

# “INFORMATION WAR BETWEEN FRANCE & RUSSIA IN THE CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC”



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2022



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## SUMMARY

For quite a long time, France was, as a matter of fact, the main dominant power in the franco-phone countries of Africa, except, perhaps, Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo). The French Intelligence, the French foreign legion, French-controlled militants and mercenaries overthrew leaders undesirable to Paris, took part in coups and civil wars. The main goal is control over the extremely rich natural resources of this region, and of course the use of these countries as markets for French goods. But for some time now, the French influence has been contested by China, Russia and to a certain extent by Turkey. Over the years of French colonial rule and after series of coups and "revolutions" instigated by Paris, quite strong and deep anti-French and even Francophobic sentiments have developed in the franco-phone countries of Africa. New players certainly take this factor into account when devising their strategy in the region. In this report, a group of Tarand expert group examines a case of information confrontation between Moscow and Paris in the Central African Republic.



To start with, it is worth noting that weak Internet coverage, poorly developed infrastructure and power outages diminish to a certain extent the capabilities of the parties to wage an information war in the CAR itself.

However, this does not in the least prevent Moscow and Paris from getting international organizations, primarily the UN, as well as other international platforms, involved in this issue. Mutual affronts of Moscow and Paris are widely circulated in the media of both countries. Obviously, the parties use primarily the state media to carry out information attacks against each other. "Investigation by Radio France International of the war crimes committed by Russians in the CAR"<sup>1</sup> could be considered one of the largest information attacks on the part of France. This investigation was published in May 2021 and instantly spread throughout the Western media and social networks. It is worth noting that in their propaganda, the French refer, inter alia, to the opinions of UN experts.<sup>2</sup> Accusing Russians of war crimes and violence against civilians clearly gives Paris a certain advantage in the information space, but not on the ground. At the same time, in the past, the French military had also been accused of sexual crimes, in particular against children,<sup>3</sup> and Russian propaganda definitely takes advantage of that. Moscow has generally much more experience in organizing and conducting propaganda campaigns, and while Paris has the ability to actively use the Western media against Moscow, Russia, taking advantage of widespread francophobia in Africa,

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<sup>1</sup> Florence Morice and Charlotte Cosset, "En Centrafrique, Des Victimes Des Exactions Russes Brisent La Loi Du Silence," March 5, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20210503-en-centrafrique-des-victimes-des-exactions-russes-brisent-la-loi-du-silence>.

<sup>2</sup> "CAR: Experts Alarmed by Government's Use of 'Russian Trainers', Close Contacts with UN Peacekeepers," March 31, 2021, <https://www.ohchr.org/SP/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26961&LangID=E>.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Dietrich, "En Centrafrique, Un Parfum de Guerre Froide," June 17, 2018, <https://www.lopinion.fr/edition/international/en-centrafrique-parfum-guerre-froide-156731>.

in the best traditions of Soviet propaganda could initiate a broad campaign directly within the country, from propaganda flyers and posters on the streets of CAR cities to public screenings of anti-French films at stadiums and troll battles on social networks.

The analysis of the whole information war between Paris and Moscow allows to highlight a couple of significant elements.

## **THE ANALYSIS OF THE WHOLE INFORMATION WAR BETWEEN PARIS AND MOSCOW ALLOWS TO HIGHLIGHT A COUPLE OF SIGNIFICANT ELEMENTS.**

- ✓ France uses a fairly powerful media machine that is controlled by the French state. The fact that French is widely spoken in the former French colonies certainly makes the local population susceptible to the French propaganda.
- ✓ Anti-French sentiments in Africa have undermined confidence in the French media, and, respectively, in the French propaganda, therefore quite often the linguistic and technical advantages of Paris do not provide the desired effect due to the widespread Francophobia, which, in addition to other factors, is fueled by Moscow as well. France kind of shoots blanks in this war.
- ✓ Apparently, Moscow was able to better adapt to local realities, and seemingly forgotten methods of Soviet propaganda turned out to be in much demand and very effective in the CAR. In addition, these methods were successfully adapted to the Internet age.
- ✓ In the eyes of the local population, Russia gets a certain advantage compared to France, because Moscow does not have a checkered past of coups and political assassinations in Africa.

Paris and Moscow wage an information war with each other both at the international level, through their media, experts, journalists, and directly in the information space of the CAR.

In December 2020, Facebook announced removal of a group of fake accounts, about 500 in total, which were used by France and Russia for the information war in the CAR.<sup>4</sup> According to Facebook, some of the accounts were associated with the French military, while others with the Russian "Internet Research Agency". Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's security manager, mentioned removal of three fake account networks associated with Paris and Moscow.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Moscow used French-speaking trolls long before the start of the information warfare with France in the CAR. These trolls were active during the presidential campaign and the yellow vest protests in France, as well as in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in France and Belgium. Then their main tasks were to "shake-up the society", "spread Islamophobic ideas", as well as "anti-EU propaganda".

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<sup>4</sup> Jack Stubbs, "French and Russian Trolls Wrestle for Influence in Africa, Facebook Says," December 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/facebook-africa-disinformation-idUSKBN28P261>.

<sup>5</sup> Nicolas Barotte, "Sur Facebook, La Guerre Secrète de l'armée Française En Centrafrique," December 16, 2020, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/sur-facebook-la-guerre-secrete-de-l-armee-francaise-en-centrafrique-20201216>.



Now Moscow has deployed its French-speaking trolls to Mali, the Central African Republic and a number of other African countries. When analyzing the comments, linguists easily identify those left by Russian trolls, as unfamiliarity with the local slang and dialects that have made their way into the French language spoken in Africa gives Russian Internet trolls away. According to French sources, the peak of the activity of Russian trolls was in December 2020, and it was related to the presidential elections in the Central African Republic.

The French and Russian Facebook and Instagram networks also targeted other African countries, which shows that the parties also have Portuguese, Spanish and Arabic speaking trolls.<sup>6</sup>

At some point, the Russian troll factory also targeted the community of Central African Republic immigrants in France. During the pandemic, Russian trolls also advertised and promoted Russian Sputnik V vaccine in Africa.

Both sides, of course, use local media to wage the information war. Some of the local media and journalists receive financing and support from Paris, and others from Moscow. The main topic of French propaganda in the CAR media are the "Wagnerites" (French propaganda calls them Russian mercenaries) and their crimes – robberies, kidnappings, rapes, and beatings of civilians. Also, local media claim that the Russians brought Syrian mercenaries to the CAR and use them to maintain their influence.<sup>7</sup> The media controlled by Paris also criticize the CAR president, and accuse him of selling out to Moscow and selling the country to the Russians. The French president also made his personal contribution to the information war between Paris and Moscow, by saying that the president of the CAR Faustin Archange Touadera was a hostage of the Wagner group.<sup>8</sup> Russian propaganda, including the Russian media, focuses on the colonial past and imperial ambitions of France, not failing to mention the past "achievements" of Paris. One of the main accusations against France is that it is not interested in stability in the CAR.<sup>9</sup>

French propaganda widely circulates news and stories about rape of women and girls, residents of the Central African Republic.<sup>10</sup> Since names and possibly locations were changed in the publications of the French media, it is very difficult to verify authenticity of these events. But they help France to create the image of the "bad Russian".

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<sup>6</sup> Quentin Velluet, "France/Russia: Propaganda War on Facebook Targets Mali & the CAR," December 21, 2020, <https://www.theafricareport.com/56013/france-russia-propaganda-war-on-facebook-targets-mali-the-car/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Paoua, Les Mercenaires Russes de La Société Wagner Ont Semé La Panique Au Sein de La Population," June 16, 2021, <https://corbeaunews-centrafrique.com/paoua-les-mercenaires-russes-de-la-societe-wagner-ont-seme-la-panique-au-sein-de-la-population/>.

<sup>8</sup> "Centrafrique: Macron Juge Le Président Touadéra «otage Du Groupe Wagner»,» May 31, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210531-centrafrique-macron-juge-le-president-touadere-otage-du-groupe-wagner>.

<sup>9</sup> Светлана Антонова, "История ЦАР Показывает, Что Франции Не Выгодна Стабильность в Этой Стране," June 5, 2021, <https://newdaynews.ru/moscow/723622.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Antoine Rolland, "Mainmise En Centrafrique, Les Mercenaires de Wagner Sèment La Peur," April 20, 2021, [https://www.liberation.fr/international/afrique/en-centrafrique-les-mercenaires-de-wagner-sement-la-peur-20210420\\_7HGMONC32BHJTKFZIQMTMJ3YJE/](https://www.liberation.fr/international/afrique/en-centrafrique-les-mercenaires-de-wagner-sement-la-peur-20210420_7HGMONC32BHJTKFZIQMTMJ3YJE/).

In addition to its own resources, the French certainly make use of local media resources in order to create the image of the “bad Russian”, and the Russian Ambassador to Bangui, Vladimir Titorenko, is one of the main targets of information attacks. He is accused of abuse of power and disrespect.<sup>11</sup>

Local media outlets, which are undoubtedly supported (and in some cases created) by Moscow, in turn, attack France and French diplomats. In this regard, the publications "Le Quotidien de Bangui", "Centrafic Matin", "Bangui24News", "Le potentiel centrafricain", "Kangbi-Ndara" stand out, and these publications tirelessly publish and circulate all kinds of accusations and conspiracy theories concerning the French. The French ambassador to Bangui has repeatedly complained to the country's authorities about the information attacks of the local media. But the local pro-Russian media are used not only for attacks on France. Russian media network, which is associated with the Russian entrepreneur Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Internet Research Agency (essentially a Russian troll factory) also often quotes the Central African media, and the main emphasis is on building peaceful life and success of Russia's mission in the CAR. Moscow's activities in Africa are presented to the Russian audience as yet another success of Kremlin's foreign policy. The flagship of this media network is the Federal News Agency (riafan.ru), also among news outlets quoting Central African media stand out the sites "inforeactor.ru" and "newinform.com", which by complete "coincidence" are also a part of the aforementioned media network.

It is noteworthy that the registration address of the Federal News Agency in St. Petersburg coincided with the address at which the Internet Research Agency was located. The Russian troll factory, the media network that owns the above-mentioned sites and the Wagner PMC operating in the CAR are all associated with Yevgeny Prigozhin.<sup>12</sup>

In addition, Mr. Prigozhin is a sponsor of the film Tourist, which is actively used and promoted by Russian propaganda in the CAR. The film "Tourist", released in May 2021, was created in the tradition of Soviet film propaganda of the 1970s and 1980s, and follows the mission of Russian instructors in the CAR. On the one hand, the film is intended to create a positive image of the Wagnerites, and on the other hand, to counteract the anti-Russian and anti-Wagner propaganda of Paris. The film is also posted on YouTube. Although the artistic value of the film may be questionable, the propaganda message of the film Tourist is quite clear.

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<sup>11</sup> Nguéma Ngokpélé, “Victoire Diplomatique Du Tchad Sur La Russie: Accusé Titorenko Levez-Vous!,” April 14, 2021, [https://www.lequotidiendebangui.fr/Victoire-diplomatique-du-Tchad-sur-la-Russie-accuse-Titorenko-levez-vous-\\_a681.amp.html](https://www.lequotidiendebangui.fr/Victoire-diplomatique-du-Tchad-sur-la-Russie-accuse-Titorenko-levez-vous-_a681.amp.html).

<sup>12</sup> “The GRU, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Russia's Wagner Group: Malign Russian Actors and Possible U.S. Responses Kimberly Marten Professor and Chair, Political Science Department Barnard College, Columbia University, Testimony before the Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment US House of Representatives,” July 7, 2020, <https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110854/witnesses/HHRG-116-FA14-Wstate-MartenK-20200707.pdf>.



Despite the Coronavirus pandemic, a mass screening of "Tourist" with participation of CAR officials and Russian representatives and no regard to social distancing measures was organized in the capital of the CAR, Bangui. The screening took place at a stadium with a capacity of 20,000. This screening was widely covered in the local media. The Russian state TV channel RT France aired a short special report of the event. There are numerous comments, presumably by

Russian trolls, on this video report on YouTube. Francophone commentators, making many grammatical and lexical errors, praise the film and express their support for Russia.

Some might think that mass film screenings at stadiums are an outdated method of Soviet propaganda, but it is a very effective method for the realities of the CAR.

The film was criticized by the French media, and in particular the French state radio, which called the film "Russian propaganda."<sup>13</sup> Some French observers considered the film to be "anti-French".

Immediately after the mass stadium screening of the film, the residents of the capital staged a rally in support of the efforts by Rwanda and Russia for establishing peace in the CAR. The main recipient of gratitude was, of course, Russia.<sup>14</sup>

A separate direction of anti-French propaganda is hunting French spies and saboteurs. Such exemplary arrests are used by Moscow as important evidence of Paris's meddling in the internal affairs of the Central African Republic. In general, this situation resembles the plot of the film "Professional" starring Jean-Paul Belmondo, which was released in 1981. In May 2021, a French "spy" Juan Remy Quignolot, as he was referred to by the local media, was arrested in Bangui. A search of his house produced a huge cache of weapons and ammunition. This case was widely used and continues to be used for anti-French propaganda in the CAR.<sup>15</sup>

The local media immediately built a conspiracy theory in the best traditions of a political detective.

In parallel, some African media recalled another Frenchman, Christophe Raineteau, whom the CAR authorities unsuccessfully tried to arrest in Madagascar, but Madagascar authorities decided at the very last moment to deport Raineteau to France.

The arrest of the alleged French agent played into the hands of Moscow, as this arrest actually confirmed all the theses that Russian propaganda was spreading in the CAR.

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<sup>13</sup> Florence Morice and Daniel Vallot, "Centrafrique: «Touriste», Une Fiction Au Service de La Propagande Russe," March 6, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210603-centrafrique-touriste-une-fiction-au-service-de-la-propagande-russe>.

<sup>14</sup> "Manifestation à Bangui Pour Soutenir Les Forces Conjointes FACA-Russie-Rwanda," December 5, 2021, <https://nouvelles-plus.com/2021/05/15/manifestation-a-bangui-pour-soutenir-les-forces-conjointes-faca-russie-rwanda/>.

<sup>15</sup> "Central African Republic Charges French National with Espionage," September 6, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/9/central-african-republic-charges-french-national-with-espionage>.

Almost simultaneously with the arrest of the French agent, Paris announced that in light of the ongoing disinformation campaign, France was suspending financial aid and military cooperation with the CAR.<sup>16</sup>

One of the important episodes of the information war between Paris and Moscow is the use of the murder of three Russian journalists in the CAR on July 31, 2018. Russian propaganda, with the help of controlled information resources, tried to promote a theory that the murder of journalists was committed by the French special services. For that purpose, both local and Russian resources were deployed. For example, the Central African news site Palmares Centrafrique published on August 1, 2018 an article,<sup>17</sup> which hinted that Russian journalists were killed by Seleka at the behest of France. The next day, this article was translated into Russian and reposted by the Russian website inosmi.ru<sup>18</sup> (this project belongs to one of the main mouthpieces of Russian propaganda, Rossiya Segodnya agency). This news was also circulated by several Russian websites. It should be noted that the site palmarescentrafrique.com is no longer live, but the Tarand expert group was able to find the original article at web.archive.org.

In June 2019, the theory of French special services involvement in the murder of Russian journalists surfaced again, by initiation of a Russian media network close to Yevgeny Prigozhin. The Federal News Agency released a video<sup>19</sup> dedicated to the investigation into the murder of journalists. According to the video, it is evident that the French special services, with which the fugitive Russian oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky was apparently in collusion (the journalists went to the CAR as part of a project of the Investigation Control Center (ICC), funded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky), certainly had a hand in this case.

The video was widely covered by a media network close to Prigozhin and the Internet Research Agency, as well as by a number of major Russian media.

In general, the information war between Russia and France in the CAR can be viewed as an integral part of the large-scale hybrid war waged between Paris and Moscow in Africa.

It is noteworthy that the methods of disinformation, disorientation and propaganda developed by the KGB proved to be very effective in the 21st century in Africa.

Based on the analysis of developments in the information field of the CAR and around it, a group of Tarand expert group came to the conclusion that in the near future, the confrontation between Paris and Moscow may spread to countries such as Mali, Niger, Chad.

In this confrontation, there are elements of both the geopolitical struggle between the two powers, and the competition for natural resources and sales markets.

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Elzas, "France Accuses CAR of Complicity in Disinformation Campaign, Suspends Support," August 6, 2021, <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20210608-france-accuses-car-of-complicity-in-disinformation-campaign-suspends-support-russia-wagner-mercenaries-social-media-politics-protests>

<sup>17</sup> "CENTRAFRIQUE: Assassinat de Trois Journalistes Russes: Un Jeu de La France ?," January 8, 2018, <https://biblioteca-virtuala.blogspot.com/2018/08/centrafrique-assassinat-de-trois.html>.

<sup>18</sup> "ЦАР: Убийство Трех Российских Журналистов — Игра Франции?," February 8, 2018, <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20180802/242891471.html>.

<sup>19</sup> "ФАН Ответит На Вопрос «Кто Стоит За Убийством Российских Журналистов в ЦАР»," June 7, 2019, <https://ri-fan.ru/1184809-fan-otvetit-na-vopros-kto-stoit-za-ubiistvom-rossiiskikh-zhurnalistov-v-car>.



January - 2022

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