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Participant organization: The Daily Beast

**Introductions:**

* Philip: I come from Nigeria, and I live in Nigeria.
* Contributor at The Daily Beast – since 2015, in the last 4 years, focusing almost entirely on Russian paramilitary and other Russian actors in Africa. Extensively wrote on Wagner in central and western Africa – human right abuses, rape – vulnerable communities, especially in central Africa
* Recently, focus on disinformation – Africa’s Ghost Reporters, Al Jazeera documentary – shows exactly how Russia places disinformation in the media in Burkina Faso and Togo. Basically, my focus is on Russian operations. Citizen-led recognition has been reported on Russian paramilitaries.

**Question: How would you describe the biggest information threats?**

* Biggest and most consistent – narratives Russia pushes through its initiatives, through social media, talking highly about Russia and the West, undermining the West.
* Many media outlets are publishing many stories – the U.S. is sending weapons to the CAR, the U.S. is trying to move biolabs from Ukraine to Africa. Pattern mostly. Information article or posts on social media that talks so well about Russia.

**Would you define it as effective and why?**

* Combination of many factors. Russia is able to use a number of media – print, online. Citizens get this information every time they open the media. They are forced to believe it.
* The involvement of the West over the last 4-5 years has not brought many results. It does not mean the West is ineffective. But in Mali, the French have been involved against jihadists – but the insurgencies have not been reduced – they are growing. The fact that it is growing even with thousands of troops in Mali angered a lot of people. France is responsible for that. Russians have been very calculative through as many media as possible.
* Economically, in central and western Africa, particularly francophone countries, there is so much political instability in these places. In Mali, France has been involved, but they have no regulation. In Central Africa, France has currency supervision from the French central bank. People believe that France has a bit of an eye on how the currency operates – stifle the growth of these countries. Easy to dwell – Russia spreads the information that economies are [affected].
* Many years of discernment.

**What is their goal?**

* Two things – political influence over the African regions. When I say political region, it means that Russia has to have some influence over the political leaders in Africa. Then they get some economic opportunities to exploit in Africa. When you look at CAR, civil war since 2013 – the current leadership is unable to lead with rebels – Russia is involved in the country. In 2016, when the president was under an arms embargo, only capital was under control. Only Russia took the opportunity to explore – agreed to come to help the central government – send troops to go fight against the rebels. Russia is doing it for free in return for control of natural resources.
* Russia: Burkina, Mali, Niger – no Western leaders wanted to work with countries that are not democracy, leaving African Union. The leadership of these African countries does not have support from the West. West does not think that they represent true democracy.
* That’s why they seem to want to have the same influence elsewhere. It is difficult for them to gain entry to countries that have a true democracy. They tried to create instability to take power in the future.
* Why Russia wants to have more African leaders as friends – it wants to have more allies – more access to resources. In Mali, they will soon be exploring gold in the south. In Central Africa, gold and natural resources. In Burkina Faso, we’ll see soon.

**How about other foreign countries?**

* The Chinese have been very active in Africa. Their activities always start and end around mining. China wants to have a say in Africa. They give huge loans that Africans cannot repay. Stringent condition. Focus more on the economy than anything else – their companies are able to work, give loans, and kickbacks to African leadership.
* No country does that, Russia does. Russia works with the local population. Russia is the top country in terms of opportunities and influence.
* Then China.

**Is China’s influence growing since 2022?**

* No, as we speak, it hasn’t gotten to the point that China would fill the gap. Russia did not really leave a gap. Yes, Russia pulled some mercenaries. But they were able to recruit the local population. They bring mercenaries from Russia. Russia did not leave a gap in CAR. In Mali, Russia lost many fighters, but they are still fighting – a significant number in Mali and Burkina. Russia is not looking into leaving the area anytime soon.
* They look into expanding their operations – they were not focused on Ghana, Nigeria in terms of disinformation – now spreading across, including into West Africa. Some of us saw protests in Nigeria. Raised Russian flags to show interest in expanding to the region.
* Maybe if the Chinese wanted to behave the same way, they would have to expand, try to bring more Chinese labor, workers, and exploit them. Otherwise, I don’t think Russia is leaving.

**What are the governments doing to counter this?**

* In terms of African governments, they are not doing anything huge – working little by little. I haven’t seen anything tangible. I’ve seen little efforts by Western organizations – not enough. Germans are trying, Americans had one program – the Africa Center for Strategic Studies – in Nigeria, and in Ghana. It’s not even close enough to fight Russian disinformation. They haven’t targeted as many people as possible. African Center for Strategic Studies – only fact-checkers – commission media, publishers commission. [Those spreading] disinformation are able to write; fact-checkers don’t have a say. The media accepts Russian disinformation articles. Not sure now in Senegal.
* In Nigeria and Ghana, I have friends in the media. Not much is done by the African governments.

**Why does the media accept Russian disinformation?**

* One of two reasons: 1) financial incentive. If you watch the Africa’s Ghost Reporters – the documentary by Al Jazeera – media outlets were paid 80 dollars per article – Russian middlemen to publish 2) some people claim that they don’t know exactly. I don’t think all those are correct. The main reason is financial.
* Money is paid to publishers, reporters, and editors. Disinformation programs target publishers. Media outlets accept articles from Russia, they don’t last. It’s not big money for the newspaper, but it may look big to a reporter and online editor. If we are able and the government and NGOs are able to get publishers and editors involved in the workshop [to educate], this would help. Like I said before – people would be [more aware].

**Any other initiatives?**

* So much more has to be done – disinformation is mostly spread through the media, that’s why I’m doing it through media – online media, print media. People read this stuff and watch these deceptive videos online. They are moved by them. Russia floods the media with narratives. Some watch and tell the others who did not watch. Media action is important.
* In terms of community, very tough acts – most people are angry at the West. They became angry as the government has not been able to provide incentives for healthcare and infrastructure. Russia capitalizes on this, saying that the Western world and the local government have not worked enough to improve African communities.
* One of the ways for the government is to provide infrastructure and security, and everything to provide – but I realize that it is too much to ask in the short term. It’s in the long term. The best way – to put out what is true. Disinformation is mostly media-based.

**Have you observed any regional differences?**

* I don’t think we are sure of other countries.
* Burkina Faso, Nigeria, Ghana – a few workshops here and there. They didn’t have any impact. Not many media outlets are doing fact-checking. Some of the foreign media do the fact-checking. Most don’t fact-check whether the info comes from Russian trolls. The outreach of these fact-checking outlets is not big.
* Many of the fact-checkers have notices in this part that are only based on text. Russia spreads disinformation using visuals, sophisticated videos, online, and radio. Most fact-checking is text-based – like a short report, two or three paragraphs or sentences. That isn’t enough. In Nigeria, it's not better than Ghana – so much money is spent by Russians on financing [the disinformation].
* China is not spending as much money on disinformation as Russia.
* Not much government is doing – if they are running visuals, then you have a few paragraphs of text by media outlets, by media debunking or fact-checking. Effectiveness is not better in some countries. Even in the West and South, we see Russia's disinformation – we haven’t seen any efforts.

**Can you elaborate more on the efforts to move away from the text?**

* A couple of journalists look on, exposing the Russian disinformation on the radio stations in northern Nigeria to debunk some of the disinformation Russia is putting out there. The person I am talking to, his idea came into fruition – proposed to a radio station – got accepted just. A couple of other radios debunked claims by the Russians, but it is not deep enough
* Many electronic media outlets don’t understand the scope. It requires resources to fact-check. They are not cheap. A claim can be made about a particular activity. Sometimes you need to investigate, you need to go out there – funding is very poor, media outlets are focused on more pressing issues – around government policies, laws of countries. Maybe it is seen as an extra burden to look at narratives spread by Russia. It will be beneficial if Western agencies are able to assist journalists, fund investigations into Russian narratives – conduct a workshop, educate the media in Africa. Education about Russian and maybe Chinese disinformation – how they are doing it.

**Have you observed influencers on social media playing a role?**

* Crucial role in spreading. They are mostly businesses. They don’t care if what they are spreading is true. They want to get paid. Russia has identified many of these influencers; they understand they can get a lot. Russia is willing to pay.

**What’s your take on having counter-disinformation legislation?**

* I think that having a law, particularly one that censors, for example, in Nigeria, that tries to control what is out there, may lead to censorship. Sometimes we understand – if we have a law that looks into what’s posted on social media, it can be misused by government agencies. If you criticize politicians or publish an exposé, you become a target.
* I’m not in favor of any new laws. Because it can be abused. It may not be the best way, but it can help – put much more, identify the influencers, call them out, and work with them to counter these narratives. Investigative journalism is very important, as it can expose the influencers. We are a people, local government, journalist communities – the international community has not done enough

**What are your plans for the future?**

* Personally, I’ve been reporting for 4.5 years on Russian paramilitary – currently, I have a big investigation on Russian fighters in West Africa. I’m looking at the spread of Russian disinformation, trying to identify the people behind it, small publishers, looking deeply.
* Expanding beyond military operations -looking into general operations, how money, a big program.