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Participant organization: Viginum

* Created in 2021 – under the Secretary general for defense and national security. Specially regarding foreign digital interference – FIMI. Implication of foreign actor, use of inauthentic means, use of misleading content, as well as the campaigns having an impact on French interests. Technical and operational focus. Team of data scientists to have a data driven approach. Focused on the behavior and way and why they are acting instead of just the behavior itself. Here to detect and analyze and share info. Not directly in charge of the response. But they can propose responses – but a policy decision. Not doing stratcomm or direct responses.
* Russian influence in Africa – following since integration of the service. Different type of actors, official and public actors – moving towards Africa since invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Really trying to develop their presence in Africa. Also trying to monitor what the intelligence services are doing – covert so harder but try to. And monitor Internet Agency – Project Lakhta. Promoting deployment of Wagner group in Mali, Niger – 2022 Fake story. Very active in Niger – fake facebook pages and twitter accounts modus operandi. Outsource fake pages in Benin and Burkin Faso also. Very persistent actor, even since death of Proghzin. Ongoing investigation. Evolution – after project Lakhta what happens. Africa Initiative. Trying to develop presence in BF and all of the ones mentioned (except in Libya – not a lot of French interests there so not following). Heatlh initiatives. Published in the press. Just for the Russian actors, but also have to monitor the activities of the local players. In Mali, just after 2021 and arrival of Wagner, know that there is a digital ecosystem that has been set up. Same phenomenon in BF and Niger. Digital ecosystem surrounding the new entity. Other local actors – GPCI – funded by Cameroon – very active in CAR in 2018. Also some pan Africanist actors – very very aggressive towards France. Always narrative that France is neocolonial power – say they fund terrorism in Africa to get the resources. We don’t know if it works – we are trying to answer what the impacts are. Could we explain the fact that French Army being asked to leave just by the activities of Russian operators. Personally doesn’t thin only that, but trying to answer that. Focus on western French speaking countries in Africa. Good laboratory.
* Chinese influence in West Africa – China unlike many countries has significant financial resources giving it a wide range of tools. The digital influence is one of many means and not the most important. Chinese strategy in West Africa – narrative on West including French remains factual without going to offensive but digital change needs to be monitored closely. In this context there are four ways in which China can influence content. First trend is Chinese or state owned media is trying to sign content sharing agreements with local newsrooms allowing it to disseminate content free of charge. Reduce Same for Russian and Turkish. Some Chinese majors are working hard to acquire stakes in Africa Media. No examples for French speaking Africa – Zambia and SA. China is trying to recruit some local journalists – every year CPDA organizes a four month seminar training bringing together a hundred of journalists – the seminar is organized within the Chinese international Press and Information center (CIPIC). Very well looked after, accommodations in central Bejing, all paid expenses. This includes African journalists – so people will tell goo story about China. Fourth trend – Chinese journalists are set up facebook accounts to disseminate accounts on China.
* Turkey - Low financial means that Russia or China but they have the cultural way to talk to these countries and religious way also. Turkey good influence in Libya – important influence. But now they try to approach parts of Libya with defense contracts with drones. But also with Islamic schools. They do so information of journalists – TRT – open different websites on the social media – in French in Africa – TRT Africa – Do information for journalists. So in East Africa, good influence because they solved conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia. They have a good impression of Turkey. Turkish airlines also has good operations there. Try to present participation – mutual benefits. 50/50 with turkey and Russia. Try to present partnerships that are equal so narrative about former ottoman empire – we work with Africa historically with this philosophy – 50/50. Other countries Qatar and UAE. And Saudi Arabia. Important investments in infrastructure in the region. For instance in Benin, Turkey invests a lot in different parts of construction of schools and roads. Of course in their narrative against France. France full of gold interests – looking for interests.
* All the countries that denounced security agreements with France – Senegal, Chad, Benin. We know that one is funded against France trying to present to the election – funded by Russia, Iran. Russia does not hide anymore. They publicly announce where they are trying to go. By monitoring digital activity – can see what they are doing. Chad and Senegal – project Lakhta. Gabon when coup happened. All states in which the political situation is not very stable. Creating digital ecosystems to protect new leaders.
* Turkey – Sadat – like Wagner – journalists from Libya come to sustain government of Tripoli. So reproduce propaganda of Russia and Wagner. Turkey strategy in Africa – they don’t choose dis/misinformation to harass France but they open line with Turkish allies. The only reason they want to do that – Erdoğan wants to change the security council – reform with Africa countries.
* Concerning China – main objective is to gain market share – to become most important diplomatic partner. Room for Chinese companies to invest. Maybe Senegal – a lot of Chinese companies in
* A lot of media agreements with Russia – the economic part isn’t as high. Finding new voices. Always present Russian partnerships on win-win.
* Biggest threats (Russia) harm towards French army and troops – last year when new guy in Burkina came into power – fake narrative about French embassy and military protecting former leader. All the narratives that could lead towards hardships towards French. Anti imperialist narratives – not really prioritizing. When see specific narratives and Ios. Would be impossible if writing a note on every accusation. Funding terrorism /supporting terrorism narrative. Since French has had to leave know how the situation is degrading. Sometimes just targeting French individuals, but also French writ large. And to develop a bit about that – same way of functioning since 2017 – same pattern. And it works. Deployment of Wagner in Mali and in Burkina very predictable. And no means to stop that – not response service. Interesting trend to monitor. Depends on scope of each organization – looking most at what has an impact on French diplomatic and economic interests. The way some French strategic companies could be targeted. French group in Niger – targeted a lot by.
* French first victim – but messages targeting directly US as well. US private military company operating there. They have been targeted a lot. Also observing messages targeting Ukraine – that they are trying to fund the terrorists. French first target, then US and USAID. US as the new colonial power.
* Main issue – local versus outside actors. The idea that everything is caused by Russian activities is the inability to see local actors interests. The Malian government had interest to use Russia against France. Most important part – local interests. Altering a lot of info ops that do not work. The very important part is what is happening there – social networks, internet presence not that developed in some places. Whatsapp – can’t see everything. Can’t see everything local players are doing.
* Fro China, main players are Chinese state owned media – problem with China in Africa. – the cultural model is not very attractive in west Africa. The challenge for Chinese are using proxies – the only way is to pay them – corruption – journalists. No examples of a big influencer – which is known to support China 100%.
* Turkey is opposite because they don’t have to disseminate articles or narratives to support turkey they just have to construct Muslim schools – to people – religious – to say Turkey is best country to defend them. More cultural.
* Local interests – the example of public funding by Russia and publicly saying it and also Hezbollah and odn’t want to put another neocolonial power. How directed he is by Russia we don’t know. Of course some local interests. The answer that could have been said by French authorities – not just Russia – the history of colonization and influence, cannot deny this local context. They can just push messages on specific things it easy
* Debunking initiatives have seemed to work well. Way to understand the response – what is the consequences – might not be just stratcomm or narrative approaches.
* Colleagues that are working on this Paris University and Strategic Institutes.
* Don’t overestimate the digital influence – money is more important.