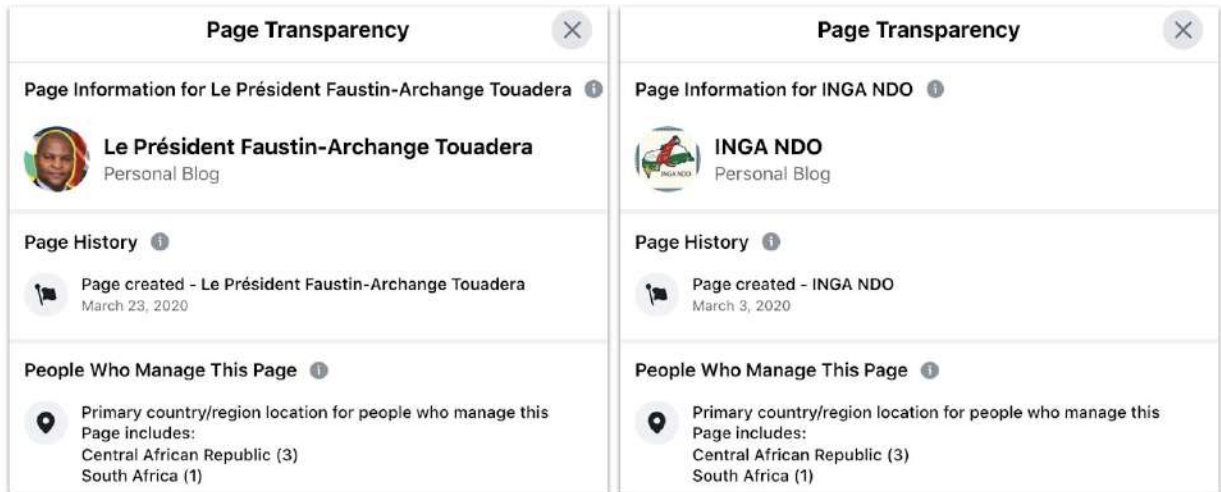
Left, profile picture of asset Lara Ferreira, uploaded on June 22, 2020. Right, the [original photo](#) by photographer Adrian McDonald (@lexonart) on Instagram, March 13, 2019. The original photo, which was liked over 55,000 times, has been widely copied and shared online.

According to Facebook’s page transparency feature, the operation was run from a number of locations in Africa, notably the Central African Republic, South Africa, and Egypt. Most of the assets showed admins in the appropriate countries: for example, the operation’s most-followed page, Southern African Development Community, had three admins in South Africa, while one of its more popular CAR pages, Centrfrik-Infos, had two admins in CAR.



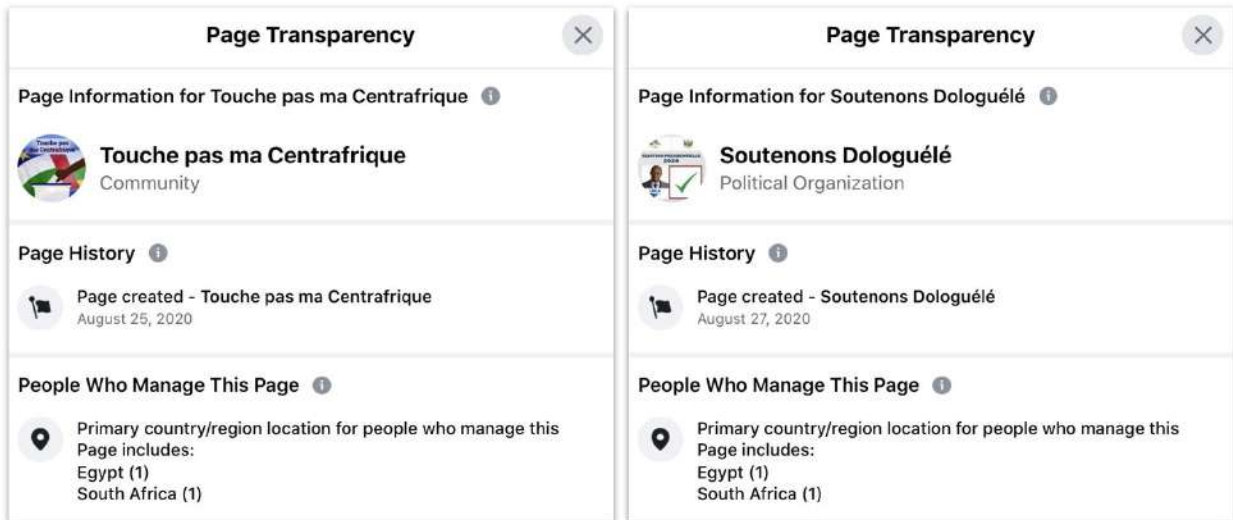
Page transparency for Southern African Development Community, left, and Centrfrik-Infos, right. Note also the name changes that the South African page went through early in its career.

Others showed a blend of locations. For example, the most-followed CAR page, *Le President Faustin-Archange Touadéra*, had two admins in CAR and one in South Africa. The page *INGA NDO* had three in CAR and one in South Africa.



Page transparency for *Le Président Faustin-Archange Touadéra*, left, and *INGA NDO*, right.

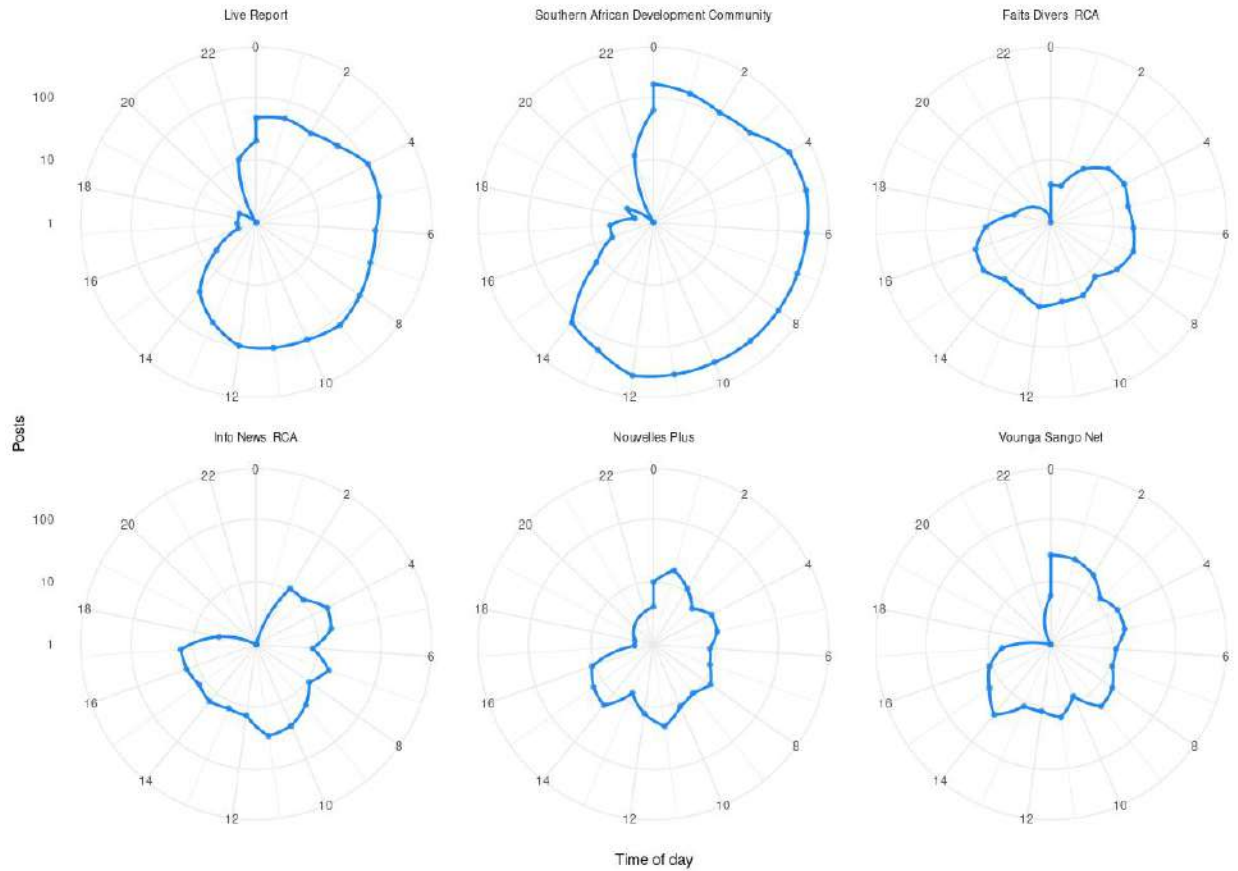
Still others, however, showed an unusual pattern. Several of the CAR-focused pages proved to be managed from Egypt and South Africa, with no visible administration from CAR at all. These included, ironically, the page *Touche pas ma Centrafrique* (“Don’t touch my CAR”).



Page transparency for two CAR-focused pages including “Don’t touch my CAR”.

Different country clusters showed some difference in behavior. The assets based in South Africa tended to post more often, and typically started earlier than some of the CAR-focused assets, as the following polar plots demonstrate.

Hourly posting frequency of Facebook Pages from Russian Set



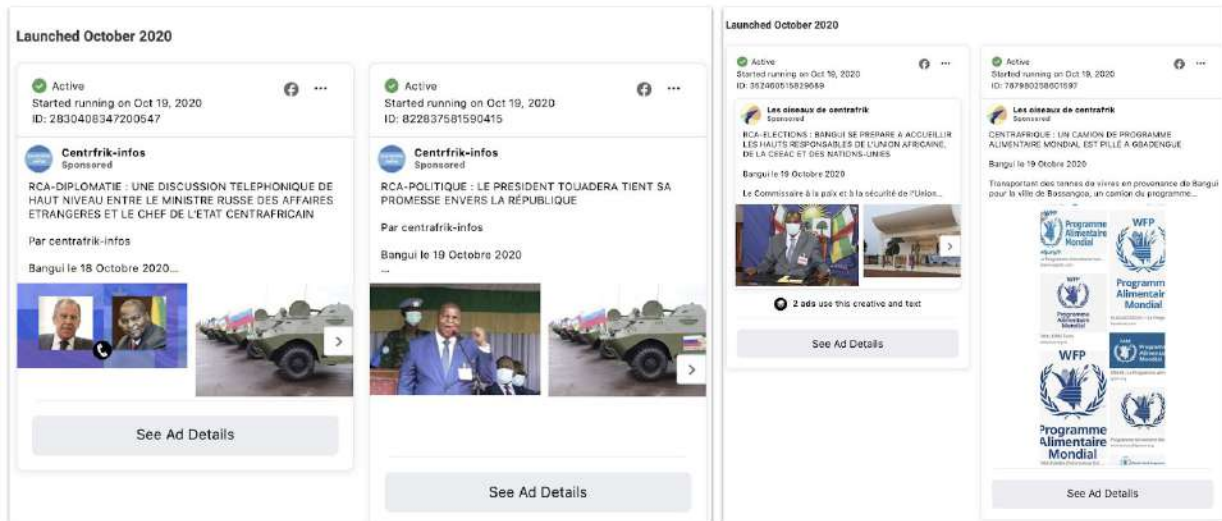
Post Counts by Hour (GMT); distance from the center of each graph indicates more activity at that time. The South African-focused Russian pages (top and center left) show a different pattern of posting behavior than that seen in the CAR-focused pages, and the South African pages produced more content in total.

On several occasions, assets from the Russian operation paid to promote their posts. For example, in December 2020 the page dedicated to the CAR president promoted a post on the 62nd anniversary of the proclamation of the CAR. The post recorded some 3,600 reactions, compared with a typical engagement rate of 100-300 for its “organic” posts. According to Facebook’s statement, the operation spent some \$38,000 on ads on Facebook and Instagram, paid for primarily in South African rand and US dollars.



Left, screenshot of the Facebook ad archive. Right, the original post; note the number of engagements at the bottom left.

Similarly, a number of pages launched ad campaigns on October 19, 2020. These included *Centrifrik-Infos*, *Les oiseaux de centrafrik*, *Nouvelles Plus*, *Younga Sango Net* and *Info Nouvelles RCA*. In each case, sponsored posts performed significantly better than the average post on the page, with 5-20 times more engagement (usually into the mid to high hundreds), suggesting that the sponsorship had some effect.



Left, screenshots of the two ads run by *Centrifrik-Infos* in October. The left one translates "CAR-Diplomacy: a high level phone call between the Russian minister of foreign affairs and the Central African head of state" and the right one "CAR-Politics: President Touadéra keeps his promise towards the Republic." Both articles took a strongly pro-Russian stance. Right, two promoted posts by *Les oiseaux de centrafrik*, on an official pre-election visit by the UN and African Union, and on a raid on World Food Program truck.

Use of Language

The Russian operation's primary language was French, in keeping with the populations it was targeting. At least one of its assets betrayed signs of unidiomatic language use in its "About" section describing the page, but the posts were overwhelmingly written in idiomatic French, including appropriate regional variations. This aligns with Facebook's statement that the operation "relied on local nationals."

The bio of the page *Centrfrik-Infos* showed signs of unidiomatic use. Its stated aim was "to inform compatriots about the country's news and also to debate, in other words to offer ideas" (*Ce page a pour but d'informer les compatriots sur informations du pays et aussi a debattre ,autrement dit proposer les idées...*). This showed a blend of grammatical, syntactical and gender mistakes: "ce page" instead of "cette page," "compatriots" instead of "compatriotes," "sur informations" instead of "sur les informations," etc.

This was an exception. Generally, the operation's posts were written in fluent and idiomatic language. Some of the assets in the takedown set were associated with real individuals from CAR; these pages are not included in this report. Recent IRA-linked operations, including one in [Ghana](#), have made substantial use of unwitting locals to generate their content and administer the pages; the CAR-focused operation followed that trend.

Links to Prigozhin

The set that Facebook identified showed multiple, interlocking connections with Prigozhin's wide-ranging activities. This applied to assets from both South Africa and CAR, which intersected with different parts of the Prigozhin troll network. Graphika identified both parts of the network from open-source clues before receiving the full sets from Facebook.

In the **Central African Republic**, the initial lead came from a fake far-right news outlet connected with the Internet Research Agency called NAEBBC, which Graphika [documented](#) in October. The fake outlet focused on the United States, but according to EXIF data, the [banner](#) that it used on its website was called "Centrfrik-Infos." That name led to one of the Prigozhin assets in CAR, the page Centrfrik-Infos.

Basic Image Information

Target image: https://naebc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ava_fbgab_400x400.jpg

Title:	Centrfrik-infos
Date:	July 31, 2020 5:51:38PM (timezone is 3 hours ahead of GMT) (2 months, 19 days, 21 hours, 41 minutes, 16 seconds ago)
File:	1,668 x 1,667 JPEG (2.8 megapixels) 1,258,313 bytes (1.2 megabytes)
Color Encoding:	Embedded color profile: "sRGB"
Apply other tools to this image via imgOps.com	



EXIF information for the [NAEBC logo](https://naebc.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ava_fbgab_400x400.jpg), extracted using the website <http://exif.regex.info/exif.cgi>.

The page was associated with an email address that led to a number of other assets in the takedown set, notably the pages *Les oiseaux de centrafrik* ("the birds of CAR"), *Info News RCA* and *Nouvelles plus*, and the personas Lara Fereiera, Carla Santa, and Gracilia Isis.

In **South Africa**, an open-source point of entry stemmed from Facebook’s takedown of Prigozhin networks in October 2019. This identified a Prigozhin page called AFRIC, which was focused on development issues in Southern Africa. AFRIC, in turn, promoted a “news” site based in South Africa called SADC News (the name referenced the Southern African Development Community, but had no connection with it).



Screenshot from the Facebook takedown announcement, October 2019.

The SADC News website had its own Facebook page. In January 2019, this page [advertised](#) a poll launched by AFRIC, indicating that their promotion went in both directions. Later in 2019, SADCNews [praised](#) AFRIC’s election observers, putting them on a par with officials from the AU and EU. Facebook identified the SADC News page as part of the Prigozhin network.



Link shared by SADCNews of AFRIC poll.

The SADC News website was created on November 1, 2018, at 21:33:55 Zulu. Of note, this is just four seconds after the creation of another site linked to an asset included in the takedown, [livereport.co\[.\]za](#).

```
Domain Name: SADCNEWS.ORG
Registry Domain ID: D402200000008187679-LROR
Registrar WHOIS Server: whois.domains.co.za
Registrar URL: http://www.domains.co.za
Updated Date: 2018-11-01T21:33:58Z
Creation Date: 2018-11-01T21:33:55Z
```

```
Domain Name: livereport.co.za
Registry Domain ID: DOM_3AIJ2-CO.ZA
Registrar WHOIS Server: whois.domains.co.za
Registrar URL: https://www.domains.co.za
Updated Date: 2018-11-21T13:49:13Z
Creation Date: 2018-11-01T21:33:51Z
```

Whois entries for [sadcnews\[.\]org](#) and [livereport.co\[.\]za](#)

As a further point of crossover, in January, the SADC website featured the name of a person who had been identified as working with the AFRIC organization. The name was deleted from the website soon after, but it then appeared in connection with the activity in the Central African Republic, and was attached to a Facebook account that was taken down in the set.

Content clues suggest further connections. One [article](#) that LiveReport published on January 8, 2020, claimed the Ukrainian flight shot down over Tehran that week could have been downed by a U.S. drone. The only source it gave for this claim was an unnamed “source from the Iranian military.” The LiveReport article was cited the same day, and repeated in the following days, by a number of Russian-language websites tied to Prigozhin: [riafan.ru](#) (which expanded the sole source into a headline that “Iranians” are convinced the U.S. was to blame), [rueconomics.ru](#), [nation-news.ru](#) and [polit.info](#).

Other articles on the SADC News website defended Russia and Prigozhin’s business interests. These were often written in unidiomatic English and attributed to authors who only went by their first name and displayed no profile picture or other biographical information, an atypical setup for bylines. For example, on April 9, 2019, a persona called “Emmanuel” published an [article](#) headlined, “Is BBC to trust?” (Note the unidiomatic phrasing.) The article attempted to discredit a [BBC report](#) on Russian interference in Madagascar’s election. A persona called “Alice” on November 1, 2019, [cited](#) a number of tweets to discredit the claim that five Wagner mercenaries had been killed in Mozambique. The deaths were confirmed by the [Moscow Times](#), citing Mozambique Army sources. Some time between February and November 2020, the website deleted all its author personas for unknown reasons.

Individually, each of these open-source indicators could be coincidental, but collectively they have provided entry points for researchers around the world to investigate and unravel the different activities linked to the Prigozhin network, and on which Facebook’s latest takedown provides additional context.

Theme: Elections

Many of the CAR-focused assets shared content praising CAR’s incumbent President Faustin-Archange Touadéra. Touadéra was elected in the 2016 presidential elections, where he won in a second round against former CAR Prime Minister Anicet Georges Dologuélé. The Russian operation typically created pro-Touadéra content on its pages, and then used its accounts to share those posts into unaffiliated groups.



Left, poll by one Russian operation account amplified by another. Right, post by an operation account portraying Touadéra as forging the country after chaos and corruption.

CAR will hold parliamentary and the first round of presidential elections on December 27, 2020 (a second presidential round is scheduled for February 14 if no candidate wins an absolute majority). The Russian operation's assets often commented on the election, usually from a pro-Touadéra point of view. This was a notable difference from the French operation, which made no systematic reference to local politics or partisan matters.



Pro-Touadéra posts by Russian assets that mentioned the election directly.

Other posts attacked one of Touadéra’s rivals, former rebel-turned-president Francois Bozizé. These posts portrayed him as a “monster,” a “bandit,” and a puppet of France, the former colonial power in CAR. On December 3, Bozizé was [barred](#) from standing in the election.



Anti-Bozizé posts by the operation. The right-hand one is a pun on his name and the French “bisou,” a kiss.

One outlier in the network was a page that supported Touadéra’s challenger Dologuélé. This consisted almost exclusively of pro-Dologuélé posts, but it also mentioned visits that he made to France. The purpose of this page is unclear.

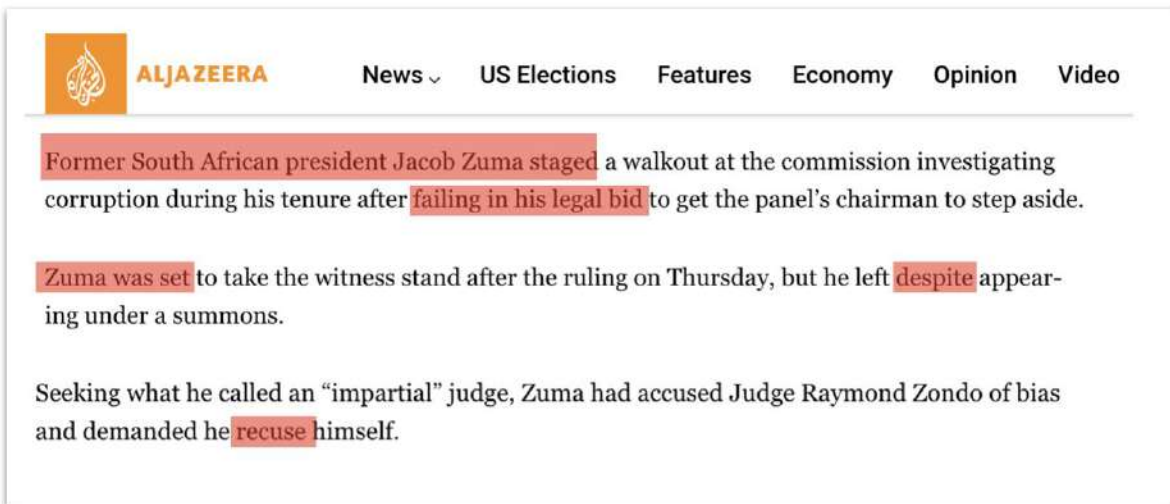
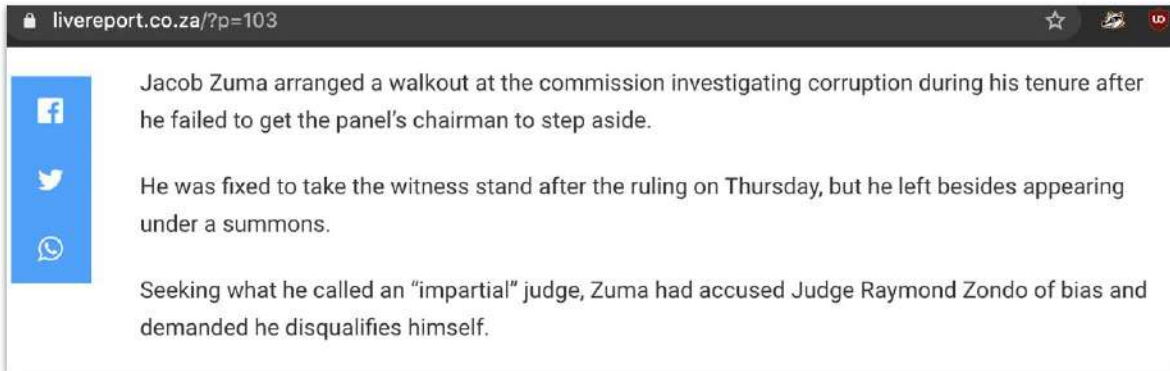


Post describing a visit by Dologuélé to France, October 2020.

The Russian assets focused on South Africa were less concerned about domestic politics. They posted broadly about news and events across Southern Africa, often copying their content from authentic sources, perhaps in an attempt to build an audience for these pages.



Selection of themes from the Twitter feed of SADC, showing the wide regional interest. Many of the articles were copied from other sources.



Comparison of an [article](#) posted by LiveReport on November 26 (top) with an [article](#) by Al Jazeera on November 19 (bottom). Words in the Al Jazeera version that did not appear in the LiveReport version are highlighted. The light editing suggests an attempt to avoid detection when copying articles wholesale.

Theme: Russia

In between its local posts, the Russian operation posted extensively about Russia. Unsurprisingly, given its origin, the tone was routinely positive and portrayed Russia as the friend, ally and savior of CAR against other foreign powers. The children’s cartoon described above was only the most egregious of its productions.

Centrifrik-Infos
Yesterday at 3:49 AM · 🌐

RCA-DIPLOMATIE : LA RÉPUBLIQUE CENTRAFRICAINE ET LA RÉPUBLIQUE FÉDÉRALE DE RUSSIE FÊTENT LE 60ÈME ANNIVERSAIRE DE LEUR ANNIVERSAIRE

Bangui le 10 décembre 2020

A peine rentré de Bozoum, chef lieu de la préfecture de l'Ouham pénéché, le Président TOUADERA a honoré par sa présence, la célébration dans la sobriété du 60ème anniversaire de l'établissement des relations diplomatique entre la Fédération de la Russie et la RCA..... [See More](#)

Younga Sango Net
Yesterday at 5:42 AM · 🌐

LA RUSSIE ET LA RCA FÊTENT LE 60ème ANNIVERSAIRE DE L'ETABLISSEMENT DE LEUR RELATION DIPLOMATIQUE

A peine rentré de Bozoum, chef lieu de la préfecture de l'Ouham pénéché, le Président TOUADERA a honoré par sa présence, la célébration dans la sobriété du 60ème anniversaire de l'établissement des relations diplomatique entre la Fédération de la Russie et la RCA.

Dans son discours de circonstance, l'Ambassadeur de la Russie en RCA Vladimir TITORENKO a réitéré l'engagement de so... [See More](#)

Posts by two CAR assets on the anniversary of diplomatic relations with Russia. Right, "Russia and RCA celebrate the 60th anniversary of their diplomatic relationship." The left post is less precise and simply says "RCA Diplomacy: RCA and the Russian Federal Republic celebrate the 60th anniversary of their anniversary."

Younga Sango Net
April 2 · 🌐

C'est merveilleux qu'il y a des gens qui sont prêts à soutenir les autres gratuitement, même des gens qu'ils ne connaissent pas, dans un autre pays. On a besoin de plus d'histoires comme celle-ci :

Il y a une fille qui habite à Berengo et qui m'a raconté comment un des militaires russes l'aidait gratuitement avec les tâches ménagères. Alors il aide sa famille, mais en fait il a demandé de ne pas en parler à personne, et je ne peux donc pas dire son nom. Il leur aide à acheter des produits pour toute la famille et autres choses dont ils ont besoin. Et il ne demande absolument rien en retour.

C'est vraiment très touchant, surtout dans le temps difficile où l'on vit aujourd'hui.

👍❤️ 44 2 Comments 3 Shares

Post by a Russian CAR-focused asset describing a Russian soldier who helped a local woman with her housework, shopping and family. The post explains that the Russian soldier "in fact asked them to not tell anybody, so [poster] can't say his name." It concludes that the story is "truly moving, especially in the hard times we're living through."

Carla Santa shared a post. October 12

Centrifrik-infos
October 12

RCA-SÉCURITÉ ET DIPLOMATIE : LA RÉPUBLIQUE CENTRAFRICAINE SE FAIT LA VIOLENCE POUR RETROUVER SA DIGNITÉ

Bangui le 12 Octobre 2020

La République Centrafricaine n'a cessé d'être victime des crises politico-militaire à répétition des suites d'une mauvaise politique et d'une gestion calamiteuse de la chose publique. Pour faire face à ce grand problème, Faustin Archange TOUADERA jette son dé partout pour renforcer les liens bilatéraux.

L'on compte trois ans durant que Faustin Archange TOUADERA a honoré de sa présence à l'anniversaire du Président Russe Vladimir POUTINE où il a parlé de son pays dans le souci d'avoir un appui conséquent de POUTINE. Ce dernier n'avait pas hésité de répondre favorable à l'appel du Président Centrafricain en lui fournissant une aide militaire à travers la formation et la dotation des FACA, une aide sur le plan socio-économique.

shared a post. October 24

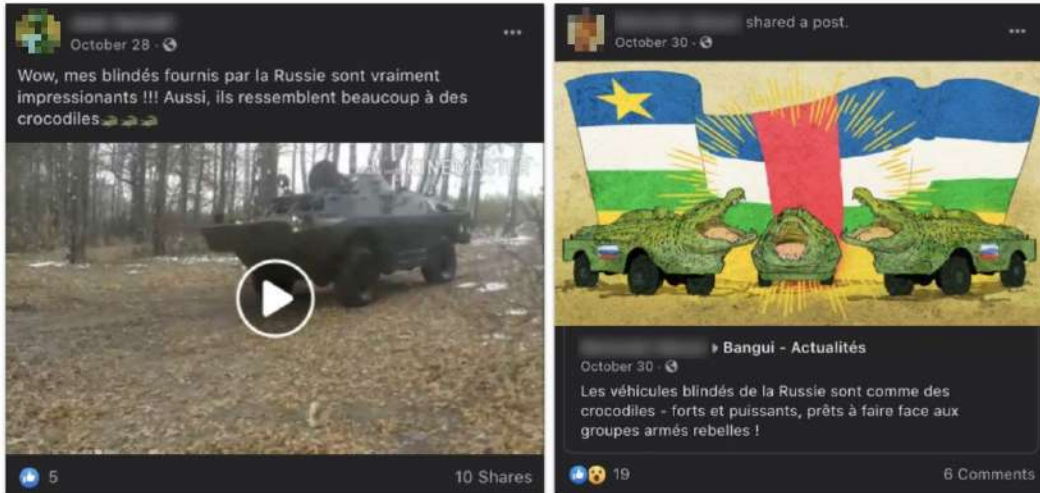
Younga Sango Net
October 24

TRANSFERT OFFICIEL DES BLINDÉS RUSSES

Ce matin, à l'aéroport de Bangui M'Poko, il y a eu un transfert officiel de véhicules blindés russes à l'armée de la République centrafricaine. Le président de la RÉPUBLIQUE centrafricaine FAUSTIN-ARCHANGE TOUADERA, la ministre de la Défense MARIE-NOËLLE KOYARA, l'ambassadeur russe Vladimir TITORENKO et d'autres autorités responsables ont participé à la cérémonie. À la suite de la cérémonie, l'armée de la RCA a reçu 10 nouveaux véhicules blindés amphibies. Il faut rappeler que c'est déjà la deuxième fois au mois d'octobre que la RCA reçoit un don pour l'armée centrafricaine de la part de la Russie.

23 1 Share

Left, post praising Russia's contribution to stability in CAR (with several un-idiomatic and grammatically incorrect French sentences). Right, post on a delivery of Russian military vehicles. French assets also commented in this story, insisting that one of the vehicles broke down soon after delivery.



Two posts from the Russian assets on the Russian delivery of armored vehicles, comparing them with crocodiles (“they are strong and powerful, ready to face armed rebel groups!”). Note the little Russian flags on the side of the crocodile-vehicles on the right post, and the crocodile emojis on the left one.

Theme: France

By contrast, and in keeping with the troll engagements described above, the Russian network was routinely hostile to the French and United Nations presence in Africa. Posts from the operation portrayed French troops as rapists and thugs, and described France as plotting against CAR internationally.



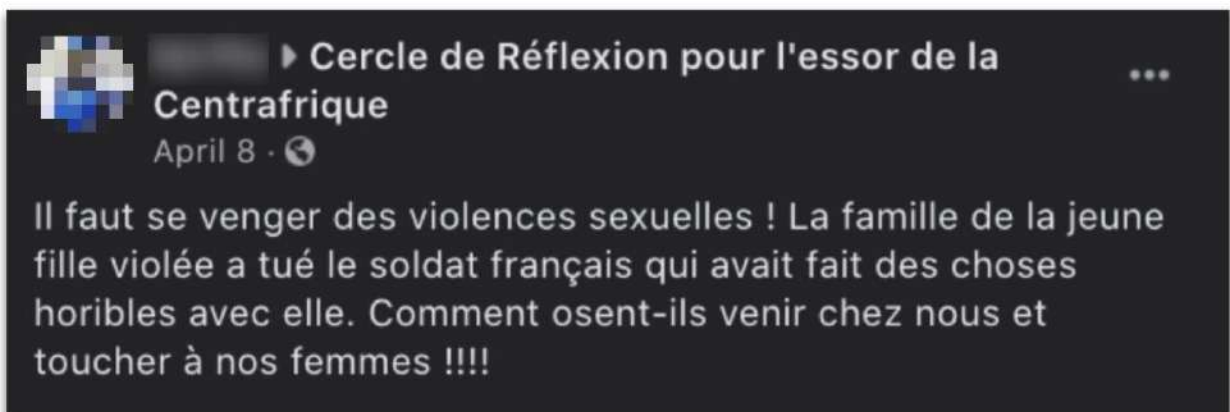
Examples of anti-French articles. From left to right: French soldiers are accused of drugging and raping girls, France is openly plotting at the UN against CAR, France is manipulating the UN Security Council to make CAR a “living hell.”



Russian troll posts portraying French President Emmanuel Macron with a banner saying “no to fake news” and a red button saying “publish some fake news.”

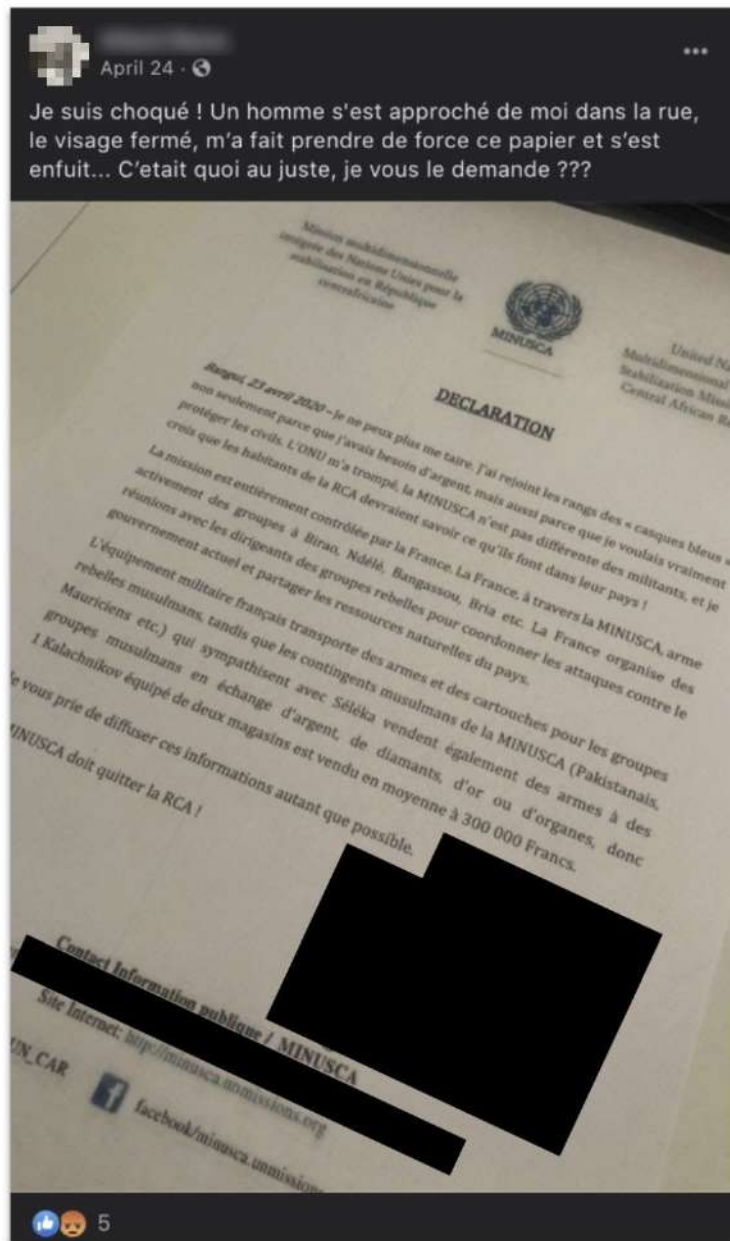
The Russian-attributed and South Africa-centric website LiveNews, which largely copied its content from other sources, did post the occasional original article. Many of these were strongly partisan and anti-French, or sometimes anti-American. For example, one article [accused](#) France of “seeking profit for itself while fueling military instability” in CAR. A second was [headlined](#), “Hypocrisy of France regarding retreat of its troops from Sahel region,” which speaks for itself. A third [described](#) a U.S. diplomatic visit as “an attempt to verify whether the hidden interests of the United States are being achieved through the United Nations peace mission.”

Still other assets accused France of plotting a coup in CAR or of stealing natural resources. One post even called for violence against French troops.



“How dare they come here and touch our women!!!!” Post by Russian asset Ed Pin calling for vengeance against French soldiers who allegedly raped local women.

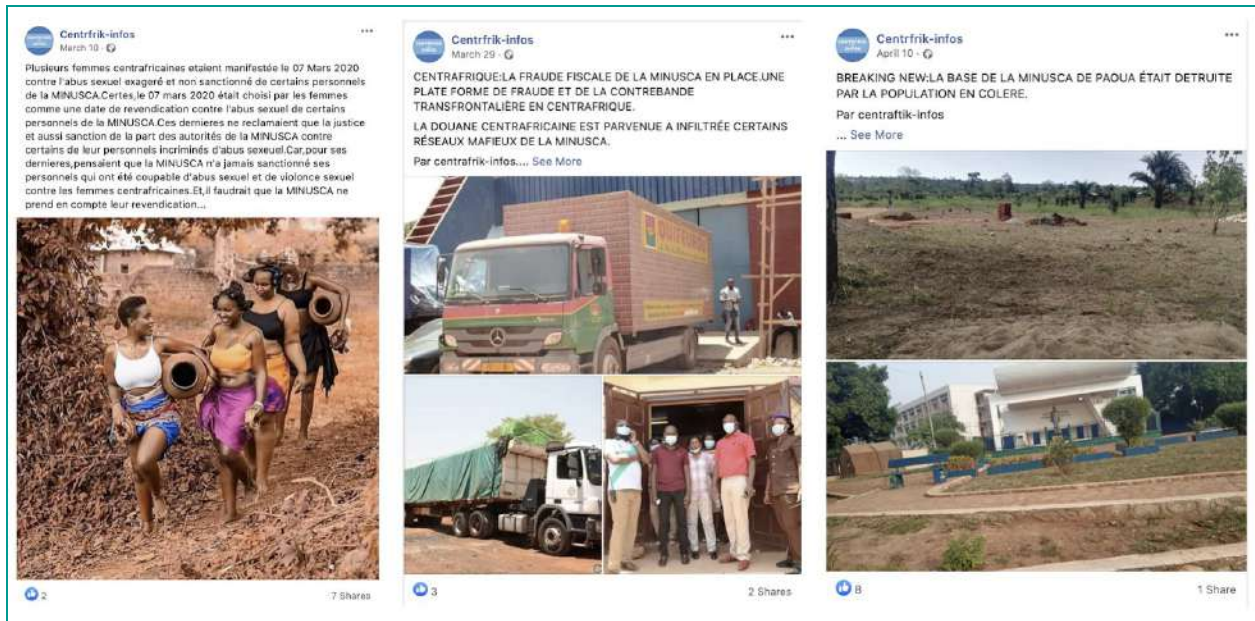
A particularly striking post in April 2020 featured a photo of a printed statement on the letter paper of the UN mission in CAR (MINUSCA). This claimed that the UN mission was “entirely controlled by France,” and that France was using the mission as a cover to fund armed militias and sell them weapons “in exchange for money, diamonds, gold or organs.” Our teams were not able to find other sites where the same image was posted, suggesting that it may have been a forgery planted by the operation itself.



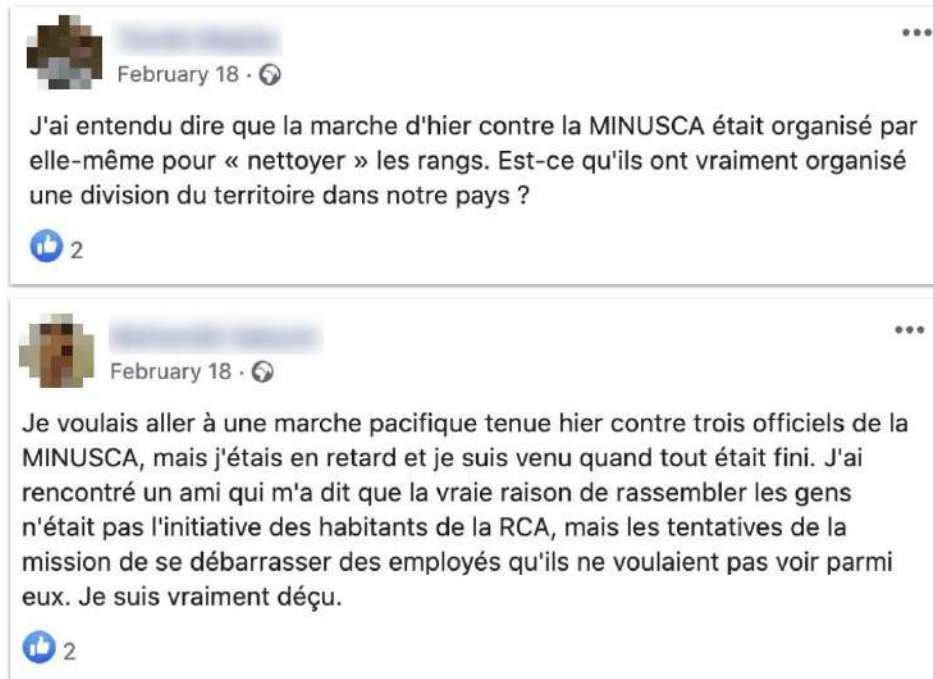
The letter accusing France of financing Islamist groups in CAR. We have covered the name, signature and contact details of the alleged signatory.

Theme: The UN Mission in CAR

More broadly, the Russian operation was routinely hostile to Western powers and the United Nations, especially the UN mission in CAR known as MINUSCA. As with their treatment of France, the Russian assets accused MINUSCA and other foreign actors of a range of crimes, including rape, theft, and pillaging natural resources.



Examples of articles shared by the Centrifrik-Infos page criticizing the UN Mission in CAR, MINUSCA, accusing its troops of raping Central-African women, of being tied to tax fraud and embezzlement schemes or of being hated by the local population.

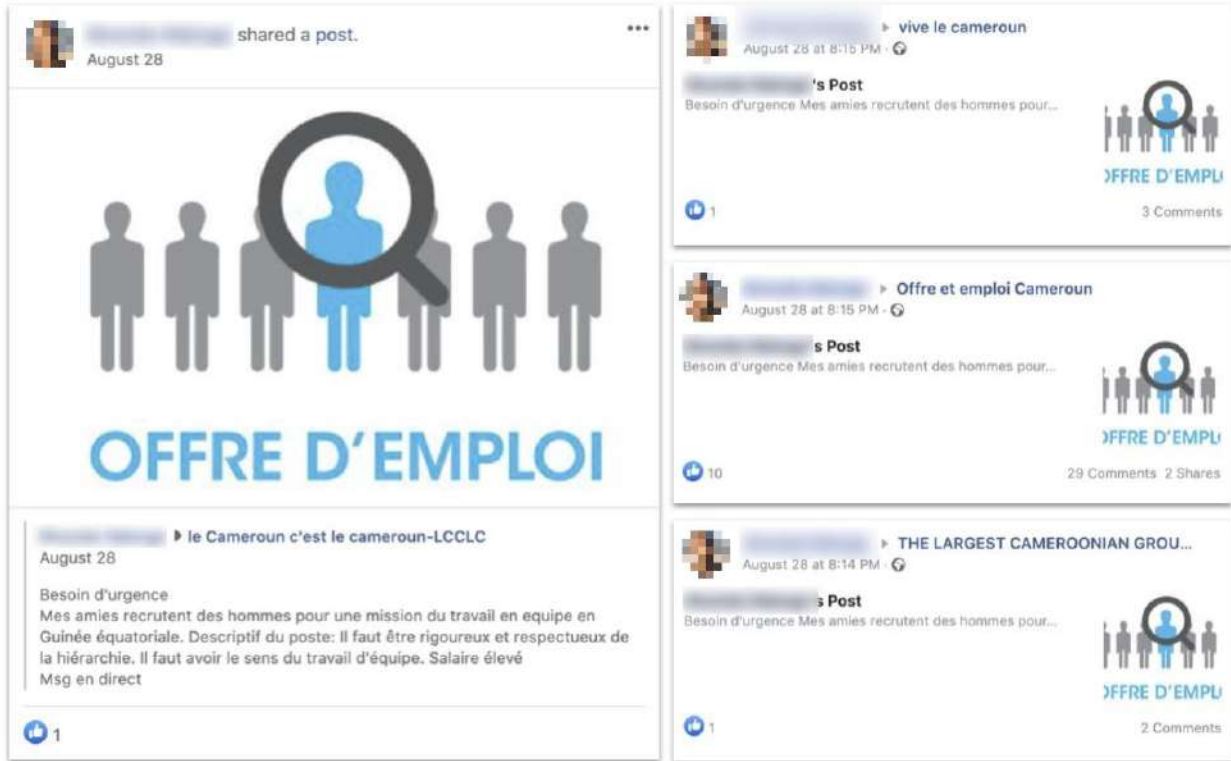


Two posts by the Russian operation accusing MINUSMA of organizing demonstrations against itself to “clean out” its opponents and “get rid” of unwanted staff.

An article by the operation’s South Africa-based asset LiveNews on the “[uselessness](#)” of UN peacekeepers in the Central Africa Republic praised Russia’s role in Africa: “In the case of the CAR, it is Russia that has been helping train the FACA soldiers that have played an important role.”

Theme: Equatorial Guinea

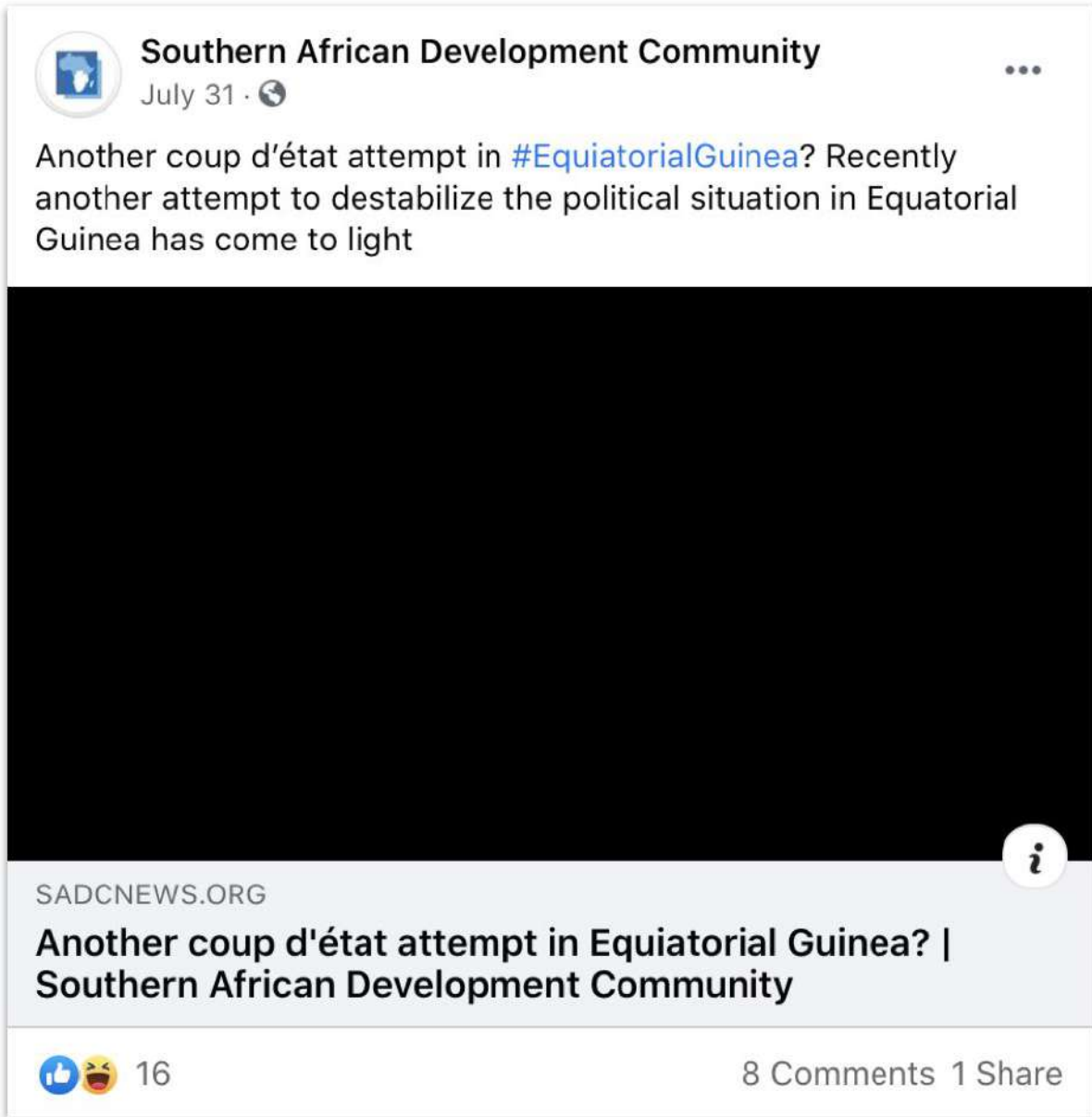
A final theme of concern to the operation emerged from the group of accounts that posed as coming from Cameroon. Unusually, the primary activity of these accounts was to spread content about Equatorial Guinea. From July-August 2020, several assets in the Cameroon-facing cluster, and the South Africa-based SADC News, posted about allegations of a forthcoming coup in Equatorial Guinea. At least one Russian asset posted job advertisements to recruit people on a “mission” in Equatorial Guinea.



"Urgent ask: My friends are recruiting men for a team work mission in Equatorial Guinea. Job description: rigorous and respectful of hierarchy, strong feel for teamwork. High compensation, DM me."



Equatorial Guinea-focused content shared by Cameroonian assets talking about a supposed coup plotted by the military.



Post by the South Africa-based SADC News on Facebook, linked to its own website, alleging the possibility of a coup in Equatorial Guinea.

The French Operation

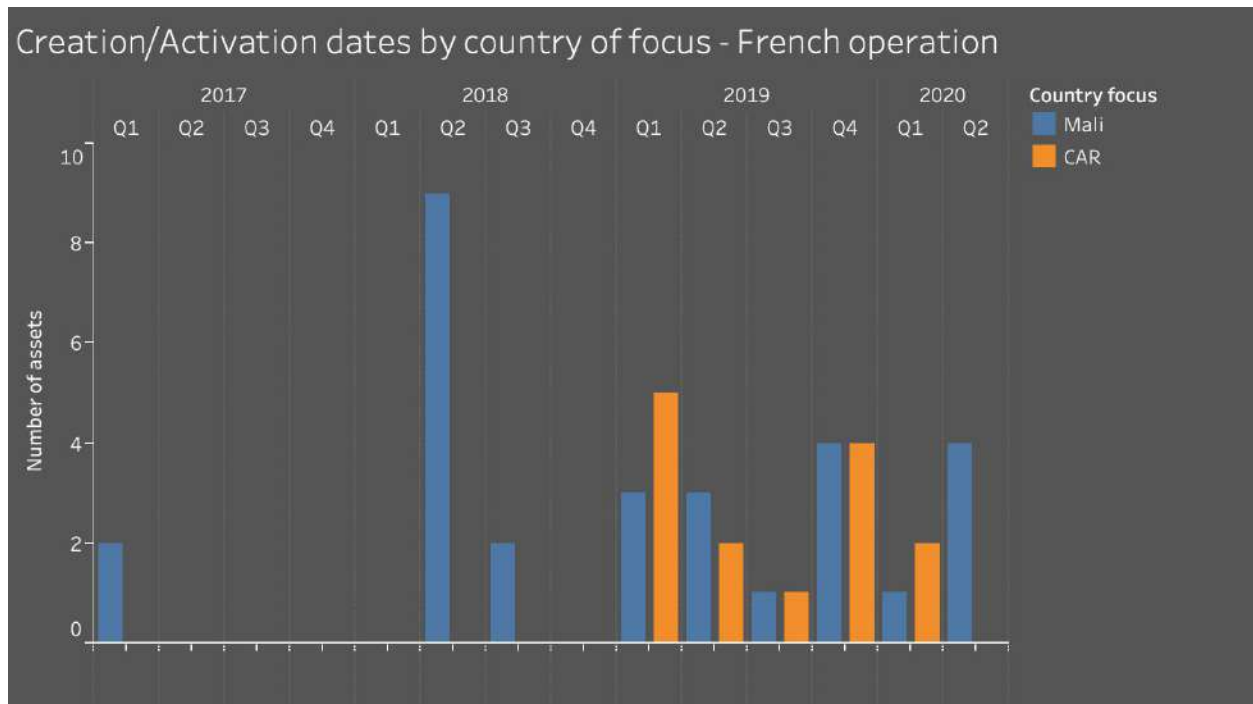
As it announced the takedown of the French operation, Facebook said, “The people behind this activity used fake accounts — some of which had already been detected and disabled by our automated systems — to pose as locals in the countries they targeted, post and comment on content, and manage Pages and Groups ... Some of these accounts also commented on the content that criticized France posted by one of the Russian operations.

“Although the people behind it attempted to conceal their identities and coordination, our investigation found links to individuals associated with French military.”

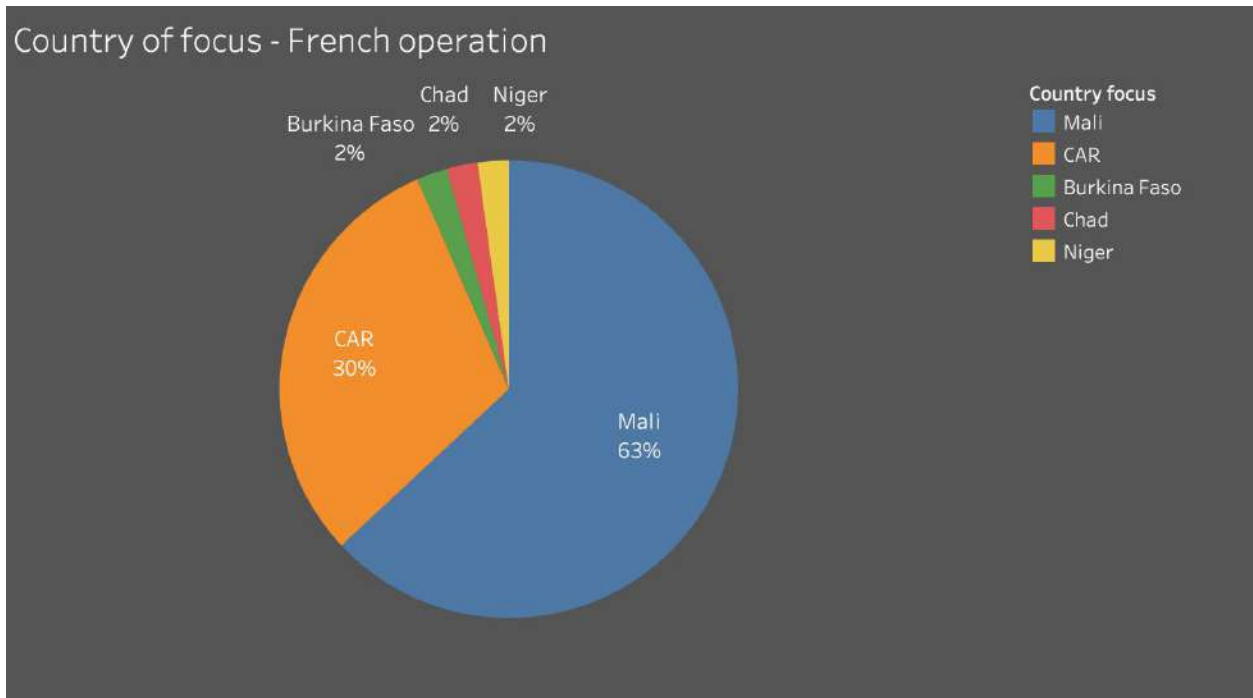
Size, Focus and Following

The French operation consisted of 84 Facebook accounts, 6 Pages, 9 Groups, and 14 accounts on Instagram. In addition, we identified at least two YouTube channels and at least 20 Twitter accounts that appeared to be associated with the same operation.

The operation broke down into two main groups. The earlier and larger, which appears to have started in May 2018, focused on the security situation in Mali, where French and UN forces have been deployed since 2013. The latter, which seems to have begun in January 2019 and accelerated in November 2019, focused on the Central African Republic and, in particular, the presence of Russian businesses and mercenaries linked to Prigozhin. A handful of assets focused on Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad; these typically posted about news and security incidents in their respective countries.

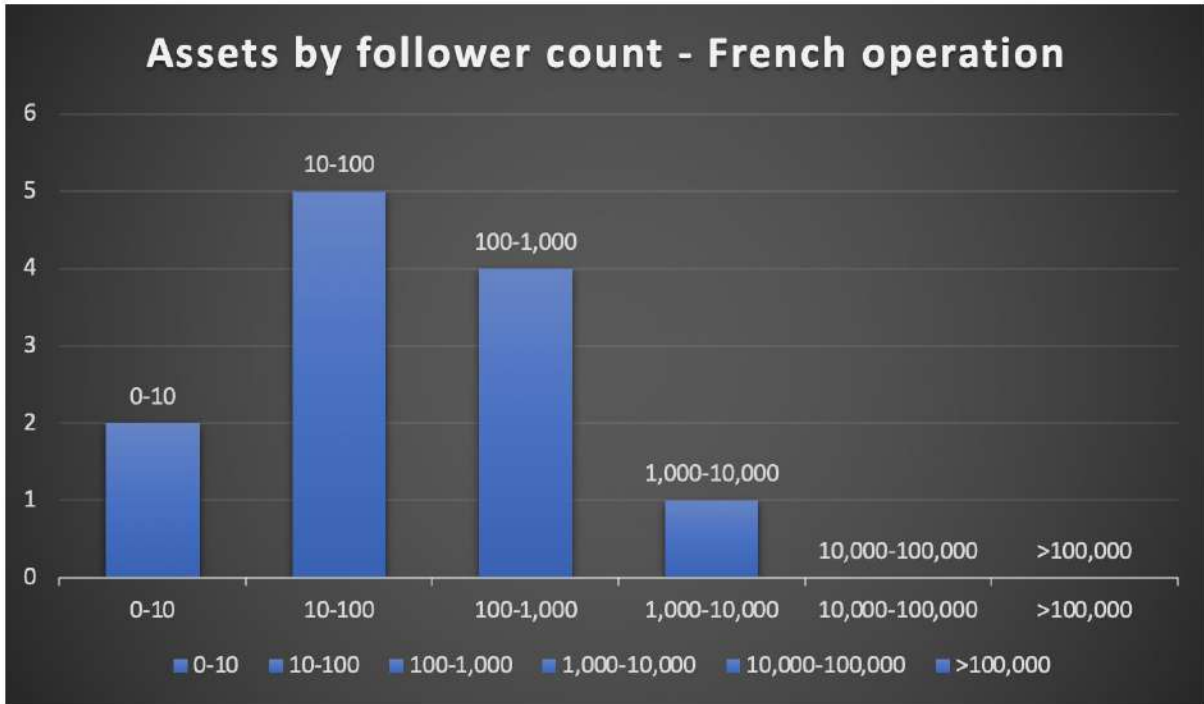


Dates of creation (pages and groups) or the date of the first profile picture (for accounts) of Facebook assets in the takedown set. Note how the CAR-focused assets only began in January 2019.



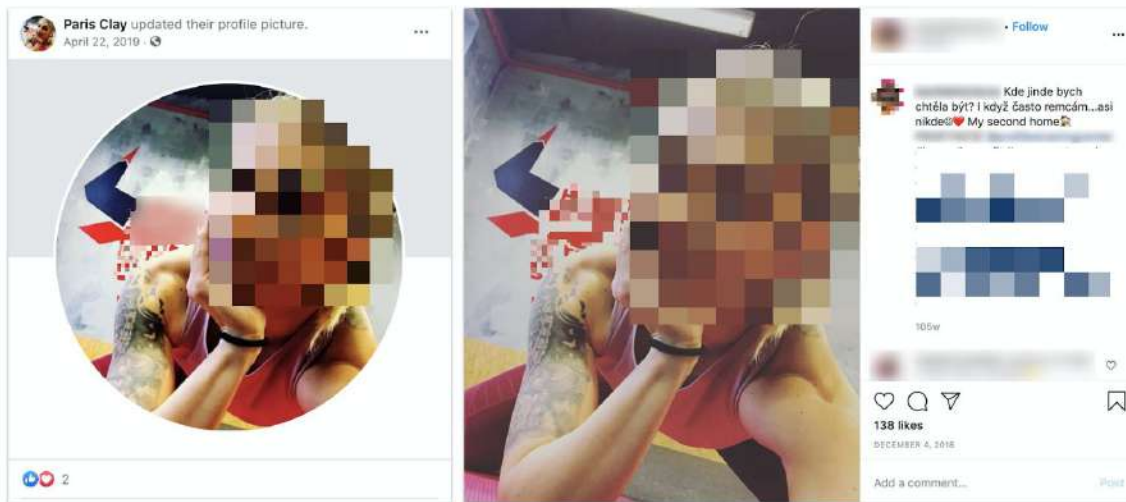
Breakdown of Facebook assets (pages, groups and accounts) by the primary country they focused on, when this was clear. Some other assets took a regional approach.

The assets tended to operate in clusters. Accounts liked or replied to each other's posts, and posted each other's content into various groups, some controlled by the operation, others apparently independent, and some controlled by the rival Russian operation. This gave them steady, if undramatic, engagement figures -- typically under 20 likes or shares and under half a dozen comments -- but left them largely confined to their own echo chamber. Other than assets controlled by the French and Russian operations, few users appear to have engaged with the operation's assets. Only one page, focused on Mali, had a significant following, at a still-modest 4,759; none of the others had over 150 followers. The group with the most members, also focused on Mali, had 490 members when it was detected and taken down by Facebook.

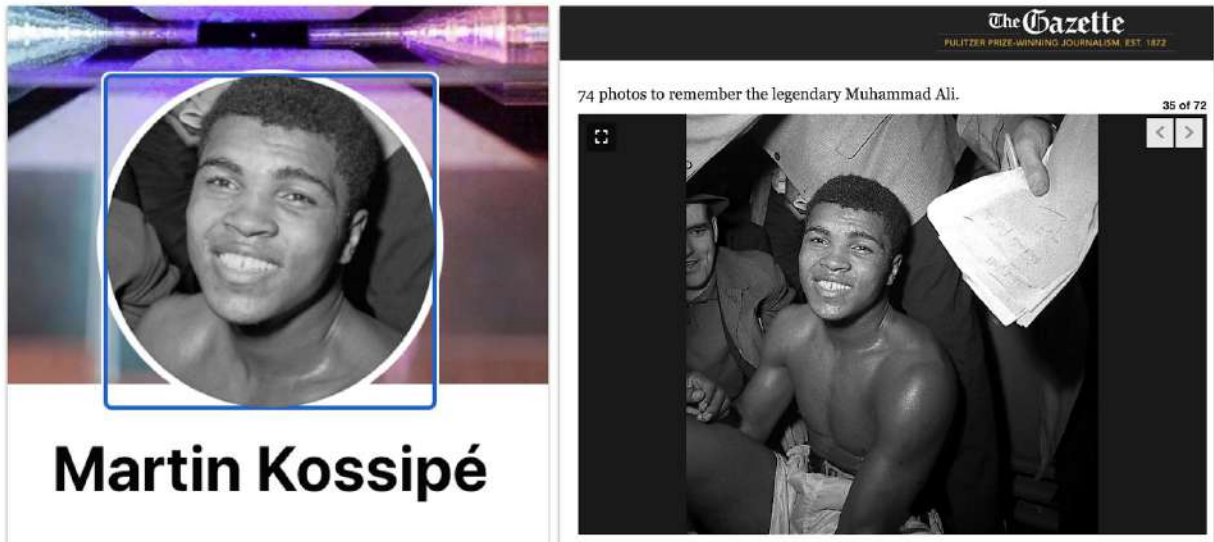


Pages and groups on Facebook sorted by their number of followers or members. No assets had over 10,000 followers; we include the columns here for comparison with the Russian set below.

Accounts in this set bore clear indicators of inauthenticity. One, for example, used boxer Muhammad Ali as its profile picture; another used a stock photo copied from Alamy Images. A third persona that was active both on Facebook and on Instagram took a series of photos from a Czech fitness coach on Instagram.



Left, Facebook page "Paris Clay," part of the operation, uploaded April 2019. Right, the Instagram profile from which the pictures were stolen. These pictures were uploaded by the original user in December 2018.



Examples of stolen and stock pictures used by the French assets.

Two accounts appear to have had profile pictures created by the artificial intelligence model known as Generative Adversarial Networks, or GAN, a tactic that has become almost ubiquitous among influence operations since we first exposed its use in a large-scale [operation](#) in December 2019. While this technology is fast-progressing in its ability to create believable imagery, to date such images often can be identified by a combination of indicators that include unnatural light outlinings of facial features, the texture of hair and clothing, distorted and irregular backgrounds, and the alignment of the eyes.



The profile pictures rendered opaque and superimposed on five synthetic faces generated by StyleGAN2 from the website [thispersondoesnotexist\[.\]com](http://thispersondoesnotexist.com). Note the alignment of the eyes and, in the case of the smaller one (which we suspect to have been cropped) of the shoulders and collar.

Amplification: Network in Action

While the Mali and CAR assets focused on different regions and issues, they typically used the same methods to gain visibility for their posts: they continuously reposted them (at times, up to 31 times) in various local groups that often had thousands of members. On some occasions, these posts were then boosted by secondary inauthentic accounts whose main purpose seemed to amplify even more the network's content.



One operation asset focused on Mali sharing the same post repeatedly to different, unrelated pages and groups. This behavior was typical of the entire network.

Within each regional focus group, different assets -- both pages and accounts -- regularly shared the same content. In Mali, this tended to focus on the struggle between Malian, French and UN forces and the Malian people, on one side, and terrorist groups on the other (the targeting is described in more detail below). Much of the content consisted of memes and cartoons either mocking the terrorists or praising the forces opposing them.



The same Mali-focused cartoon from an operation Facebook page, left, and Twitter account, right. The post mocks Al-Furqan, and its caption translates to “The IQ of a terrorist is lower than that of the most stupid of animals. I think it’s insulting for animals to be compared to them!”

This mutual amplification was carried out across multiple groups and multiple platforms. For example, the CAR-focused and “Russian counter-messaging” persona Bangui Square maintained a [YouTube channel](#), at least one [Twitter account](#), and a Facebook page, all of which shared the same simple videos.



Bangui Square assets on YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, all sharing the same video.

Often, other accounts in the network would then pick up on the original posts from Bangui Square and post them to a range of CAR-focused groups, disseminating them to new potential audiences.

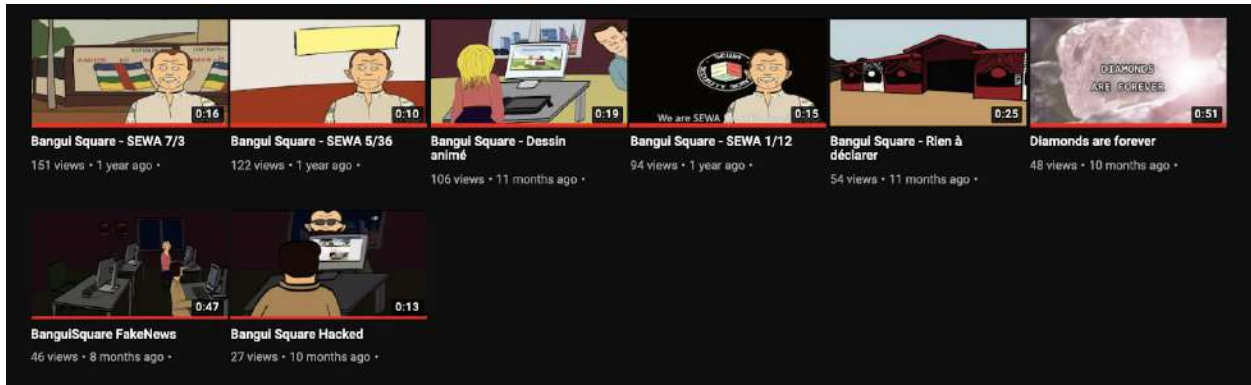


37 Shares



Shares of an anti-Russian video by asset Bangui Square on YouTube, posted by French assets on Facebook. All these pages have been identified by Facebook as being inauthentic users centrally operated by the French operation.

As noted above, this allowed the operation to spread its content to different groups and to give it the appearance of popularity, if not outright virality. However, there is little indication that the tactic paid off in terms of heightened engagement. At the time of the takedown, only one of the Bangui Square YouTube videos had more than 150 views (in fact, 151), and most had under 100. This suggests that fake engagement is not enough to convince authentic users to also engage, if the quality of the content itself is not enough to attract them.



The video list for Bangui Square, in descending order of popularity; note the viewing figures.

Theme: Russia in Africa

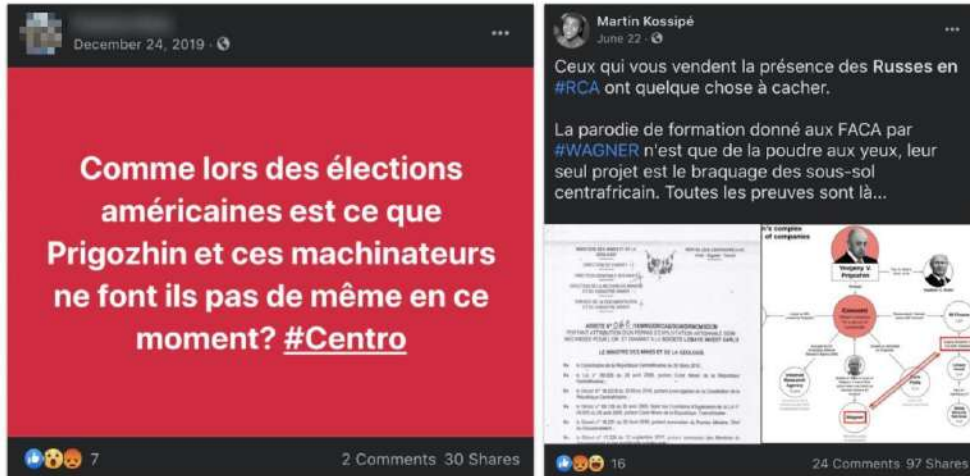
As noted above, in mid-2019, the network expanded its remit and began posting about CAR, including posts on Russia’s engagement and, in particular, the presence of entities and businesses associated with Prigozhin.

It is worth acknowledging that the French “Russian counter-narrative” campaign exposed by Facebook and detailed in this report is a departure from the French Government’s stated principles on how democracies must tackle “Information Manipulation.” In a landmark report co-authored by the French Center for analysis, prevision and strategy of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs (“CAPS”) and the Institute for Strategic Research of the Ministry for the Armed Forces (“IRSEM”) entitled “Information Manipulation: A Challenge for Our Democracies” and published on September 4th 2018 and hosted on the French Foreign Ministry [website](#), the authors explicitly recommend that Governments “avoid heavy handedness” in tackling adversarial informations, stating: “Civil society (journalists, the media, online platforms, NGOs, etc.) must remain the first shield against information manipulation in liberal, democratic societies. The most important recommendation for governments is that they should make sure they retain as light a footprint as possible—not just in keeping with our values, but also out of a concern for effectiveness.” The report even acknowledges that “clandestine operations, aiming for instance at manipulating the manipulators, are risky because, if exposed (and it is becoming increasingly difficult to prevent this in the long run), they can jeopardize the very credibility of the source and invigorate conspiratorial actors—which would end up strengthening the very actors one aimed at undermining.”



Anti-Russian posts amplified by asset Marius Ndebe in July 2019. Left, sharing an article that accuses Russia and China of exploiting diamonds. Right, meme linking the presence of Wagner mercenaries and Russian mining companies.

This anti-Prigozhin aspect of the operation moved up a gear in November 2019, after Facebook took down a network of Prigozhin-linked fake accounts on [October 30, 2019](#). Four new assets were created in the weeks after the takedown, and the operation stepped up its attacks on Prigozhin's presence, including by calling him out by name.



Posts directly attacking Prigozhin shared by French assets. Both were substantially re-shared among local groups by the network. The first one retrieved by Graphika dates back to December 24, 2019, after Facebook took down the Prigozhin-affiliated fake network.

While the theme and focus were different, this aspect of the operation used many of the same techniques as the Mali-centric aspect. It, too, used primitive cartoons and memes, and caricatured its targets: the operation portrayed Russians as drunken, violent neo-colonialists bent on looting Africa of its mineral wealth, and on spreading fake news. The portrayal drew on crude national stereotypes including a regular use of the Soviet hammer and sickle motif, the Russian fur hat (often with a red Soviet star), and bottles of vodka. French assets even engaged in homophobic commentary (see below) in their pursuit of “counter-narratives” to the Russian influence in CAR.

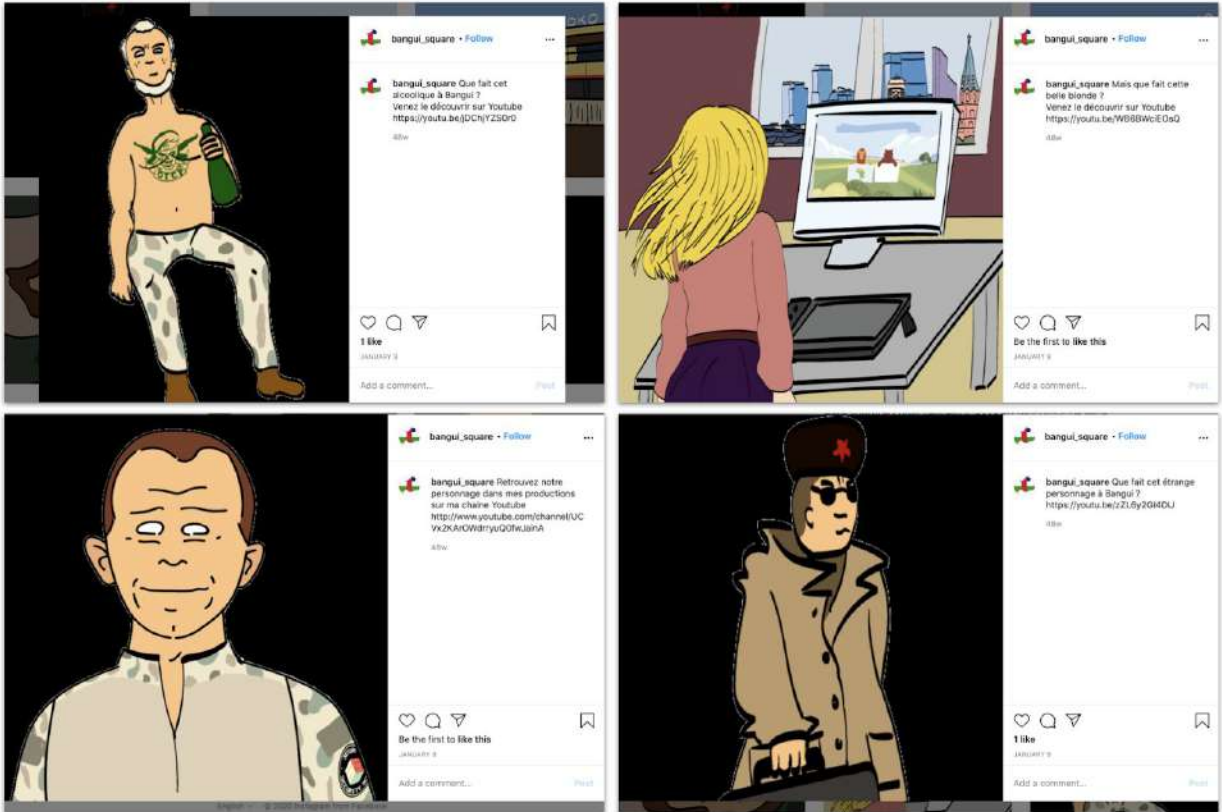
Marius Ndebe
November 28 at 6:53 AM · 🌐

Quand je vois ça je me pose sérieusement des questions. Cette photo parle d'elle-même. La Russie est une puissance que je ne comprends pas. Elle a des valeurs bien particulières qu'il n'est pas bon de suivre du tout. Ce pays est une honte mes frères. Ne laissons pas la Russie envahir notre pays. Des cas en rapport à ces situations ont été rapportés. Ce n'est pas du tout comme ça que je vois l'avenir. Je tiens à garder ma fierté telle qu'elle est et ne pas leur ressembler. Et vous mes frères qu'en pensez-vous ?

**Est-ce
l'avenir que
tu souhaites,
fier frère?**

😂 1 3 Comments 18 Shares

"Is that the future you want, my proud brother?" Meme from the operation portraying Russians as obese, drunken, and gay.



The drunk, the dumb blonde, the mercenary, and the spy: four stereotypes of Russians from the Bangui Square persona.



A video by Bangui Square, showing a SEWA Security Services mercenary beating up a local while the manager says, “We are SEWA Security Services. Are we here to help the people of CAR?” SEWA was exposed for being associated with Prigozhin and Wagner in [September 2019](#).

The assets therefore disseminated content depicting Russians as violent mercenaries molesting locals and lying about the real reasons of their presence. One narrative disseminated by one fake French online account in Central African groups, for instance, accused Russians of arming Central African rebel militias, while other assets claimed that they committed crimes and sexually abused local women.

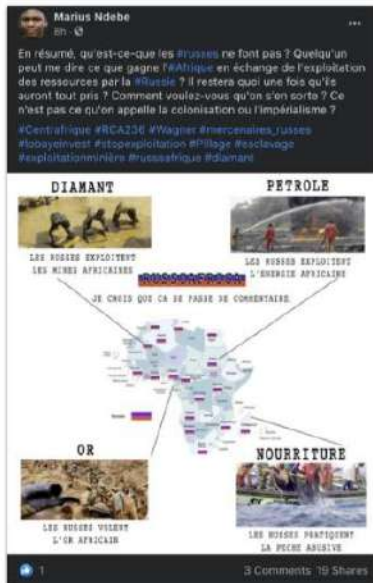


Post by French asset Martin Kossipé accusing Russian “propaganda” networks of covering up an alleged rape.

Content depicting Russians as the new imperialists in Africa was especially common within the group, alongside content presenting Russians as neo-colonial settlers there to plunder the continent without giving anything substantial in return.



The left-hand post claims that the Russians are fueling insurrection in CAR, and the right-hand one that they are committing crimes in the country.



Anti-Russian posts depicting Russians as imperialists. The right one claims they are "parasites for Africa", whereas the left one emphasizes the abusive attitude of Russians on the continent.

The operation worked across platforms and across media. A number of assets shared screenshots of a satirical newspaper called "Centre à fric Matin" (a pun on the words "Centrafrique" and the French for "cash centre") over some months. The editorial line was vehemently anti-Russian, and mostly consisted of a satire of the Russian presence in CAR, for instance ridiculing the military material sent to Centre-Africa earlier this year. The headline below

mocked Russia for sending trampolines to CAR after floods so that Central Africans won't get their feet wet. The header called the outlet a "very dependent daily," while the header made pointed references to the Internet Research Agency, a Moscow phone number, and vodka. We have only found two assets that promoted this outlet: the GAN-faced Facebook account Marius Ndebe and a Twitter account that posted the same content, @afrik_com.

QUOTIDIEN TRÈS DÉPENDANT

CENTRE À FRIC MATIN

Jeudi
5 nov. 2020
N° 2441

COMPLEXE MULTI-PRESSE NATIONALISTE D'ÉDITION ET DE DIFFUSION DE PROPAGANDE
DIRECTEUR DE PUBLICATION JULIEN BELA : (+7495 697-13-59)
CMI-CM RCCM : CA/BG-2010B488 BSIC-CBN 37 130046400.63
HCC/AUTO.N°05/09/HG/B/CC DPP Du 13 mai 2005
SIÈGE SOCIAL : IRA SP
ECOBANK-CBN 0010322910173401 BPMC-CBN 37102080001-29
CENTRE-A-FRIC@VODKA.RU WWW.CENTRE-A-FRIC.COM

0,3 FCFA

**SUITE AUX INONDATIONS QUI ONT FRAPPÉ LA VILLE DE BANGUI,
LA RUSSIE FAIS UN DON DE TRAMPOLINES AU KM5 AFIN
QUE LES CENTRAFRICAINS NE SE MOUILLENT PAS TROP LES PIEDS.**

LA RUSSIE A OFFERT DES TRAMPOLINES À LA CENTRAFRIQUE, AFIN DE L'AIDER À SE SORTIR DU PÉTRIN DANS LEQUEL L'A MIS LES INONDATIONS QUI ONT FRAPPÉ LA VILLE DE BANGUI. MAIS CE DON DE MATÉRIEL INDISPENSABLE ET VITAL POUR CHACUN DES CITOYENS DE NOTRE PAYS, EST SOUMIS À DE LOURDS DOUTES. EN EFFET, APRÈS AVOIR FRAPPÉES LE SUJET DES VÉHICULES BLINDÉS RUSSES, LES RUMEURS DE MALVERSATION ET DE DÉTOURNEMENT D'ARGENT FRAPPENT MAINTENANT CES ÉQUIPEMENTS DE HAUTE TECHNOLOGIE, LES TRAMPOLINES. ET AUTRE QUESTION, QUAND LES SOLDATS DE WAGNER SERONT-ILS DOTÉS DE CET ÉQUIPEMENT INDISPENSABLE POUR LES RENVOYER D'OÙ ILS VIENNENT ?

Sample of Centre a Fric Matin, whose main target of satire was the Russian presence in CAR. The headline story says that Russia gave Central Africans trampolines to help survive floods. The impressum section includes the email domain vodka.ru (actually the domain of Russskiy Standart vodka) and the head office "IRA SP." The banner calls it a "nationalist multi-press complex to edit and spread propaganda."

As part of its anti-Russian and anti-Prigozhin operation, the French network set up two Facebook groups that masqueraded as anti-fake-news discussion forums. This is a particularly troubling manifestation of fake news, and one that has often been observed in other disinformation operations, including Russian ones. Its effect on the information environment has the potential to be doubly damaging, as it casts suspicion on legitimate anti-fake-news outlets.

Martin Kossipé shared a post.
November 21, 2019 · 🌐

 shared a post to the group:
Afrique conscience, Afrique éveillée.
November 20, 2019 · 🌐

Facebook démantèle une opération de désinformation russe en Afrique






November 6, 2019 · 🌐

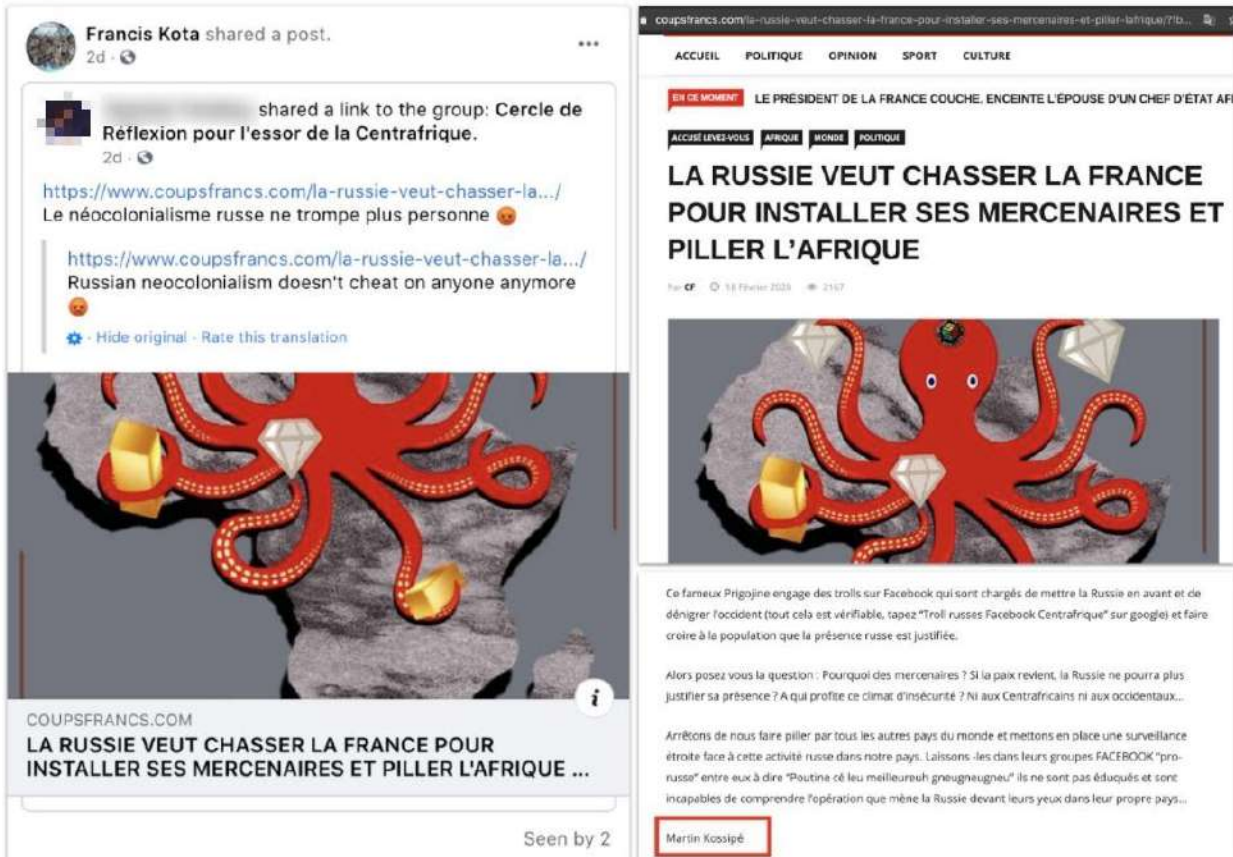
😊😊😊

#Russie #RCA #Manipulations

Seen by 7

The first post shared to the group “ANTI FAKE NEWS CENTRAFRIQUE” by the account that created it, whose profile picture was Muhammad Ali. Note the use of the hammer and sickle, which repeatedly featured in this operation. The share was posted on November 21, 2019, the day after the group was set up, and three weeks after Facebook exposed Prigozhin’s fake operations in Africa.

On one occasion, the operation appears to have gone beyond its usual social media posts and cartoon videos to plant a lengthy article in a local outlet. Several assets shared the article, headlined “Russia wants to chase France out so it can instal its mercenaries and loot Africa,” alongside a picture of an octopus crawling across Africa holding gold and diamonds. (This is a [common trope](#) of cartographic propaganda.) The article was attributed to Martin Kossipé, one of the French operation’s personas and the founder of one of its anti-fake-news groups. The article was dated February, but assets were still sharing it in December.



Left, share by multiple assets of an article on Russia wanting to “chase France out so it can instal its mercenaries and loot Africa.” Right, the [article](#) on a conspiracy-minded website (note the reference to the French president making an African president’s wife pregnant at the top), attributed to another operation asset, Martin Kossipé. The Russian octopus cartoon displayed above was particularly popular among the set, and was repeatedly used by assets to comment on anti-Russian posts.

On several occasions, the assets used repurposed and doctored images to push their anti-Russian message. In October, for example, operation accounts shared a photo that they claimed showed 1,000 Russian mercenaries arriving in Africa in secret. In fact, the [original photo](#) showed the arrival of Russian military medics in Kyrgyzstan to help fight COVID-19 in July; the French operation appears to have reversed the picture and altered the color palette to make it harder to detect the forgery.



Left, post shared in the unfortunately named “ANTI FAKE NEWS CENTRAFRIQUE” group, October 2020.
 Right, excerpt from a report on [Russian military medics arriving in Kyrgyzstan](#), July 2020.



Left, detail from a reversed shot of the French image; note the baggage in the middle ground.
 Right, detail of the image of [Russian medics arriving in Kyrgyzstan](#).



Left, detail from a reversed shot of the French image; note the baggage in the foreground and the alignment of the net in the background. Right, detail of the image of [Russian medics arriving in Kyrgyzstan](#).

Another asset, Marius Ndebe, shared a doctored picture taken in Congo in 2018 that showed gold miners working. The picture was rotated and its resolution and exposure settings changed; the operation then added the silhouette of an armed white man - supposedly a Russian mercenary - taken from the back, to make it look like he was watching the gold miners with a weapon while they were working. The doctored picture was shared with the hashtags #pillage (#plundering), #esclavage (#slavery), #Wagner, #stopexploitation and #blacklivesmatter, among others.



Marius Ndebe

November 30 at 9:36 AM · 🌐



Quand on est surveillé de cette façon est-ce-que les droits de l'homme sont respectés ? L'impérialisme russe va bon train...

[#Centrafrique](#) [#RCA236](#) [#Wagner](#) [#mercenaires_russes](#)
[#lobayeinvest](#) [#stopexploitation](#) [#Pillage](#) [#esclavage](#)
[#exploitationminiére](#) [#russeafrique](#) [#diamant](#) [#blacklivesmatter](#)
[#PanAfricanism](#)

When we are monitored this way are human rights respected?
Russian imperialism is going well...

[#Centrafrique](#) [#RCA236](#) [#Wagner](#) [#mercenaires_russes](#)
[#lobayeinvest](#) [#stopexploitation](#) [#Pillage](#) [#esclavage](#)
[#exploitationminiére](#) [#russeafrique](#) [#diamant](#) [#blacklivesmatter](#)
[#PanAfricanism](#)

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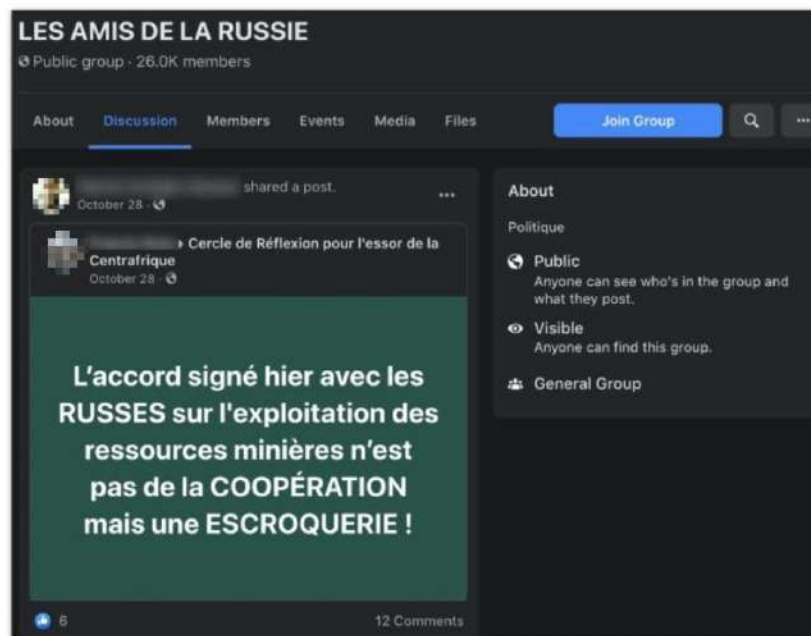
5 Shares

Post by a French asset on "Russian imperialism" in Africa.



Left, the French image reversed. Right, photo of gold miners in Ituri province, Congo, from a [Wall Street International magazine article](#), October 2018.

On repeated occasions, the set's accounts shared anti-Russian content in pro-Russian Facebook groups; when other users called them out as "French propaganda," the operation trolled back. Often, if the conversation became heated, other assets joined the argument in support.



Anti-Russian content created by a French asset was repeatedly shared by supporting French assets in pro-Russian groups.

Theme: Vive la France

As the Central African accounts posted content critical of Russia in Africa while they pushed pro-French narratives, the assets located in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad simultaneously disseminated pro-France content in local groups. The posts often celebrated both the French and

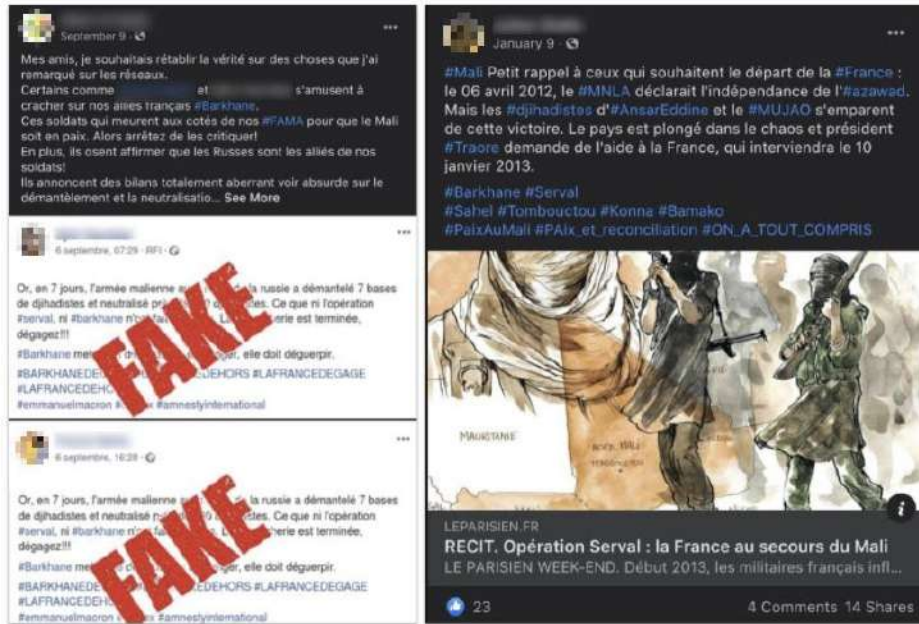


Posts praising French soldiers for their help in Timbuktu. The left-hand one thanks Operation Barkhane for food donations made to the Sankor mosque and French soldiers for reminding people that anti-Covid rules need to be respected at any time. The right-hand post reposts on French presence in Timbuktu to take care and treat people in a school.



Post from Focus ON Focus praising a Barkhane-financed project of school as a "efficient and smart way of fighting terrorism" and stating that "each development action of Mali for its people is a good thing."

Another side of the operation consisted in countering anti-French discourse in the region. Sometimes, the messages also contained anti-Russian messaging. The network's strategy to defend France was varied, with some accounts sometimes accusing others of spreading disinformation about France, or by arguing that signing treaties with France would not prevent Mali from emerging as a strong and independent post-colonial country.



Posts defending the French presence and the Barkhane operation in Mali. The left-hand post claims to "set the record straight" on French allies, and criticizes the Russians. The right-hand post claims the French army saved Mali from Jihadis by sharing an article entitled "Operation Serval: France to Mali's rescue."



Accounts defending French presence in Africa. The post on the left reacts to a famous quote by poet [Aimé Césaire](#) commenting that "other former colonized countries became great independent and modern nations." The post on the right defends French soldiers who were confronted by locals in Chad after getting involved in a car accident, claiming that people should not attack them because the French military is here to help local populations.



Left, pushing back on an article that Russia had supplanted France in Mali. Right, post praising a seminar that trained journalists to fight disinformation, which was supported by the French Embassy (there is no indication that the Embassy was aware of this amplification by a fake network).

Theme: West Africa, the UN and Terrorism

Outside its clash with the Russian operation in Central Africa, the French operation ran a separate group of assets that focused on West Africa, and particularly Mali. This part of the operation began earlier, in 2018, and it predominantly posted about peacekeeping and counter-terrorism efforts in Mali, either praising the peacekeeping forces or attacking the terrorists. The three principal entities that the accounts promoted were the Malian Armed Forces (FAMa/A), the UN peacekeeping operation in Mali known as MINUSMA, and an anti-insurgent effort led by the French military in the Sahel known as Operation Barkhane.

The United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali ([MINUSMA](#)) and the French [Operation Barkhane](#), both of which are still active operations, were mentioned by a number of accounts in the set, with posts seeking to cast a positive light on both of these operations. Some of the content focused on their military activities, such as the destruction of a terrorist base, or the neutralizing of more than 500 IEDs across Mali in one year. Other posts showcased the forces' contribution to stability and development more broadly, including through aid donations.



Two posts on the Mali Armed Forces (FAMA, in the French acronym). Left, praise for the Malian army and the French-led operation Barkhane for destroying a “terrorist base.” Right, cartoon of a day in the life of Abdul Rahman, “fighting so that no more innocents are killed.”



Two posts by the operation on the contributions Operation Barkhane made to Mali. Left, a Ramadan donation of food to a mosque, coupled with a reminder of how to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Right, sharing a communiqué from the French Ministry of Defense on an operation against a terrorist leader.

Most of the fake accounts detected and deactivated by Facebook that focused on this part of the operation posed as Malian locals, praising the Malian armed forces, while also underscoring the importance of the UN mission.



#JeSuisFAMa (I am FAMA).



Supporting the UN. Left, on unity; right, on demining operations.

Alongside these positive posts, the operation kept up a string of counter extremism narratives amplified by the same assets. One YouTube channel, for example, ran a series of short videos about terrorists, portraying them as cynical, corrupt, foolish (“a golden saddle doesn’t turn a donkey into a horse,” read one caption on a video about a terrorist stealing a motor bike), and ultimately doomed to death at the hands of the military.



“Soldiers are going to deal with you.” YouTube video from the French operation, directed at a caricature terrorist called “Amadou” and warning that the fate of terrorists is death and judgement.



Still from a video titled "The assassination" from a YouTube channel associated with the operation. The terrorist protagonist, who has just planted a mine, says, "It's not good but I make money so never mind." The cartoon then shows a civilian vehicle being blown up, with the caption, "And what if it was your mother or daughter who got blown up?"

Some of the Facebook accounts, especially those that posted in Arabic, portrayed the extremist groups as hypocritical and un-Islamic, accusing them of luxury, theft, extortion, cruelty and oppressing the civilian population.



Facebook posts by the operation, auto-translated from the Arabic. Left, on luxury; right, "terrorism is the opposite of Islam."



Two posts on terrorist groups, January and November, 2020. Left, blaming Islamic State for the death of ill children after it closed dispensaries and accusing the group of twisting the Quran. Right, post accusing terrorists of destruction, theft and kidnapping.

The operation also highlighted divisions between different terrorist groupings. [Recent reports](#) on UN operations in the Sahel indicate that violence between insurgent groups in Mali continues to result in persistent attacks and loss of life. For example, conflict between the Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (IS-GS) and Jama'a Nusrat ul-Islam wa al-Muslimin (JNIM) in the central region of Mopti resulted in [over 100 deaths](#) in one day in April this year. These two groups are known to have perpetrated [over 1,000 attacks](#) in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger since the beginning of 2019.



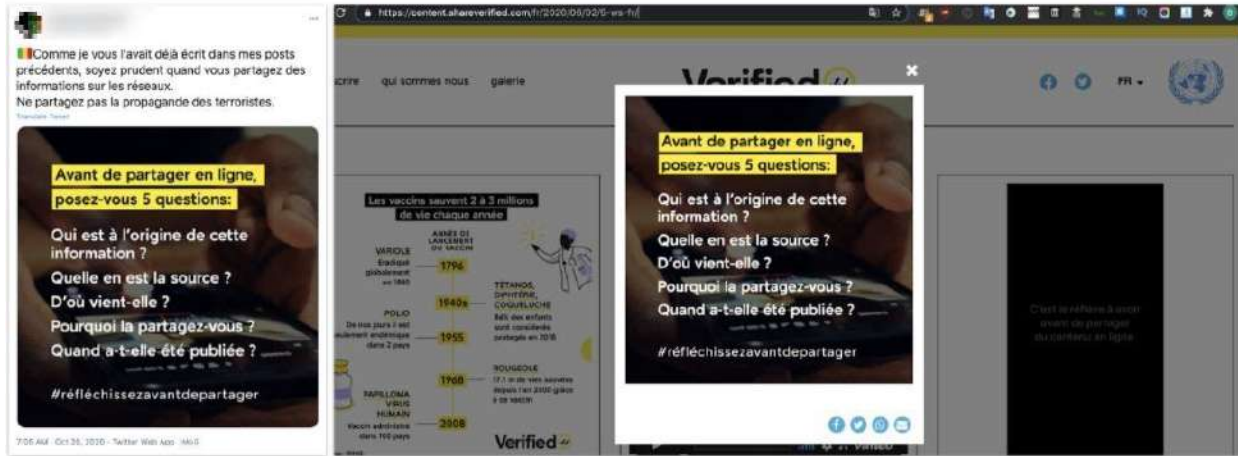
Cartoon depicting a member of the Al Qaeda-affiliated group JNIM spying on his “brothers” to sell their secrets to the Barkhane operation or the local ISIS affiliate, together with the text: “These men have no respect for Mali or even each other. The only words they know are: treachery, murder and theft.”

On occasion, some assets tried to engage with users across platforms. For example, one persona which was active on Twitter as well as Facebook used the former platform to invite Malians to a Facebook group called “Mali: Jeune et pret a lutter contre le terrorisme” (Mali: young and ready to fight terrorism), and to create a poll of reactions to a news report that criticized the Malian army. Neither effort appears to have borne rich fruit: by December 10, the group had 369 members, while the Twitter poll had just one vote.



Attempted engagement. Left, Twitter asset inviting people to join one of the Facebook groups linked to the operation. Right, the same asset running a poll on a representation of the Malian armed forces. Note the lack of engagement on either post.

In a particularly ironic gesture, the same Twitter account tweeted a meme that was originally published by a UN-partnered project called [Share Verified](#), urging its readers not to share unverified content from unknown accounts. “Before you share online, ask yourself five questions: Who is behind this information?” the meme began.



Left, Twitter account warning users not to share terrorist propaganda. Right, the meme on the Share Verified website; note the UN logo at top right.

Special Acknowledgements

A special thanks to @Z3dstar and Robby Delaware for providing additional tips on this network.

Graphika

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