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# How Strategic Information Operations Affect Peacekeeping: Two Case Studies from the Central African Republic

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## ABSTRACT

Strategic information operations – efforts by individuals or groups to shape public opinion using propaganda, rumors and facts – pose significant challenges to peacekeeping missions. These operations undermine trust, hinder communication with the public and complicate the implementation of peacekeeping mandates. Common approaches to addressing these operations have primarily viewed them as state-led, top-down activities and have focused on combating viral falsehoods through strategic communications. In this article, we offer an alternative conception of these operations as fundamentally embedded within broader peacekeeping assemblages, where they become ‘actants’ exerting influence on the broader peacekeeping system. Using a mixed-methods analysis of two strategic information operations targeting the UN Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) on Facebook, we demonstrate that these operations are multi-directional and participatory, involving interactions among state actors, influencers and ordinary individuals. We also reflect on how concern over the impact of these operations has shaped peacekeeping self-image, resourcing and coalition-building, and argue for more reflection on these dynamics when designing counter-disinformation strategies.

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**KEYWORDS** UN peacekeeping; disinformation; information operations; Central African Republic; assemblage; complexity; conspiracy; rumour

## 1. Introduction

This article examines two strategic information operations targeting the UN Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA) in November 2021 and March 2022. In the immediate aftermath of two separate crises – a shooting near the president’s residence and a seizure of military equipment in transit – rumours accusing MINUSCA of orchestrating a coup

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d'état, plotting an assassination attempt, and colluding with armed groups spread widely across Facebook groups and pages focused on francophone Africa. We show that the amplification of these false narratives was not solely the work of a top-down disinformation campaign orchestrated by state actors and elites. Rather, it was shaped by a complex interplay of deliberate and organic action, involving foreign actors, regional media outlets, political influencers and everyday people. Building upon mistrust of MINUSCA and enabled by the online environment, this 'participatory' strategic information operation created an alternative account of MINUSCA that undermined the mission's credibility and challenged the legitimacy of UN peacekeeping more broadly.

Though there is a large body of academic literature on strategic information operations in several fields, including communication, computer science and political science, existing literature on this topic in peacekeeping settings has largely been confined to policy reports.<sup>1</sup> These reports often frame information operations as external threats targeting the missions with falsehoods. We offer an alternative conception of strategic information operations as fundamentally embedded within broader peacekeeping assemblages, where these operations themselves become 'actants' exerting influence on the broader peacekeeping system. Actants are understood in Latour's sense, as entities, human or non-human, that influence a broader network.<sup>2</sup> From this perspective, peacekeeping missions are not passive targets but active participants that shape and reshape how such operations are deployed and sustained. This understanding allows for the development of counter-disinformation strategies that could more effectively account for the complex ways in which missions influence and are influenced by the information environment.

## 2. Analytical Framework and Empirical Setting

Our work draws on several bodies of theory. First, theories of collective rumouring provide a lens to understand the spread of information during crises, especially under conditions of uncertainty. Second, complexity theory informs our focus on emergent patterns and non-linear processes, rather than top-down, unidirectional information campaigns. Lastly, assemblage theory allows us to explore the relationships among actors, technological systems and social and historical contexts, highlighting the configurations that enable or constrain the flow of rumours. Together, these theories guide

<sup>1</sup>For an overview of scholarly literature on mis/disinformation, see: Broda and Strömbäck, "Misinformation, Disinformation, and Fake News." For disinformation and UN peacekeeping see e.g., Trithart, "Disinformation against UN Peacekeeping Operations." or Vermeij et al., "The Impact and Response to Misinformation."

<sup>2</sup>Latour, "On Actor-Network Theory."

our analysis by framing rumours as emergent phenomena shaped by a complex assemblage of human and non-human actors.

We adopt our definition of strategic information operations from Starbird et al., who conceive of them as ‘efforts by individuals and groups, including state and non-state actors, to manipulate public opinion and change how people perceive events in the world by intentionally altering the information environment.’<sup>3</sup> Disinformation – false or misleading information spread with the intent to deceive – is often a key element of these campaigns, which in practice blends deceptive information with larger beliefs in order to influence perceptions of events. Importantly, Starbird et al. view strategic information operations as ‘participatory’ in nature – rather than being top-down, state-driven campaigns deployed onto subjects, they constitute improvised and emergent collaborations between ‘witting and unwitting agents,’ ranging from state actors, political elites, online influencers, to everyday people.<sup>4</sup>

### ***2.1. The Role of Rumour and Conspiracy Theorizing in Crisis Settings***

A longstanding body of work in sociology has studied rumouring behaviour as a form of collective sensemaking.<sup>5</sup> Rumours within this framework need not be false or irrational, only unverified.<sup>6</sup> In their unverified state, rumours hold power, threatening to challenge and even at times supplant, the official account of events presented by institutionally powerful sources of information, such as governments, mass media and international organizations.<sup>7</sup> When rumours are imbued with a lens of suspicion toward institutions, groups, and individuals with political power, they can evolve into conspiracy theories, which present increasingly complex, structured narratives of these entities’ hidden agendas and machinations.<sup>8</sup>

Because rumours and conspiracy theories flourish in times of uncertainty, they are a pervasive feature of crisis and conflict environments.<sup>9</sup> Studies that have examined the production of rumours and conspiracy theories in these settings have conceptualized them as forms of emergent political expression and action. In an exploration of conspiracy theorizing during the 2010 presidential elections in Guinea, for example, Fioratta articulates that ‘particular conspiracy theories that may not be strictly verifiable may nevertheless index larger truths.’<sup>10</sup> In Fioratta’s case studies, conspiracy theories circulating in

<sup>3</sup>Starbird, Arif, and Wilson, “Disinformation as Collaborative Work.”

<sup>4</sup>Ibid; Starbird, DiResta, and DeButts, “Influence and Improvisation.”

<sup>5</sup>Allport and Postman, “An Analysis of Rumor”; Kapferer, *Uses, Interpretations and Images*; Shibutani, “Improvised News.”

<sup>6</sup>Kapferer, *Uses, Interpretations and Images*.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid. 84, 263–64.

<sup>8</sup>Gelfert, “Coverage-Reliability, Epistemic Dependence.”

<sup>9</sup>Sandor, “The Power of Rumour(s) in International Interventions.”

<sup>10</sup>Fioratta, “Conspiracy Theorizing as Political Practice.”

Guinea about electoral fraud were viewed as ‘paranoid’ or ignorant of the electoral process by outside observers, but in fact were founded in Guineans’ acute awareness of the country’s past political realities: the lived experience of authoritarian repression, colonial subjugation and the jostling for power among military forces, politicians and colonial powers.

The dismissal of locally produced narratives of conflict as illegitimate ‘conspiracy theories’ by international observers is a tension that Perera also observes in the Democratic Republic of Congo.<sup>11</sup> Drawing on over a decade of interviews and ethnographic fieldwork, she argues that instead of dismissing these narratives outright, researchers of conflict and peace-keeping practitioners should view them as analytically useful in elucidating some of the failures of peacekeeping efforts.

The rumours, conspiracy theories and disinformation circulating in CAR are tied with the country’s political history, including the legacy of colonialism and successive regional and UN intervention forces over the past 22 years.<sup>12</sup> In its 10 years presence in CAR, MINUSCA has seen some successes in supporting peace and stability in the country – but it has also faced recurrent challenges to its credibility, including sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA) by peacekeepers and failures to protect civilians from violence.<sup>13</sup> A survey conducted by Harvard and the UN in February 2020 found that MINUSCA was the least trusted security actor in CAR, with 42% of respondents expressing trust in the peacekeepers, compared to the Central African security forces (police: 47%; gendarmerie: 54%; and CAR armed forces: 58%).<sup>14</sup>

For its part, France carries the legacy of colonialism and a post-colonial history of military interventions in the country, including allegations of human rights violations by French troops in 2013–14. Maiangwa and Suleiman argue that ‘France’s reputation of interfering in the sociopolitical and economic affairs of the CAR and its method of imposing unelected dictators on the country has seriously damaged its image as a benign peacekeeper’.<sup>15</sup> CAR expert Louisa Lombard noted that ‘most [Central African] people fall back on France as the ultimate author of CAR’s immiseration’.<sup>16</sup> That France has a central role in shaping MINUSCA’s mandate on the Security Council as ‘penholder’ has contributed to the view of intertwined and

<sup>11</sup>Perera, “Methodology of the Excluded.”

<sup>12</sup>Prior to MINUSCA, CAR hosted regional peacekeepers of the CEMAC (FOMUC), ECCAS (MICOPAX) and AU (MISCA), going back to 2002.

<sup>13</sup>External Independent Review Panel of the United Nations Response to Allegations of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse in the Central African Republic, “Report of an Independent Review on Sexual Exploitation.” And on PoC: Cinq-Mars, “Too Little, Too Late”; and the 2017 Independent Special Investigation on CAR led by Brigadier General Fernand Amoussou.

<sup>14</sup>Pham et al., “Peace, Justice and Security Polls,” 9.

<sup>15</sup>Maiangwa and Suleiman, “Liberal Peace Intervention in the Central African Republic.”

<sup>16</sup>Lombard, *State of Rebellion*.

mutually reinforcing French and UN peacekeeping interests. These factors combined provide fertile ground for rumours, conspiracy theories and speculation on UN motives and objectives in CAR.

The appeal of unofficial, alternative narratives is heightened by the insufficiency of the UN's own explanations of its failures, and the emphasis on technocratic, 'unreflexive empiricism'.<sup>17</sup> UN peacekeeping staff often argue that negative perceptions belie a lack of understanding of peacekeeping mandates; or that the primary responsibility for the protection of civilians or accountability for SEA are the host state or troop/police contributing country respectively – thus shifting the onus on other actors. UN investigations into misconduct or protection failures generally focus on functional, technical fixes (capabilities, training, logistics, resources, etc.). As Picco and Vircoulon note, investigation results are rarely shared with the most affected communities, and 'this lack of accountability and transparency only fuels Central Africans' distrust of MINUSCA and increases rumours and speculation about the causes of its passivity'.<sup>18</sup> Common tropes include that interveners are there for personal gain, not to support peace and security, or that they are on the side of the rebels.<sup>19</sup> As Lombard notes, Central African and international perspective brings 'different frames of interpretation and suspicion to the process of figuring out what is going on'.<sup>20</sup> This epistemological clash ultimately hampers missions' efforts to counter rumours with 'official' versions of events, as the latter are not trusted as authoritative sources of truth.

## 2.2. Complexity and Assemblage Theories and Peacekeeping Operations

Recent academic work has called separately for the application of complexity and assemblage theories to understand how UN peacekeeping operations affect change,<sup>21</sup> and their myriad multidirectional effects.<sup>22</sup> Day and Hunt argue that conventional UN peacekeeping doctrine has been dominated by linear models for change which assume that the input of mission activities (patrolling, trainings, etc.) can lead to direct positive result, such as improved security. They argue for an alternative approach that sees peacekeeping operations as 'nodes within a complex system, rather than external actors attempting to generate an output'.<sup>23</sup> For its part, an assemblage lens offers the possibility, as has been argued by Albrecht et al, to understand the

<sup>17</sup>Sandor, "The Power of Rumour(s) in International Interventions."

<sup>18</sup>Picco and Vircoulon, "La MINUSCA en Centrafrique."

<sup>19</sup>Lombard, *State of Rebellion*; Autesserre, *Peaceland*.

<sup>20</sup>Lombard, *State of Rebellion*, 230.

<sup>21</sup>Day and Hunt, "A Perturbed Peace"; de Coning, "Adaptive Peace Operations."

<sup>22</sup>Albrecht et al., "From Peacekeeping Missions"; Albrecht, "Assembling Community Policing."

<sup>23</sup>Day and Hunt, "A Perturbed Peace," 9.

multidirectional, dynamic power relations between actors, knowledges, technologies, norms and values that constitute the peacekeeping enterprise. Applying an assemblage lens surfaces the agency of a diverse set of actors and 'actants' involved in peacekeeping, from state to non-state entities and technology elements, and sheds light on the interplay of power, resources and capacities involved.<sup>24</sup>

These theoretical frameworks share some central tenets. Moving beyond traditional IR ontologies such as state/non-state, international/national, both frameworks acknowledge a heterogeneous set of elements that form a complex system or assemblage. Both theories posit that assemblages or systems transform and reorganize because of the interdependency, feedback processes and interplay between structure and detail, people and things.<sup>25</sup> As such, both theories understand systems as self-organizing and dynamic. They also can understand peacekeeping not as a closed-circuit system, but one that is multidirectional. Seen from this perspective, strategic information operations are an additional element that impact and shape the constituent parts of the peacekeeping assemblage. The case studies described here are in themselves assemblages that bring together discourse, technology and people to produce knowledge about peacekeeping that is imbued with power.

### 3. Methods

This article takes an inductive, mixed-methods approach, integrating analyses of interview data and social media data from public Facebook pages and groups. First, to characterize the CAR information landscape, the first author conducted nine individual, virtual interviews with current or former UN officials, researchers and bloggers working in or on CAR. Interviewees were provided an information form containing the parameters for the voluntary, confidential interview. Their names are withheld by mutual agreement. Interviewees were asked open-ended questions related to the trends and patterns of disinformation targeting MINUSCA; pathways for propagation and amplification; and the impact on the UN's work and perspectives for the future. Interview scripts were systematically coded into themes using an inductive approach that integrated open coding to surface emergent themes, closed-coding to note where those themes appeared across interviews, and memo-writing to capture meanings and connections between themes. The interviewees' views informed analysis of how the peacekeeping assemblage was impacted by strategic information operations. Findings from these interviews are reported in the following sections and

<sup>24</sup>Albrecht et al., "From Peacekeeping Missions."

<sup>25</sup>Deleuze spoke of the assemblage's 'only unity being that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy.' Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 69.

provide additional insight into the information environment in CAR regarding MINUSCA.

Complementing the interviews, we conducted a grounded, interpretive, mixed-method analysis of data collected from social media. Our methodological approach emerged within the field of crisis informatics<sup>26</sup> and has been applied to the study of online rumours<sup>27</sup> and the spread of disinformation.<sup>28</sup> This method adapts Kathy Charmaz's approach to grounded theory to the study of digital trace data, applying a qualitative coding and memoing process as an interpretive exercise to orient the research team to the primary rumours and tropes present in the data<sup>29</sup> and complementing those qualitative analyses with high-level, quantitative analyses of rumour volume, network structure and other 'signatures' over time. Following a recommendation from Charmaz, these quantitative analyses and visualizations become artefacts for interpretation within the broader inductive research process.

For our social media analysis, we collected a dataset of 8,421 posts made to public Facebook pages and groups that mentioned MINUSCA during the months of November 2021 and January to March 2022. To inform and guide our qualitative analysis of specific social media posts, we created quantitative artefacts – or 'signatures' – of broader patterns in the data. We first constructed temporal plots to understand how discourse evolved over time and identify salient moments. [Figure 1](#) shows a weekly time series of posts on public Facebook pages and groups mentioning MINUSCA. There were three spikes in the number of mentions of MINUSCA during the period between July 2021 and March 2022. Through our reading of the posts, we determined that each of the spikes corresponded to a single 'incident.' The spike in November 2021 related to the Egyptian FPU shooting; the spike in February 2022 related to the arrest of four MINUSCA personnel at M'poko airport for an alleged assassination attempt on President Touadéra; and the spike in March 2022 related to the confiscation of Senegalese contingent owned equipment.<sup>30</sup> While the alleged assassination attempt generated the largest amount of content among public Facebook pages and groups, we found that verifiable information on the facts of the incident was scant at the time we conducted the research. The other two peaks offered the possibility of examining disinformation targeting police and military units, and the difference between spontaneous and seemingly planned strategic information operations. For these reasons, we opted not to select the alleged

<sup>26</sup>Palen and Anderson, "Crisis Informatics."

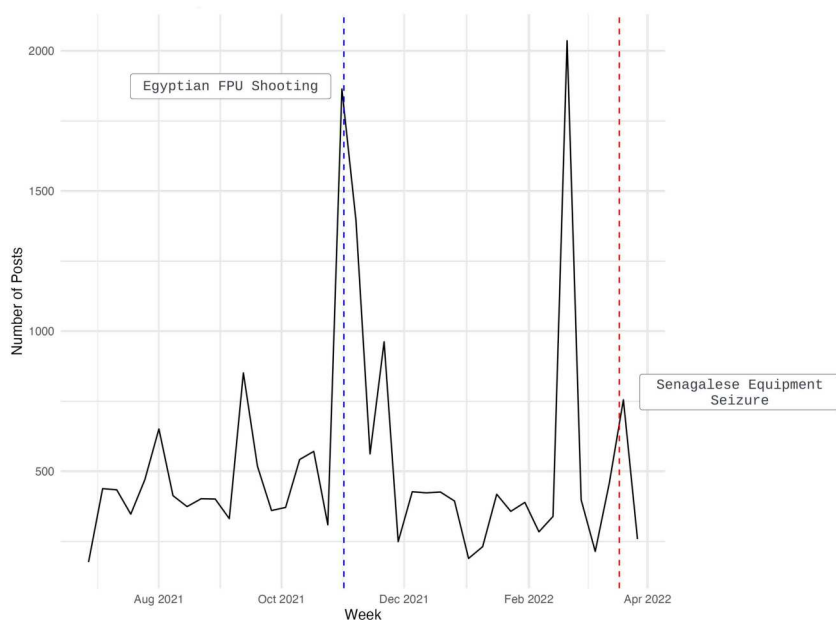
<sup>27</sup>Maddock et al., "Characterizing Online Rumoring Behavior."

<sup>28</sup>Starbird et al., "Disinformation as Collaborative Work."

<sup>29</sup>Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

<sup>30</sup>See <https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/02/1112532> and <https://www.voanews.com/a/un-rejects-central-african-republic-suspicions-against-peacekeepers-/6455865.html>.





**Figure 1.** Weekly timeseries of posts on public Facebook pages and groups mentioning MINUSCA. Annotated lines indicate timing of the two incidents analysed in the case studies. Note that the spike in posts at the end of February are related to an incident regarding an alleged assassination attempt that is not covered in this article.

assassination attempt as a case study, given that we had significantly fewer reference points to consult in our construction of the narrative arc of the incident.

We analysed the dataset in two ways. First, the research team closely read and analysed the most viral (top 10 commented and top 50 shared posts) for each month, highlighting the main themes and narratives that surfaced in the data. For example, we logged recurring content, such as images and videos that showed up multiple times and identified several recurring narratives, such as ‘MINUSCA is arming rebels,’ ‘MINUSCA is exploiting resources,’ and ‘a particular actor [e.g. Russia, France], is destabilizing CAR.’ Second, we coded a further 1,177 and 608 posts for the first and second case studies, representing all the posts captured in the dataset during the time-frames of 1–5 November 2021 and 18–23 March 2022 respectively, bringing the total to 2,225 closely read and coded MINUSCA-related posts.

Next, we constructed network visualizations for both incidents that highlighted the spread of top links, both on Facebook and off Facebook, during the time periods relevant to each incident. Using the open-source software Gephi, we visualized the shares of URLs made by Facebook pages and within Facebook groups in our dataset for the time periods corresponding

to the two case studies. We used a force-directed layout, Force Atlas, to draw the network.<sup>31</sup> In this type of layout, nodes (the points on the graph) are charged with a repulsive force that drives them apart, while edges are subjected to an attractive force that draws them closer. The result of this layout is a graph where nodes that are more closely associated with one another are clustered more closely together. To integrate these graphs into our analyses of the case studies, we followed the steps of visual network analysis (VNA) as described by Venturni et al.: (1) the application of the force-directed layout to the dataset; (2) sizing and labelling nodes according to their importance; and (3) colouring nodes by category.<sup>32</sup> Through this process, we produced network graphs that visualize the relationships between two types of entities: Facebook pages or groups in our dataset (coloured pink) and URLs (coloured blue) made by a page or posted within a particular group.

Because VNA often involves a great deal of iteration and ‘a continuous switch between data and visualization, selecting and filtering, zooming and panning’, its results are often difficult to replicate. Venturni et al. thus caution against relying on network maps for hypothesis confirmation but argue they are well suited for interpretative analyses of complex phenomena because ‘their visual ambiguity mirrors some of the empirical ambiguity of the phenomena they represent.’<sup>33</sup> In line with this perspective, we use VNA to highlight that strategic information operations are rarely confined to a single platform, as actors often mobilize content from across the online information ecosystem.<sup>34</sup> We also used these network graphs to inform further analysis of coordinated posting behaviour across Facebook groups and pages, which we uncover and discuss through manual investigation.

### 3.1. Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, our reliance on CrowdTangle for access to Facebook data limited our ability to make conclusions about MINUSCA-related Facebook content that circulated outside of the most popular public pages and groups. CrowdTangle only tracked content from public pages and groups, and only automatically indexed pages with more than 25,000 likes and groups with over 95,000 members. This meant that the data was not representative of all the content related to MINUSCA that circulated on Facebook.

Because we relied on open-source social media data, we were also unable to attribute the spread of disinformation narratives online to a particular

<sup>31</sup>Jacomy, et al., “ForceAtlas2, a Continuous Graph Layout Algorithm.”

<sup>32</sup>Venturini, Jacomy and Jensen, “What Do We See When We Look at Networks.”

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>Wilson and Starbird, “Cross-Platform Information Operations.”

actor or group of actors. This is a common limitation of open-source research relying on social media data. Though our findings show patterns of coordinated amplification of anti-MINUSCA narratives in CAR that align with certain state actors' objectives, clear attribution to a specific actor would require access to technical signatures, such as IP addresses linked to certain Facebook accounts, that were not available to us.

## 4. The Information Landscape in CAR

CAR has two television networks, some 60 capital-based print media and several dozen radio stations.<sup>35</sup> The lack of revenue from advertising or subscriptions means that journalists receive low or no steady remuneration, contributing to clientelism and influence trafficking, and exposing them to manipulation,<sup>36</sup> making the media a marketplace for self-promotion.<sup>37</sup> This, together with weak professional training, means that traditional media in CAR feeds on rumours and is of dubious accuracy.<sup>38</sup> In a similar manner, participation in demonstrations is a payable service.<sup>39</sup>

At 7.1% as of early 2022, internet penetration in CAR was weak during the period examined. DataReportal indicated that there were 137.6 thousand social media users in CAR, of which 95% of total users were on Facebook. The reach of social media content is likely wider than these penetration numbers suggest. The relationship between social and traditional media is dynamic: material from Facebook finds its way onto radio or print media, while, as the following section shows, articles from print media propagate and mutate on Facebook.<sup>40</sup> There is also cross-over between public and private social media networks, and stories from social media spread by word-of-mouth.<sup>41</sup> Thus, Facebook is an integral part of a cross-platform information ecosystem.

### 4.1. CAR: A 'Laboratory' for Influence Operations

CAR observers noted a shift in the Central African media environment – in infrastructure, actors and content – from 2018 onwards, after the signature of a military cooperation agreement between CAR and Russia that enabled the deployment of Russian 'military instructors' to CAR.<sup>42</sup> Their arrival

<sup>35</sup><https://rsf.org/en/country/central-african-republic> (last accessed 9 April 2024).

<sup>36</sup>Interview, 30 April 2022; see also <https://rsf.org/en/country/central-african-republic> (last accessed 9 April 2024).

<sup>37</sup>Jendoubi, "Panorama de la presse centrafricaine."

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Picco and Vircoulon, "La MINUSCA en Centrafrique."

<sup>40</sup>Interview, 15 July 2022.

<sup>41</sup>Interviews, 24 May 2022, 15 July 2022.

<sup>42</sup>Interviews, 26 and 29 April 2022, 3 May 2022; Jendoubi, "Panorama de la presse centrafricaine."

marked the start of a multi-pronged campaign to extend and cement Russian influence, leading to descriptions of CAR as the laboratory for Russian influence operations in Africa.<sup>43</sup> Actions included sponsorship of *Radio Lengo Songo* – known in Bangui as ‘la radio russe’ – which airs content in CAR’s second official language, Sango;<sup>44</sup> payment and authorship of pro-Russian articles posted by local bloggers;<sup>45</sup> and the establishment of networks of trolls on social media run by freelance and paid content producers.<sup>46</sup>

Western countries have also engaged in information warfare in CAR, both covert and overt. In 2019 and 2020, Facebook removed two influence operations from its platform that primarily targeted CAR and other countries in the region. The company attributed the first operation to ‘individuals associated with the French military’, and the second to individuals associated with the *Internet Research Agency* (IRA), the infamous Russian troll farm backed by the now presumed dead Russian financier, Yevgeny Prigozhin.<sup>47</sup> In what is perhaps the first such publicly disclosed case of duelling influence operations, both operations clashed through posts, comments and memes, often attempting to discredit and expose one another. Public discursive skirmishes between France and CAR have also taken place.<sup>48</sup>

Influence operations have also targeted MINUSCA and its peacebuilding work, drawing on infrastructure comprising troll farms, public figures who amplify narratives, and communications structures.<sup>49</sup> In its 2021 report, the UN Panel of Experts on CAR noted two developments that shed light on the actors and operators behind information manipulation targeting MINUSCA. The Panel obtained a weekly social media workplan for 21–25 December 2020 of the *Bureau d’information et de la communication* (BIC), an office located in the CAR Presidency. MINUSCA’s main effort at the time was to support the preparation and delivery of presidential elections in CAR on 27 December 2020. One of the workplan’s weekly objectives explicitly called for the dissemination of accusations that undermined

<sup>43</sup>Audinet, “Le Lion, l’Ours et les.”

<sup>44</sup>Schipani, Pilling, and Adeoye, “How Russia’s Propaganda Machine is Reshaping the African Narrative.”

<sup>45</sup>Interview, 29 April 2022, 24 May 2022; Jendoubi, “Panorama de la presse centrafricaine,” 17. A panoply of initiatives to burnish Russian image have been funded, including beauty pageants; statues in Bangui depicting Russian soldiers protecting Central African civilians; and a 2021 feature-length film glorifying Russian military support to CAR ‘Tourista,’ portraying UN peacekeepers as layabouts, which has been screened across CAR to audiences of thousands.

<sup>46</sup>Interviews, 26 and 29 April 2022, 25 May 2022 and 15 July 2022; Marchal, “Touadéra Tilts to Moscow.” A documentary by TV-5 Monde shows an interview of a former worker of a troll factory who explains how weekly talking points would be issued for action.

<sup>47</sup>Graphika and Stanford Internet Observatory, “More-Troll Kombat.”

<sup>48</sup>President Macron declared on 30 May 2021 that CAR President Touadéra was ‘hostage to the Wagner Group’ which he asserted was ‘taking over mines, and by the same token, the political system’ in CAR; Valade, “Macron juge le président Touadéra otage du groupe Wagner.” RFI, 31 May 2021. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20210531-centrafrique-macron-juge-le-pr%C3%A9sident-touad%C3%A9ra-otage-du-groupe-wagner>.

<sup>49</sup>Interviews, 24 May 2022, 15 July 2022.

MINUSCA's role: 'Strongly denounce the double game of MINUSCA, which is allowing armed groups to advance in order to prevent the elections from being held on 27 December 2020'.<sup>50</sup> The Panel further documented a well-orchestrated, targeted disinformation campaign in February 2020 against four MINUSCA staff that had been facilitating intercommunal dialogue in the PK5 neighbourhood of Bangui. The campaign 'included the use of fictitious local NGOs and social media accounts to share messages as widely as possible, and access to print and online media,' and was, according to the Panel, coordinated behind the scenes by an adviser at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Labelled 'genocidal mercenaries' and accused of supporting armed groups,<sup>51</sup> the MINUSCA staff were relocated.

The strategic information operations illustrated here took place in the context of what some CAR observers have described as an 'authoritarian turn'.<sup>52</sup> While space does not allow for a detailed accounting of this progression, political and civic space shrunk as the government paved the way towards the 2023 constitutional referendum approving the removal of presidential term limits. Numerous cases of intimidation of civil society activists, political parties and journalists by national security and pro-government militia were reported.<sup>53</sup> Speaking in April 2022, one interviewee said: 'I don't feel safe now. It happened after I wrote about the change to the constitution. The same day four armed men from the presidency came next to my home. My neighbours thankfully didn't tell them where I was.'<sup>54</sup> Another remarked: 'The fear is really palpable. Everyone knows that it's Wagner you have to watch out for. It became really different by April 2021. Russians were stopping people on the street and going through people's phones.'<sup>55</sup>

## 5. Case Studies

Here, we set out the narrative evolution of the two case studies. Both share the same metanarrative: that MINUSCA did not serve the interest of Central Africans, was operating against the government and that CAR had to break free from UN iniquity. The first case study on the shooting of a bus carrying personnel of an Egyptian Formed Police Unit (FPU), in November 2021, grew out of an unplanned incident; the second centred on the seizure of Senegalese military equipment in March 2022, and appeared to have involved a degree of premeditation and planning.

<sup>50</sup>CAR Panel of Expert report, 25 June 2021, S/2021/569, 180.

<sup>51</sup>CAR Panel of Expert report, 8 July 2020, S/2020/662, 13–4.

<sup>52</sup>Marchal, "Centrafrique: La Fabrique d'un Autoritarisme"; Bruckmeier, "CAR: Touadéra's Third-Term Plans."

<sup>53</sup>Freedom House, "Central African Republic." <https://freedomhouse.org/country/central-african-republic/freedom-world/2022> (last accessed 12 September 2024).

<sup>54</sup>Interview, 15 July 2022.

<sup>55</sup>Interview, 29 April 2022.

### 5.1. Case Study 1: Egyptian FPU Shooting Incident

According to the UN, around 3.30 pm Bangui time on 1 November 2021, the Central African Presidential Guard opened fire on a bus transporting members of a newly deployed Egyptian FPU, just 120 metres from the presidential residence. The FPU was part of a periodic rotation, in line with the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) signed between the UN and the CAR government. While *en route* from the airport to the Egyptian FPU camp, one of the three unarmed convoy vehicles mistakenly approached the outer security perimeter of the presidential residence. When the vehicle attempted to turn around near a Presidential Guard checkpoint, the guards opened fire without warning, injuring eight FPU members. A 16-year-old girl was also injured and subsequently died, with widespread but unsubstantiated reports suggesting she was struck by the UN vehicle during its retreat.

In the days following the incident, both MINUSCA and the UN Secretary-General condemned the attack on the FPU vehicle,<sup>56</sup> while then-UN Special Representative, Mankeur Ndiaye, called for the immediate arrest of the perpetrators on X.<sup>57</sup> MINUSCA also held a press conference and conducted a Board of Inquiry to investigate the incident.

#### 5.1.1. Evolution of the Disinformation Narrative

Initially, the incident was reported factually by international and central African news outlets in multiple languages, including French, English, Russian, Spanish, Portuguese, Turkish, Kinyarwanda and Indonesian. The story then evolved into speculation about MINUSCA's 'true motives', primarily through three framings.

The first framing asserted that the peacekeepers were caught taking photographs of the presidential residence, citing multiple anonymous security and government sources. This frame was amplified by self-styled 'Pan-Africanist' Cameroonian influencer Franklin Nyamsi, who discredited both MINUSCA's account and that of the 'neo-colonialist media' through several posts.<sup>58</sup> The CAR Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sylvie Baïpo-Temon,

<sup>56</sup>United Nations, "Les casques bleus de la MINUSCA restent déterminés à accomplir leur mission en RCA." <https://minusca.unmissions.org/les-casques-bleus-de-la-minusca-restant-d%C3%A9termin%C3%A9s-%C3%A0-accomplir-leur-mission-en-rca>; United Nations, "La MINUSCA condamne fermement une attaque contre ses Casques bleus." <https://minusca.unmissions.org/la-minusca-condamne-fermement-une-attaque-contre-ses-casques-bleus>; United Nations, "Déclaration attribuable au Porte-parole du Secrétaire général sur la République centrafricaine." <https://minusca.unmissions.org/d%C3%A9claration-attribuable-au-porte-parole-du-s%C3%A9cr%C3%A9taire-g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral-sur-la-r%C3%A9publique-centrafricaine-13>.

<sup>57</sup>Mankeur Ndiaye, "Les auteurs de cette attaque criminelle contre les casques bleus doivent immédiatement être mis aux arrêts #Minusca." *Twitter*, 3 November 2021. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231008125850/https://twitter.com/ndiayemankeur/status/1455882525805584384>.

<sup>58</sup>Franklin Nyamsi, born in Cameroon, is perhaps the most prominent of those who participated in both stories. A self-described 'pan-Africanist' who has criticized French policy in Africa extensively (while rejecting the 'anti-France' label) across various social media platforms with a combined following of

also echoed these allegations, legitimizing and amplifying the narrative.<sup>59</sup> A second framing, first shared by the page *Libérons l'Afrique*, suggested that the incident was part of a series of deliberate coup attempts in African countries including the CAR, Mali, Libya and Côte d'Ivoire, orchestrated by France, the US and the UN, in collaboration with armed rebels.<sup>60</sup> A third narrative, first propagated by the page 236 *Actu* and further disseminated by other pages including the Iranian state-controlled media outlet *Press TV Français* and the Facebook page *Libérons l'Afrique*,<sup>61</sup> accused the blue helmets of attempting to breach the Presidential Palace to assassinate President Touadéra.

By the evening of the next day, 2 November, more visual content related to the incident was posted, serving as a powerful tool to reinforce the three framings. Photos of injured Egyptian FPU members and their vehicle were widely shared online, providing the 'evidence' for the framings (Figure 2). Three new images also appeared afterwards: one image depicted an individual holding bullets, and others showed military personnel handling a casket full of ammunition, alleged to be found in the FPU vehicle (Figure 3).<sup>62</sup> These images were used to suggest that the blue helmets harboured malicious intentions, with many comments to the post expressing approval for the

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over 700,000. Franklin Nyamsi Wa Kamerun, "LA PENSÉE UNIQUE SUR LA CRISE ..." Facebook, 2 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/franklin.nyamsi1/posts/pfbid02LLNNixJT5HEMDT1Q8XDNFWsM6PV9zMTdRyBUG1TxrhYeJ9XpsrzKREv6dQcUejgl>; Franklin Nyamsi Wa Kamerun, "ERREUR D'ITINÉRAIRE? ON CONNAÎT ÇA ! ..." Facebook, 2 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/franklin.nyamsi1/posts/pfbid0fjZEGfbVujbSfGgFKfa98WESsceRMXstrDbyDCwij4N3mMdnpodpqKSm7QPf9Q6l>.

<sup>59</sup>Kossi Salomon, "Centrafrique Emergente Avec TOUADERA (CET). CFCF. A Écouter et Partager Au Maximum Pour Dénoncer La Mission Diabolique de La Minusca Qui Na Trop Duré Ils Doivent Quitter Not ..." Facebook, 4 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/736323783626241/permalink/971792193412731>; Lego Ti Beafrika, "#Centrafrique: Le Ministre Des #Centrafriques Étrangères Sylvie #Baipo Demande à La #MINUSCA ..." Facebook, 3 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/100885705543537/posts/184403783858395>; 236 Actu, "Extrait de La Déclaration de La Ministre Centrafricaine Des Affaires Étrangères Sylvie BAIPO TEMON ..." Facebook, 4 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/101280878775971/posts/220195570217834>; Franklin Nyamsi Wa Kamerun, "Extrait de La Déclaration de La Ministre Centrafricaine Des Affaires Étrangères Sylvie BAIPO TEMON ..." Facebook, 2 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/franklin.nyamsi1/posts/pfbid02xirQF1vrR9QJqMY6cUg4nwtjYnJ7daDCnyZcvZAp5wNkUHpwpskCB4SmabE32P9Yl>.

<sup>60</sup>Libérons l'Afrique, "En Afrique, Quand Des Rebelles Où Terroristes Tentent de Faire Un COUP-D'ETAT et n'arrivent Pas Qui Se Transforme En Rébellion ..." Facebook, 2 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/posts/173140905022240>.

<sup>61</sup>236 Actu, "Bangui 1er Novembre 2021–(Ndjoni Sango): Aujourd'hui 1er Novembre, de Nombreux Habitants de Bangui Ont Assisté à Un Échange de Tirs Entre ..." Facebook, 1 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/101280878775971/posts/218694553701269>. Press TV Français, "RCA | Tentative Ratée de l'assassinat Du Président ?! ..." Facebook, 2 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/102925205253581/posts/207593924786708>; Libérons l'Afrique, "CENTRAFRIQUE : Les Casques Bleus de La MINUSCA Ont Tenté d'assassiner Le Président Centrafricain Touadéra ..." Facebook, 3 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/posts/173430698326594>.

<sup>62</sup>Streetcar with Dante, "CENTRAFRIQUE: Tentative de COUP-D'ETAT Organisée Par La France et l'ONU (MINUSCA) ..." Facebook, 3 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/118440913382589/posts/374933147733363>; Kotazo Baba Keté, "RCA NA DOUNZOU (RND CF CF) Bangui Kota Kodro Ti Bé Africa ..." Facebook, 2 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1690995597808239/permalink/3076857489222036>.





**Figure 2.** Post from Diallo alifa adaptateur combining the 'coup d'état' narrative with the pictures of the injured blue helmets and their vehicle.





**Figure 3.** Additional pictures posted on Facebook in the context of the shooting incident: picture from Kotazo Baba Keté (left), pictures from Streetcar with Dante (middle and right).

Presidential Guard's actions and non sequiturs calling on Russia to extend its support.<sup>63</sup>

MINUSCA's statements on 2 and 3 November condemned the deliberate and unjustified attack and offered condolences to the victim's family, outlining the Mission's efforts to investigate the incident. They received minimal attention, and the Mission faced criticism for its perceived lack of sympathy and an inadequate response to the incident.<sup>64</sup>

Another set of images – graphic photos of the sixteen-year-old victim – began circulating on 4 November, further shared by other accounts to illustrate the human cost of the incident and the callousness of the peacekeepers. These did not circulate as widely as the images depicting the wounded blue helmets.<sup>65</sup> A video testimonial was also posted, initially by *236 Magazine* on the same day, in which the mother of the victim asserted that the Egyptian FPU members had indeed photographed and filmed the Presidential Residence, leading to the encounter with the Presidential Guard.<sup>66</sup>

On 4 November, the UN Secretary-General issued an official statement condemning the attack on UN peacekeepers.<sup>67</sup> Commentary on this

<sup>63</sup>Diallo alifa adaptateur, "INFO DIRECT Centrafrique CF [Tentative de Coup d'État Pour La France et l'ONU]..." *Facebook*, 3 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/407834739647269/posts/1326754124421988>.

<sup>64</sup>United Nations, "La MINUSCA condamne fermement une attaque contre ses Casques bleus." MINUSCA, 2 November 2021. <https://minusca.unmissions.org/la-minusca-condamne-fermement-une-attaque-contre-ses-casques-bleus>; MINUSCA, "Les Casques Bleus de La Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée Des Nations Unies Pour La Stabilisation En République Centrafricaine..." *Facebook*, 3 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100064730887023/search/?q=LES%20CASQUES%20BLEUS%20DE%20LA%20MINUSCA%20RESTENT%20D%C3%89TERMIN%C3%89S%20%C3%80%20ACCOMPLIR%20LEUR%20MISSION%20EN%20RCA>.

<sup>65</sup>Tribune Des Jeunes Pour La Nouvel Centrafrique, "A VOUS de JUGER Voici Les Faits, d'un Côté Notre Sœur Morte..." *Facebook*, 4 November 2021. [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0TWztLDefVHK2YUkKWRyP2KX3DyKeXjMaoWjLEyycMafjct7sqmNnaFaQvJHLgl&id=1576683282646583](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0TWztLDefVHK2YUkKWRyP2KX3DyKeXjMaoWjLEyycMafjct7sqmNnaFaQvJHLgl&id=1576683282646583).

<sup>66</sup>236 Magazine, "CENTRAFRIQUE: Après Les Communiqués de La MINUSCA et Celui Du Gouvernement de La Centrafrique..." *Facebook*, 4 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=652370285890099>.

<sup>67</sup>United Nations, "Déclaration attribuable au Porte-parole du Secrétaire général sur la République centrafricaine," MINUSCA, 4 November 2021. <https://minusca.unmissions.org/d%C3%A9claration>.

statement expressed strong anti-UN sentiment, berating the organization for a perceived lack of sympathy for the victim and their family. A day later, CAR Foreign Affairs Minister Baïpo-Temon again publicly addressed the incident, adopting a stronger stance on the UN and its actions. The Minister asserted that ‘the different statements that have been produced have not taken into account the gravity of the situation, which is the loss of an individual,’<sup>68</sup> reinforcing the perception of the Mission as indifferent and unremorseful. In the same radio interview, reacting to a comment by a French diplomat, she added ‘When you see that, at the international level, your country is presented as a country of nothingness, whose authorities are just sitting at their desks and taking orders from other people ... They say things that are not the reality.’ Following these remarks, *RFI* shared an article online, highlighting the escalating tensions between MINUSCA and the CAR government over the incident, garnering over 400 divisive and inflammatory comments accusing France of ‘backing the insurgents’ through its ‘neo-colonialist media outlets’ like *RFI* and *France 24* (Figure 4).<sup>69</sup>

On 5 November, the Facebook account of the Prime Minister’s office posted images of then-Prime Minister Henri-Marie Dondra visiting the victim’s family,<sup>70</sup> which was also posted through live video, amassing over 44,000 views.<sup>71</sup> Together, these two posts garnered over 500 shares and elicited some 800 comments expressing sympathy for the victim and their family and celebrating the solidarity and patriotism of the CAR government. While the government was seen as acting in solidarity with its people, the UN continued to be portrayed as distant and unconcerned with local suffering. (Interviewees indicated that MINUSCA representatives had visited the victim’s mother to offer condolences and support.) In response to these developments, a small group of demonstrators gathered near the Egyptian FPU camp on 6 November, demanding justice for the victim and carrying signs that labelled MINUSCA as murderers.

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attribuable-au-porte-parole-du-secr%C3%A9taire-g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral-sur-la-r%C3%A9publique-centrafricaine-13.

<sup>68</sup>Radio Ndeke Luka, “L’action des casques bleus a suscité la réaction des éléments de la garde présidentielle,” 5 November 2021. <https://www.radiondekeluka.org/actualites/securite/37692-l-action-des-casques-bleus-a-suscite-la-reaction-des-elements-de-la-garde-presidentielle.html>.

<sup>69</sup>RFI, “La Tension Monte Entre Le Gouvernement et Les Nations Unies (ONU) ...” *Facebook*, 5 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/67334499441/posts/10159026289354442>.

<sup>70</sup>Primature RCA Officiel, “LE PREMIER MINISTRE ASSISTE LA FAMILLE DE LA FILLE MORTE DANS L’ACCIDENT ...” *Facebook*, 5 November 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/112930940447962/posts/42544839186569>.

<sup>71</sup>Banguiwod Media, “Une Fille de 16ans Tuée Par Un Véhicule de La MINUSCA à Bangui, Centrafrique ...” *Facebook*, 5 November 2021. [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=395171552248288](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=395171552248288).



**Figure 4.** Comments on Facebook regarding the statement of UN Secretary-General Guterres: post on the MINUSCA Facebook page (left), post on AGORA Actualités (right).

## 5.2. Case Study 2: Seizure of Senegalese Contingent-Owned-Equipment

In this case study, a routine deployment of peacekeeper equipment – that of MINUSCA’s incoming Senegalese military unit – was portrayed as the illegal trafficking of anti-personnel mines for the benefit of Central African armed groups. The contingent’s deployment, part of an increase in uniformed personnel authorized by UN Security Council resolution 2566 (2021), was in line with the SOFA; both documents establish the legal basis for MINUSCA’s presence in CAR. The Central African Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been formally notified on 1 February 2022 of the arrival of the equipment in 50 trucks with a load list, via the Cameroon/CAR border. Two trucks carrying four containers with ammunition were seized by CAR customs authorities and deviated to Bangui, where they arrived on 17 March.

On the morning of 18 March, the Gendarmerie opened the four containers, alleging that they contained prohibited missiles and munitions. After checking against the load list, the containers were resealed, but not before photos were taken by unknown individuals present and posted online. On 21 March, MINUSCA posted on Facebook that the four containers carrying MINUSCA military materiel had been released.<sup>72</sup> Despite the release of the cargo, influencers and media outlets on Facebook claimed that the shipment was evidence of a covert plot, driven by France and the US, to illegally traffic

<sup>72</sup>MINUSCA, Facebook, 21 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=336937405140620&set=a.293153419519019>; UN internal documents and interviews. The first three outlets referenced have reportedly received Russian financial support, according to Dukhan, “Central African Republic.”

anti-personnel mines and other weapons into CAR to supply anti-government armed groups.

### 5.2.1. A Narrative arc in Four Phases

The first post appeared several hours after the containers were opened on 18 March. The post claimed that a cache of weapons belonging to MINUSCA's Senegalese contingent was seized, and that the CAR authorities had not been informed. The news soon took off with a video of CAR soldiers opening the containers, garnering 30,000 views and over 700 shares and some 100 comments.<sup>73</sup> Comments expressed disappointment with Senegal and the MINUSCA head of mission – also Senegalese – and called on MINUSCA to leave the country. The next morning, an article in the CAR newspaper *Le Potentiel Centrafricain*, asserted that the Gendarmerie had unmasked a plan proving that MINUSCA was prolonging the conflict instead of keeping the peace. In a clear show of double standards, it asserted, MINUSCA was arming rebels in violation of the arms embargo it had imposed on CAR.<sup>74</sup>

Once this framing was established, in the second phase, three narrative threads emerge that appeared to exert pressure on the government and the UN; denounce exploitation; and rally African solidarity. Twenty-four hours after the containers were opened, posts began to appear questioning why MINUSCA had not provided an explanation for what happened. This persistent message, which seemed to equate silence with culpability, culminated on 20 March with a meme from the aforementioned influencer Franklin Nyamsi. Comments in response to this meme blame President Touadéra for not being hard enough on the UN.<sup>75</sup>

In reaction to the 'proof' of MINUSCA supplying anti-personnel mines 'for terrorists to kill the CAR population', posts call for the 'total independence of CAR and Africa'.<sup>76</sup> The narrative is given a pan-African framing by an account linked to the Malian influencer Dani de Paris, which recalled that renowned pan-Africanists such as Nathalie Yamb and Franklin Nyamsi had been warning about the need for the CAR government to 'do its duties'.

<sup>73</sup>Paul Geo PGnews, "CENTRAFRIQUE Saisie, Grâce Aux Renseignements, ..." Facebook, 18 March 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=3146511308970882&id=100008361304431](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=3146511308970882&id=100008361304431); RCA\_Magazine, "Arrestation Par Les Autorités Centrafricaines de Deux Conteneurs ..." Facebook, 18 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=5133274600062815>.

<sup>74</sup>Le Potentiel Centrafricain.com, "Arrestation de Deux Camions Privés Avec 4 Conteneurs UN ..." Facebook, 19 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/1858990931081329/posts/3049598728687204>.

<sup>75</sup>Examples: 'Touadéra is a coward'; 'TOUADÉRA must move up a gear and kick them out' on Franklin Nyamsi Wa Kamerun, "On Attend Toujours de La MINUSCA ..." Facebook, 20 March 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/franklin.nyamsi1/posts/10216703499578917>.

<sup>76</sup>Original post from FB page Sire Debozar le buteur re-posted into a public group, 'recrutement', with 403.2k followers. Sire Mel, "Chers Africains Voici La Vraie Face de La Mission Des Nations. Unis En Centrafrique ..." Facebook, 19 March 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/792889944681793/permalink/998203857483733>.

Comments to this post have an anti-France, anti-Senegal (and anti-Ivory Coast) tone, draw parallels with other peacekeeping host countries, including the DRC and Mali.<sup>77</sup> Senegal and Ivory Coast are portrayed in comments as 'black French subprefects,' in a criticism of those countries' relationship with France. A third theme attacks France and the West. A post from *Libérons l'Afrique – 2 Rena Afri* asserts that the weapons were to be used in a coup against President Touadéra, and that France and the US were accomplices in this scheme, the aim of which was to remove Touadéra so that France can pillage and exploit CAR and impoverish the country.<sup>78</sup>

In a third stage of the strategic information operation, the *mise en scene* shifts from social media to the physical world, in a performative show of outrage. On 21 March, a demonstration was staged outside MINUSCA headquarters in Bangui, attended, according to UN observers, by some 80 people. During the demonstration, a letter addressed to the then head of MINUSCA, Mankeur Ndiaye, was handed by an association named *La Coordination du Réseau National pour la Sauvegarde des Acquis de la paix en Centrafrique*. The letter re-hashed the content circulating on social media. A second association, *Tôngôlô ti Bê Afrika*, posted a statement on Facebook demanding a response from the UN Secretary-General.<sup>79</sup> The statement adds a new spin: it claimed that MINUSCA was violating the terms of the SOFA, and was exploiting its diplomatic immunity to sell arms in Africa, with the aim of destabilizing the continent.

Filming and photographing the physical act of the demonstration provided a new reality, one that put wind in the sails of the fabricated story and enabled a renewed push for the disinformation narrative. The demonstration was covered in Facebook-only media outlets as well as news websites, all of which showed photos (Figure 5).

Commentary on the demonstration ensued. *Afrique Média TV*, a Cameroon-based outlet linked to Russia, posted a 77-minute video reporting on the demonstration with an interview of the Belgian far-right activist Luc Michel.<sup>80</sup> Luc Michel provided a retrospective of UN peacekeeping exploitation of Africa going back to the Congo in the 1960s, condemned the hypocrisy of the US, the UK and France, and called out the UN for being far from

<sup>77</sup>Original post from the page Dani de Paris officiel, with 78 comments, 773 shares and 1k reactions. Dani de Paris officiel, "URGENT: MINUSCA Arrestation Par..." Facebook, 19 March 2022. [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=167912928918974&id=100071008043915](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=167912928918974&id=100071008043915).

<sup>78</sup>Mouv't Panafricain des Droits des Peuples pour la Libération de L'Afrique, "URGENT CENTRAFRIQUE : Saisie à Bangui de Deux Conteneurs Remplis d'armes et d'explosifs," Facebook, 19 March 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=362459562554149>. The page changed its name from Libérons l'Afrique – 2 Rena Afri to Mouv't Panafricain des Droits des Peuples pour la Libération de L'Afrique on 22 September 2022.

<sup>79</sup>Bé-Afrik News, "CENTRAFRIQUE-DEFENSE : LE MOUVEMENT «TÔNGÔLÔ TI BÊ AFRIKA»", Facebook, 21 March 2022. <https://www.facebook.com/100064032372373/posts/338734334937643>.

<sup>80</sup>On Luc Michel and *Afrique Média TV*, see for example Weiss, Michael and Vaux, Pierre: "THE COMPANY YOU KEEP: Yevgeny Prigozhin's Influence Operations in Africa."





**Figure 5.** Coverage of the 21 March 2022 demonstration: ActuCameroon (left), Corbeaunews (right).



**Figure 6.** Stills of the Afrique Média TV video, including Luc Michel (on the right).

neutral. He rounded off by saying that ‘radicalization, confrontation is a good thing for the African people’ (Figure 6).<sup>81</sup>

An Ivorian influencer, Gbagbo Koné, loudly encouraged people to demonstrate every day against MINUSCA, to film and post it on social media. He denounced the French exploitation of the CAR and shouted ‘We will have to rise up!’ in between calls on followers to share his post.<sup>82</sup> The day of the demonstration, MINUSCA posted its first and only message on the incident. The post clarified that the containers had been returned, consultations with government counterparts held, and denounced disinformation in the press and social media. Re-posts of the MINUSCA message triggered comments criticizing MINUSCA, and reinforcing claims that the Mission was using mines.<sup>83</sup>

The final stage in the story’s evolution saw an intellectual rationalization of the incident, through a post-mortem panel discussion via Facebook Live on

<sup>81</sup> Afrique Média, “APPEL SUR LE CONTINENT CENTRAFRIQUE : LE PEUPLE EXIGE LE DÉPART DE LA MINUSCA,” Facebook, 22 March 2022, [https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch\\_permalink&v=977139273171059](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=977139273171059).

<sup>82</sup> L’Afrique d’Abord, “Urgent Urgent ... Le peuples Centrafricain demande le départ de la Minusca ...” Facebook, 22 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/109743754136226/videos/495148568935941/>.

<sup>83</sup> 236 Magazine, “La MINUSCA Communique Sur Le Dernier Événement Des Armes ...” Facebook, 21 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/181675982557938/posts/1033058394086355>.



**Figure 7.** Stills from the Facebook live video of the DBS TV panel discussion.

DBS TV, a web TV service with a Facebook and YouTube channel based in Cameroon. The falsehoods of the campaign are used as a launchpad to justify a pan-Africanist, sovereigntist and emancipatory worldview (Figure 7).

With the headline ‘*GEOPOLITICS: MINUSCA and arms trafficking in CAR – the UN, destabilizing gendarme?*’, during the 80-minute video members of the DBS TV panel provide their version of the historical and geo-political context to the trafficking of weapons by the UN. Recalling Libya, one panellist says that ‘behind humanitarian law lies a desire to interfere in internal affairs’. Citing UN missions in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire as examples, speakers argue that UN peacekeeping impedes national security forces from dealing with rebels, behind the fig leaf of dialogue. Panellists denounce France’s control of policy making in the Security Council and within missions, and western decision-making on African affairs. One speaker says: ‘The blue helmets are instruments in the service of a policy that was born without us and controls the world without us. We have the right to participate in a new world to be built.’<sup>84</sup> Another panellist calls the UN a ‘brigand

<sup>84</sup>DBS TV, “Géopolitique : Minusca et trafic d’armes en RCA. L’ONU, le “gendarme” déstabilisateur ? ...” Facebook, 23 March 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/dbstvafrique/videos/492279625704145>.

oligarchy’ and ‘united neo-nazi organization’. In wrapping up, one panellist denounces Western double standards and says that Africa is a soft target.

### *Visual Network Analysis and Online Posting Behaviour*

While in the previous section, we have reconstructed the case studies by establishing a chronology of events and highlighting which rumours emerged at specific stages, network maps in this section present an alternative view of our data that is primarily relational in nature.<sup>85</sup> This relational view is suited for answering specific questions about our data: Are certain clusters of entities on Facebook (e.g. pages, users, groups) sharing similar content related to MINUSCA? What content are they sharing?

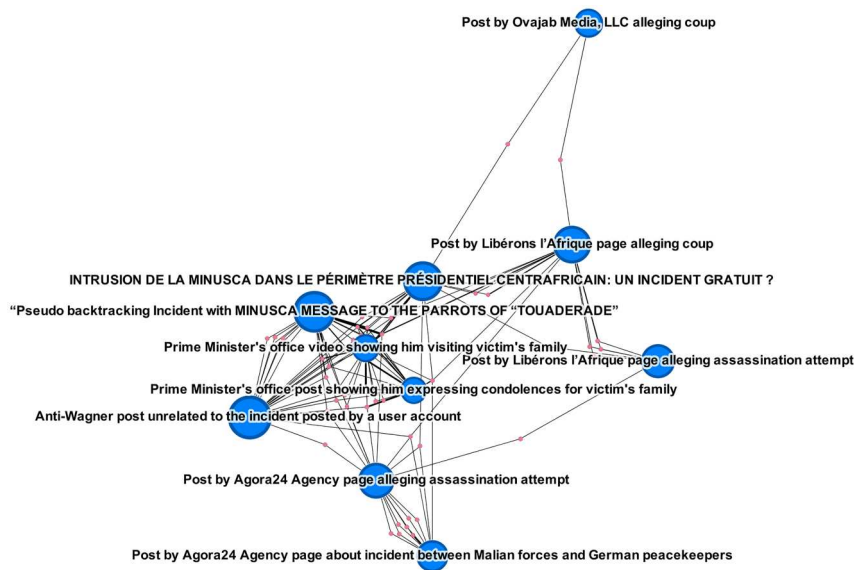
Here, we visualize the spread of the top URLs for the respective time periods related to the Egyptian FPU shooting and the Senegalese container incident. URLs include both internal URLs (links to content posted elsewhere on Facebook) as well as external URLs (links to content, such as news articles, posted on other websites). We colour the nodes (the points on the graph) representing each URL blue and label each blue node with a researcher-coded description of the content. We colour nodes representing a page or group pink to visually distinguish them from the URLs. To further distinguish between pages/groups and URLs, we size URLs as larger. We include edges (i.e. the lines connecting each pair of nodes) to represent shares of URLs made by a page or within a group. For clarity, we filter the maps to show only the ten URLs that received the most shares, and only pages/groups that shared the links in the top ten at least twice.

Figure 8 shows the spread of the top ten most posted links around the time of the Egyptian FPU incident. The visualization allows us to see which links are shared among the same entities on Facebook. In our dataset, these entities were comprised predominately of Facebook groups, and very few pages. Though different users may share content to the same groups, the fact that the same groups co-occur throughout the network suggests that they constitute part of the same content sharing ecosystem. Previous research has indicated that groups to which the same, unverified content is posted on a repeated basis can function as ‘echo chambers.’<sup>86</sup> Users that participate in these groups may thus be less likely to encounter cross-cutting information that challenges disinformation narratives. We see evidence that certain Facebook groups function as echo chambers in both of our network visualizations. For example, two of the links in Figure 8 – a YouTube video by Franklin Nyamsi and a Facebook post by the *Libérons l’Afrique* page – were posted to the same groups on multiple occasions. These

<sup>85</sup>Willaert et al., “Disinformation Networks.”

<sup>86</sup>Santos and Ceron, “Disinformation Echo Chambers on Facebook.”





**Figure 8.** Network visualization highlighting the spread of the top ten most posted links about MINUSCA across pages and groups around the time of the Egyptian FPU incident.

groups included general purpose groups for a Central African audience, such as ‘*Cercle de Réflexion pour l’essor de la Centrafrique*’ and ‘*TOUS LES CENTRAFRICAINS DU MONDE*,’ as well as groups with a more explicitly pan-Africanist leaning, such as ‘*RENAISSANCE AFRICAINE LUTTE POUR L’INDÉPENDANCE*.’ Both links furthered the unsupported claim of an attempted coup or assassination attempt, and we found no record of posts within these two groups that presented a factual report of the incident.

Table 1 displays these same URLs in table form, ranked by a network centrality measure called *in-degree*. In-degree is defined as the number of incoming links to an entity in a network, which in this case translates to the number of times the link is shared to Facebook pages or groups in the dataset. While the URL appearing the most in the dataset is not directly related to the shooting incident, eight of the remaining nine links are. Moreover, four of the top ten most linked to posts in the dataset falsely alleged that MINUSCA had attempted to either stage a coup against or assassinate President Touadéra. The last two most linked to posts were from the CAR Prime Minister’s office Facebook page and showed Prime Minister Henri-Marie Dondra expressing condolences to the family of the shooting victim.

The primary takeaway from this analysis is that posts falsely alleging a coup or assassination attempt on the part of MINUSCA and speculation from influencers were shared more widely across public Facebook groups than posts presenting a factual interpretation of the shooting incident.

**Table 1.** Top URLs, defined by the number of pages/groups linking to them in the dataset, during the period of the Egyptian FPU incident.

Caption/Description	Type	In-Degree	URL
[Redacted for privacy]	Anti-Wagner post unrelated to the incident posted by a user account	40	[Redacted for privacy of the user]
'Pseudo backtracking Incident with MINUSCA MESSAGE TO THE PARROTS OF 'TOUADÉRA DE'	Video recounting the incident by digital creator Axime Cesaire Oronindji	38	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/aximecesaire.oronindji/videos/307753114526520/">https://www.facebook.com/aximecesaire.oronindji/videos/307753114526520/</a>
INTRUSION DE LA MINUSCA DANS LE PÉRIMÈTRE PRÉSIDENTIEL CENTRAFRICAÏN: UN INCIDENT GRATUIT?	YouTube video by Cameroonian influencer, Franklin Nyamsi (Le Professeur)	36	<a href="https://youtube.com/watch?v=-2qBuMEvml4&amp;feature=share">https://youtube.com/watch?v=-2qBuMEvml4&amp;feature=share</a>
'In Africa, when rebels or terrorists try to stage a COUP D'ETAT and don't succeed in turning it into a rebellion, why do France and the United States of America step in to ensure that the rebellion's plan is carried out?'	Post by Libérons l'Afrique page alleging coup	34	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/photos.a.101994072136924/173140841688913/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/photos.a.101994072136924/173140841688913/?type=3</a>
[Content unavailable]	Post by Agora24 Agency page alleging assassination attempt	32	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/agora.vingt.quatre/photos.a.124227783254141/167612488915670/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/agora.vingt.quatre/photos.a.124227783254141/167612488915670/?type=3</a>
'The blue helmets of MINUSCA attempted to assassinate President Touadéra ...'	Post by Libérons l'Afrique page alleging assassination attempt	30	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/photos.a.101994072136924/173430638326600/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/photos.a.101994072136924/173430638326600/?type=3</a>
[Content unavailable]	Post by Agora24 Agency page about incident between Malian forces and German peacekeepers	28	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/agora.vingt.quatre/photos.a.112605484416371/168556695487916/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/agora.vingt.quatre/photos.a.112605484416371/168556695487916/?type=3</a>
"CENTRAL AFRICA: attempted COUP-D'ETAT organised by France and the UN (MINUSCA) against President Touadéra which failed."	Post by Ovajab Media, LLC alleging coup	25	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/OvajabMediaLLC/photos.a.531161893646241/4436850743077317/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/OvajabMediaLLC/photos.a.531161893646241/4436850743077317/?type=3</a>
'PRIME MINISTER HENRI-MARIE DONDRÉ ASSISTS THE FAMILY OF THE GIRL DEAD IN THE ACCIDENT CAUSED BY THE MINUSCA VEHICLE ...'	Prime Minister's office video showing him visiting victim's family	24	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/primaturercaofficial/videos/221261930078079/">https://www.facebook.com/primaturercaofficial/videos/221261930078079/</a>
[Photo]	Prime Minister's office post showing him expressing condolences for victim's family	23	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/112930940447962/photos.a.165181191889603/425542092520177/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/112930940447962/photos.a.165181191889603/425542092520177/?type=3</a>

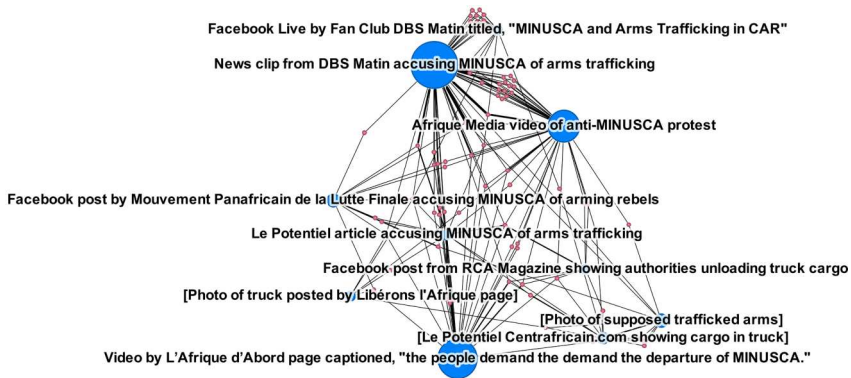
Moreover, none of these most linked-to posts were from established national or regional media outlets. Instead, they were primarily posted by either online influencers or self-styled media outlets with little to no media presence off Facebook and subsequently shared across popular CAR-focused Facebook groups. This is significant because it highlights the exploitation of a ‘data void’ – absent an authoritative account of events related to the shooting incident from established media outlets in CAR, a collection of online influencers and outlets with an already established Facebook presence were well positioned to disseminate false narratives with little pushback.<sup>87</sup>

Figure 9 shows the corresponding graph for the period matching the Senegalese equipment seizure incident. Again, the top links (blue) are labelled by researcher-coded descriptions, and only pages/groups (pink) that shared at least two of the links in the top 10 are represented in the visualization. For clarity, only pages/groups that shared at least two of the links in the top 10 are represented in the visualization. Compared to the graph of the Egyptian FPU incident, this graph appears more tightly interconnected. For example, we can see two clusters of groups that are tied to the news clip from *DBS Matin* worth investigating: one cluster of groups also hosted links to the *Afrique Média TV* video of the anti-MINUSCA protest, while another cluster also hosted links to the *DBS Matin* Facebook Live titled ‘MINUSCA and Arms Trafficking in CAR.’ Through a manual investigation of these clusters, we found a Facebook user account that lists itself as an employee of *DBS Matin* posting all three links across various Facebook groups. Some of the Facebook groups the account posted to appear to be related to the outlet, such as ‘FAN CLUB DBS MATIN Officiel,’ while others were more general, such as a group called ‘JEUNESSE CONSCIENTE.’ We could not determine whether the Facebook account was authentic. Regardless, this appeared to be an attempt by individuals linked to *DBS Matin* to amplify content that spread the arms trafficking narrative.

Table 2 shows the top URLs, again ranked by in-degree. All the URLs are related to the incident. The top URL in the dataset, shared across 146 pages or groups, is the news clip from *DBS TV* referenced earlier that falsely characterizes the transport of the containers as arms trafficking by MINUSCA. Several of the remaining posts echo this false narrative explicitly or include photos of the cargo trucks as ‘evidence’ of the alleged arms trafficking by MINUSCA. Like the Egyptian shooting incident, the top links in the second case study are dominated by a disinformation narrative: in this case, falsely accusing MINUSCA of arms trafficking. There are no posts among the most shared links that either factually report on the incident

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<sup>87</sup>Boyd and Golebiewski, “Data Voids.”



**Figure 9.** Network visualization highlighting the spread of the top ten most posted links about MINUSCA across pages and groups around the time of the Senegalese equipment seizure incident.

or outright challenge this disinformation narrative, once again highlighting the exploitation of a possible data void.

### 5.3. Distributed Amplification and Possible Coordinated Posting Behaviour

While the network maps offer some insight into clusters of Facebook groups that host similar content related to MINUSCA, the ‘birds-eye’ view they present does not indicate whether these sharing patterns are merely coincidental or evidence of coordination. To answer that question, we engage in manual investigation of posting patterns. Though most content appeared to be shared by authentic accounts, we found some evidence of potential coordinated posting, where the same content was posted by clusters of accounts to different groups within a relatively short period. As Table 3 shows, for the Senegalese container case study, for example, four posts were re-posted over 60 times.<sup>88</sup> A central characteristic of these two campaigns – and indeed of anti-UN rhetoric more broadly on Facebook – was their relentless repetition. Cognitive science research shows that exposing an individual to a statement repeatedly increases the likelihood that the person will find it accurate.<sup>89</sup>

The re-posting behaviour reveals the geographical and ideological targeting of groups/pages and apparent coordination. The top four re-posted messages were shared in public pages and groups related to eleven

<sup>88</sup>These were Gbagbo Koné’s commentary; the *Afrique Média TV* news video; the first *Le Potentiel Centrafricain.com* article; the *DBS TV* panel discussion.

<sup>89</sup>Pennycook and Cannon, “Prior Exposure Increases Perceived Accuracy of Fake News,” 1865.

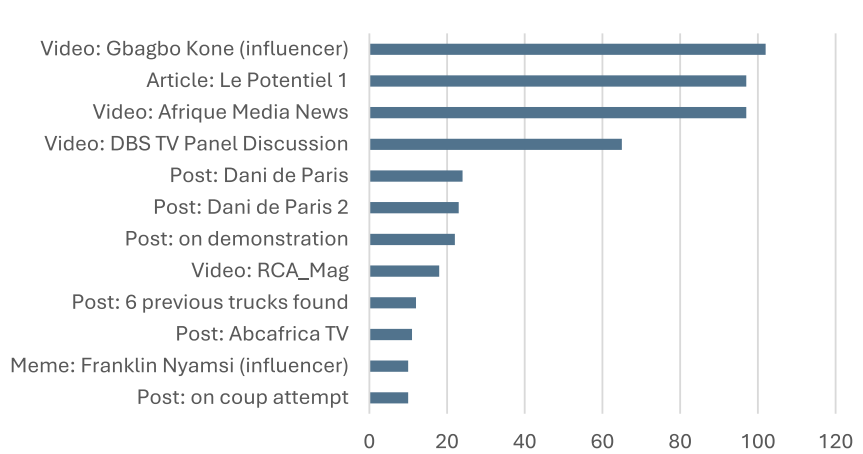
**Table 2.** Top URLs during the period of the Senegal containers incident. The in-degree value of a URL is the number of pages and groups linking to it in the dataset.

Caption/Description	Type	In-Degree	URL
"Geopolitics: Minusca and arms trafficking in CAR. The UN, the destabilising 'gendarme'?"	News clip from DBS Matin	146	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/dbstvafrique/videos/492279625704145/">https://www.facebook.com/dbstvafrique/videos/492279625704145/</a>
"The Central African people demand the departure of the Minusca'.	Video by l'Afrique d'Abord page	121	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/109743754136226/videos/495148568935941/">https://www.facebook.com/109743754136226/videos/495148568935941/</a>
"THE PEOPLE DEMAND THE DEPARTURE OF MINUSCA'.	Afrique Media video of anti-MINUSCA protest	96	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/afriquemedi/videos/977139273171059/">https://www.facebook.com/afriquemedi/videos/977139273171059/</a>
	[Photo of supposed trafficked arms]	32	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=167912712252329&amp;set=a.155719133471687&amp;type=3">https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=167912712252329&amp;set=a.155719133471687&amp;type=3</a>
#ONU_resupplies_the_rebels! Two civilian trucks carrying containers with the UN logo were stopped in Beloko."	Facebook post by Mouvement Panafricain de la Lutte Finale accusing MINUSCA of arming rebels	32	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/105256462036065/photos/a.105360902025621/135078502387194/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/105256462036065/photos/a.105360902025621/135078502387194/?type=3</a>
	[Photo posted by Le Potentiel showing cargo in truck]	25	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/lepotentielcentrafricain/photos/a.2232370747076677/3049598422020568/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/lepotentielcentrafricain/photos/a.2232370747076677/3049598422020568/?type=3</a>
'Arrest of two private trucks with 4 containers of antipersonnel mines and other munitions, conclusive proof of arms smuggling by MINUSCA'	Le Potentiel article accusing MINUSCA of arms trafficking	21	<a href="https://lepotentielcentrafricain.com/arrestation-de-deux-camions-privés-avec-4-conteneurs-un-des-mines-antipersonnel-et-autres-munitions-de-guerre-une-preuve-probante-de-la-contrebande-darmes-par-la-minusca/">https://lepotentielcentrafricain.com/arrestation-de-deux-camions-privés-avec-4-conteneurs-un-des-mines-antipersonnel-et-autres-munitions-de-guerre-une-preuve-probante-de-la-contrebande-darmes-par-la-minusca/</a>
Arrest by the Central African authorities of two containers filled with weapons and explosives belonging to Senegalese contingents of MINUSCA. Investigations are ongoing by the relevant authorities.	Facebook post from RCA Magazine showing authorities unloading truck cargo	20	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/110099857276221/videos/5133274600062815/">https://www.facebook.com/110099857276221/videos/5133274600062815/</a>
	[Photo of truck posted by Libérons l'Afrique page]	20	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/photos/a.101994072136924/262482849421378/?type=3">https://www.facebook.com/101981002138231/photos/a.101994072136924/262482849421378/?type=3</a>
'MINUSCA and Arms Trafficking in CAR'	Facebook Live by Fan Club DBS Matin	19	<a href="https://www.facebook.com/100064310193679/videos/376858697419760/">https://www.facebook.com/100064310193679/videos/376858697419760/</a>

francophone African countries.<sup>90</sup> One Facebook account posted the *Le Potentiel Centrafricain.com* article into 14 Mali-related groups, some within seconds of one another (see Table 4). The top five shared posts

<sup>90</sup>CAR, Mali, Senegal, DRC, RoC, Burkina Faso, Chad, Cameroon, Burundi, Niger, and Togo.

**Table 3.** Messages with over ten re-posts related to the Senegalese container incident.



Content re-posted	No. of Re-posts
Post: on coup attempt	10
Meme: Franklin Nyamsi (influencer)	10
Post: Abcafrica TV	11
Post: 6 previous trucks found	12
Video: RCA_Mag	18
Post: on demonstration	22
Post: Dani de Paris 2	23
Post: Dani de Paris	24
Video: DBS TV Panel Discussion	65
Video: Afrique Media News	97
Article: Le Potentiel 1	97
Video: Gbagbo Kone (influencer)	102

**Table 4.** Single Facebook account re-posting behaviour of the Le Potentiel Centrafricain.com article on 19 March 2022 into Mali-themed Facebook groups and pages.

Time Stamp (EST)	Recipient Facebook group or page
9:49:41 AM	République du MaliTable
9:49:41 AM	100% malienne
9:49:47 AM	infos du Mali
9:49:51 AM	BA MALI BA 223
9:50:06 AM	GÉNÉRATION NOUVELLE DU MALI
9:50:36 AM	kati 24
9:50:43 AM	AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST INFO
9:50:47 AM	Actualités au Mali 24 h24
9:51:00 AM	JEUNES DU MALI
9:51:13 AM	Bamako INFO
9:51:42 AM	LA TRANSITION
9:52:11 AM	NARA KOUNAFONI
10:03:52 AM	AFRIQUE DE L'OUEST INFO
12:04:05 PM	Le Mali avenir

related to the Egyptian FPU story<sup>91</sup> were shared in groups and pages related to ten countries.<sup>92</sup> These examples suggest that a deliberate effort was made to target audiences across francophone Africa. The dissemination (in which Malian political influencers also participated) of content to Malian audiences may suggest an effort to use the CAR experience as a means of undermining the peacekeeping mission in Mali, MINUSMA. MINUSMA itself was the target of significant disinformation in the run up to its removal by the Malian transitional authorities.<sup>93</sup>

Both stories were also repeatedly posted into pan-African groups with a more thematic, professional, or interest-based focus, with names such as ‘*Groupe panafricain de soutien a vladimir poutine*’ (‘Pan-African group supporting Vladimir Putin’) or ‘*Contre l’impérialisme et le néocolonialisme + les suppôts locaux africains*’ (‘Against imperialism and neocolonialism + local African henchmen’). In disseminating the content, a division of labour between operators emerges. Two accounts seem to share re-posting duties for the *Bé-Afrik News* content, re-sharing the posts reporting the 21 March demonstration and the *Tôngôlô ti Bé Afrika* declaration each into the same set of CAR-focused groups (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Possible coordinated posting behaviour of two Facebook accounts.

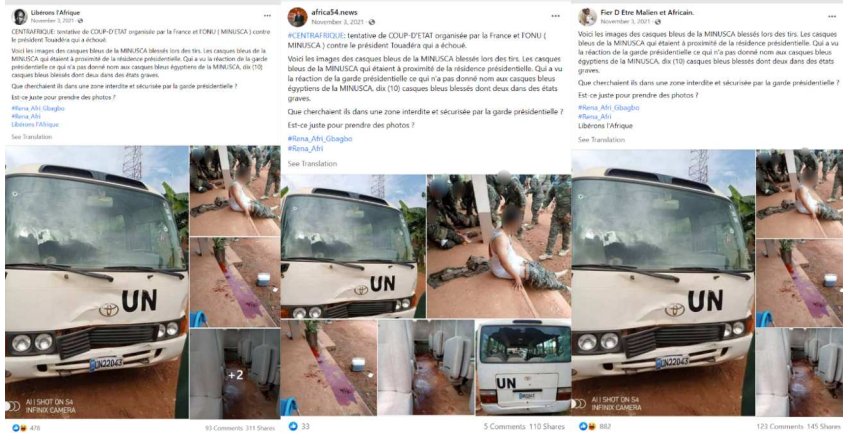
Facebook account 1		Facebook account 2	
Time Stamp (EST)	Facebook Group or Page	Time Stamp (EST)	Facebook Group or Page
<b>Bé-Afrik News</b> post on <i>Tôngôlô ti Bé Afrika</i> declaration re-posts on 21 March 2022			
4:07:46 AM:	La Primature Centrafricaine	4:08:55 AM:	Bangui Centrafrique
4:07:57 AM:	Association TOUADÉRA est ma Sécurité (ATS)	4:08:59 AM:	FIER D'ÊTRE CENTRAFRICAINE
4:08:03 AM:	Groupe TDR.TOUADÉRA DOIT RESTER	4:09:04 AM:	CENTRAFRIQUE VISION 2030
4:08:09 AM:	Rca-Actualité (Politique) CFCF	4:08:51 AM:	Unis pour la Centrafrique
<b>Bé-Afrik News</b> reporting on demonstration re-posts on 22 March 2022			
5:25:32 AM:	La Primature Centrafricaine	5:26:23 AM:	Unis pour la Centrafrique
5:25:40 AM:	Association TOUADÉRA est ma Sécurité (ATS)	5:26:27 AM:	Bangui Centrafrique
5:25:46 AM:	TDG. TOUADÉRA Doit Gagner	5:26:31 AM:	FIER D'ÊTRE CENTRAFRICAINE
5:25:51 AM:	TOUADÉRA DOIT RESTER TDR	5:26:35 AM:	BANGUI.INFO
5:25:55 AM:	Rca-Actualité (Politique) CFCF	5:26:40 AM:	CENTRAFRIQUE VISION 2030
		5:26:51 AM:	Centrafrique Emergente avec TOUADÉRA (CET)

<sup>91</sup>These were *Libérons l'Afrique's* post combining the ‘coup d'état attempt’ narrative with pictures of the injured peacekeepers, a Turkish press agency *Anadolu Agency* article citing MINUSCA CAR Government reactions regarding the incident, two posts from *AGORA Actualités* and a videoblog from an individual account Axime Cesaire Orondjii.

<sup>92</sup>CAR, Guinea, Cameroon, Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Chad, Togo, Senegal and DRC.

<sup>93</sup>Secretary-General report on the situation in Mali, 3 October 2022, S/2022/731, 13.





**Figure 10.** Example of coppasta effect: original post by Libérons l'Afrique (left), coppasta post by africa54.news (middle), and third coppasta post by Fier D Etre Malien et Africain (right).

### 5.3.1. Coppasta

The same content was re-posted under different guises ('coppasta').<sup>94</sup> Figure 10 show a first post by *Libérons l'Afrique* (left), coppasta post by *africa54.news* (middle) with an additional 110 shares. Coppasta post by *Fier D Etre Malien et Africain* (right) with an additional 145 shares, has removed the first line including the coup attempt narrative. In total these posts garnered 566 shares.

## 5.4. Actors Involved in Spreading Disinformation

### 5.4.1. Online Media Outlets

Both stories received a lot of attention from a variety of Facebook accounts, but a small set of recurring accounts dominated the storylines. Several of these accounts position themselves on Facebook as digital media outlets providing news coverage on CAR, Mali and the wider region. These so-called news outlets, however, have no websites, provide no information online about who runs them, and their content often takes a strong anti-UN and anti-Western stance. Notable amongst these accounts is the constellation of '236' pages, their name taking inspiration from the country's telephone code. This cluster of pages played a pivotal role in shaping and amplifying narratives aimed at undermining UN peacekeeping in both case studies, often the first to disseminate

<sup>94</sup>The DISARM Framework refers to coppasta as 'a piece of text that has been copied and pasted multiple times across various online platforms. A coppasta's final form may differ from its original source text as users add, delete, or otherwise edit the content as they repost the text.' <https://disarmframework.herokuapp.com/technique/93/view>.



key elements of the storylines,<sup>95</sup> supporting a potential coordinated strategy to influence public perception. Despite the pages having different admin countries and contact details on Facebook, they exhibit overlapping names and content patterns. This may be an attempt to hedge against possible takedowns.

#### 5.4.2. Influence Entrepreneurs

Limonier and Laruelle qualify *Afrique Média TV*, the Cameroon-based television network that participated in the Senegalese container story, as an ‘influence entrepreneur’, referring to actors that ‘profit from the economic (and political) capital they invest while accompanying the return of Russian influence to Africa.’<sup>96</sup> Referring to Luc Michel, one of the ‘talking heads’ of *Afrique Média TV*, Limonier and Laruelle further note that while it was unlikely that Michel acted on Moscow’s request, ‘he and Afrique Media are de facto echo chambers for Russian narratives, as such narratives are aligned with their own political agendas.’<sup>97</sup> While very little information is available on the Cameroon-based *DBS TV*, it has a similar anti-West, pro-Russia editorial line to *Afrique Média TV*. With journalistic trappings but not the ethics and rigour, influence entrepreneurs create new poles for the diffusion of manipulated narratives on UN peacekeeping at a regional and global level.

Similarly, social media influencers referenced in the case studies played a strong role in amplifying the narratives of both stories. None of the most prominent influencers commenting on the two stories are based in CAR or are Central African citizens. Several Malian influencers also amplified narratives on the Egyptian shooting incident; these influencers were frequent vocal critics of UN peacekeeping in Mali as well as CAR, and the West.

## 6. Discussion

Policy papers addressing misinformation and disinformation in crisis contexts frequently employ metaphors such as ‘information disorder,’ ‘information pollution,’ and, more recently, ‘infodemic,’ casting these phenomena as contaminants that were dispersed throughout the information environment, facilitated by social media technologies. Policy circles conversely also refer to ‘information integrity,’ suggesting information that does or does not have integrity, and setting standards for ‘integrity’

<sup>95</sup>On the Egyptian shooting case, *236 Actu* was the first to share MINUSCA’s press release; *236 News* was the first to introduce the assassination storyline; *236 Magazine* was the first to share the video testimonial of the mother of the victim. On the Senegalese container incident, *236 News* was the first to break the story; *236 Magazine* re-posted messages questioning MINUSCA’s silence and undermining its post when it came out.

<sup>96</sup>Limonier and Laruelle, “Russia’s African Toolkit,” 412; *Afrique Média TV* signed a partnership agreement with Russia Today in 2022.

<sup>97</sup>*Ibid.*, 414.

through a normative framework.<sup>98</sup> These framings, however, oversimplify the problem by obscuring the role of human action and discounting the role uncertainty plays in the spread of rumours. In the specific case of CAR, they also devalue the epistemological frameworks that Central Africans themselves use to make sense of the world.

In this paper, we integrate complexity and assemblage theories to offer an alternative way to understand strategic information operations. Four central observations are made in the context of the case studies. First, the online narratives of the two stories reflect disparate but convergent decolonial perspectives and beliefs. The defiance of the Foreign Minister's declaration after the Egyptian incident is grounded in resentment towards what she saw as UN and French condescension and disregard for CAR, reflecting a decolonial sentiment that channelled widely shared views in the country, as discussed earlier. The social media reactions also reflect a similar sentiment applied more broadly in the African context. The ideological thread of the DBS TV discussion denounced intervention in sovereign affairs, promoted a multipolar rather than West-dominated unipolar world, and denounced double standards. These represent genuine views, but also echo Russian foreign policy talking points.<sup>99</sup>

The discourse on DBS TV also picked up on long-standing and bona fide tensions in New York between UN Member State constituencies of peacekeeping – namely between the so-called P3 (Permanent Three) members of the Security Council that 'hold the pen' on peacekeeping mandates, and troop and police contributing countries (T/PCC), mostly from the Global South, that execute those mandates (Russia and China have often aligned with T/PCC and host country positions). The lack of effective dialogue over how mandates are formulated and managed between these peacekeeping constituencies has led to frustration over the years.<sup>100</sup> Both case studies combine separate analytical frames around a convergent emancipatory discourse. Seen from this perspective, the false disinformation stories were devices to reinforce and further a particular worldview. In this context, the agency of the Egyptian and Senegalese units in MINUSCA becomes subsumed under a bigger, (western-driven) UN enterprise.

Second, breaking down the boundaries of national/international and geographically limited peacekeeping mandates, these two strategic information operations were deliberately disseminated across west and central Africa, and amplified by influencers outside of CAR. Grounded in localized incidents in CAR, the emancipatory metanarrative of the two stories makes an appeal to

<sup>98</sup>See, e.g. "United Nations Global Principles for Information Integrity Recommendations for Multi-stakeholder Action," June 2024 or "Global declaration on information integrity online", endorsed by over 30 countries, October 2023.

<sup>99</sup>Gorenburg, "Russian Foreign Policy Narratives."

<sup>100</sup>Report of the High-Level Panel on Peace Operations, 17 June 2015, A/70/95.

the social and historical experience of postcolonial francophone Africa. Applying Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory lens, the strategic information operations simultaneously *detrterritorialize* peacekeeping by breaking down the notion that the impact of peacekeeping actions are contained to the host country and *territorialize* the idea of peacekeeping by homogenizing the messaging on peacekeeping to francophone African audiences.<sup>101</sup>

Third, the propulsion of both stories was multidirectional. The evolution of the story reflected a narrative arc, going from breaking the news with photographic/video 'evidence,' to the mounting drumbeat of outrage, to the concluding take-aways of the two incidents. This arc was propelled by discernible actants and actors (Facebook accounts, media outlets, social media influencers, state officials); as well as by real life actions (demonstrations and petition letters organized by so-called civil society groups). The stories were seeded, enabled and amplified purposefully by the actors and infrastructure mentioned earlier, and played out through dynamic and self-organizing interactions between online and offline elements. Sometimes this led to incongruous parallel narrative tracks. For example, one – less viral – denouement of the Senegalese container incident involved an Ivorian-registered Facebook account declaring that President Touadéra has asked MINUSCA to leave (this had not in fact happened).<sup>102</sup>

Comments on posts online also fed and padded the story. In an example of what Introne et al. have described as 'participatory storytelling,'<sup>103</sup> a comment on the Senegalese container incident anticipated the UN's response, warning that the UN Secretary-General would *of course* say that the story was disinformation and that Guterres will ask the CAR government to remove the images of the ammunition. It is unlikely that the complex interplay between these actants, whether influencers, trolls, sock puppets, so-called NGOs, media outlets and government representatives was coordinated or directed by a central entity. Consistent with Limonier and Laruelle's notion of a diffuse set of influence entrepreneurs, the actants instead came together through an emergent, participatory, and self-organizing dynamic, spinning the story while echoing the analytical frames described in the first point.

<sup>101</sup> Manuel DeLanda explains it thus: 'processes of territorialization are processes that define or sharpen the spatial boundaries of actual territories. Territorialization, on the other hand, also refers to non-spatial processes which increase the internal homogeneity of an assemblage, such as the sorting processes which exclude a certain category of people from membership in an organization, or the segregation processes which increase the ethnic or racial homogeneity of a neighborhood. Any process which either destabilizes spatial boundaries or increases internal heterogeneity is considered detrterritorializing.' DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*.

<sup>102</sup> NaWa.cm, "#Centrafrique: Le Gouvernement Du Président Faustin Archange Touadéra Vient de Demander et Acter Le Départ de La MINUSCA (Mission Des Nation Unies Au Sahel et En Centrafrique)," Facebook, March 22, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/100064824081011/posts/730556304993658/>.

<sup>103</sup> Introne et al., "How People Weave Online Information into Pseudoknowledge," 2.

Fourth, exploring the impact and purpose of these operations offers insights. Assessing the impact of strategic information operations, particularly relying on public social media data, is notoriously difficult.<sup>104</sup> But two reflections are worth noting. On the one hand, observations from interviewees suggest that strategic information operations interact with, and build upon, existing distrust of MINUSCA. One international interviewee, talking about disinformation, said:

There is an enormous, incredible impact. So destructive. It really crippled us, particularly in Bangui. It impacts us less in the regions, where people are in need of immediate assistance from MINUSCA. In Bangui though, the population has been easily convinced that we are worthless, useless etc, but also that we are part of the problem, in cahoots with armed groups, and it is easy for the Russians to do that given the frustration with the mission, and frustration on the embargo, no hope for opportunities ... therefore people are easy to manipulate.<sup>105</sup>

Whether these information operations indeed had an impact on local perceptions, the perception of them *having done so* is also significant. The perceived damage done by disinformation in itself impacts the international peacekeeping assemblage. The threat – perceived and real – of strategic information operations has shaped peacekeeping self-image, resourcing, and coalition-building. To be sure, false or misleading information has had tangibly harmful effects on peacekeepers' safety, work, physical and mental wellbeing.<sup>106</sup> Alarm over disinformation targeting UN peacekeeping – and the UN more broadly – has generated an emerging normative agenda and field of expertise in 'information integrity', and 'disinformation and misinformation,' with a new set of desired resources, skillsets, and job families.<sup>107</sup> The fear that disinformation and misinformation discredit the impact and efficacy of UN peacekeeping has contributed to the adoption of mandates to 'counter' disinformation and misinformation by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly, mobilizing diplomats, military/police advisors, and UN civil servants.<sup>108</sup> The goals of this agenda are not necessarily to understand the reasons why narratives targeting UN peacekeeping may resonate, and shift peacekeeping posture accordingly, but rather to equip and protect peacekeeping against the threat that information operations pose.

On the other hand, the political purpose of strategic information operations is also worth examining. As the case studies show, while they were participatory, there were also signs of coordination on- and offline, as well

<sup>104</sup>Rid, *Active Measures*.

<sup>105</sup>Interview, 15 April 2022

<sup>106</sup>Trithart, "Disinformation against UN Peacekeeping Operations."

<sup>107</sup>Vermeij et al. "The Impact and Response to Misinformation."

<sup>108</sup>Security Council resolutions on MINUSCA, MONUSCO, UNIFIL and MINUSMA mandate action on disinformation. Other SC and General Assembly resolutions also call on the Secretariat to take action.

as links with state actors and influence entrepreneurs. What may have been the objectives of these actors? Some interviewees with internal or specialist knowledge of MINUSCA and political dynamics in the country assessed that the strategic information operations served political objectives, ranging from distracting and deflecting negative views of the Government to MINUSCA, to painting the mission as a foil to elevate the Russian military presence and CAR security forces, to preparing the ground for a closure of the Mission.<sup>109</sup> The targeting of the francophone African world, including countries that are not peacekeeping host countries, suggest that influencing views on UN peacekeeping across French-speaking Africa may have been another objective.

From this perspective, the strategic information operations illustrated here served to weaken the role of the United Nations in CAR. They manifested a contestation over what and who the United Nations served, with echoes in the Security Council's annual negotiations over MINUSCA's mandate. Contrary to earlier practice, MINUSCA's mandate was not unanimously adopted in 2021 or 2022 – Russia and China abstained in both years, over differences in views with the penholder and other members over human rights, wording on the Russian armed presence in the country, and the mission's freedom of movement.<sup>110</sup> Contestation over the role of MINUSCA can be seen in the context of a broader competition for influence between the West and the 'Political East.'<sup>111</sup> Strategic information operations make peacekeeping the terrain for an adversarial dynamic among members of the Security Council. This in turn places political and operational constraints on the responses that peacekeeping missions are able or willing to take, perhaps propelling the peacekeeping bureaucracy towards less controversial, technocratic measures, rather than confronting the underlying political schism that these operations exploit.

In the peacekeeping assemblage, Albrecht et al argue, '[a]ctants encompass technologies, infrastructures and artefacts, among other material actors and things that *can become sources of power in the sense that they shape responses, practices and actions*, and as such are integral to shaping peacekeeping contributors politically and socially, as well as economically' (emphasis added).<sup>112</sup> Strategic information operations are thus themselves actants influencing the behaviour of peacekeeping within this assemblage. Moreover, the UN is not exogenous to these operations, nor is it merely a target – rather, it is deeply embedded within them, with

<sup>109</sup>Interviews, 15 and 26 April 2022, 3 May 2022.

<sup>110</sup><https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2022/11/central-african-republic-minusca-mandate-renewal-2.php>.

<sup>111</sup>Sakwa, "The International System and the Clash of World Orders."

<sup>112</sup>Albrecht et al., "From Peacekeeping Missions," 903.

its responses continuously shaping and reshaping how these operations are sustained.

## 7. Conclusion

Though disinformation is often seen as top-down campaigns orchestrated by state or non-state actors, the case studies presented in this paper point to a more complex, multidirectional phenomenon. While recognizing the directed and purposive nature of the strategic information operations, this article attempts to surface their participatory dynamics, which are often overlooked in analyses of disinformation campaigns targeting UN peacekeeping operations. Their combination of elements – discourse, technology and people – produce knowledge that is not grounded in fact but channels beliefs and worldviews that are embedded in the lived experience of audiences that interact with them. The article argues that the impact of these operations manifest in the diplomatic, advocacy, material and technocratic shifts that the peacekeeping assemblage has taken. That the strategic information operations are diffuse and participatory has also presented a challenge for political and operational responses. Addressing this challenge from the perspective of apolitical ‘corrective’ communications will not tackle the fundamental political, historical and cognitive reasons why false or misleading narratives resonate. A shift towards greater self-reflection and humility, genuine engagement with host communities and a more frontal engagement with the actants contributing to strategic information operations would be steps towards effectively tackling the challenge.

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## Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the underlying data and restrictions from CrowdTangle on data sharing, supporting data is not publicly available.

## Ethics Statement

The University of Washington's Human Subjects Division determined on 30 March 2022 that this research was human subjects research that qualified for exempt status (IRB ID: STUDY00015353).

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## Appendix. Codebook Used for Facebook Content

**Note:** the codes were identified for both case studies based on an initial analysis of Facebook posts, and the comments therein. Separate but overlapping codes were identified for the posts and comments. All applicable codes were identified per post or set of comments.

Codes identified in posts in facebook pages and groups

- (1) MINUSCA does nothing
- (2) MINUSCA is arming or supporting rebels
- (3) MINUSCA is preying on population / terrorists
- (4) MINUSCA is exploiting resources
- (5) Peace process not working
- (6) MINUSCA: tool of France
- (7) UN Security Council controlled by France
- (8) MINUSCA plot against Govt
- (9) UN doesn't support Touadera
- (10) MINUSCA should leave
- (11) MINUSCA has lied
- (12) CAR Govt should push back on the UN
- (13) Criticising France
- (14) Denouncing French/West colonialism
- (15) Denouncing double standards, hypocrisy
- (16) Lack trust between PKOs and Africa
- (17) Inciting violence against UN
- (18) Calling on African mobilization/liberation
- (19) Embargo crippling CAR
- (20) CAR needs non-Western partners
- (21) Russians & FACA are stabilizing CAR
- (22) RF supporting socio-econ development
- (23) Denouncing disinformation
- (24) Peacebuilding efforts underway

Codes identified in comments to each post coded

- (1) Challenging veracity of post
- (2) MINUSCA does nothing
- (3) MINUSCA is arming or supporting rebels
- (4) MINUSCA is preying on population / terrorists
- (5) MINUSCA is exploiting resources

- (6) Peace process not working
- (7) MINUSCA: tool of France
- (8) UN Security Council is controlled by France
- (9) MINUSCA plot against Govt
- (10) UN doesn't support Touadera
- (11) MINUSCA should leave
- (12) MINUSCA has lied
- (13) CAR must explain collaboration with MINUSCA
- (14) Denouncing French/West colonialism
- (15) Inciting violence against UN
- (16) Denouncing double standards
- (17) Embargo is crippling CAR
- (18) CAR needs non-Western partners
- (19) Calling on African mobilization/liberation
- (20) Criticising France
- (21) Russians & FACA are stabilizing CAR
- (22) RF supporting socio-econ development
- (23) Expressing sympathy/condolences
- (24) Congratulating CAR or Russians
- (25) Russians are committing human rights violations
- (26) Russia is exploiting CAR
- (27) Denouncing disinformation