

PISM REPORT

FERTILE GROUND: HOW AFRICA AND THE ARAB WORLD FOUND COMMON LANGUAGE WITH RUSSIA ON UKRAINE ANALYSIS OF THE PRO-RUSSIAN SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSES



JANUARY 2023

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THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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ANALYSIS OF THE PRO-RUSSIAN SOCIAL MEDIA DISCOURSES

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CONTENTS

Key takeaways	5
Introduction: Beyond Disinformation	6
1. Is it all about Western hegemony again?	8
1.1. Building on Anti-French Sentiments in Africa.	8
1.2. From a Pan-Africanist Dream to the <i>Russkiy Mir</i>	18
1.3. Arabs' Allergy to the Promotion of Democracy.	25
1.4. Democracy Outdated in Africa?	28
1.5. Who Stood for Our Liberation? Cold War Reminiscences	32
2. What About... Double Standards?	38
2.1. Are All Victims Treated Equally?	38
2.2. The Long Shadow of the 2003 Iraq Invasion	41
2.3. What about Palestine?	45
3. Strong and Weak. Is tradition at Stake?	55
3.1. Myth of the "War of Values." Tradition vs "Western Decadency"	55
3.2. "Don't Poke the Bear." Putin as an Archetype of a Strong Leader.	62
4. The Evolving Discourse	72
4.1. A Divided Ethiopia Seeking a Rationale for Its Own War —Saying Moscow, thinking Addis	72
4.2. Radicalisation of Discourse. Social Media Crowd Begins to Enjoy Cruelty	76
Recommendations.	83
Notes on Methodology	86
Annex.	89
About the Authors.	95

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- African and Arab social media users tend to adopt pro-Russian narratives on the Ukraine war when they resonate with locally relevant, long-established issues, worldviews, grievances, or prejudices. Those contexts are key in forming perceptions of the war.
- While Russia actively participates in shaping the Arab and African infosphere, its influence is limited. Popular debate on the war in Ukraine is, at its core, driven mainly by embedded scepticism towards the West, rather than by a distant conflict per se.
- When discussing the war, popular influencers have been exploring questions of agency, dignity, colonialism, racism, the West's hypocrisy on values, and calls to reform the global order. That has pushed the debate to friendly towards Russia. Sympathisers with Ukraine tend to go silent rather than confront them, as this would mean questioning other, legitimate concerns.
- While declared support for the Russian narratives regarding the reasons and goals of its war against Ukraine might dominate sections of the public debate, it remains largely superficial and selective. Still, it influences policymakers.
- Discussing Russia and Ukraine often serves as a frame to debate local politics, especially in sensitive, fragile contexts (like Ethiopia or Palestine).
- Russia's positioning itself as a supporter of the global South filters down to grassroots debates while Ukraine remains difficult to relate to.
- For Arab and African debaters, the unprecedented Western support for Ukraine proves rather than reduces their scepticism of the West and liberal democracy.
- Attempts in the West to build broad, global support for defending Ukraine by linking it with the urgency of defending the rule-based international order and calling to take sides often proves counterproductive.
- To counter pro-Russian narratives in the public debate in African and Arab countries, the West must take local sensitivities into much greater account and adapt its communication accordingly.
- To change the perception of Russia as an attractive partner to non-Western states and, in consequence, encourage political decisions that will benefit Ukraine, the West should highlight how Russian victory in the war threatens the national interests of the Arab and African states.
- To narrow the space for pro-Russian narratives to grow in African and Arab countries, the West should closely examine and note lessons-learned from the cases in which discourses favouring Russia failed to gain traction.
- To challenge the momentum that has been built around the pro-Russian narrative, for example in the Sahel, a two-track approach is needed: exposing the falsehood of image of Russia's attractiveness and addressing legitimate concerns that feed into criticism of the West in Africa and the Arab world.

INTRODUCTION: BEYOND DISINFORMATION

Since the start of the full-scale Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022, the governments of African and Arab states have shown restraint in criticising Russia. This is reflected in the voting on March 2, 2022, on the UN General Assembly resolution condemning the Russian aggression. Of the 35 abstentions, 17 came from Africa. Seven other countries from these group of states did not vote at all, and Eritrea and Syria openly supported Russia. Subsequent votes showed a similar pattern. The tradition of non-alignment, unwillingness to take sides in a war that was “not ours,” and calculations of the costs of losing Russia as a partner were important factors behind their choices, as were grassroots sentiments, which the governments must reckon with.

In Africa and the Arab World, throughout different stages of the war, the public debate and the popular discourse around it, which to some extent is reflected in social media exchanges, showed substantial sympathy towards Russia. On a more grassroots level, the mainstream debate portrayed Russia’s incursion into Ukraine as justified, denying or relativising Russian terror, and saw Ukraine as a rogue actor guilty of the problems that spilled over to the rest of the world.

While *disinformation*—intentional attempts by an actor (here: Russia-affiliated entities) to make one believe in false, but politically desirable elements of a story—played a part in shaping those sentiments, the pro-Russian discourse cannot be reduced to just that. While outspoken French/Beninese activist Kemi Seba might be justifiably listed by the U.S. State Department as Yevgeny Prigozhin’s (Russia’s info-war kingpin) principal agent of influence in Africa, he also seems to support Russia with true conviction. This can be explained by the formation of his earlier political and ideological positions within African and French socio-economic contexts and the imperative to satisfy his audience’s expectations. If agents of *disinformation* are seed-sowers, introducing new talking points to the regions concerned, this analysis is focused on the fertile ground of locally relevant discourses and issues, without which the pro-Russian narratives would not have taken root and held. The authors explore the intellectual agency on the part of the debate’s mostly spontaneous participants, rather than seeing them solely as at the receiving end of processes steered from the outside.¹

Pro-Russian views expressed in social media by the many citizens of African and Arab countries are quite often perceived in the West as part of the Russian disinformation and propaganda machinery. This is true only in part. Perceptions of Russia’s attractiveness, among African and Arab populations, as illusory as they might be, are often born out of their perceptions of the West. They have experienced its hypocrisy, self-interest, and untrustworthiness, which fuels resentment and pursuit of radical change. A social media user may see his/her transformation into adopting—at least declaratively—an “alternative” view on global events, as a satisfying act of rejecting the unwanted status quo, marred by local conflicts and economic and social hardships. This led the authors to conclude that the declared support to Russian policies and war are most often secondary to other bigger and locally more relevant stories and sets of problems. Those “super-narratives,” centred on issues of agency, domination, (un)fairness, and tradition help Arab and African audiences contextualise Russia (often incorrectly or based on misinformation) and frame it within a familiar area. They help to relate to the Russian story of the war in Ukraine on the basis of local experience and conditions. Members of the

¹ The scope of the research and the methodological approach of the authors is explained in detail in the Notes on Methodology at the end of the report.

Pan-Africanist Facebook community who eagerly post comments glorifying Putin's speeches and pronouncements on Ukraine do so primarily because they relate to his critique of colonialism and racism. At the same time, the 2003 invasion of Iraq or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict prompt Arab commentators to criticise the sanctions against Russia, since such measures were not implemented when Arab states' sovereignty was violated. They do this, though, not because they gleefully agree with Putin's conduct of the war or because they were manipulated into doing so. In this sense, pro-Russian narratives are often adopted organically, but they are also superficial.

Understanding these mechanisms can help avoid basing Western policies and communication—meant to build cohesion around the Ukrainian cause—on false assumptions. Upholding the narrative that simplifies whatever is sympathetic to Russia as mere *disinformation* builds upon the same mindset that led to the citizens of these countries to be suspicious of narratives coming from the West. This includes the argument about non-Western regions as a “battleground of ideas” rather than space in which rational actors that may possess and propose ideas themselves. Continuing within this intellectual framework is not only counter-productive but further alienates non-Western actors. While countering *disinformation* is the right thing to do, it may not be sufficient to proceed the same way against legitimate resentment that increases the popularity of pro-Russian narratives.

1. IS IT ALL ABOUT WESTERN HEGEMONY AGAIN?

In many countries outside the West, the Russian attack on Ukraine is perceived by citizens and governments alike as a challenge to what they see as the hegemony of the West (mainly the U.S.) in the world order.

Arab and African influencers using this lens promote the vision of Western hegemony as responsible for most of the pressing problems in the Middle East and Africa. In their perspective, the world order since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been unipolar, with the U.S. and its Western allies dominating, and whenever existential issues break out, these actors inject their own interpretation of morality into politics and require “junior” partners to decide whether they are with them or against them. To support this view, the influencers interpret Western diplomatic initiatives regarding Ukraine as intended to “preserve the unipolar world.”

Pro-Russian influencers in the Arab and African world claim that Russia’s potential success in what they see as confrontation with NATO opens the way for a more just global setting in which states in these regions become subjects rather than objects in the international game, free to follow their national interests. While in Africa the anti-hegemonic discourse usually also criticises local governments, the Arab public (especially in the Gulf) takes pride in their leaders refusing to bow to pressure from the West. However, the declared reasons for satisfaction associated with the awaited collapse of Western dominance in the world—to be brought by the Russian victory in Ukraine—are based on regional issues. They constitute a complicated network of grievances in which sometimes opposite sides of the same debate express similar allegations against the West.

1.1. BUILDING ON ANTI-FRENCH SENTIMENTS IN AFRICA

A new, unprecedented, and strong tide of anti-French—and by default, pro-Russian—sentiment is sweeping across French-speaking Africa. It combines legitimate criticism of the former colonial power with wild conspiracy theories. Social media debaters often portray Russia’s war in Ukraine as an element of the same desirable process for global change that would open space for Africa’s development; France, they believe, is opposed to this. The progression of anti-French attitudes in French-speaking Africa have become correlated with a rise in views favourable to Russia. The opinion that Russia should be a global leader, a view expressed in Africa more often (42%) than the global average (33%), surged in parts of West and Central Africa shortly before the war. Gallup noted that between 2020 and 2021 in Mali, this opinion increased by 25% of respondents from 59% to 84%; in Ivory Coast, by 17% up to 71%; in Gabon, by 13% up to 64%.² It can be explained by the perception that Russia is the main adversary of France in Africa. In this context, French support to Ukraine leads many citizens of francophone African states and social media users in these countries sympathetic with Russia—their latest bet—more naturally than with the attacked country, which remains outside the regions’ popular imagination.

The disparity between the global status of France and the Sahel, one of the world’s poorest regions, has led to a love/hate relationship between the two for years. Experience of domination by the French in business and politics of the region (*Franceafrique*) matched with the failure

² Z. Bikus, “Africans Divided on Russia’s Leadership Before Ukraine War,” *Gallup*, 13 April 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/391718/africans-divided-russia-leadership-ukraine-war.aspx>.

of often French-educated leaders to bring development, despite the natural riches of the region, such as uranium or gold. This has led many to see France as principally exploiting the region without offering much in return, despite Paris' enduring status as a cultural centre and a destination of choice for migrants.

ILLUSTRATION 1.



Post by Yerewolo social movement (Mali) celebrating cancellation of Macron's visit to Bamako. Originally posted on Facebook profile "Yerewolo debout sur les remparts", 17 December 2021.

ILLUSTRATION 2.



A caricature of Macron with Louise Mushikiwabo, secretary-general of the Francophonie, author Meschac Kadima (M Kadima), a Congolese artist, originally posted on Twitter @mkadimart, 28 November 2022.

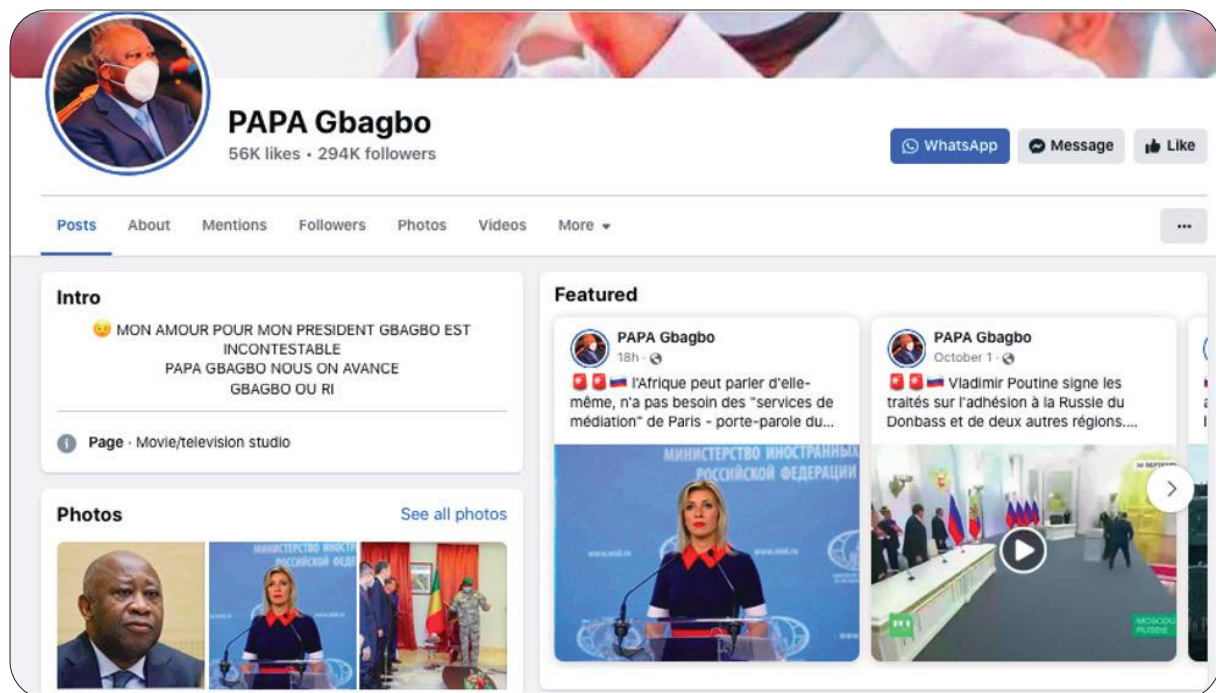
A large part of the region's *political class* has vast French political and business connections, often holding double passports, and travel to Europe freely, contrasting with the poverty and lack of agency of their citizens. Another stream of criticism of France arose in the last decade when activists like the Senegalese development economist Ndongo Samba Sylla continually calls for abandoning the post-colonial CFA franc currency used by 14 states in West and Central Africa. They argued that the CFA was seen as an obstacle to essential monetary and wider economic independence despite its stabilising role in preventing inflation.

A build-up of anti-French rhetoric was associated with the former Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, who denounced French "neocolonialism." During his time in office (2000–2011), state-run TV and radio stations as well as private newspapers such as *Notre Voie* and *Le Temps* adopted a strongly anti-French tone.³ After he lost elections to incumbent Alassane Ouattara in 2010, the civil war that erupted was ended thanks to French intervention and he faced persecution at the ICC, leading him to become an icon of anti-French resentment. Despite his

³ "Ivorian media fuel anti-French hostility," *Reporters Without Borders*, 4 December 2010, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4cfde64f1a.html>.

advanced age (now 77 years old) and lack of prospects for running the country anymore, his supporters are a strong community, at least online. After the eruption of the war in Ukraine, Gbagbo supporters became one of the pillars of the pro-Russian discourse in French-speaking Africa. The Facebook profile of “Papa Gbagbo” (with almost 300,000 followers, by early 2023 under the new name “Papa Koudou Gbagbo”) has become both a meeting spot and a spreader of Russian wartime propaganda. Following the 24 February 2022 attack, it published pro-Russian war “news” more frequently than information about Gbagbo himself and by the end of the year appeared to be a Russian-run shell. Nevertheless, it retained original, genuine followers who engaged in fervent discussions with little internal criticism.

ILLUSTRATION 3.

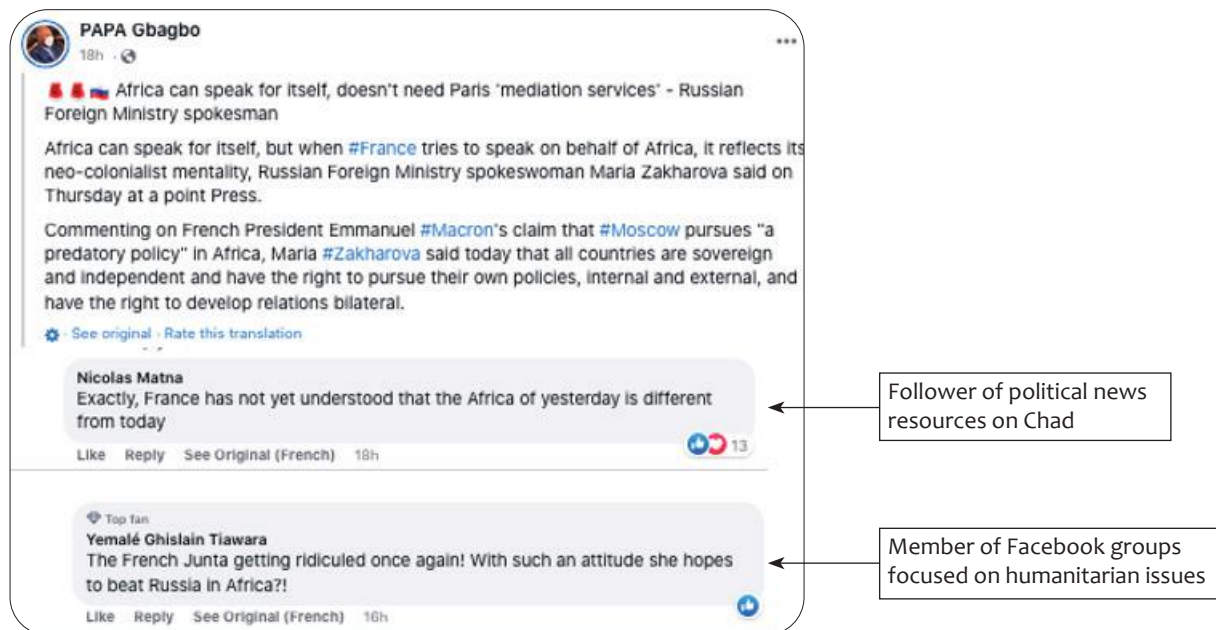


Source: Facebook

For its users, the figure of Gbagbo, seen as a “man of the people” who stood up to the former coloniser, embodied rejection of both the national and international systems in their current form. He became the glue holding together Putin, France, NATO, and Ukraine in an apparently coherent story of (Western) “oppression” and (Russia-led) “resistance.”

The decade-plus legal saga of Gbagbo’s undergoing “attacks” by the mainstream, particularly French media, offers his supporters a solid parallel with today’s Russia. Their natural leaning towards Putin is validated through the perception that, like Gbagbo, he also favours a fairer and more independent Africa. Gbagbo’s success in overcoming his pariah status shows his supporters that even if the great powers are against you, you who may turn out to be right.

ILLUSTRATION 4.



Source: Facebook

While Malians massively supported the entry of the French anti-jihadists intervention in 2013, by the end of the decade, fatigue with the continuation of its Operation Barkhane in the five states of the Sahel (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, Mauritania) without clear objectives and without lasting results translated into frustration. This was similar to the criticism of the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan or the UN deployment in the DRC. The breakdown of trust in France was understandably fuelled by a steady rise in violence by Islamic extremists in Mali, which spilled over to neighbouring Burkina Faso and Niger. This was despite French forces killing numerous commanders of local branches of Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Overwhelmed with expanding security threats, and without trustworthy local sources of information and institutions, a large part of the online audiences is prone to grasp whatever piece of “information” seems relevant and relatable, be it anti-French gossip on WhatsApp, a conspiracy, or fake news.⁴

Attempts to make sense of this ongoing unbearable situation steered many, particularly the poorly informed and rural constituencies involved in the discourse thanks to WhatsApp, towards seeing France as the main obstacle to moving forward. In this context, conspiracy theories that the French were secretly arming the Islamist militants were born. These feelings would be exploited by the Malian junta that ousted the French-favourite, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, in 2020. With spectacularly antagonising gestures, the young officers expelled the French ambassador, and invited the Wagner Group to effectively replace the French as Mali's military partner against the jihadists.

⁴ M. LeRiche, “Facebook and Social Media Fanning the Flames of War in South Sudan,” Centre for Security Governance, 12 July 2016, <https://secgovcentre.org/2016/07/facebook-and-social-media-fanning-the-flames-of-war-in-south-sudan>.

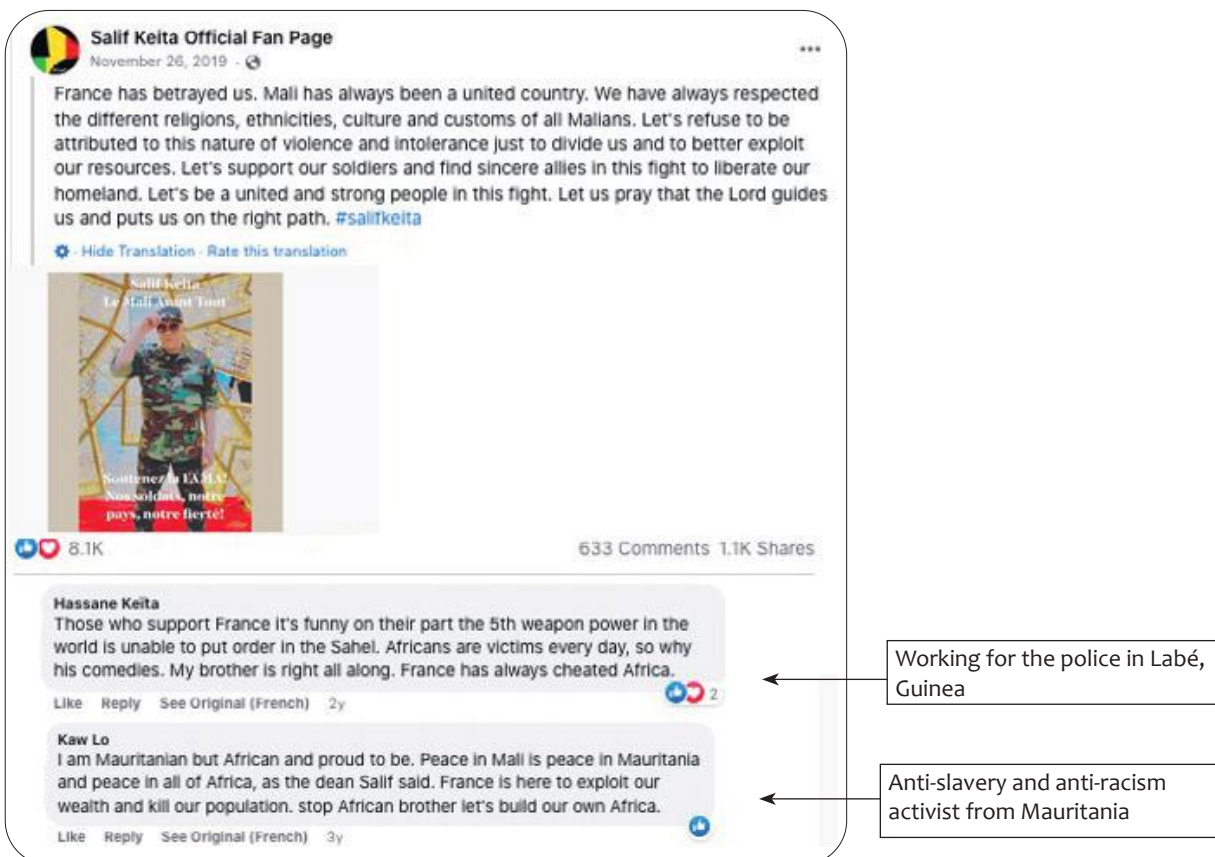
ILLUSTRATION 5.



Cover photo at the Facebook profile “L’Afrique Mon Beau Pays” (59,000 followers on Facebook) relates to the conspiracy theories that the French are arming terrorists, cover photo updated on 28 September 2022.

These theories referred to memories of the familiar colonial style divide-and-rule machinations, the dubious attitude and actions of France during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. They found promoters among respected figures, such as the world-famous Malian musician Salif Keita (who runs a Facebook fanpage with 1 million followers).

ILLUSTRATION 6.



Source: Facebook

The experience of dozens of ordinary Burkinabe and Nigeriens blocking the passage of a French military convoy across their countries in November 2021 to “prevent” alleged reinforcement of the jihadists illustrated the snowball-like traction of the anti-French mobilisation in the region.

In the last two to three years, it seems a critical mass has been passed, and whatever France does, or is involved in, results in an imminent social media backlash and eruption of conspiracist speculations. This was exemplified in a November 2022 incident when a French plane made an emergency landing in Kisangani in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). It was immediately—and falsely—interpreted by many (here: a Rwandan anti-government commentator, 13,500 followers) as a flight carrying arms to the M23 rebels destabilising eastern Congo.⁵

ILLUSTRATION 7.



Source: Twitter

⁵ P. Muyaya, “L’avion militaire français qui a atterri en détresse à Kisangani a été inspecté par les services de la DGM,” *Radio Okapi*, 23 November 2022, www.radiookapi.net/2022/11/23/actualite/politique/patrick-muyaya-lavion-militaire-francais-qui-atterri-en-detresse.

Expressions of anger with France became increasingly accompanied by pro-Russian voices. This association developed both organically and thanks to inspiration by the Russian media machinery and its agents of influence, such as Mali's Adama Ben Diarra. Since the installation of Goita's junta in 2020, Diarra's street protest movement Yerewolo has helped to keep protesters mobilised, binding together the demands for a French exit and a Russian entry. On social media, it played the role of a "videographer," as Malians and Ivorians call the increasingly influential social media personalities providing live coverages of major events, such as demonstrations.⁶

ILLUSTRATION 8.



Source: Facebook

This was easier as Russia had already been actively positioning itself as a security alternative to France. Russia presented itself as a better partner, free of colonial baggage and willing to shake up the global order, as witnessed in its successes from 2018 onwards in driving out France as the main ally of the Central African Republic.

This pro-Russian drive within the anti-French discourse was accelerated by prominent social media influencers, notably the Beninese-origin Kemi Seba (1.1 million followers on Facebook), Swiss-Cameroonian Nathalie Yamb (both heavily courted by Russia), later joined

⁶ H. Bako, "Réseaux sociaux et désinformation au Sahel," *Bulletin FrancoPaix*, vol. 7, no 10, Chaire Raoul-Dandurand en études stratégiques et diplomatiques, Université du Québec à Montréal, December 2022.

by Paris-based Egountchi Behanzin (267,000 followers on Facebook). All of them grew into prominence as online—and offline—activists using anger with France as the main fuel for their popularity. All of them developed this attitude while living in the West (France or Switzerland) and their appeals resonated both among the African diasporas and on the continent. Inside Africa, they primarily build their audiences by criticising France-friendly African governments, depicted as French proxies.

In the context of the info-war with Russia, France revoked visas for Yamb and Maïkoul Zodi (the Nigerien coordinator of the *Tournons la page* coalition, a civic coalition harshly criticising French military presence in the Sahel). This elevated their status to that of quasi-martyrs and further boosted the credibility of their affection towards Putin.

ILLUSTRATION 9.

The illustration shows a screenshot of a Facebook post by Nathalie Yamb, dated October 17, 2022. The post is titled "I KNOW" and contains a long text where Yamb expresses her determination to fight for freedom and justice, referencing the assassination of Thomas Sankara in 1987. The post has 42K likes, 9.8K comments, and 6.1K shares. Below the post, two comments are visible: one from Mamadou Thiaw and another from Mahamat Ali Djibrine Houlimi. Annotations with arrows point to these comments from boxes on the right. The first box identifies Mamadou Thiaw as a "Dentist and medical researcher from Senegal". The second box identifies Mahamat Ali Djibrine Houlimi as a "Government employee from Chad, supports Russia's stance against LGBT and mobilisation of a new, 'conscious' Sahelian generation".

Nathalie Yamb October 17, 2022 · 🌐

I KNOW

Yup. I know there going to kill me. But they will not be able to assassinate the unrepentant desire for freedom and justice that drives the vast majority of Africans. On October 15, 1987, they murdered Thomas Sankara, but they failed to kill the aspirations and values he embodied.

On October 15, 2022, 35 years later to the day, they announce to the whole world that I am the greatest danger on the planet to French interests. A small African woman of 163 cm, who runs no state, owns no guns, army, media, that they themselves snatched from Africa, getting me arrested and deported to Europe, as we were arrested and threw our sigh dan s the docks of the boats to send them in Slavery in Europe and the plantations.

But am not a slave. I am nobody's slave. I have never been one. I lived live and will live as a free woman And I will die a free woman.

In the same way I inherited aspirations, values, principles and courage from Thomas Sankara, Jerry Rawlings, Ruben Um Nyobé, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, in the same way thousands, millions of people will inherit heaven until when they kill me.

Have a great start to your week friends.

#LaDameDeSochi 🐼👉

See original · Rate this translation

42K 9.8K comments 6.1K shares

Most relevant ▾

Mamadou Thiaw
Better to live with strong principles than to live to live. By opening our eyes more to the true identity of France and their African collaborators, you have already accomplished your mission. The flame will never go out again. Force to you

Like Reply See Original (French) 11w 240

Mahamat Ali Djibrine Houlimi
I advise you Madam to leave Western Europe and go live in an African country or Russia.

Like Reply See Original (French) 11w

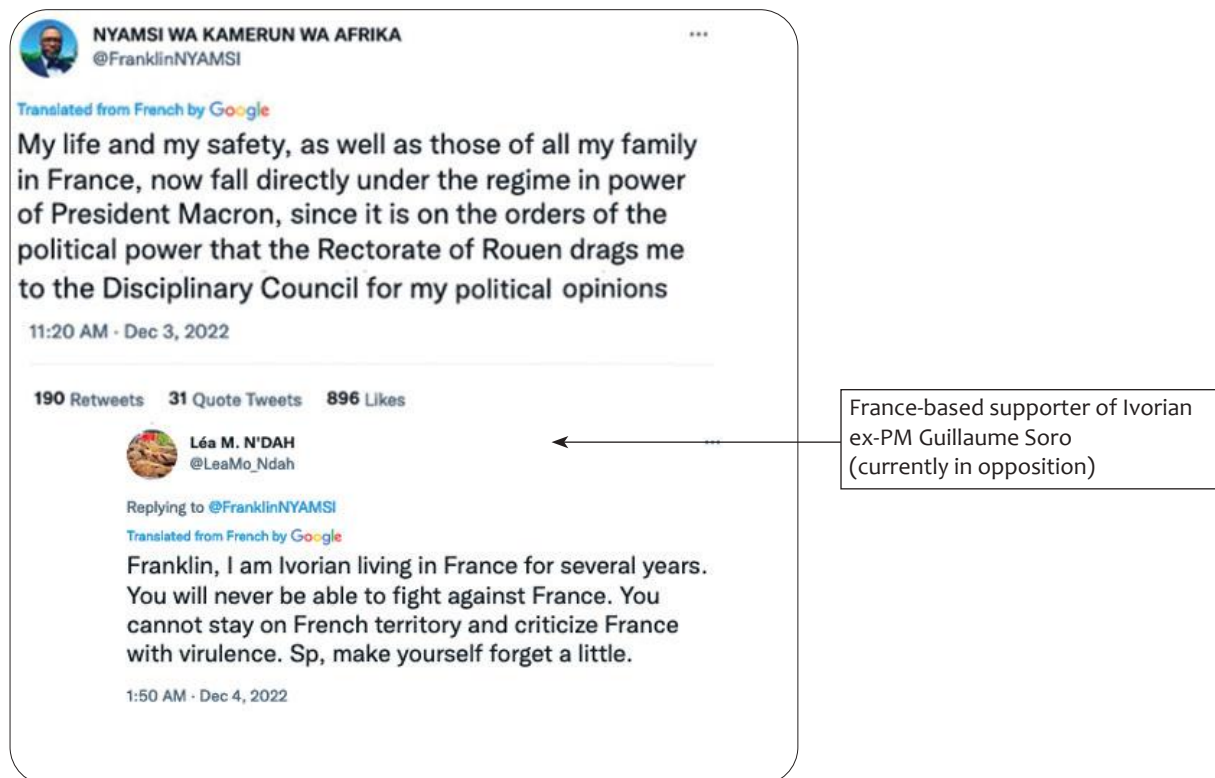
Dentist and medical researcher from Senegal

Government employee from Chad, supports Russia's stance against LGBT and mobilisation of a new, "conscious" Sahelian generation

Source: Facebook

Similar self-portrayals of Prof. Franklin Nyamsi (205 thousand subscribers on YouTube, large following on all main social media), a lecturer at Université Lille-III and French resident, mostly backfired. When in December 2022 the state-owned University of Rouen, where he taught, called him in front of its disciplinary council, he decried being “persecuted by *Franceafrique*” for his views (even putting a note to this effect in his Twitter bio). While some commentators expressed support, most genuine users pointed to his hypocrisy of benefiting from the comfort offered by the French state while “biting the hand that feeds.”

ILLUSTRATION 10.



Source: Twitter

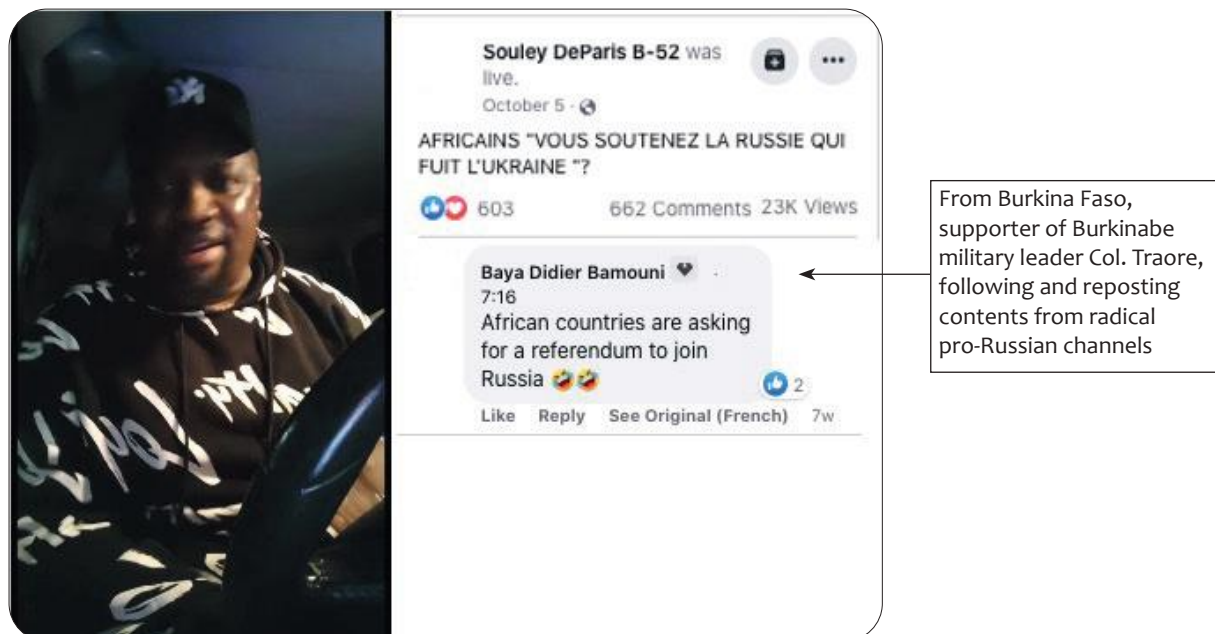
While these opinion leaders would package their anti-French crusade with videos well-tailored for media consumption, others would use rough, and therefore authentic-looking, means of communication. This latter group includes low-level opposition figures turned videobloggers, such as Ivorians Souleymane Traoré (a.k.a. Souley DeParis B-52, who has 555,000 followers on Facebook), a political activist close to ex-Prime Minister Guillaume Soro, and Souleymane Gbagbo Koné, a supporter of Gbagbo (garnering 1,000–10,000 comments under popular video posts). Their amateurish, but very frequent videos, often filmed in selfie-mode from cars, combine criticism of the current France-friendly leadership of the country with accusations against France for playing puppet master in Ivorian politics. Their devotion towards the Malian, and lately Burkinabe, military juntas and eventual support of Russia in war on Ukraine came as an offshoot to all of these issues. Though Russia may not be the focus of their attention, they find its policies and alliances in the region resonating with their own goals and perceptions.

ILLUSTRATION 11.



Source: Facebook

ILLUSTRATION 12.

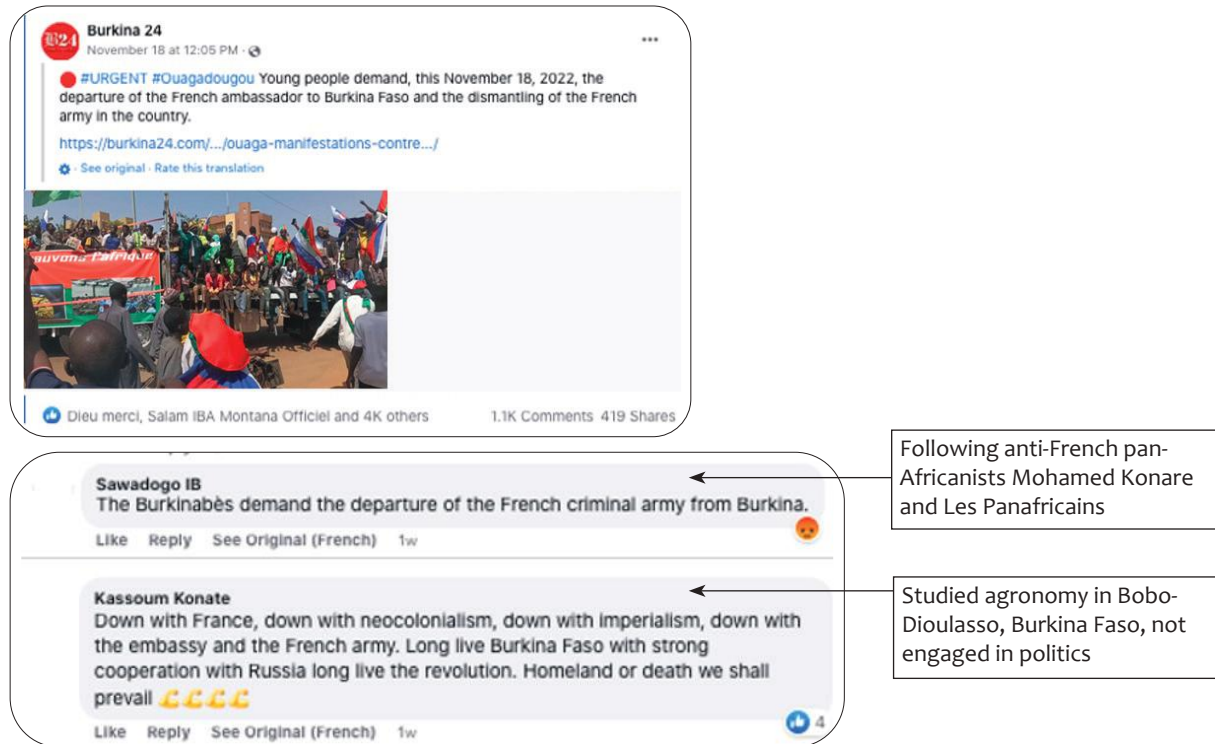


Source: Facebook

In African francophone countries calls to get rid of French influence (and/or call in the Russians) have primarily been built on frustration with local elites, poverty, and insecurity. Even during the war in Ukraine, backtracking from once declared sympathising with Russia can be difficult, as it could have been read as retracting from legitimate demands for reforms and agency, both locally and globally. Still, as pro-Russian war-time declarations became routine, they also remained superficial.

Often, anti-French and pro-Russian declarations are instrumentalised. This is the case with the Burkinabe coup-making group of officers, reliant on the pro-Russian masses to consolidate power between 30 September and 2 October 2022 or during the pro-military 18 October 2022 demonstrations in Burkina Faso when references to Russia served as to popularise their reforms agenda.

ILLUSTRATION 13.



Source: Facebook

More cynically, or maybe playing according to the post-truth rulebook, Malian youth groups developed a habit of spreading anti-French fake news knowing it was false.⁷ For them, this, as well as making pro-Russian declarations, became part of the game and an easy means to poke the local establishment or the “larger West” and channel emotions and nationalistic fervour more than sticking to the actual meaning of the content they spread.

1.2. FROM A PAN-AFRICANIST DREAM TO THE *RUSSKIY MIR*

Pan-Africanism is an African intellectual tradition that matured during the decolonisation period in pursuit of full sovereignty and a belief that the continent’s unity will give it strength. A classical Pan-Africanist would express pride in one’s African heritage while pursuing a broader, continental identity, manifesting solidarity and seeking greater ties with other African peoples and hope for such policies to be implemented by one’s state government. Prominent Pan-Africanists include the political leaders of Ghana (Kwame Nkrumah) and Burkina Faso (Thomas Sankara) and its principles were heavily influenced the foreign policy of countries like Tanzania and Zambia.

⁷ Keita Mohamadi, a youth leader from Bamako quoted in: L. Ouedraogo, “Mali’s Fake News Ecosystem. An Overview,” *Centre for Democracy & Development*, 2022, p. 6.

The newest generation of Pan-Africanists, growing with the help of social media, developed different priorities and methods. First, they would channel Africans' frustrations by exposing continued, post-colonial dependencies, decry political elites' clientelist mindsets, and seek the continent's agency on the international level. Remaining routinely in opposition to governments and establishments helps them maintain ideological purity.

While Pan-Africanist groups produce some of the most vibrant intellectual ferment on the continent, raise public interest in international affairs and in civic engagement (for example *Deux Heures pour Nous*, *Deux Heures pour Kamita* revived dormant political activism among students in Burkina Faso),⁸ they also tend to radicalise, absorb conspiracy theories, spread disinformation, and give credit to whatever changes the status quo. Russia has actively sought to engage with Pan-Africanists, whom it considered amenable to its calls for multipolarity and sovereignty.⁹ Since at least 2017, it has invested heavily in courting Kemi Seba, the most vocal—and controversial—French-Beninese radical neo-Pan-Africanist (he has 1.1M followers on Facebook), who became an intellectual partner to the prominent Russian Alexander Dugin, an influential Russian nationalistic thinker and promoter of Eurasianism.¹⁰ The self-convinced, charismatic and media-savvy social-media like-minder advocates Africa's pivot to Russia as a means of defeating U.S. unipolarity and strengthening sovereignty. In the last few years, pro-Russian declarations became widespread in a big part of neo-Pan-Africanist circles (especially Francophone ones) as synonymous to contestation of the established order. Russia-friendly statements and allusions became part of their inside language and recurring features in the public discourse.

Pan-Africanist voices with a Russian flavour are channelled through professional media outlets (*Afrique Media TV*, a Cameroon-based TV channel with established European far-right and Russian links, had by December 2022 entered a formal partnership with RT¹¹), social media communities (*Les Panafricains*, *Mouvement Panafricain de Rejet du Franc CFA*, etc.), and by movement-affiliated authors and individual sympathisers. Between classical Pan-Africanist and regional topics, some provide passionate tirades defending the rationale of Russia's war (Seba),¹² or its conduct (Floyd Shivambu,¹³ a South African Economic Freedom Fighters, EFF, party politician with 1.3M followers on Twitter).

Members of the online anti-CFA Pan-Africanist community (189K followers on Facebook) republish and analyse Putin's speeches touching upon issues of racism, equality, and justice, reading them as validation of their own worldview.

⁸ L. Ouedraogo, "If we lie down, we are dead," *Africa Is A Country*, 3 November 2021, <https://africasacountry.com/2021/03/if-we-lie-down-we-are-dead>.

⁹ L. Harding, J. Burke, "Leaked documents reveal Russian effort to exert influence in Africa," *The Guardian*, 11 June 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/11/leaked-documents-reveal-russian-effort-to-exert-influence-in-africa>.

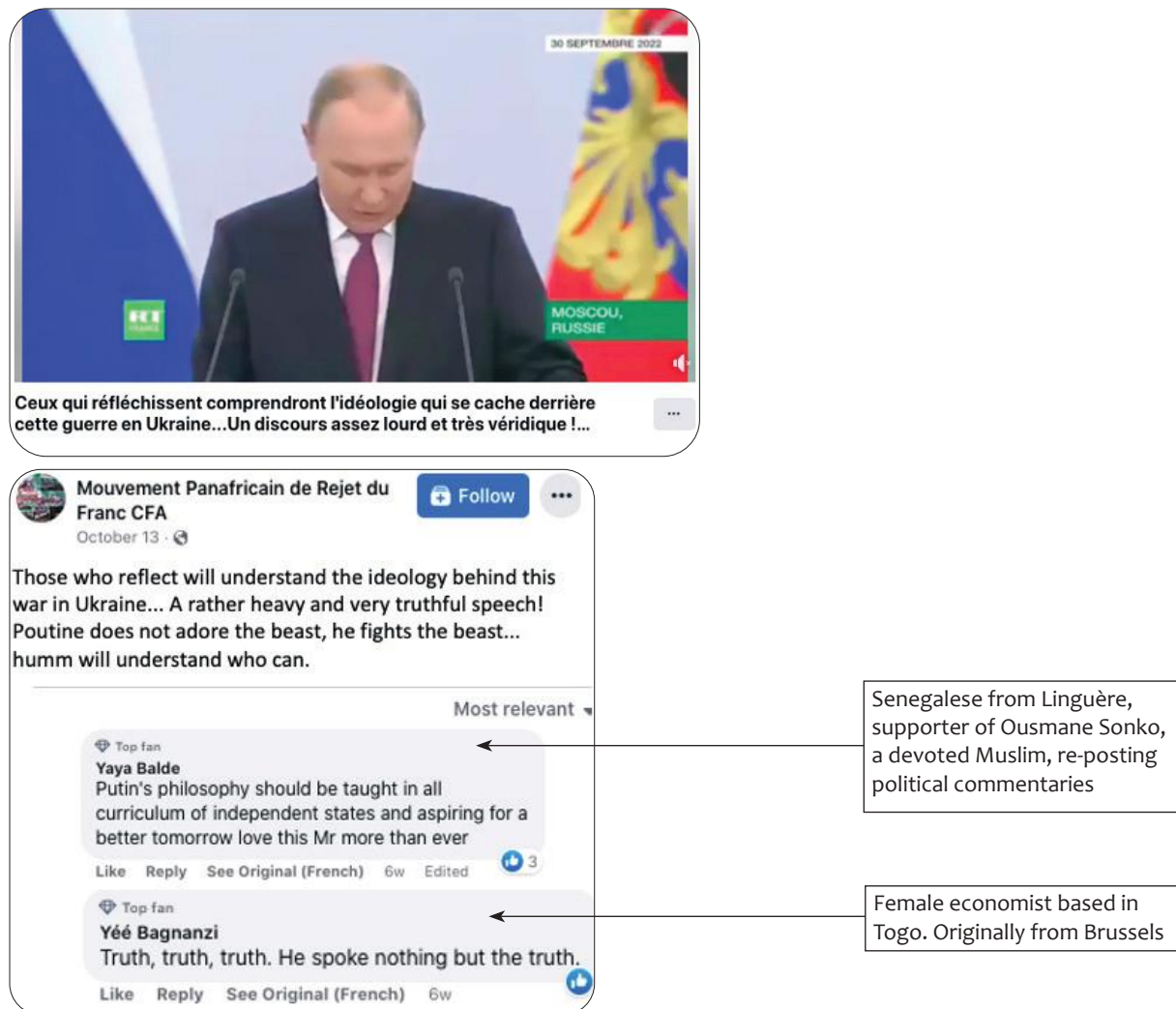
¹⁰ Dugin wrote the preface to Seba's book *Afrique Libre ou Mort* (*Africa Free or Death*), published in 2019.

¹¹ "Partenariat Afrique Media - RT: Bientôt la fin de la 'Propagande Mensongère Occidentale?'," *Afrique Media* YouTube channel, 27 December 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zijp_RGo36c.

¹² "Russie/Ukraine/ Union Européenne...", live video, 26 February 2022, 1.6M views, 19K comments, www.facebook.com/100044532245473/videos/985684672079610.

¹³ R. Chanson, "War in Ukraine: Malema's party in South Africa acts as Russia's mouthpiece," *The Africa Report*, 21 March 2022, www.theafricareport.com/186080/war-in-ukraine-malemas-party-in-south-africa-acts-as-russias-mouthpiece.

ILLUSTRATION 14.



Source: Facebook

Discourse favoured by the young generation of pro-Russian Pan-Africanists is boosted when credited or referred to by established moral authorities. Such was the case with the embrace of Seba, Nathalie Yamb, and Ousmane Sonko (a Senegalese opposition leader whom they support) as truth-holders by the Ivorian reggae singer Alpha Blondy, who has attained cult-like status. An allusion to the popular demand of partnership with Russia by the widow of legendary 1980s Burkinabe leader Thomas Sankara served a similar role.

ILLUSTRATION 15.



Source: Twitter

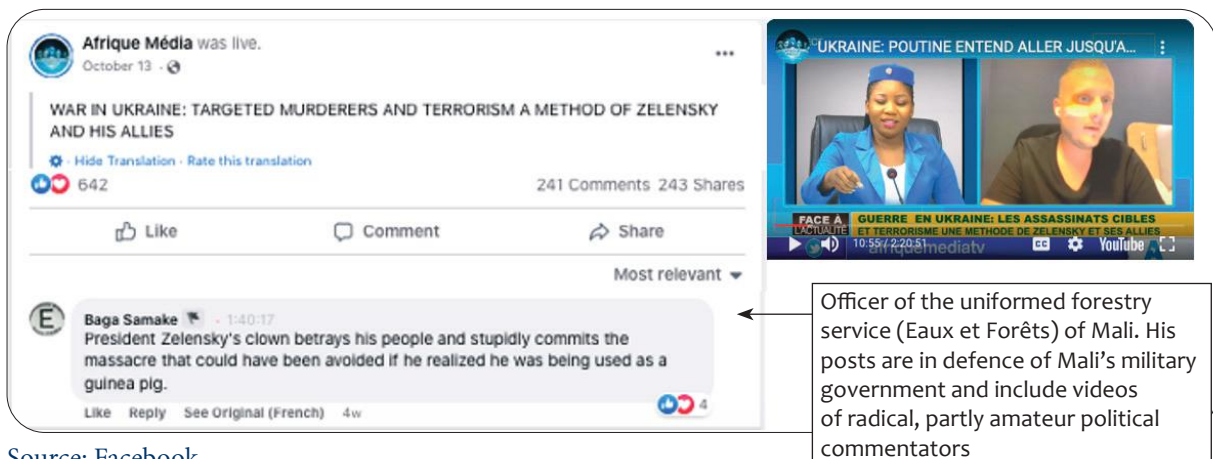
ILLUSTRATION 16.



Source: Twitter

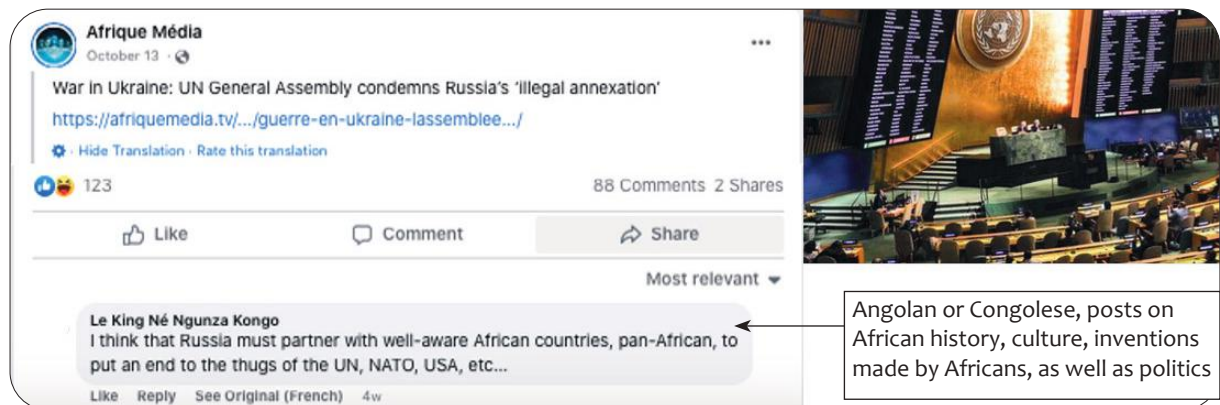
Some, like the Cameroon-based Pan-Africanist TV and magazine *Afrique Média*, which has established links to Russia, massively re-post RT/TASS-derived content and forward anti-Western commentary, which then filters out to other, nominally neutral Pan-Africanist platforms. On a sample day, 13 October 2022, out of the 14 stories posted on its Facebook profile (850K followers), six were focused on the Russia-Ukraine war, all narrated in a highly biased, often non-rigorous way. Example comments, highlighted by Facebook algorithms as the “most relevant,” represent heavily pro-Russian stances framed within recognised Pan-Africanist contexts. They include making analogies to the experience of being instrumentalised and deprived of agency, seeing the situation around Ukraine as a circumstance favourable to fostering political unity between African states, anticipating the end of Euro-centrism, and seeing confirmation of the value of non-alignment.

ILLUSTRATION 17.



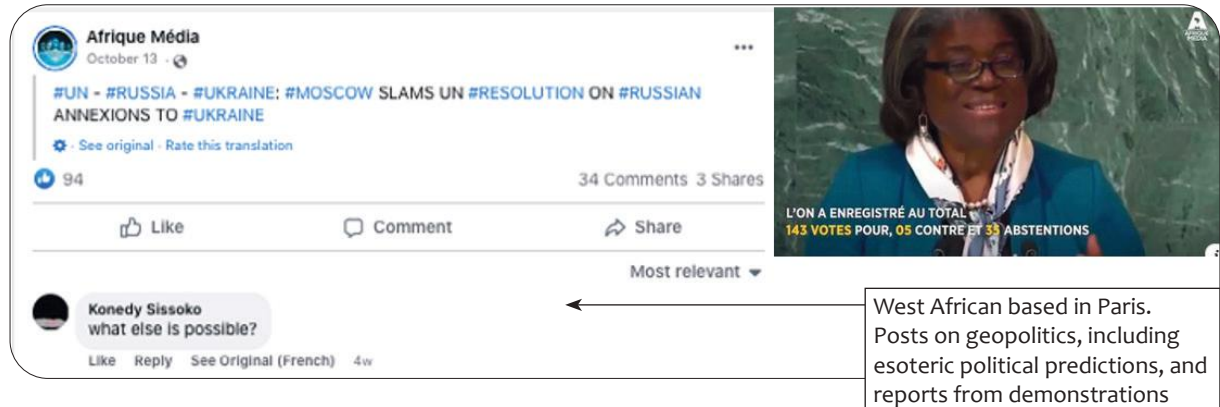
Source: Facebook

ILLUSTRATION 18.



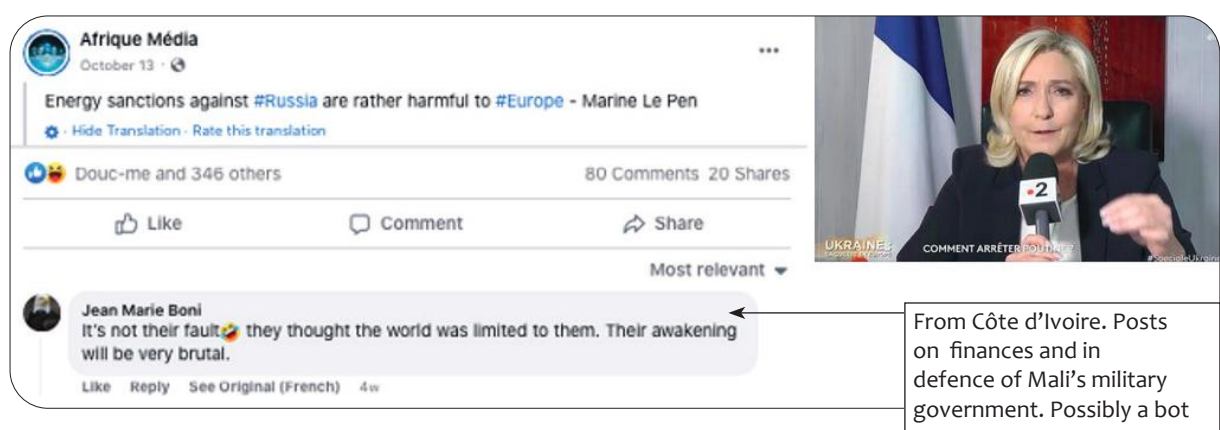
Source: Facebook

ILLUSTRATION 19.



Source: Facebook

ILLUSTRATION 20.



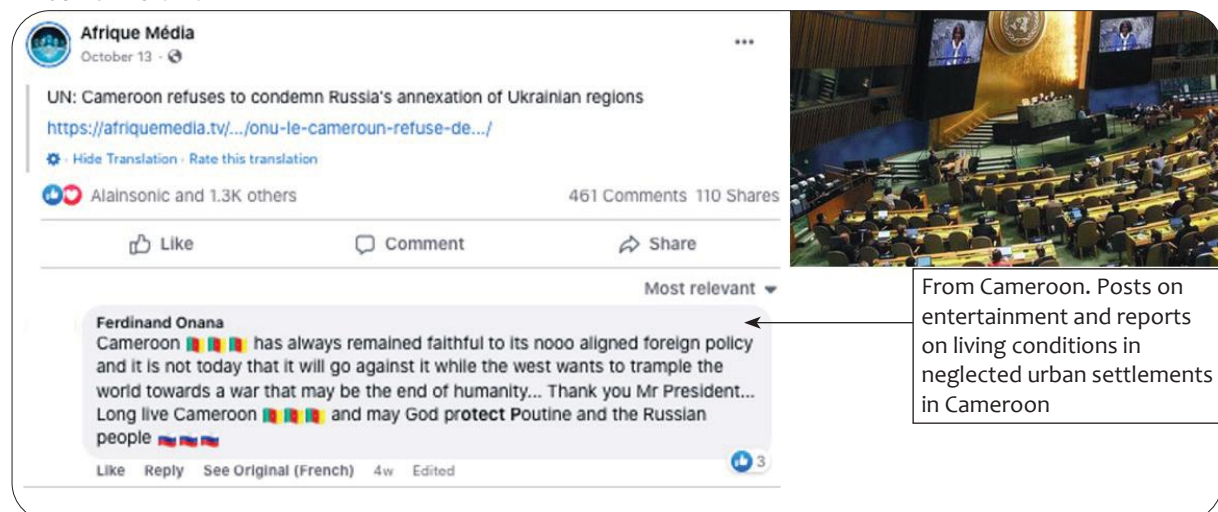
Source: Facebook

ILLUSTRATION 21.



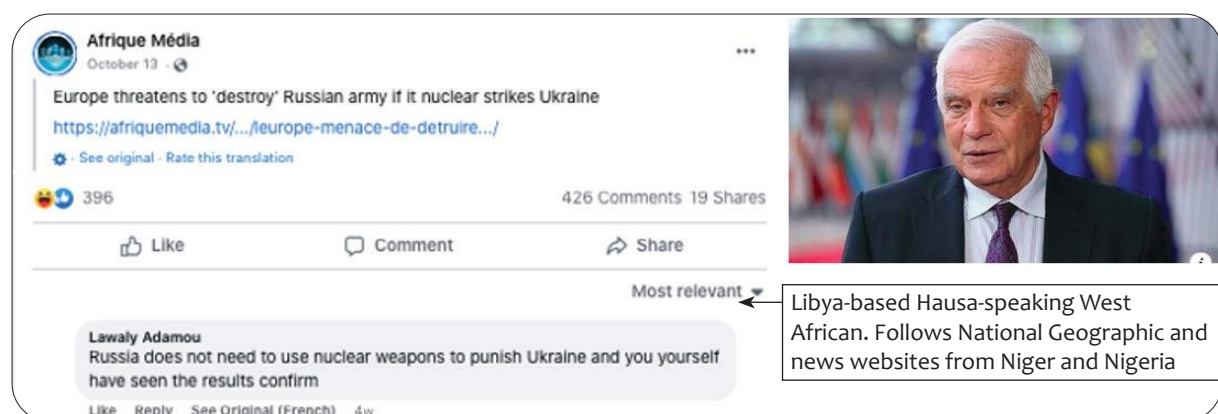
Source: Facebook

ILLUSTRATION 22.



Source: Facebook


ILLUSTRATION 23.



Source: Facebook


Uncritically pro-Russian stances on behalf of a vocal part of the Pan-Africanist community is far from affecting it in its entirety. Multiple other manifestations of the movement do not have such inclinations and see the intellectual limitations of these new-born pro-Russians as discouraging. After the new Burkinabe military leader, Col. Ibrahim Traoré, delivered a speech pointing primarily to domestic shortcomings in governance as reasons for the surge in jihadist activity in the country in recent years and called for a national response, a Nigerien analyst, consultant at the Al-Amal service, Ismael Mohamed (1,300 followers on Twitter) ironically commented on the disappointment it brought to stereotypical pro-Russian Pan-Africanists who routinely blame foreign powers for all the problems and see Russia as a universal solution. The following reactions either defended Mali's Russian choice or pointed to the populist nature of Pan-Africanism.

ILLUSTRATION 24.

Ismael Mohamed 
@IsmaelAmnar

Translated from French by Google

This speech shows the clear difference in the experience of the President **#Burkina** and the populist **#Malien**, who instead of identifying the problems, looking for solutions, preferred to appeal to **#Wagner** to finish what the terrorists started
This will not please the Pan-Africans



2:20 1,290 views


2:29 PM · Nov 14, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

TRAORE Balla
@TRAOREB42661479

Translated from French by Google

No.
Mali has done more: strengthening military cooperation with Russia thanks to which the army has been better equipped (combat planes and means of surveillance).
That everyone has seen and that no one disputes.

10:15 AM · Nov 15, 2022 · Twitter for Android

GARBA Mousse (Dr.) 
@GarbaMussa

Replying to @IsmaelAmnar

It was the Pan-Africanists who made Assimi a populist

12:23 PM · Nov 15, 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

Malian author on books on failed economic and political choices in Africa

Economist and policy analyst from Niger, based in Paris

Source: Twitter

1.3. ARABS' ALLERGY TO THE PROMOTION OF DEMOCRACY

In the Arab world, with some exceptions in the Maghreb, the Western narrative of supporting and defending democracy in Ukraine is read through the lens of regional experience of the Arab Spring and its aftermath (including the wars in Libya and Syria), and more notably, through the way this period is discussed in Arab media. In the mainstream discourse, the Western support for pro-democratic movements, especially during the Arab Spring, has been presented as proof of the West's self-interest and striving for domination. It is also described as an example of a lack of pragmatism that leads to instability and violence. The roots of this narrative lay in the consolidation of Arab authoritarianism that followed the mass protests in 2011. Since then, Arab autocrats have been working to undermine democracy by linking it to instability and radical religious movements, for example, by highlighting the Islamist provenance of the parties that dominated Tunisian and Egyptian governments in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Alternatively, they present the current ruling elites as necessary tutors in the process of building a soft, acceptable version of democracy. This, however, requires a careful top-down application of changes within the Arab societies so that they become "mature enough" to live under democracy. In this context, some regional autocrats, like Egyptian President Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, even present themselves as true democratic leaders.

This narrative is supported by the decrease in faith in democracy as a system that can improve Arab people's life conditions. The promise of replacing autocracy as a way to gain more freedom and economic stability has been gradually dying out throughout the last decade due to the deepening crisis in Tunisia and at the same time, some economic successes of Sisi's regime in Egypt and consolidating soft and hard power of monarchs from the UAE and Saudi Arabia. In Tunisia, the percentage of those who agreed that economic performance is weak under democracy grew from 17% to 70%, in Iraq from 26% to 72%, and in Jordan from 39% to 57%.¹⁴ The number of those claiming that democratic regimes are ineffective and full of problems grew in a similar manner. Even though most Arabs still agree that despite its problems, democracy is better than other political systems, their scepticism towards democratisation itself, and with it, the narrative of a great global fight between authoritarianism and democracy taking place in Ukraine, is hard to miss.

Additionally, the helpful role of social media in organising mass protests and other civil society initiatives since the Arab Spring pushed the autocratic leaders in the region to widen states' activity on social platforms. Hence, a significant part of the online conversations along the anti-democratic line is by state-sponsored accounts from Saudi Arabia or the UAE. Leaders of these states use their financial resources to dominate the discussion about protest movements, civil society initiatives, and Western support for democratic initiatives, not only in the Gulf states but also in the wider Arab world. The significant activity of such accounts was reported, for example, during the recent political changes in Tunisia or Qatar's elections to the Shura council,¹⁵ connecting these events, respectively, to Muslim Brotherhood¹⁶ initiatives and human rights violations.

¹⁴ "Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa," *Arab Barometer Wave VII*, July 2022, www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Governance_Report-EN-1.pdf.

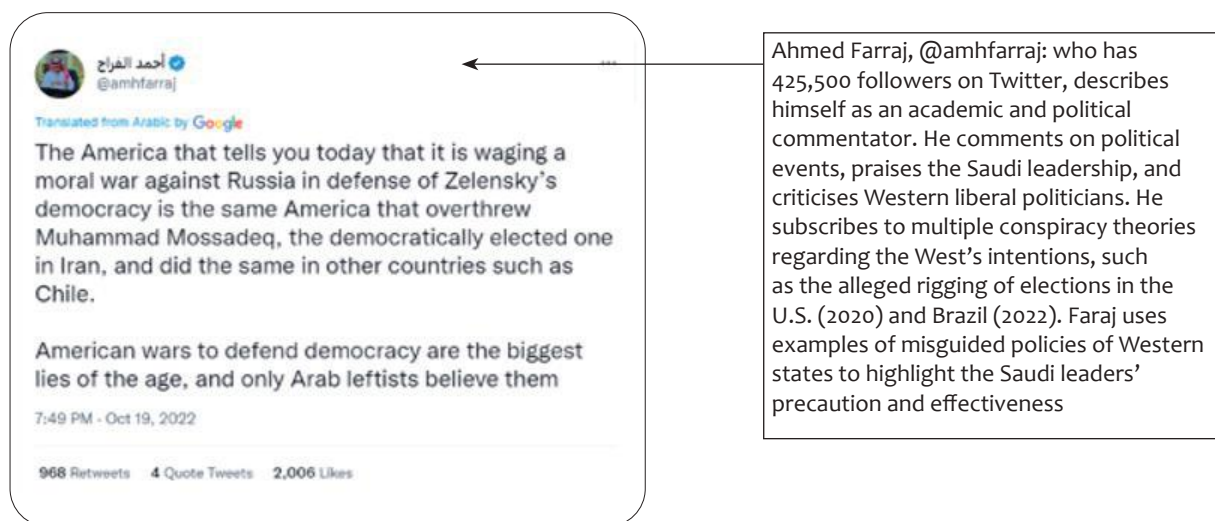
¹⁵ M.O. Jones, "Analysing online deception around Qatar's Shura elections," *DohaNews*, 10 August 2021, <https://dohanews.co/analysing-online-deception-around-qatars-shura-elections>.

¹⁶ M.O. Jones, "Tunisia crisis prompts surge in foreign social media manipulation," *Aljazeera*, 28 February 2021, www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/7/28/tunisia-crisis-prompts-surge-in-foreign-social-media-manipulation.

Except for the presence of accounts directly steered by these states, there is much activity by those who are otherwise related to state institutions in one way or another. Accounts belonging to academics working at state universities, government workers at different levels, experts and others connected to state run media in the Gulf, together with armies of bots, dominate the debate on social media about the role of democracy in the Arab world. On Twitter, Saudi interventions in shaping the discourse are also favoured by the significant imbalance of the number of the platform's users in the Arab world, with the vast majority from the kingdom. According to research by Hamdy Mubarak and others, around 55% of all Arab Twitter accounts belong to Saudi users.¹⁷

Throughout the last 11 years, the Arab autocrats' increased activity on social media distorting references to democracy as a foreign tool managed to permeate into the organic public debate. The spectrum of such voices ranges from presenting democracy as a pretext for Western countries to start or provoke a war to presenting democratic leaders as hypocrites who only talk about democratic values, while not following them themselves. This is exemplified by popular conspiracies on how the U.S. (especially then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton) planned the Arab Spring to rearrange the international order in the Middle East according to its interests. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, the same authors who opposed Western interventions in the name of democracy, like Ahmed Farraj (425K followers), a journalist working for the Saudi journal *Al-Jazirah*, became strong advocates of Russia's goals in Ukraine. In this context, Farraj used the example of the U.S.-supported 1953 coup in Iran as a symbolically anti-democratic intervention to discredit support for Ukraine.

ILLUSTRATION 25.



Source: Twitter

In Farraj's posts, Ukraine becomes a pretext to discuss what he sees as American hypocrisy and interest-driven politics. It falls within the wider pattern of similar posts from Arab Twitter commentators who refer to the image of the Russian aggressor as the one who fights against hypocrisy and attempts to impose regime changes by the West.

¹⁷ H. Mubarak, S.A. Chowdhury, F. Alam, "ArabGend: Gender Analysis and Inference on Arabic Twitter," Qatar Computing Research Institute, HBKU, Doha, Qatar, March 2022. <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2203.00271.pdf>.

On the other side of the spectrum in this discussion are accusations that the West is cherry-picking on democracy and human rights, while it allegedly violates these principles in applying sanctions on Russia.

ILLUSTRATION 26.

Sufian Samarrai, @SufianSamarrai: with 120,100 followers on Twitter, is the chair of the Baghdad Post and comments on political developments in the Middle East. He posts a lot of anti-U.S. content

With 803 followers on Twitter, writes mostly about MENA (Iraq) affairs, quotes from Quran; this was a response to the post by Sabah al-Khozai (@sabahalkhozai) about Ukraine allegedly recruiting children to the army



Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 27.



Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 28.

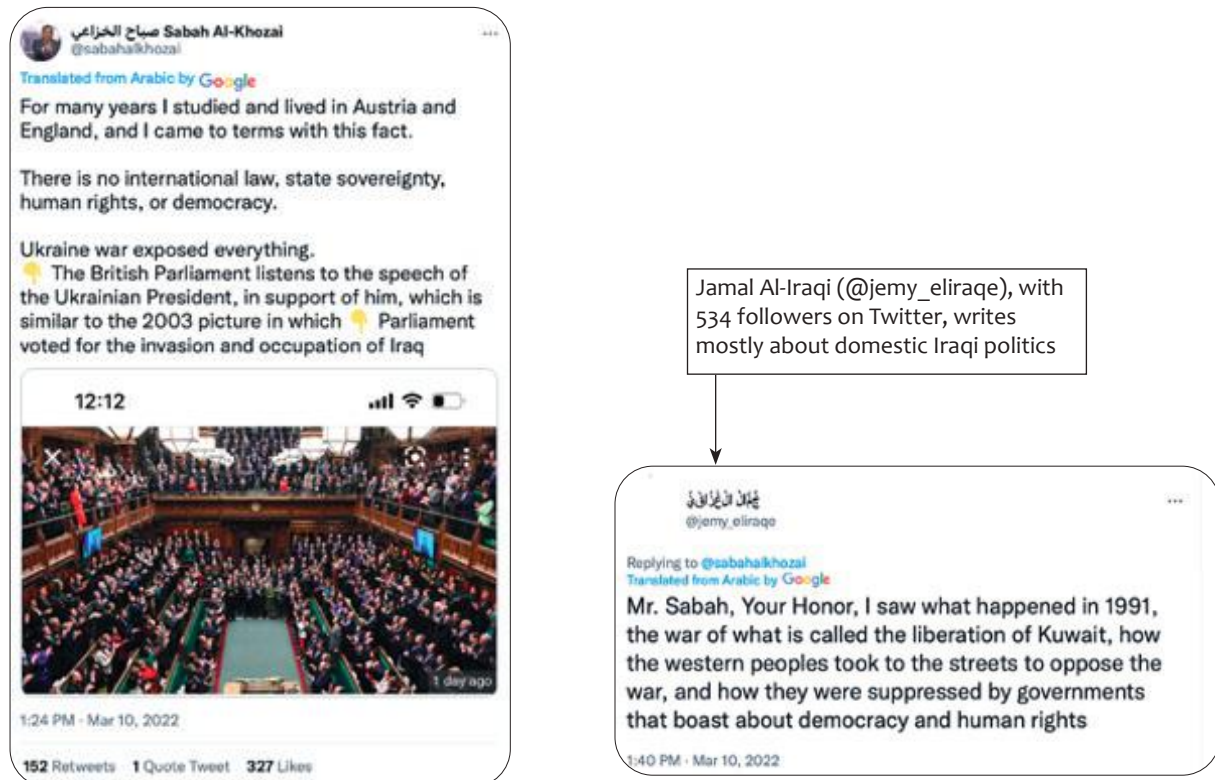


Zizi Saleh, @ziziabozaid: with 45,300 followers on Twitter, introduces himself as an Egyptian patriot and tweets about Egypt and Sisi

Source: Twitter

Other commentators, such as Sabah al-Khozai (@sabahalkhozai, with 146K followers on Twitter, is an Iraqi academic and political analyst living in England) and his readers use the pretext of the war in Ukraine to “expose” what they see as the superficiality of Western democracies. To support that, at least on an emotional level, he compared the enthusiasm in the British parliament hosting a transmission of a speech by Zelensky with its 2003 support for the Iraq invasion. Subsequent commentators alleged suppression of anti-war voices in the West.

ILLUSTRATION 29.



Source: Twitter

Posts by those who have contradictory views that do not criticise the U.S. or the West for supporting pro-democracy movements but rather because of their insufficient reaction to dictators' actions also appear. They often tend to come from accounts of activists, religious users, and sometimes supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. They are, however, then usually overwhelmed with negative reactions. Additionally, these views, even though supportive of the general idea of democracy and freedom, also tend to serve as a starting point for “whataboutism” in the context of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. By contrasting the strong support for Ukraine with the weak response to Arabs protesting against brutal dictators in 2011, they highlight the limits of equalling Ukraine's defence with defending democracy as a means to build support for pro-Ukrainian policies outside the West.

1.4. DEMOCRACY OUTDATED IN AFRICA?

After the adoption of formally democratic, multi-party systems by most African states in the 1990s, the economic dividend of more freedom largely failed to materialise. Quality governance remains rare. Still, as periodic opinion surveys prove, overwhelming support for

democracy as the most desired system of governance prevails across the continent.¹⁸ From the early 2000s until recently, continental, and regional bodies have succeeded in fighting military coups. If they occurred, they only garnered conditioned popular support as long as they held the promise of eventually bringing more freedoms. The first cracks in this picture came with the 2020 coup in Mali. Young officers of the Malian junta garnered support not as facilitators of democratic change, but as leaders themselves, thanks to personal charisma, symbolic gestures to restore national pride, and skilful harnessing of anti-French sentiment. African social media discourse was filled with the organic, grassroots cult of Col. Assimi Goita, the leader of the Malian junta who invited the Russian Wagner Group to assist its military in the fight against the jihadists and evicted French media (e.g., France24, RFI). His government received an unexpected boost when regional bloc ECOWAS placed sanctions on Mali in January 2022 for backtracking from the promise of holding elections (and declared willingness to do so in 2026). Paradoxically, the regional body's move strengthened the junta's legitimacy and produced declarations of solidarity from across the region. In those reactions, Mali was described as a victim unfairly targeted by the "Western-influenced" ECOWAS. This bloc is widely perceived as weak and selective in its nominally pro-democratic stance.

In Pan-Africanist and anti-French circles, the increasingly autocratic Malian junta became synonymous with a vanguard revolutionary government. Popular opinion leaders with a large social media following, such as the Ivorian-Cameroonian writer Franklin Nyamsi Wa Kamerun or the Paris-based anti-racist activist Egountchi Behanzin, boasted of their closeness to the Malian and other new West African military rulers.

ILLUSTRATION 30.



Malian singer Salif Keita with Guinea's junta leader, Col. Mamady Doumbouya, 2 October 2022; source: Keita's official Facebook fanpage.

ILLUSTRATION 31.



Egountchi Behanzin with the Malian military; January 2022; source: egountchibehanzin.com.

ILLUSTRATION 32.



Franklin Nyamsi Wa Kamerun with Malian junta leader, Col. Assimi Goita, February 2022; source: Nyamsi's Twitter account.

Recent coup-makers in Guinea and Burkina Faso modelled themselves on Goita by adopting a similar look, declaring themselves—contrary to the practice of the last two decades—the head of state and pushing forward with long and vague transition plans barely masking their intent to stay in power. Those developments marked a new, authoritarian shift in West Africa, the strength of which is yet to be fully seen. According to a 2 December 2022 poll by Afrobarometer, 82% of Malians agreed that the army can intervene to run the country and 68% assessed that the situation in Mali was going in a good direction (an extraordinary surge

¹⁸ R. Mattes, "Democracy in Africa: Demand, supply, and the 'dissatisfied democrat,'" *Afrobarometer Policy Paper*, no. 54, February 2019, p. 7.

from just 14% in 2020), despite the economic situation being bad or very bad (66%).¹⁹ This spectacular rise in optimism can be attributed to the re-emergence of a seemingly long-gone patriotic fervour, and the significance of framing the current developments and unorthodox political choices within adequate, well-resonating narratives. Russia took the opportunity to keep the Malian strongmen popular and capitalise on the developing trend. Following the ECOWAS sanctions, it quickly sent a plane with aid to Mali,²⁰ and after the departure of the last French soldiers in August 2022, Putin assured Goita of his support for the Malian “transition” (into autocracy) and promised fertilisers.²¹ The increasingly pro-military Malians read Russia as supportive of their “revolution.”

In Mali, the widely discussed idea of *Mali kura* (“New Mali” in the Bambara and Dyula languages) provides an intellectual backup to the authoritarian shift. Its proponents argue that the elected civilian leadership is too weak or unwilling to “clean the house” and that democracy doesn’t bring money to one’s bank account. They look to the authoritarian, but effective Rwandan leader Paul Kagame as role model for leadership and they see Western-style human rights concepts as irrelevant. These ideas became fashionable and are widely used in local pop-culture. A June 2022 Bambara-language song, “Mali Kura,” by King KJ (315,000 views on YouTube) captures the popular imagination of what *Mali kura* is and what ought to be done by Malians to get there. The song describes Mali as a powerful and strong nation standing around Goita and all the martyrs who gave their lives to protect the nation—referring to the FAMA (a French abbreviation of the Malian Armed Forces). In the Bambara language, coincidentally, *fama* also means “the power holders” or “the king.” The song describes how FAMA/*fama* are at work to build that desired Mali, invites the listeners to be patient, to support the FAMA, and to be careful not to let “the bad White People” mislead them to think otherwise. It is an appeal to the Malian people, which, however, doesn’t seek their opinion but asks them to adhere.²²

ILLUSTRATION 33.

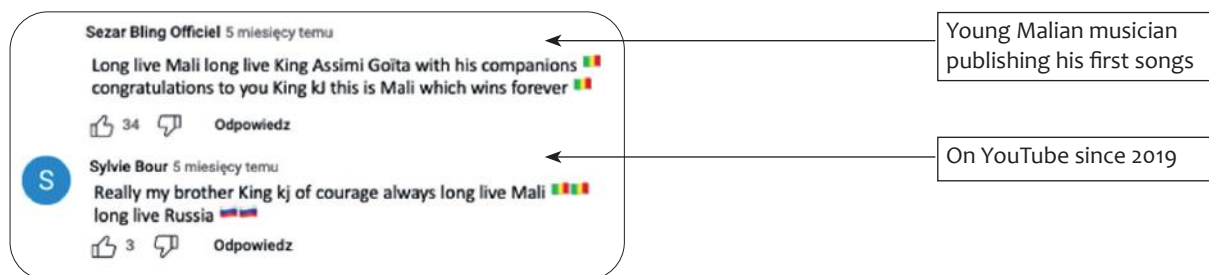


¹⁹ “Aux yeux des Maliens, le pays va dans la bonne direction même si la situation économique n’est pas satisfaisante,” *Afrobarometer*, December 2022, www.afrobarometer.org/articles/aux-yeux-des-maliens-le-pays-va-dans-la-bonne-direction-meme-si-la-situation-economique-nest-pas-satisfaisante.

²⁰ “Un avion cargo en provenance de Russie est arrivé à Bamako,” *MaliActu*, 3 March 2022, <https://maliactu.net/un-avion-cargo-en-provenance-de-russie-est-arrive-a-bamako>.

²¹ Tweet by col. Assimi Goita, 10 August 2022, <https://twitter.com/GoitaAssimi/status/1557377210427777024>.

²² Analysis and interpretation by Lassane Ouedraogo.

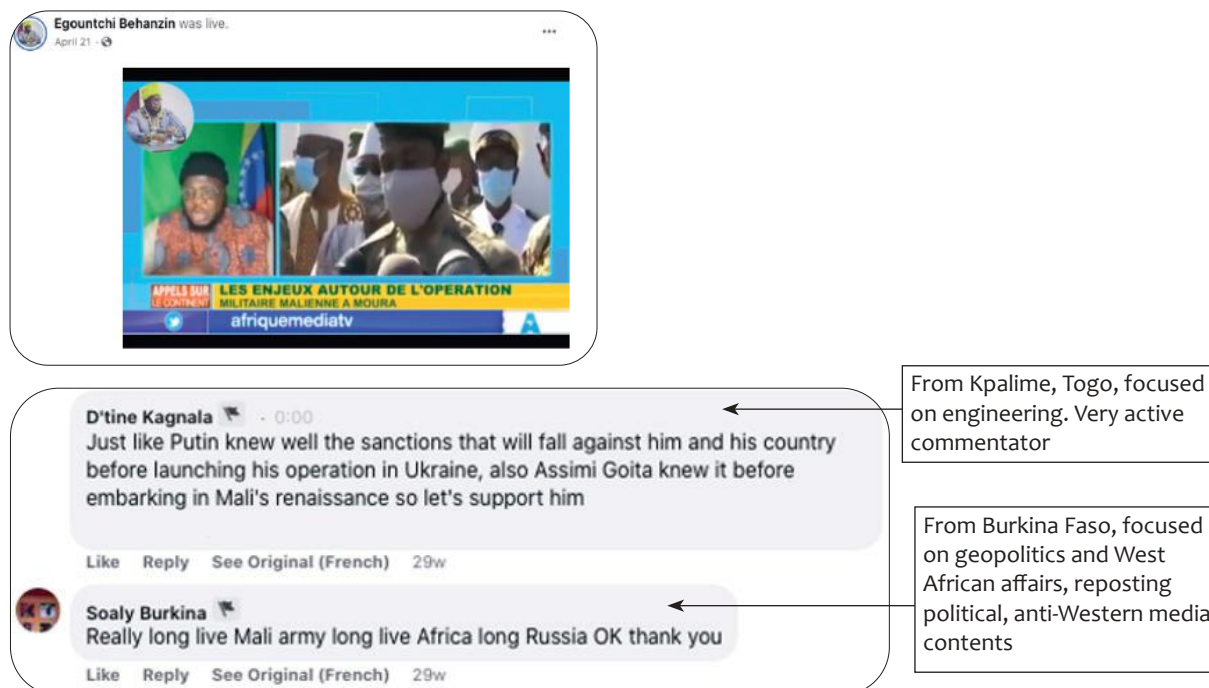


Source: YouTube

For this growing line of strongmen-seekers, Mali's militaristic turn would be something to stand by firmly and to defend in social media discussions. Its Russian links would come as part of the package and steer Goita's admirers further towards seeing analogies between Mali and Russia—now in the context of the war in Ukraine—both identified as lonely rebels with a cause.

Those feelings are well illustrated by the conduct of discussions following the screening by Afrique Media TV of a story calling into question the accuracy of reports of a Wagner-orchestrated massacre of at least 300 civilians in Moura in April 2022. The studio guest (Behanzin) proceeded with denial and blaming France for allegedly arming terrorists. He stated: "While France doesn't have the courage to go to the war in Ukraine itself, it puts accusations on Mali, because it is in the military partnership with Russia." Facebook commentators naturally linked Goita and Putin as victims of scapegoating by the old powers for their refusal to play by Western rules.

ILLUSTRATION 34.

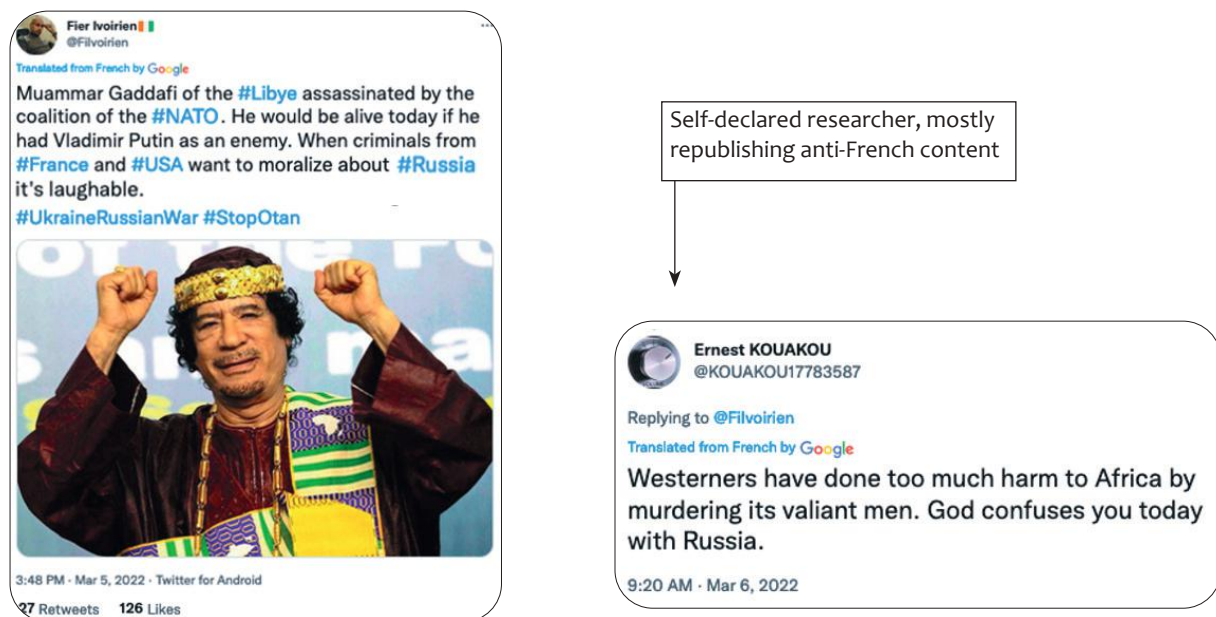


Source: Facebook

Mythologising and uncritical support for Goita follows and adds fresh blood to the earlier, but recently revived cult of Col. Thomas Sankara, the 1980s Burkinabe revolutionary leader and one of a few African military rulers who delivered. Supporters of Goita and Col. Ibrahim Traoré (who

led the September 2022 coup in Burkina Faso) have been seeing them as Sankara's new versions. New authoritarians also grasp onto the peculiar following enjoyed by the late Libyan leader Col. Muammar Ghaddafi. He was and continues to be popular in Sub-Saharan Africa for his aid outreach, anti-imperialist rhetoric, and Pan-Africanist posture. Ghaddafi's humiliating death during the NATO intervention in Libya serves as a reminder of the Alliance's alleged anti-African agenda and support for reactionary forces. NATO's support for Ukraine can be interpreted through a similar lens. Many Ghaddafi sympathisers, such as Fier Ivoirien (3,900 followers on Twitter), a self-declared cyberactivist from Côte d'Ivoire, active in the party of ex-president Laurent Gbagbo, compare the late Libyan leader facing NATO force, with today's Russia under Putin.

ILLUSTRATION 35.



Source: Twitter

1.5. WHO STOOD FOR OUR LIBERATION? COLD WAR REMINISCENCES

In African reactions to the Russia-Ukraine war, the history of the USSR's stance on decolonisation continues to play a role. In the 1950s and 1960s, many newly independent states, including Egypt, Guinea, Ghana, Mali, and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), turned to the USSR in pursuit of socialist models of development. The Soviet Union provided military support to left-leaning liberation movements, including Angola's MPLA, Mozambique's FRELIMO, South Africa's ANC, Namibia's SWAPO, and Guinea-Bissau's PAIGC. All of them remain in power, or are dominating parties, in their countries until today and cultivate an ethos of a liberation struggle, which involves the memory of Soviet support. For some in their cadres, working with the Soviets or having been trained or educated in the USSR was an important, formative experience. The African service of Radio Moscow offered ideological support against the West and colonialism. The Moscow-based Patrice Lumumba People's Friendship University was established in 1960 to offer higher education to youth from developing countries. About 25,000 Africans, often children of local elites, attended this or other universities across the USSR up to 1990. While the Soviet Union included the present-day Ukraine within its borders, and Odessa and Kiev were important centres of education and training for Africans, in the collective memory their "Soviet" or "Russian" character prevails.

This makes Putin's Russia to be seen as the USSR's present-day successor and synonymous. For ethos-derived or biographical reasons, many among the elites, particularly those from the former liberation movements, feel they owe Moscow a moral debt and a degree of loyalty. Also, for those reasons they naturally lend their support to Russia when the war in Ukraine is discussed.²³ Yevgeny Prigozhin himself lent weight to this perspective when answering questions on the death of the Zambian student Lemekhane Nathan Nyirenda, killed in Ukraine after being recruited into Wagner from Moscow's prison. Prigozhin claimed that Nyirenda argued that he subscribed to war on Russia's behalf to repay Africa's debts owed to Russians for their support in becoming independent and out of gratitude to the current activity of Wagner on the continent.²⁴

Persistence of this attachment was manifested in the involvement of the historical African liberation (now ruling) parties in legitimising Russia's annexation of the occupied Ukrainian territories. South Africa's ANC and Zimbabwe's ZANU-PF youth leagues sent "observers" to referendums in the Donbas, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson. Khulekani Skosana (ANC), presenting himself as the new Oliver Tambo, a historical ANC leader, defended his position on Russia in interviews and on social media. In doing so, he argued that the history of oppression of South Africans makes his movement naturally in solidarity with the people of Donbas in their pursuit of "self-determination." While most of the reactions to Skosana's statements have been critical or pointed to his naivety, the discourse he adopted is not foreign to the mainstream ANC. Its powerful international relations sub-committee continues to analyse global roles played by the West and Russia through the Cold War lens, embedded with the outdated rhetoric of "imperialism" and "progressiveness"²⁵. Therefore, Skosana's reading of the situation in Ukraine—sincere, opportunistic, or both—no matter how inadequate, derives from the long tradition that continues to resonate in a substantial part of African states.

ILLUSTRATION 36.



Source: Twitter

²³ R. Shryock, "For Former Rebel in West Africa, Her Allegiance Still Lies With Russia," *New York Times*, 20 August 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/08/19/world/africa/guinea-bissau-russia-gomes.html.

²⁴ Press Service of the "Concord" company, 29 November 2022, https://vk.com/concordgroup_official?w=wall-177427428_1511.

²⁵ "In Pursuit of Progressive Internationalism in a Changing World," Policy Conference 2022 Discussion Documents, ANC Umrahulo Policy Conference 2022 Special Edition, pp. 79–84.

The “testimonies” of the young ANC observers reporting on allegedly universal support for Russia among voters of the referendums were also meant as counterweights to the findings of the previous, pro-Ukrainian fact-finding mission. In April, South Africa’s opposition Democratic Alliance (DA) leader’s trip to the country included visits to Bucha, and exchanges with Ukrainian officials. In South Africa it was heavily criticised as proof of the mainly “white” party’s preference for European rather than African issues. This quasi-Cold War-era perspective allegedly aligned the DA’s interests with those of the West, and not those of Africans. A similar lens would be placed over the Russia-Ukraine war as for or against African liberation.

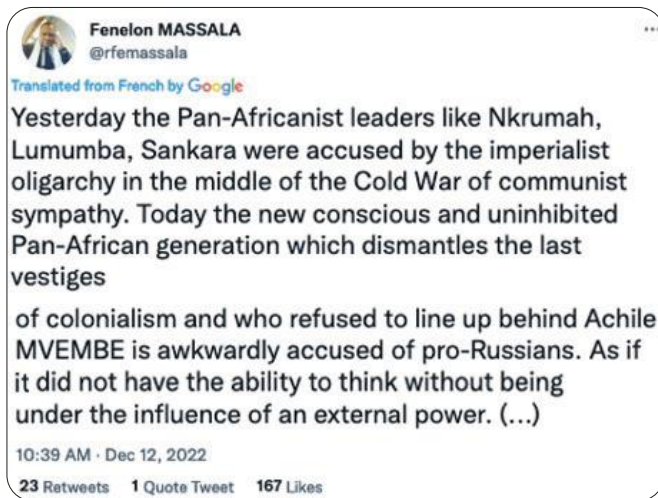
ILLUSTRATION 37.



Source: YouTube

The Cold War analogies are often applied when commentators seek a broader, historical perspective to frame NATO’s support for Ukraine against Russia. A popular influencer, Fenlon Massala, (70K followers on Twitter, author of *Afrik Finance*) argued that the present-day Western criticism of African Putin-supporters are a continuation of its persecution of left-leaning African leaders of the 1960s–1980s.

ILLUSTRATION 38.



Source: Twitter

Another line of division was drawn here to distinguish “anticolonial” hardliners from those who keep on working in favour of prolonging what Massala sees as postcolonial dependence. Through this lens, the famous Cameroonian philosopher and Ukraine supporter Achille Mbembe would be portrayed as a traitor for his attachment to the idea of renewal of France-Africa relations in line with common values. Mbembe proposed this in a report commissioned by President Macron and in a 2022 book *Pour un monde en commun* (*For a World in Common*).²⁶ In line with Massala’s argumentation, rejecting Mbembe, the West, and Ukraine means following the tradition of African liberation.

²⁶ “Reinventing Development: an Interview with Achille Mbembe and Rémy Rioux,” Agence Française de Développement, 1 April 2022, www.afd.fr/en/actualites/reinventing-development-interview-achille-mbembe-and-remy-rioux.

Box 1. OPEC+ decision

Reactions among Arab commentators to the OPEC+ October 2022 decision to cut oil production unveiled their frustration with what they saw as the intention to maintain the “Western-dominated unipolar world order,” justified by the support of the Ukrainian cause. From the Western perspective, initiatives of European and American leaders aimed at securing a declaration to increase oil production were simply taken as hindering Russia’s involvement in Ukraine and help for Europeans to survive the winter after they limited imports of Russian hydrocarbons. Since the beginning of the invasion in February 2022, Western leaders paid at least five visits to GCC countries to facilitate energy cooperation. U.S. President Joe Biden’s visit to Saudi Arabia raised the most controversy given the president’s earlier harsh criticism of Crown Prince. However, the leaders of Arab oil exporting states, primarily the crown prince, refused to align with the West in that matter.

According to a poll ordered by the Washington Institute, around 75% of Saudis have a negative view of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. At the same time, however, both Russia and China are perceived as more important partners and only a quarter of respondents saw any positive outcome of Biden’s visit.²⁷ After OPEC+ announced it would cut oil production by 2 million barrels a day, Western media tended to present it as Saudi alignment with Russia. The Saudis and other OPEC+ members on the other hand focused on their economic interests and the unstable global economic situation as pushing them to make the decision to cut production.

From the perspective of Saudi influencers, following Western demands would violate their country’s sovereignty. They used this argument to discredit Western leaders’ declarations that objecting to Russia’s actions is a common goal for all countries who value the rules-based order, since its aggression can create a precedent for other major powers to violate the sovereignty of smaller states. Social media were immediately filled with expressions of support from the Arab public for the OPEC+ decision, no matter the general approach towards Russia and its war. The symbolic aftermath of the decision was celebrated as it proved the limits of U.S. influence on the regional powers in a key moment that fell within the wider perception of the weakening U.S. role in the Middle East. Although American leaders tried to build on the narrative that the Saudi crown prince aligned with Russia, Arabs did not buy into that either. Quite to the contrary, after some U.S. politicians called for suspending the sale of weapons to Saudi Arabia, they additionally criticised the U.S. for politicising the OPEC+ decision and saw the production cut as an emergence of multipolarity.

²⁷ D. Pollack, “New Saudi Poll Shows Biden’s Visit Barely Budged Skepticism,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 26 August 2022, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-saudi-poll-shows-bidens-visit-barely-budged-skepticism.

ILLUSTRATION 39.



Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 40.



With 620,100 followers on Twitter, is an Algerian journalist working for Shouruk News

Source: Twitter

2. WHAT ABOUT... DOUBLE STANDARDS?

An African or Arab public debater tends to compare crimes in regional conflicts raging in the Global South, be it in Palestine, Iraq, Libya, Ethiopia's Tigray, Yemen, Syria, with human rights violations committed by Russia in Ukraine to legitimise his or her emotional and rhetorical distance to the latter. Although many of these conflicts have produced human suffering of a similar magnitude, they have not received as much global attention, nor the world's will for decisive action to secure civilians' lives, as in the case of Ukraine. This comparison strengthens the view that the Western world always neglects the global South and prioritises issues important to the global North, implicitly pointing to what they deem the "white" West's racist nature. Therefore, for many African and Arab observers, joining the global choir of sympathisers with Ukraine would mean siding with a global order in which the South is sidelined and stripped of agency. This trope, and examples thrown in to support it, continues to stifle enthusiasm for any bottom-up manifestations of solidarity with Ukraine emerging from these regions.

2.1. ARE ALL VICTIMS TREATED EQUALLY?

The story of non-white students struggling to flee Ukraine at the beginning of the Russian invasion in February 2022 cast a long, and possibly the most severe shadow, over the early reactions in Africa and the Arab world to the war. It narrowed the space for expressions of solidarity with Ukrainians and paved the way for pro-Russian voices to go unchallenged and legitimised accusations of racism and anti-Islamism by European states.

Out of about 80,000 foreign students studying in Ukraine at start of the invasion, significant groups of non-European appearance included Indians (18,000), Moroccans (7,200), Nigerians (3,800), Turks (3000), Egyptians (3000), and Ghanaians (1000). Accounts from the fleeing students and groups supporting them repeatedly pointed to cases of non-white students being forced to get off trains, beaten, robbed, and finally separated from "white" people at the border. The apparent temporary refusal for them to proceed resulted in large groups of only non-white people sleeping in the cold at the border.²⁸ The WHO envoy reported on 1 March, for example, the death of two such people.²⁹

No matter how much of these tragedies could have been attributed to the overall chaos of the early days of war and hardships that everyone fleeing Ukraine faced, incidents of racial profiling and discrimination at that peculiar moment did happen and understandably influenced both the popular discourse and official statements. The African Union's 28 February statement referred to the treatment as "shockingly racist and in breach of international law,"³⁰ and a group of African and Caribbean states (Kenya, South Africa, Côte d'Ivoire, Grenada, Gabon, Congo, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines) raised the issue during the 11th extraordinary session of the UN General Assembly.

Ukraine's newly earned label of a "racist" state placed it in the popular reception alongside former colonisers, remembered for implementing racist policies, rather than among the

²⁸ A report by Bijada Hosseini for CNN described the struggle by his own sister, who is from Sri Lanka, to flee.

²⁹ J. Hanspal, "Russia – Ukraine: War sees many Africans left stranded, with no aid," *The Africa Report*, 1 March 2022, www.theafricareport.com/180849/russia-ukraine-war-sees-many-africans-left-stranded-with-no-aid/.

³⁰ "Statement of the African Union on the reported ill treatment of Africans trying to leave Ukraine," African Union, Addis Ababa, 28 February 2022.

universe of the oppressed. This additionally prevented Ukraine being credited as a country defending universal principles. Many shied away from expressing solidarity with it, even if they disapproved of the Russian invasion. The fact that reports of racist incidents in Ukraine, partly real partly exaggerated, helped to steer sympathy towards Russia is paradoxical. Xenophobic and racist attitudes are deeply embedded in the Russian society. Since the Soviet times African and Arab students and professionals residing in Russia have lived in constant fear of everyday violence.³¹ This contrasted and continues to contrast with Moscow's rhetoric on solidarity with the developing world and its peoples.

Commentators were quick to rebuke voices sympathetic with Ukraine in the Arab world or Africa with arguments such as why should *we* offer *them* solidarity, if *they* didn't extend it to *our people* when needed, but rather turned against them. Even though the student refugee crisis subdued in March with coordinated evacuations largely concluded and in April the social media buzz around it was largely over, the issue continued to haunt any initiative aiming to counter pro-Russian voices in the region. Illustratively, in December 2022 Patrick Gathara, a popular Kenyan journalist, cartoonist, and commentator (*The Washington Post*, *Al Jazeera*) stated he did not believe that Ukraine, at the time launching a diplomatic effort offering free shipments under its *Grain From Ukraine* initiative to alleviate the food crisis in Africa and elsewhere, would be able to change many minds. He believed efforts to popularise the otherwise strong Ukrainians' case would be ineffective in the region because they strongly harmed their own cause by mistreating fleeing Africans. Additionally, they would never overcome accusations of double standards from Palestine sympathisers.³² The "whatabouts" largely stripped Ukrainian victimhood of its universal character, while Russia's anti-Western posture kept on representing, in a more generalised way, a challenge to the global status quo, welcome by many.

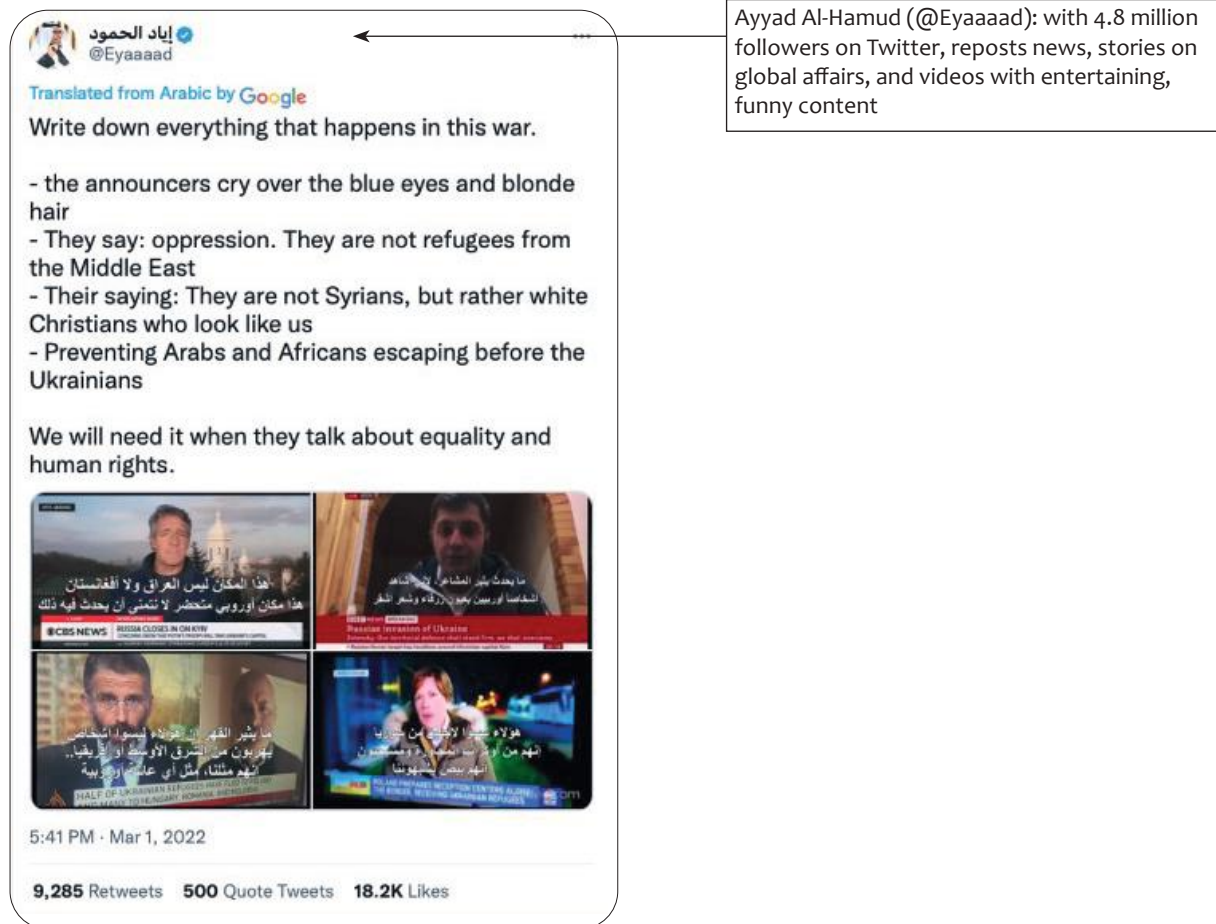
Another trending story about Western double standards focused on the way journalists juxtaposed the European war reality with that in the Middle East when reporting on Ukraine. The language chosen by many Western reporters normalised tragedies and conflicts in the Middle East and presented them as the normal order of things there, unlike the war in Europe. Stories with this kind of reporting pushed the Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association to issue a statement in which its members criticised bias against their regions, which seemed omnipresent in the early coverage of the Ukraine war.³³ The disparity was also widely pointed out by Arab social media influencers.

³¹ K. St. Julian-Varnon, "Russian hypocrisy and the death of a Zambian student in Ukraine," *Al Jazeera*, 3 January 2022, www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/1/3/is-russia-really-africas-friend.

³² E. Libii, "Ukraine sows its offensive across Africa through grain diplomacy," *The Africa Report*, 5 December 2022, www.theafricareport.com/265600/ukraine-sows-its-offensive-across-africa-through-grain-diplomacy.

³³ "The Arab and Middle Eastern Journalists Association (AMEJA) statement in response to coverage of the Ukraine crisis," AMEJA, 26 February 2022, www.ameja.org/resources/Documents/Ukraine%20Statement.pdf.

ILLUSTRATION 41.



Source: Twitter

In a similar vein, the issue of contrasting treatment of Arab and Ukrainian refugees in the European Union was criticised. Since the refugee and migration-management crisis in 2015, EU Member States have been pushing for stricter rules on access for irregular migrants trying to reach the Union. Frontex (European Border and Coast Guard Agency) prerogatives were widened,³⁴ while some states, notably Italy, financed and trained the border guards of third states in the Southern Mediterranean, such as Libya, to prevent more migrants from entering the territory of European countries.³⁵ According to reports from some EU Member States, refugees have been living, sometimes for years, in detention camps with no possibility of holding a job or acquiring an apartment. Right-wing parties have been securitising migration and asylum seekers in their political campaigns and portraying them as a major threat to states and as terrorists. Information about these campaigns and the hate they spread has permeated into the mainstream media in the Arab world.³⁶ Stories of migrants stuck on the borders of EU countries in the east in autumn 2021 made headlines in Arabic-language news.³⁷

³⁴ “‘Regaining control’: new powers for Frontex,” *State Watch*, www.statewatch.org/deportation-union-rights-accountability-and-the-eu-s-push-to-increase-forced-removals/frontex-the-eu-s-deportation-machine/regaining-control-new-powers-for-frontex.

³⁵ “Anti-migration cooperation between the EU, Italy and Libya: some truths,” *State Watch*, 19 March 2020, www.statewatch.org/analyses/2020/anti-migration-cooperation-between-the-eu-italy-and-libya-some-truths.

³⁶ لاجئون-عرب-وأفغان-تقطع بهم السبل في قلب الحملة الانتخابية في المجر *Al-Arab*, 26 January 2022, <https://alarab.co.uk/>؛ وفي قلب الحملة الانتخابية-في المجر.

³⁷ دعت لوقف «تقاذف» المهاجرين.. رايثس ووتش تتهم بيلاروسيا وبولندا بانتهاكات حقوقية خطيرة *Al-Jazeera*, 24 November 2022, www.aljazeera.net/news/humanrights/2021/11/24/دعت-لوقف-تقاذف-المهاجرين-رايثس-ووتش.

The reaction to the arrival of millions of Ukrainian refugees in the EU though was overwhelmingly different. The EU Justice and Home Affairs Council granted temporary protection for refugees fleeing the Russian aggression under a 2001 directive. This allowed Ukrainians escaping the war to access the local job market and housing in EU countries, while some Member States also supported citizens who hosted Ukrainians at their homes and granted them free public transport.³⁸ The contrast between the approach towards Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion and Syrian refugees was quickly picked up by Arab commentators. Some of them highlighted that in a twisted way, Syrians were escaping the same aggressor due to the Russian military support for Bashar al-Assad.

This picture (a reaction to a post about Germany allegedly changing their position on Russia and looking for common ground with Putin), tweeted by Mohammed Saleh (@mizodjmowi) an Algerian and pious Muslim who often criticises Morocco and tweets antisemitic posts, is a graphic example of this.

ILLUSTRATION 42.



Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 43.



Source: Twitter

2.2. THE LONG SHADOW OF THE 2003 IRAQ INVASION

One of the key subjects that justifies a lack of support for the Ukraine cause or even standing with Russia is the Western involvement in and approach to other wars, be they civil or international, fought in the countries of the Middle East and Africa. Pointing out the ignorance or violations of international law by Western actors regarding their policies in these regions resonates with the whole spectrum of Arab and African social media users, no matter their political preferences, demography, or education. Whereas leaders and political commentators question the West's "double standards" to justify their countries' voting patterns in the UN regarding current issues, such as condemning the Russian invasion, some analysts also see

³⁸ J. Szymańska, "Exodus from Ukraine: The New Refugee Challenge for the European Union *PISM Bulletin*, no. 42 (1959), 16 March 2022, www.pism.pl/publications/exodus-from-ukraine-the-new-refugee-challenge-for-the-european-union.

them as a means to question the very credibility and ability of the UN Security Council to react equally to the world's different crises.

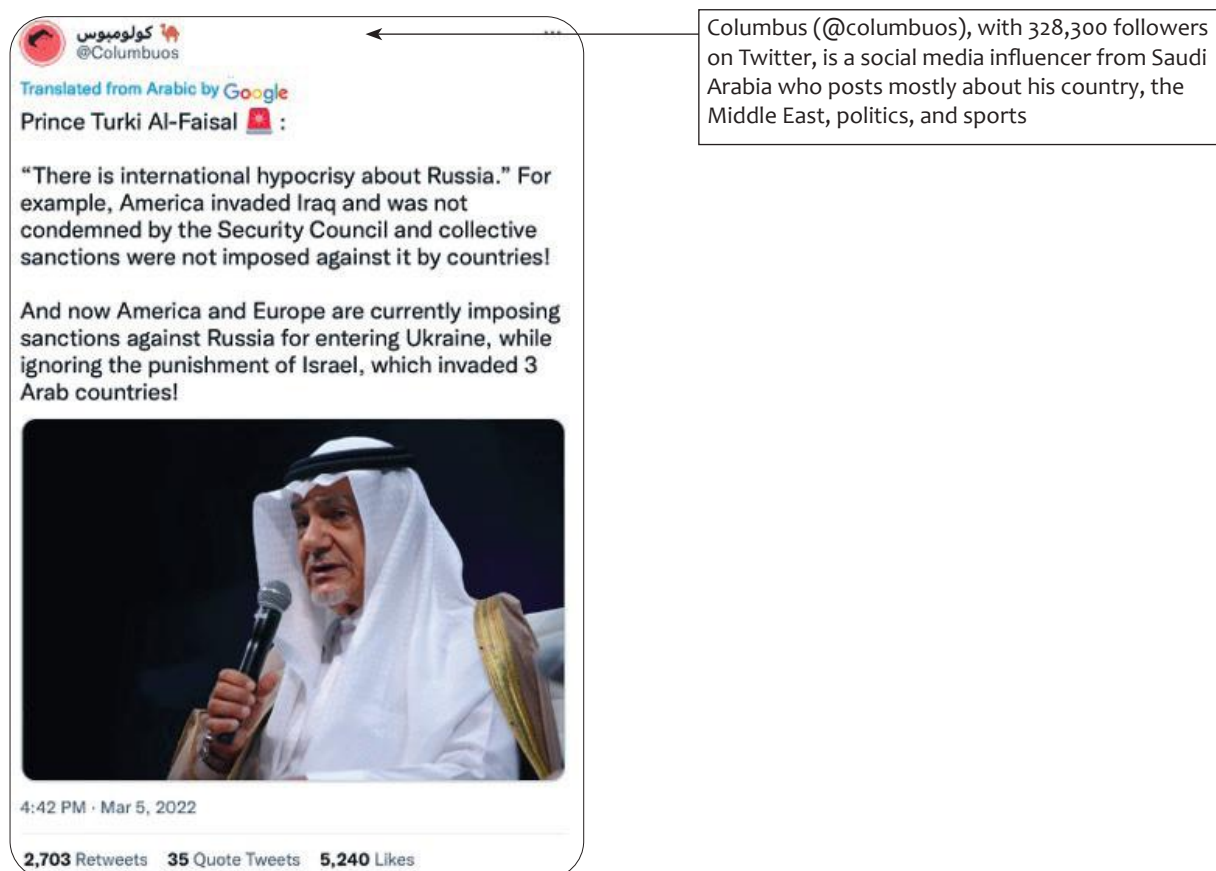
ILLUSTRATION 44.



Source: Twitter

The most prominent example used to rebuke the West over double standards is the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. The invasion had no support from the UN and turned out to be based on false assumptions of Saddam Hussein's development of weapons of mass destruction. Social media influencers in Arab states often develop their opinions on Russia and Ukraine by building on the analogy to Iraq, by expanding on the statements of regional officials.

ILLUSTRATION 45.



Source: Twitter

The sarcastic post below by Dhahi Khalfan and comments underneath it illustrate the way the Iraq question resonates within Arab social media. Khalfan is a Lieutenant General and the current Deputy Chief of Police and General Security in Dubai, UAE. His posts mostly praise the UAE government and the country's development, and he writes as well about MENA affairs. However, he also publishes plenty of posts criticising Western policies and forwards pro-Russian content, including retweets from accounts with Russian news or those posted by RT Arabic journalists and others. No matter how factually inaccurate his posts often are, they attract a lot of attention and often become a starting point for lengthy political discussions.

ILLUSTRATION 46.



Dhahi Khalfan Tamim (@Dhahi_Khalfan), with 3 million followers on Twitter, joined the platform in July 2011 and writes about the UAE and MENA, but also posts a lot of pro-Russian content, mostly retweets from accounts with Russian news. He is a Lieutenant General and the current Deputy Chief of Police and General Security in Dubai, UAE

Source: Twitter

In this case, the tweet presents an analogy to the Iraq invasion, but provoked some unsupportive responses that point out that Russia, together with its ally Iran, is co-responsible for the deaths of many Syrians, took part in other wars in the MENA region, and finally was the one that attacked Ukraine. Nevertheless, Khalfan quickly rebuked them by blaming the Muslim Brotherhood as the one responsible for the situation in Syria (a comment that gained 28 likes, whereas most other comments got none or a few). Some also supported Khalfan by pointing to differences between the U.S. and Russian invasions. In this perspective, Russia attacking Ukraine might have been a measure taken to protect its national interests due to Ukraine's proximity, and secondly, the perception of it being a part of the Russian zone of influence into which NATO and (to a lesser extent) the EU wanted to expand. The U.S., however, attacked a distant country presenting no direct threat to its borders. This argument was also used elsewhere whenever a comparison between the two "invaders" was made.

ILLUSTRATION 47.



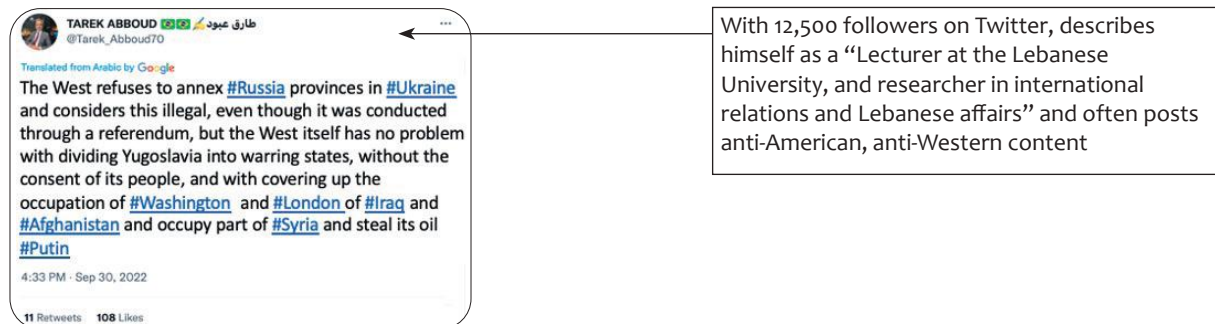
User @mshabib1957, with nearly 1,600 followers, describes himself as a "PhD in the field of educational administration and a former consultant in the Office of the Undersecretary for Education and Curricula at the Ministry of Education, Oman"

Source: Twitter

The discussion evoked by Khalfan's post is symptomatic of the reluctance towards accepting a Western-like perspective on Ukraine. It points to the strength of the hypocrisy argument as a tool in consolidating anti-Western sentiment. It also exposes limitations to the West's appeal to norms and laws, as after Iraq it is seen as the one that broke international law.

For another political commentator from Lebanon, Tarek Abboud, the question of grounds for Iraq's occupation, as well as the U.S. presence in Afghanistan and Syria, became an argument against the West's decision not to recognise Russia's referendums on annexation of Ukrainian provinces. In this perspective, these processes seemed to be completed with more respect to the law.

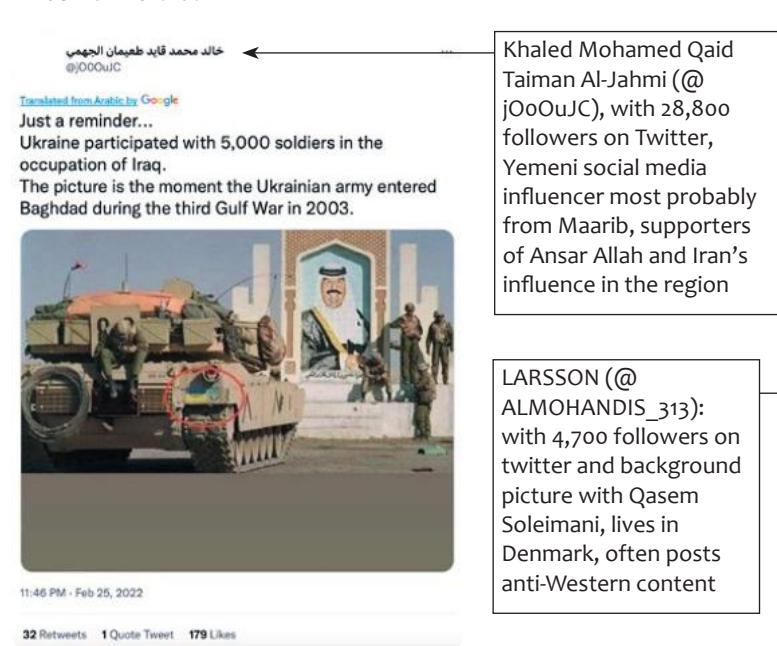
ILLUSTRATION 48.



Source: Twitter

Important, although less widespread, of the unwillingness to support Ukraine is its participation in the occupation of Iraq. From 2003 until 2008, around 5,000 Ukrainian soldiers served, comprising the Coalition's third-largest force by national contingent. Many tweets reminding the Arab public about that fact appeared at the very beginning of the Russian invasion. Some users commented that the 24 February attack was a work of justice which was especially picked up by Shiite social media users.

ILLUSTRATION 49.



Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 50.

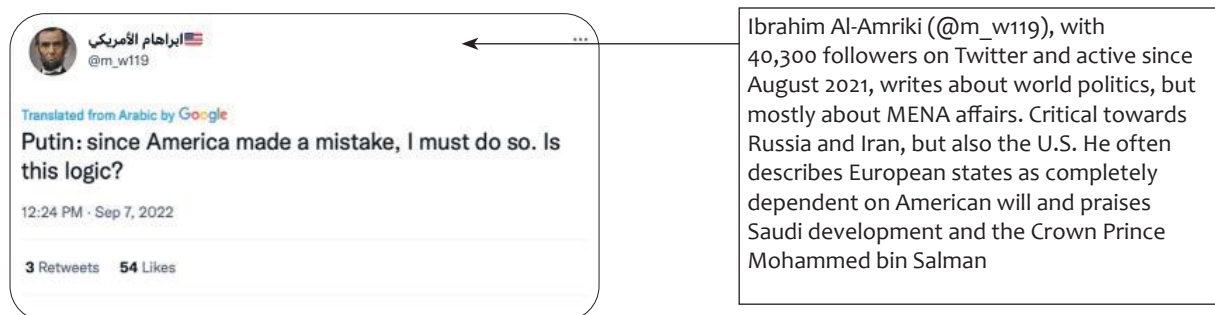


Source: Twitter

Voices critical of Russia, mostly due to its involvement in Syria or Libya also appear. However, as shown in the previous example, they quickly attract “defenders” of Russia or simply *whatabouters*, who sometimes repeat false information. Usually, these replies get more approval from the audience than the Russia critics, but when Russian atrocities against people in the MENA region are mentioned, such a voice is able to garner a significant amount of support.

From the observed examples of critics of the Russian attack on Ukraine, one that evoked an analogy to the American invasion of Iraq (by Ibrahim Al-Amriki, @m_w119) received the biggest support. The comment was written in reaction to Putin’s speech in which the Russian president used the Iraq argument himself.

ILLUSTRATION 51.



Source: Twitter

Although very brief, this comment (and reactions to it) reflect an important dependency: criticising Putin can gather Arab supporters when Russia’s war is equalised with the acknowledged West/U.S. wrongdoings in their region.

2.3. WHAT ABOUT PALESTINE?

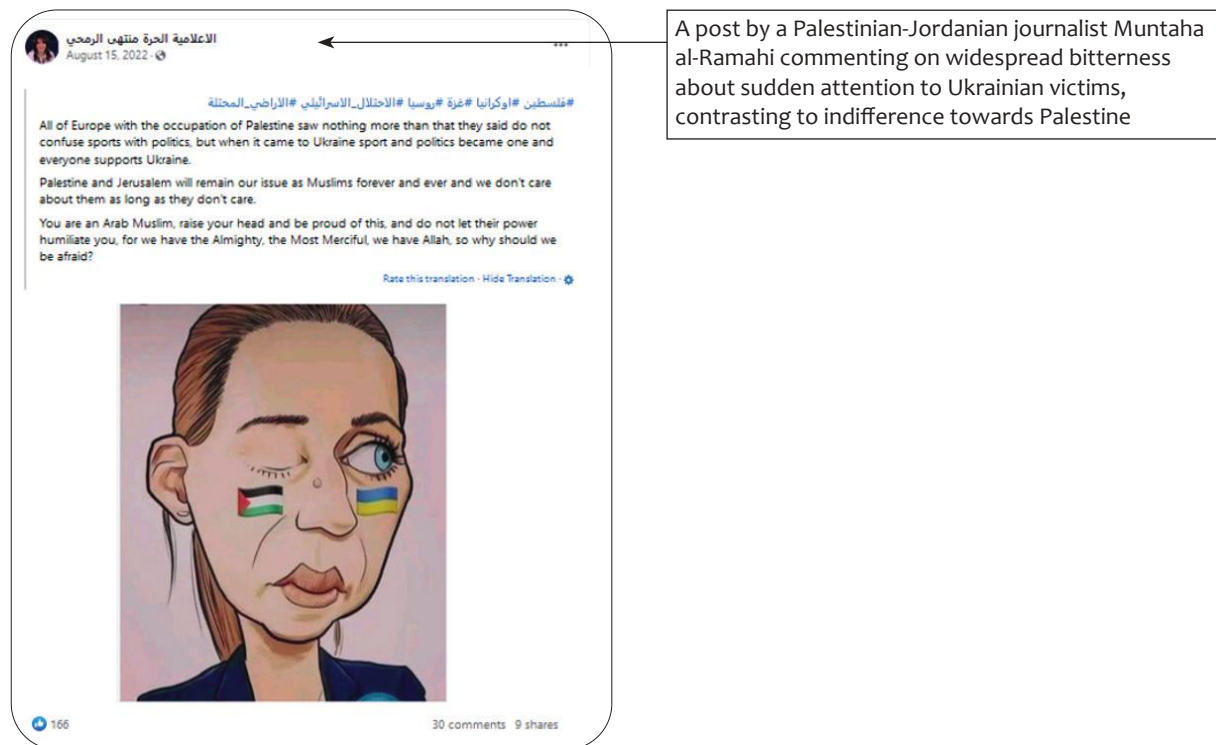
The inclusion of the Palestinian cause within the pro-Russian discourse on Arab social media is two-fold. On the one hand, it falls within the wider narrative of *whataboutism* and seems to be the main example in arguments formed in that way. On the other, from the Arab perspective, the Western reactions to the Russian attack on Ukraine contrast with the lack of action in response to Israeli unilateral decisions regarding Palestinian territory, which also violate international law. Thus, the narrative emerged according to which the West is interested in international law violations only when it suits its interests, because while it is objecting to the imperial ambitions of its rival, it ignores the neo-colonial approach towards Palestine by its ally.

Despite recent normalisation between four Arab states (UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan) and Israel, the Palestinian question still widely resonates with the Arab public. Beyond the political elites, the Abraham Accords were received with a strong dose of criticism and defined as a mistake.³⁹ As the agreements were signed under the auspices of the Trump administration, which granted unconditional support to Israel while cutting financial aid for Palestinians and organisations supporting them, they deepened the distrust and scepticism towards Western policies on the Middle East conflict. Moving the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, whose status as the Israeli capital is disputed, and recognising the Golan Heights as part of Israel although it contradicts international law, made Arab popular opinion perceive Trump as one of the worst

³⁹ K.E. Jahshan, “Does Arab Public Opinion on Palestine Still Count in 2020?,” Arab Center Washington DC, 18 November 2020, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/does-arab-public-opinion-on-palestine-still-count-in-2020/>.

American presidents. Furthermore, living conditions in Palestine have been worsening throughout the last decade while the numbers of victims of violence, which is frequently erupting between the two sides of the conflict, increased.⁴⁰ Within this context, after the Abraham Accords were signed, Palestinians felt abandoned and forgotten. The West's strong and united response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine contrasted with a perception of indifference towards, for example, the expansion of illegal Israeli settlements and thus exacerbated these feelings even further, as expressed on social media. As such, the Ukraine issue became a channel for grievances against ignoring breaches of international law at the expense of the Palestinians.

ILLUSTRATION 52.



A post by a Palestinian-Jordanian journalist Muntaha al-Ramahi commenting on widespread bitterness about sudden attention to Ukrainian victims, contrasting to indifference towards Palestine

Source: Facebook

ILLUSTRATION 53.



“Find the difference between the two pictures.” The one on the top says “terrorist” above the Russian flag, the bottom one says “terrorist” above the person with the Palestinian flag. Author: Alaa Aid Al-Majid Musa Allaqta (Alaa Allaqta), originally published on 13 April 2022 on Alla Allaqta’s Twitter account.

Source: Twitter

⁴⁰ “Israel killed five times as many Palestinians in 2022 than it killed in the same period in 2021,” Reliefweb, 15 April 2022, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/israel-killed-five-times-many-palestinians-2022-it-killed-same>.

To support this narrative, activists and journalists focusing on the Palestinian cause pointed to similarities between the Russian narrative, which denies Ukrainians statehood and questions their existence as a nation, to that of Israeli leaders about Palestinians.⁴¹ However, Western reactions and policies towards people who resist these harmful narratives are strikingly different. While Ukrainians are presented as defending their sovereignty and right to self-determination against state terrorism, the Palestinians recognised that the dominant western perspective on their resistance defines it as terrorism itself. Sanctions against Russia are contrasted with an unwillingness towards an economic boycott of Israel, such as the BDS movement, which Western politicians define as anti-Semitic.⁴²

ILLUSTRATION 54.



Source: Twitter

The killing of American-Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh offered yet another opportunity to point out Western hypocrisy and double standards on Arab social media because of evidence of Israeli soldiers' complicity in her death.

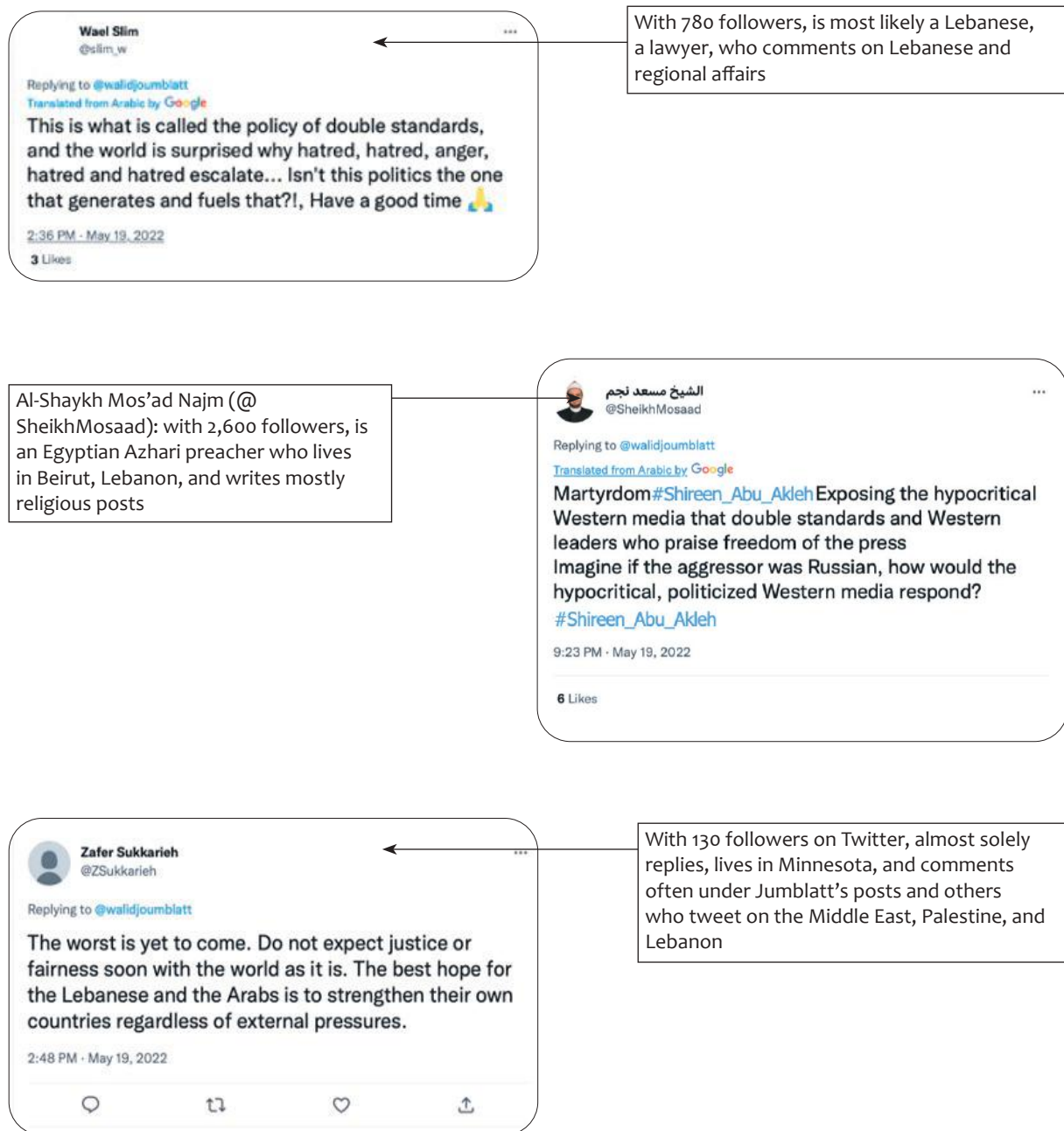
Walid Jumblatt, a Lebanese-Druze politician and the leader of the Progressive Socialist Party, pointed out the international community's seeming indifference to her death.

What followed were accusations of double standards and calls for Arab countries to strengthen and, implicitly, detach themselves from external influences (such as those calling for them to stand by Ukraine):

⁴¹ P. Beinart, "Justifications for Destroying a People," *Jewish Currents*, 8 March 2022, <https://jewishcurrents.org/justifications-for-destroying-a-people>.

⁴² "BDS Israel boycott group is anti-Semitic, says US," *BBC News*, 19 November 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54999010.

ILLUSTRATION 55.



Source: Twitter

To point to the unfair difference in the Western approach towards Ukraine and Palestine, influencers also use the comparison with Ukraine to highlight a similar perception of the scale of hardships that the inhabitants of the two countries must face.

ILLUSTRATION 56.

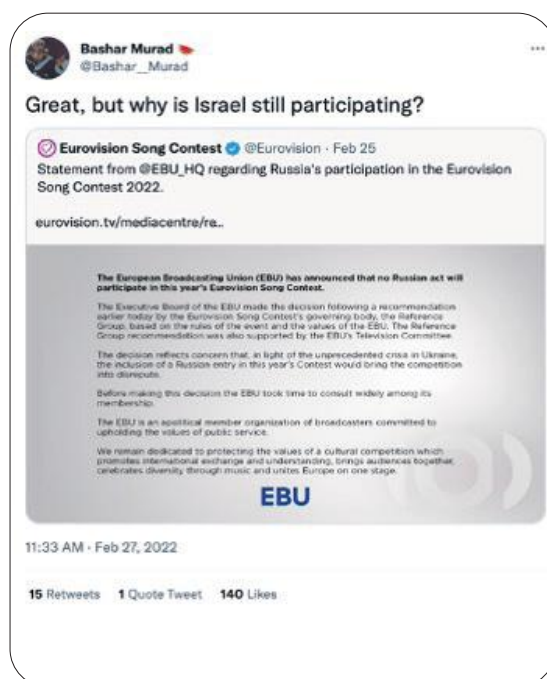


The profile of user Sa'udiyun m'a Al-Aqsa (@Saoudis2018) states that it is uniting Saudi citizens behind the Palestinian cause

Source: Twitter

This narrative has also permeated into the sports and pop culture domains as a consequence of decisions such as banning Russia from international culture and sport events. A post by popular Palestinian singer Bashar Murad and a statement by an Egyptian squash player who expressed his astonishment at the lack of attention on Palestine after being asked about his position on Ukraine gained significant popularity.

ILLUSTRATION 57.



Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 58.



Who has 2.9 million followers on Twitter, is an Algerian BeIN sports commentator who lives in Doha, Qatar

Source: Twitter

Another cause for an outburst of wrath amongst the Arab public on social media was President Zelensky's speech to the Knesset on 20 March in which he quoted Golda Meir's words about

the danger from neighbours that Israelis have to face. He further claimed that in this way that the Ukrainian and Israeli stories are “intertwined” and the two countries are coping with the same dangers due to their neighbours’ willingness to destroy them.⁴³ For Arabs, this narrative was misplaced. The Zionist movement of which Golda Meir was an adherent is perceived by Arab influencers as racist and colonialist. Besides that, Palestinians’ life conditions contrast with that of the Israelis, as do the numbers of victims on both sides of the conflict. Even rather neutral commentators criticised Zelensky’s speech and in the end it became a chance for more radical voices to speak out.

Abdulkhaleq Abdulla (@Abdulkhaleq_UAE), with 301,400 followers on Twitter, is a political science professor from the UAE who throughout the war has posted in a rather informative way, and sometimes critical towards both the West and Russian invasion. He commented on Zelensky’s speech.

ILLUSTRATION 59.

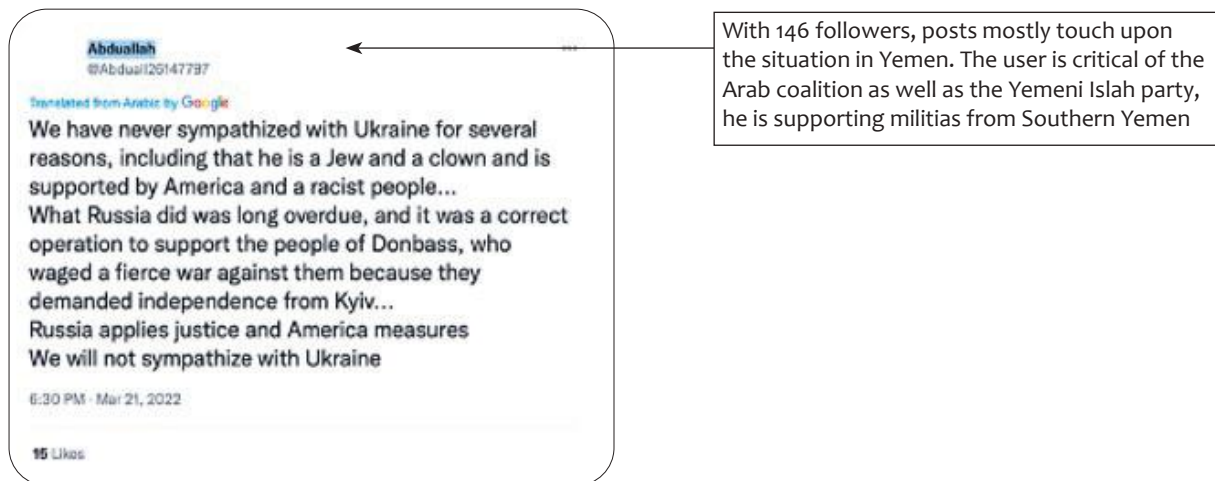


Source: Twitter

One of the most popular comments under this tweet used Zelensky’s speech as legitimising the lack of support for Ukraine among Arabs and as proof of the Russian correctness in attacking Ukraine.

⁴³ “Full text: Ukraine President Zelensky’s speech to Israeli lawmakers,” *The Times of Israel*, 20 March 2022, www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-ukraine-president-zelenskys-speech-to-israeli-lawmakers/.

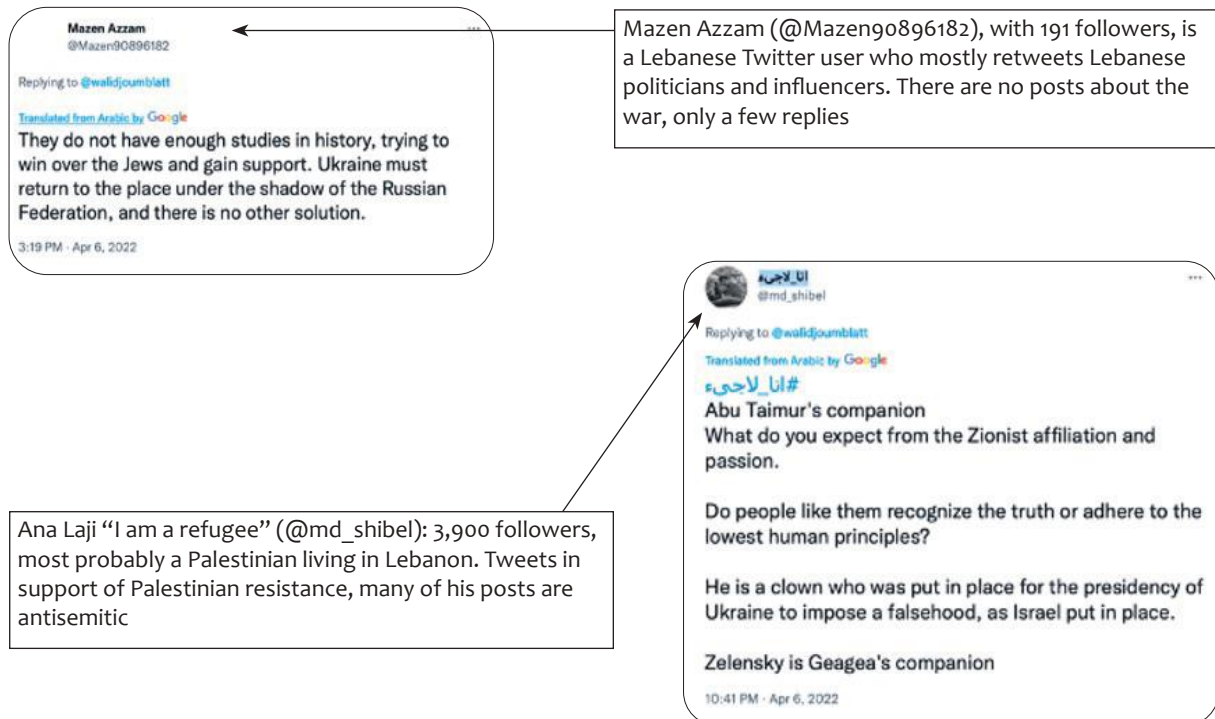
ILLUSTRATION 60.



Source: Twitter

A similar reaction followed when in April President Zelensky declared his intention to turn Ukraine into “the big Israel.” A post by Walid Jumblatt referred to Zelensky’s speech by writing that Israel is not a good, conciliatory example to follow but a symbol of aggression, occupation, and colonialism. The tweet by itself did not bear a pro-Russian tone, but it served again as a starting point for discussion with a clear pro-Russian tilt. Within it, looking for inspiration in Israel was enough to discredit the Ukrainian defence of its sovereignty.

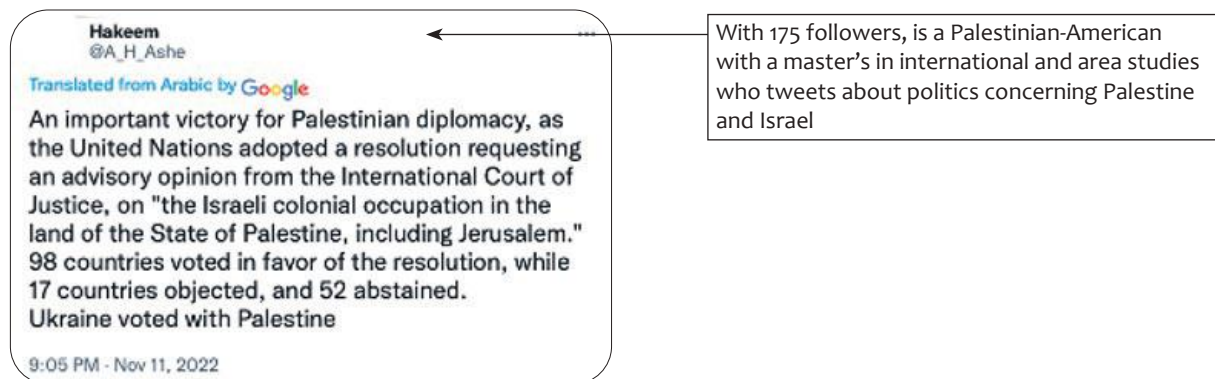
ILLUSTRATION 61.



Source: Twitter

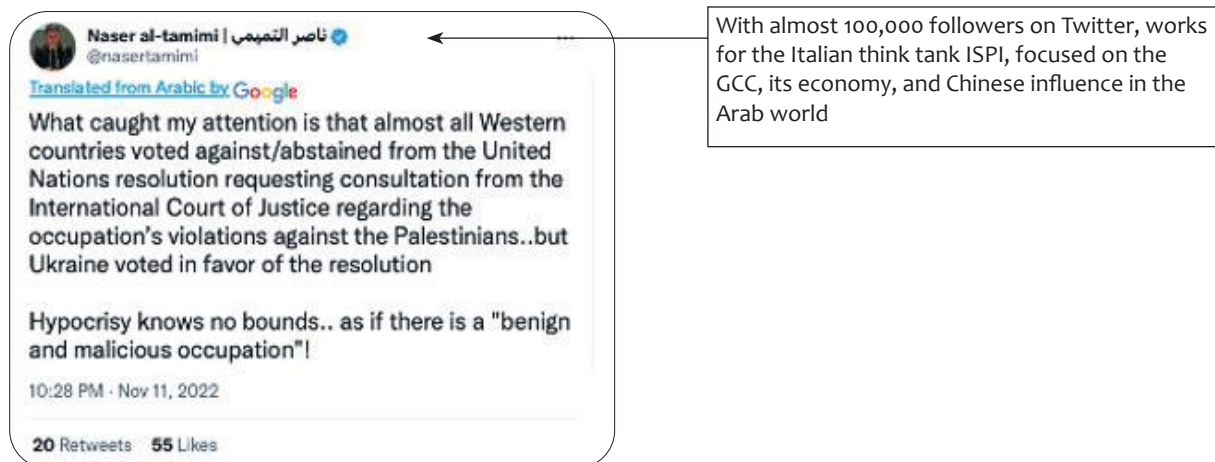
At the same time, the Palestine question has the potential to build solidarity behind Ukraine by highlighting Ukraine's—and states supporting it—decisions taken during the voting in the UN in favour of Palestine. In November 2022, there was voting at the UN General Assembly on Resolution L.12 calling for an opinion from the International Court of Justice on “the Israeli colonial occupation in the land of the State of Palestine, including Jerusalem.” Although the voting was used to highlight Western double standards due to the U.S. and Germany voting against the resolution, Arabs noted that Ukraine voted with Palestine.

ILLUSTRATION 62.



Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 63.

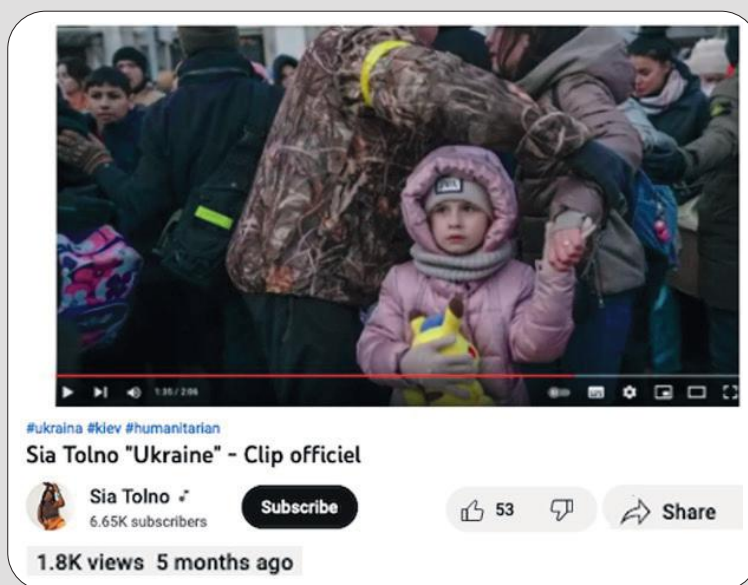


Source: Twitter

Box 2. Could a pop song swing the discourse?

A telling reserve accompanied the publication of pro-Ukrainian songs released by African artists. Sia Tolno from Guinea received very little enthusiasm for her song “Ukraine,” a tribute to civilian victims of the war. Commentators were quick to point to, among others, her lack of solidarity gestures in more familiar contexts, such as suffering of the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Libya, Palestine, or the marginalisation and collective punishment against the Fulani people (in Guinea and Mali respectively). This backlash contributed to preventing the song from gaining traction: it only had 1,800 views at the time, about 10 times less than her other music videos.

ILLUSTRATION 64.



Murtudo Joop 4 miesiące temu (edytowany)

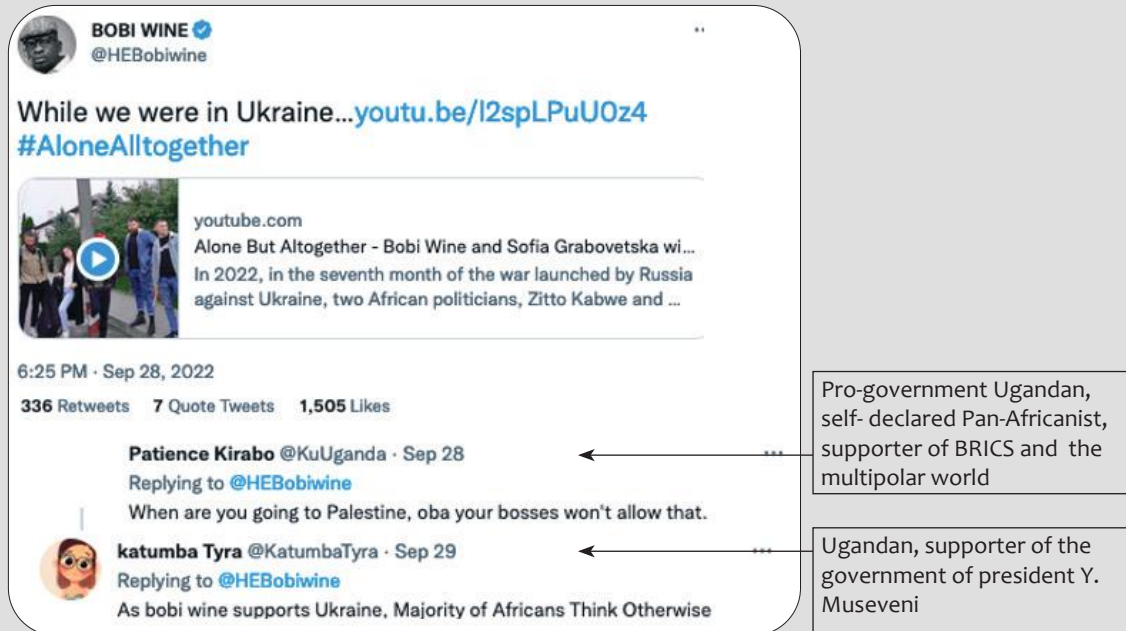
Pulaar à dit dūm ko nafiagal tan. How many people were killed in recent years in Mali, Guinea and ...

Senegalese/Mauritanian activist for the rights of the Fulani people in West Africa

Source: YouTube

A similar reserved reaction was seen with the Ugandan singer-turned-youth-and-opposition-leader Bobi Wine. Reception of his song “Alone but altogether,” recorded in Ukraine in September 2022 with Ukrainian musicians, did not succeed in swinging the discourse towards solidarity with the attacked people as he had hoped. The tweet introducing the song received fewer likes than Wine’s regular political tweets (usually reaching about 2-4K) or earlier postings of his musical premieres. As with Sia Tolno, counter-voices touched upon issues highly relevant to Ugandans and other Africans, even if pushed forward by uncritical government supporters. Those voices were—again—based on “whataboutism” (Palestine), along with allegations of foreign meddling or references to the racist incidents African students experienced during the evacuation from Ukraine in the early days of the war.

ILLUSTRATION 65.



Source: Twitter

3. STRONG AND WEAK. IS TRADITION AT STAKE?

A specific type of appeal that resonates in the mostly conservative African and Arab societies is one based on strength, morality, and religiosity, as well as sets of prejudices in family and sexual spheres. Many associate the ongoing changes in value systems with influences from the West, which, in the eyes of traditionalistic African or Arab audiences, has lost its moral orientation and become a source of decadence, which weakens the societies it influences.

Russia instrumentalises this question of traditional values and sometimes succeeds in presenting itself as a shield against Western “degeneration.” No matter how misleading this assumption is, for some African and Arab conservatives, Russia and Putin represent a symbolic antithesis to what they criticise about the West. Participants in the public debate usually do not go deep into details of the conflict itself and shy away from seeing the cruelty and injustice committed by the Russians. Instead, their contemplation of a universal strong-weak, moral-immoral tension leads them to declare they side with Russia; this contributes, in a specific manner, to the spectrum of pro-Russian voices in social media debates.

3.1. MYTH OF THE “WAR OF VALUES.” TRADITION VS “WESTERN DECADENCY”

African and Arab societies are among those that most reject homosexuals and people with other, non-standard sexual orientations. In 2021, only 21% of young Africans (18–25 years old) said they would accept a gay neighbour, while tolerance to those of different ethnicity, religion, or a foreign background stood as high as 85–90%.⁴⁴ The last survey studying acceptance of LGBT+ communities in the Arab world comes from 2019. From 5% to 26% of respondents agreed that homosexuality is an acceptable practice, with the highest percentage in Algeria and the lowest in Palestine. In the same survey, in only one country (Sudan) was the percentage of respondents claiming that honour killings are acceptable lower than those accepting of homosexuality.⁴⁵ Many believe these “novelties” originate from the West and are being imposed on conservative societies of the global South against their will. This translates into alleged pressure to pass laws securing (or “normalising”) LGBT+ people’s rights, particularly in developing states. In Africa, a popular belief, developed since the arrival of the (mostly American) evangelical anti-LGBT agitators in the 2000s, is that by exporting homosexuality, the West seeks to weaken African societies and thus prevent their progress and agency.⁴⁶ Disgust and rejection of LGBT+ people (or what one *believes* LGBT+ represent) is one of the recurring leitmotifs for the anti-Western, conservative mobilisation in those regions. Fear of LGBT+ people is also a rare rallying point that brings Christian and Muslim radicals together.

Under Putin, Russia extensively plays the conservative, anti-LGBT+ card to secure support from its own population, satisfy the pro-government Russian Orthodox church, and lure foreign far-right movements into its sphere of influence. In the Russian-driven anti-Western narratives, a “Gayropa” (Gay Europe) is synonymous with a weak, rotten, crumbling Europe—equated with the broader West—that has lost its sense of direction and moral orientation. In this story, Putin’s

⁴⁴ “On gay rights, young Africans share the intolerance of their elders,” *The Economist*, 6 March 2021, www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/03/06/on-gay-rights-young-africans-share-the-intolerance-of-their-elders.

⁴⁵ “The Arab world in seven charts: Are Arabs turning their backs on religion?,” *BBC News*, 24 June 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48703377.

⁴⁶ C. Parke, “Natural Deception,” Political Research Associates, 21 January 2015, <https://politicalresearch.org/2015/01/21/natural-deception-conned-by-the-world-congress-of-families>.

Russia—where manhood, strength, and a “healthy” tradition still matter—is its antithesis. This view has been used as the background to build up Russia’s presence in Africa in recent years. In 2018, Konstantin Malofeev, financier of the first intervention in the Donbas (2014) and an ultra-conservative, Orthodox media mogul, financed the World Congress of Families (WCF) in Moldova. There, prominent Russian ideologues shared the stage with like-minded African anti-LGBT+ activists. The spotlight was given to Nigeria’s Theresa Okafor, a campaigner for the criminalisation of homosexuality and famed for alleging connections between Nigerian LGBT-promoters and Boko Haram terrorists, and Malawian MP Justin Majawa. The latter mobilised Malawians against Western donors whom he suspected wanted to use their economic advantage over his country to push it into accepting same-sex marriages.⁴⁷ Contacts between organisations and conservative sponsors through umbrella groups like the WCF helped strengthen the perception of Russia as the world’s leading anti-LGBT+ “shield,” under which Africa could resist the Western-derived “threat.” Also, for Gulf Muslims, a similar view about the “defence of the traditional family” helped to strengthen institutional relations with Russia’s religious establishment. In December 2022, the head of the Muslim Religious Administration in Russia, Sheikh Rawi Ayn Al-Din, met with the Saudi Minister of Islamic Affairs, Dawah, and Guidance Abdullatif Al-Asheikh. They signed a Memorandum of Understanding that allows for organising training for preachers, imams, and muezzin in Russia.⁴⁸

In Africa, Russia has played on homophobic sentiments in both Christian and Muslim contexts. In Sudan in 2019, Russian advisors prepared a strategy aimed to help its embattled dictator Omar al-Bashir confront massive street protests. They suggested “creating an image of [protesters as] enemies of Islam and traditional values” by staging rallies with LGBT flags,⁴⁹ which they assumed would push public opinion into rejecting the protesters.

Since the invasion of Ukraine, the notion that Russia is on a global mission to stop LGBT+ “deviations” has been upheld by Putin himself, the Russian church hierarchy, and promoted by top media figures. In his speech on 24 February declaring the “special military operation,” Putin warned that “they sought to destroy our traditional values and force on us their false values that would erode us [...]. Attitudes that are directly leading to degradation and degeneration because they are contrary to human nature. This is not going to happen.”⁵⁰ Striking a similar tone, the head of the Orthodox Church, Patriarch Kirill, in early March 2022 endorsed the war on the basis that the West’s true intention is to suppress societies that refuse to stage gay parades.⁵¹ Similarly, by early November, a popular TV host, Vlodimir Soloviov, called the invasion of Ukraine a “counterattack” in response to “genocide against those who won’t accept LGBT, transgender-Nazi values.”⁵² Many conservative spectators, including those in Africa and the Middle East, bought into the idea that the war in Ukraine reflects a looming global confrontation between the Western- and Russia-leaning blocs, each representing a different set of values. This “big picture” offers them a quasi-intellectual filter for information about the

⁴⁷ “Anti-LGBT hate group World Congress of Families to gather in Moldova this week,” Southern Poverty Law Center, 12 September 2018, www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/09/12/anti-lgbt-hate-group-world-congress-families-gather-moldova-week-reveals-details-last.

⁴⁸ “Saudi minister receives head of Russian Muslim organization,” *Arab News*, 16 December 2022, www.arabnews.com/node/2216906/saudi-arabia.

⁴⁹ T. Lister, S. Shukla, N. Elbagir, “Fake news and public executions: Documents show a Russian company’s plan for quelling protests in Sudan,” CNN, 25 April 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/25/africa/russia-sudan-minvest-plan-to-quell-protests-intl/index.html>.

⁵⁰ “Address by the President of the Russian Federation,” Office of the President of Russia, 24 February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67843>.

⁵¹ A. Mackinnon, “LGBTQ Russians Were Putin’s First Target in His War on the West,” *Foreign Policy*, 7 October 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/10/07/lgbtq-russia-ukraine-war-west/>.

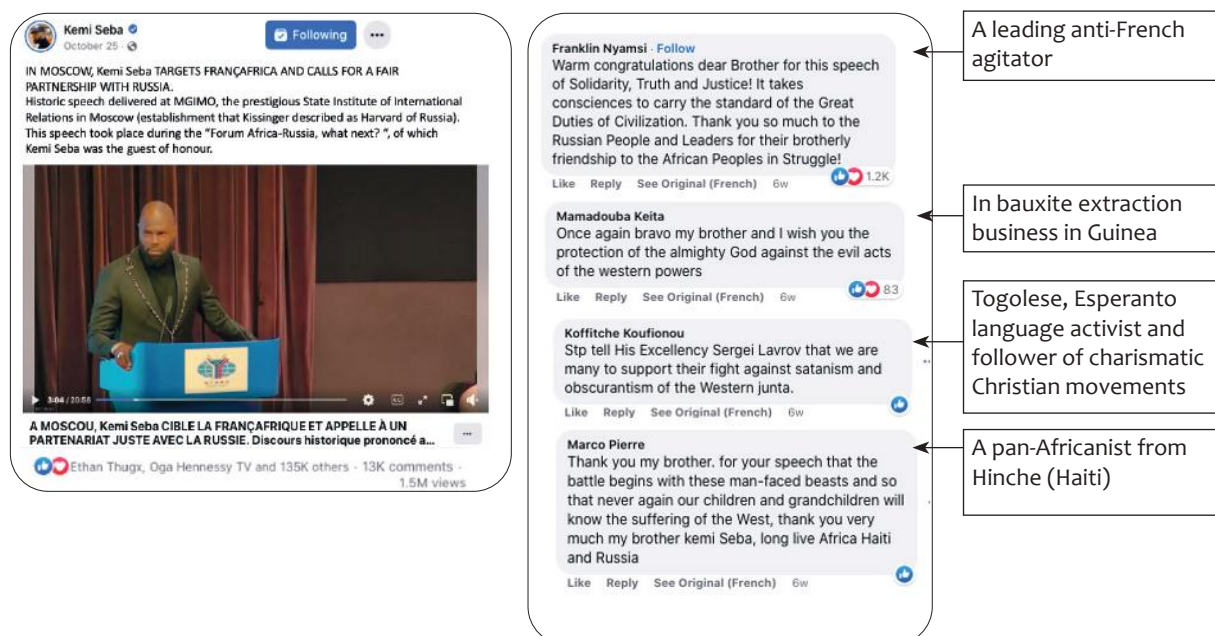
⁵² “Нацисты Зеленского призывают нас надо уничтожить, только потому что мы страна традиционных ценностей,” *Соловьёв LIVE*, 1 November 2022, <https://rutube.ru/video/be62402482cad3057a477f7399594f81/>.

conflict and to overlook reports about unprovoked Russian military violence against civilians. If many in Africa and the Arab World cross fingers for any challenge to the West-dominated global order, seeing Russia as “confronting” the allegedly powerful pro-LGBT+ “lobby” would make the point stronger and more concrete.

Such an argument has been picked up by Kemi Seba, a top African anti-French and pro-Russian influencer. During the conference “Russia-Africa, What’s Next?” at Moscow’s MGIMO university on 24 October 2022, he talked about a new global war between the two blocs. The first is a neoliberal, globalist one that opposes “everything rooted in tradition [...] but prefers to propagate materialism, decadence, degeneracy, destruction of people’s values, family, belief in God whatever your religion is.” Russia, he continued, together with China and the African people, represent a resistance to this movement, for which they are “being demonised.”⁵³

The speech, which he posted on his Facebook account, received 1.5 million views and generated 13,000 comments, many of them upholding the Manichean divide he painted.

ILLUSTRATION 66.



Source: Facebook

The approach of seeing in Ukraine a laboratory or the frontline of a greater “war of civilisations” resonates in the Arab world. It incites online influencers to focus on the opposing Russia-West blocs in relation to values associated with monotheistic religions (not necessarily Islam). To illustrate that, a Moroccan journalist (who was suspended in 2021 after he compared the obligatory vaccination passes in Morocco to Nazi Germany policies) at the beginning of the Russian invasion juxtaposed pictures of the New York Pride Parade with those of Moscow’s churches.

⁵³ “A Moscou, Kemi Seba cible la françafrrique et appelle à un partenariat juste avec la Russie,” Kemi Seba Facebook profile, 25 October 2022, www.facebook.com/watch/?v=677614766924092.

ILLUSTRATION 67.



Source: Twitter

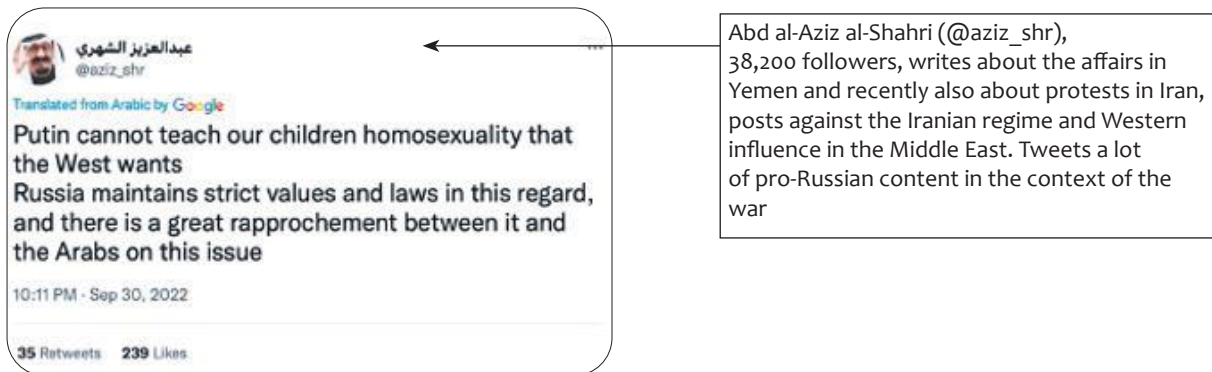
This context, where the West is being accused of bringing “decadency” and Russia opposing it, progresses in Africa by crossing religious divides. It gave birth to the emergence of unique pro-Russian Wahhabi groups in Burkina Faso. These Muslim radicals (not tolerated in Russia itself), prone to painting global events in apocalyptic terms, attended street protests in Burkina Faso with Russian flags throughout 2022 and contribute to the anti-French, anti-Western, and pro-Russian war-time discourse.⁵⁴

In Arab countries, initiatives promoting traditional values in social media gained popularity in recent years. Labelling someone a homosexual or part of a homosexual “cabal” (or suspicious in this way) became a popular way of discrediting an individual, political group, or ideas—such as Western liberalism—associated with it.⁵⁵ One of the most widespread attacks of this kind was launched in Egypt even after the invasion of Ukraine. It was called Fetrah (#Fetrah) Use of this hashtag was supposed to indicate a person objecting to homosexuality. Unsurprisingly, Arab influencers began posting praises of Putin as the defender of traditional values at the beginning of the invasion. They also highlighted an Arab and believers’ identity, which they often claim is threatened by Western values and the politics of imposing them forcefully.

⁵⁴ P. Deutschmann, J. Tilouine, “How religion and politics provide Moscow with a path to influence,” *Africa Intelligence*, 13 June 2022, www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2022/06/13/how-religion-and-politics-provide-moscow-with-a-path-to-influence,109791444-ge0.

⁵⁵ In one of his tweets on the home invasion at Nancy Pelosi’s house, Farraj suggested the “real” perpetrator had nothing to do with right-wing extremism. He “reveals” that it was done by a leftist activist supporting the Black Lives Matter and LGBT movements and allegedly having a gay affair with Pelosi’s husband.

ILLUSTRATION 68.



Source: Twitter

Putin's image as a defender from the "deviations" threatening people of these regions was strengthened in November 2022 after the lower house of Russian parliament passed a bill criminalising "promoting LGBT propaganda." When the law, which banned presenting homosexual relations as normal in movies, books, or any other form, was voted in, pro-Russian influencers quickly picked it up to support their arguments. Passage of the law was to be proof of Putin's assertiveness towards Western leaders and his political strength. Among those citing it was Ahmed al-Farraj.

ILLUSTRATION 69.



Source: Twitter

Another trend was to frame Putin's attack on Ukraine not just as a move against left-liberal elites but also against individuals symbolising "control" over the world system, believed to be behind the pro-LGBT+ agenda implemented by Western decision-makers.

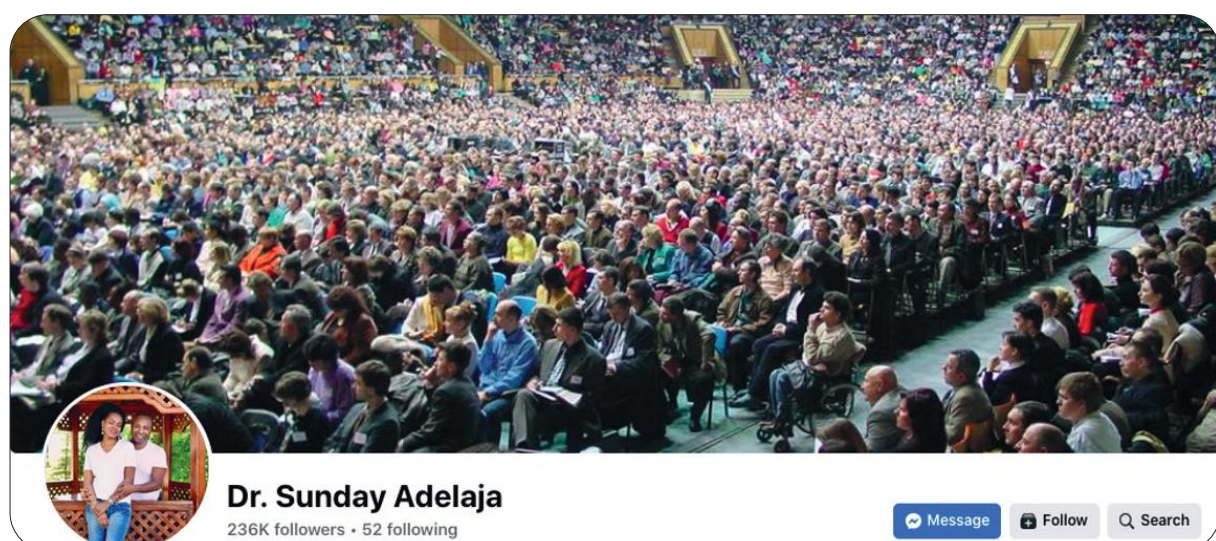
ILLUSTRATION 70.



Source: Twitter

While the development of a joint, anti-LGBT+ platform between Putin and conservative Arabs and some African online (and offline) activists was symptomatic, it met severe difficulties in Christian strongholds. Particularly, influential African Pentecostal megachurches, representing the continents' most expansive and media-savvy branch of Christianity emanating from Nigeria, didn't buy into this connection. This was despite their history of anti-gay agitation and upholding conspiracy theories on the coronavirus and vaccines (e.g., as the "mark of the beast"). It can probably be explained by their global outreach, and physical presence in Ukraine and Central-Eastern Europe, which makes them stick to first-hand testimonies. Of them, the most important came from Nigerian pastor Sunday Adelaja, founder of the Embassy of the Blessed Kingdom of God for All Nations in Kyiv, the biggest charismatic church in Europe.

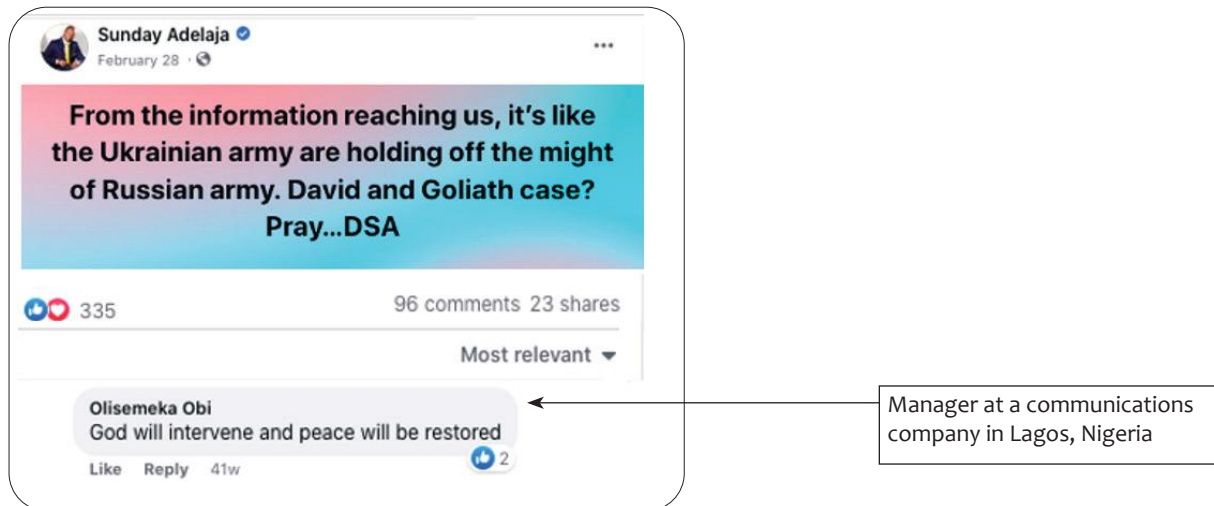
ILLUSTRATION 71.



Facebook fanpage of Dr Sunday Adeaja presenting his church's Kyiv congregation

He narrated his personal testimony of the Russian invasion on his Facebook profiles (his personal page has 48K followers, while his fanpage has 263K followers) using the David-Goliath analogy. After returning to Nigeria, he kept on commenting on the situation from a Ukrainian perspective, believing he, after being denied access to Russia in the last 20 years, was also on Putin's hit-list.⁵⁶ While he considers LGBT+ people sinners, he, unlike leaders of most similar churches in the region, have always rejected labelling and targeting them, and therefore he naturally ignored Russia's narrative on values, not only on political but also ideological grounds.

ILLUSTRATION 72.



Source: Facebook

Equally important aspect was the resistance to the Russian anti-LGBT+ rhetoric by Nigerian pastor Enoch Adeboye (5.1M followers on Facebook), General Overseer of the Redeemed Church of God (RCCG). This most influential pastor of Africa's new churches boasts of having parishes in more than 100 countries on all continents. While earlier Adeboye stated that gay marriages could end humanity,⁵⁷ in commenting on the war he focused on the safety of the church's followers in Ukraine, which included both Africans and Ukrainians.

⁵⁶ C. Oloaze, "Russian crisis: Nigerian pastor narrates how he fled Ukraine," *Daily Trust*, 27 February 2022, <https://dailytrust.com/ukraine-crisis-nigerian-pastor-putin-marked-for-death-speaks-on-how-he-escaped/>.

⁵⁷ "Gay Marriage Could End Humanity, Nigerian Pastor Says," VOA, 24 January 2013, www.voanews.com/a/nigeria-pastor-says-gay-marriage-could-end-humaity/1590151.html.

3.2. “DON’T POKE THE BEAR.” PUTIN AS AN ARCHETYPE OF A STRONG LEADER

ILLUSTRATION 73.



“Oh, the moon of Kremlin.”
Source: Syria Untold

Vladimir Putin’s decisions concerning the Russian Middle East policy helped determine the ideological and religious profile of social media users most prone to spreading the image of the Russian president as a strong leader who is furthering foreign policy effective in suppressing mass protests and uprisings blamed for spreading instability. It is also facilitated by the political instability in some countries since the Arab Spring, which influenced support for a system based on strongman personalities. In a poll conducted by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung in 2020, between 79% (Libya) and 50% (Morocco) respondents agreed with a statement: Our country needs a leader that bends the rules if necessary to get thing done.⁵⁸ Two key moments were Putin’s support for authoritarian leaders following the Arab Spring and Russia’s military intervention in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Assad, the Shiite-Alawite leader of the country.

When the U.S. and other Western states supported the protesters’ demands in 2011 and called on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down, Arab leaders took it as a betrayal by their long-time ally. Other authoritarian leaders lost trust in their relations with the U.S. and decided that to avoid external pressure on democratisation and human rights, they needed to diversify their foreign relations.

The Russian leader saw it as an opportunity to strengthen his country’s position in the MENA region. When in 2013 Egyptians took to the streets once again to object to the rules of the first democratically elected president, Muhammad Morsi, which led to a military coup and the taking of power by Gen. Abd al-Fattah al-Sisi, the U.S. suspended military aid for Egypt, flowing to the country since 1979. After Sisi won the presidential elections in 2014, the Russian president made sure he was the first non-Arab leader to congratulate him. Since

⁵⁸ “10 Years after the Arab Uprisings: Where does the Public Opinion in the Region Stand Today?,” *Konrad Adenauer Stiftung*, 2020, www.kas.de/documents/252038/11055681/Where+does+Public+Opinion+in+the+Region+Stand+Today+-+10+Years+after+the+Arab+Uprisings.pdf/73611431-093a-3e69-8e5e-7811f1f153e9?version=1.0&t=1611755841567.

then, the Sisi-Putin relationship has consolidated. Egypt increased arms imports from Russia despite putting at risk the renewed military aid from the U.S. When Putin visited Cairo in 2015, the city was decorated with posters with his image and Russian flags. He was received with a military parade, an orchestra playing the Russian anthem, and horse riders.⁵⁹ Not only was it an illustrative display of Sisi's rearrangement of traditional Egyptian alliances but also of Russia's successful resistance to Western attempts to isolate it after the Crimea annexation.

Putin's support for Sisi, his opposition to the Western intervention in Libya in 2011, and finally the military intervention in Syria, framed as a fight against Islamist forces threatening the stability of the region, created a popular image of the Russian president as a consistent and predictable partner. This "strong" leader, unconstrained by democratic procedures presented as obstacles to fast and effective changes, would also serve as a counterweight to the West, which frames its policies around liberal values seen by many as merely the justification for its interventionism.

Although initially major Arab powers like Saudi Arabia criticised Russia's intervention in Syria, its success and the unwillingness of the Western allies to increase their role in Syria made these powers accept Russia as a regional actor. This trend was furthered by the UAE and Egypt's opposition to organisations connected to the Muslim Brotherhood, among them some of the Syrian rebel groups. Additionally, it created a positive image of Russia among groups supporting Iran, like Hezbollah and the Hashd al-Shabi (PMF) in Iraq. The fact that they played an important part in defeating ISIS validated Russia's role as an opponent of radical Islamism, supportive in the fight against terrorism. It also provided a channel for spreading messaging praising President Putin as a reliable partner by locally recognisable and admired organisations and influencers.

On social media, it became popular to call Putin by the Arabic nickname “kunya,” given to adults either after their oldest child or because of their special achievements. Putin was therefore called *Abu Ali Putin* or *Abu Maria* or *Abu al-Tin* (*tin* is Arabic for fig). The last name carried with it a story published by one of the media channels affiliated with the Iraqi Shia militias Al-Quds al-Arabi (Arabic Jerusalem). According to the article, Putin has Iraqi origin.⁶⁰ He was born in Iraq and then moved to Russia with his parents, but because Russians had problems with pronouncing Abdul Amir Abu al-Tin (supposedly his full name), his name was changed to Vladimir Putin. The story appeared on social media several times, also after the Russian invasion on Ukraine, sometimes as a means to praise Putin, sometimes to laugh at the author’s invention. Nevertheless, it is an important indicator of how groups supporting Russia’s politics in the Middle East intend to present the Russian leader as someone who truly belongs to it, and also as a way to highlight common goals of Shiites and Putin in the Middle East.

⁵⁹ “Putin Receives Warm Royal Welcome In Egypt,” *NPR*, 10 February 2015, www.npr.org/2015/02/10/385267223/putin-receives-warm-royal-welcome-in-egypt.

⁶⁰ صفحات تابعة لمليشيات عراقية: بوتين أمله عراقي واسمه الحقيقي عبد الأمير أبو التين بن-تو-هيفار-تاشليط-عباد-ت-احفص. Al-Quds Al-Araby, 7 October 2015, www.alquds.co.uk/%EF%BB%BF

ILLUSTRATION 74.



Dr. Taha Hamad Dulaimi (@tahadulaimi): with 220,800 followers on Twitter, publishes mostly religious content

Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 75.



Ad'amuni wa law bi'amamihi (@3tab_a7bab): with 19,000 followers, social media influencer who stopped being active in 2018

Source: Twitter

Several profiles under these nicknames exist on Twitter and Facebook, although they are neither active nor have a large number of followers. The nicknames themselves, however, persist and are used on different occasions to praise Putin's actions in the Middle East by supporters of Iran-affiliated parties or strong authoritarian rulers, like this post when Lebanon made a deal with Russia to buy its COVID-19 vaccines:

ILLUSTRATION 76.



Source: Twitter

After Russia attacked Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the expressions of support for Russia also were personified in Putin's figure. In Baghdad, large billboards of Putin were hung in the city centre, likewise in South Lebanon. In Telegram, Iraqi militias affiliated with Iran also published content in support of Putin. One of them was a song in the Iraqi dialect called "The Man of Axis," which voiced support for the Russian attack on Ukraine.⁶¹ Many influencers embarked on criticising Western policies against Russia, calling Putin "a Russian bear" or "Tsar" and warning Ukraine's President Zelensky to not "poke the bear."

⁶¹ "Telegram Outlet Linked To Iraqi Shi'ite Militias Glorifies Putin As 'The Man Of Axis' In Song, Posts Video Lauding Putin's Weaponizing Of Energy, Poster Glorifying A Russian General," MEMRI, 11 October 2022.

ILLUSTRATION 77.



Dr. Issam Bin al-Sheikh (@IssamBENCHEIKH): 20,700 followers, Algerian writer and university lecturer in political science and international relations

Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 78.



Ahmed Ayed Ahmed (@ahmedayed2000): 23,500 followers, member of the Yemeni militia Ansar Allah (Houthi) specialising in security affairs

Source: Twitter

Further in the context of the war in Ukraine, Putin is constantly presented as “the man of the hour” who can single-handedly change the world order and end Western influence over it. As such, he is seen as a leader who can bring justice for the Arabs suffering because of the Western colonial past and imperial present.

ILLUSTRATION 79.



Anji Ali (@omomar10095411): with 82,400 followers, describes his profile as “Egyptian flags, mostly Egyptian affairs, sometimes world affairs”

Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 80.



With 305 followers on Twitter, mostly tweets videos, but commented here on a post about double standards in Western journalists' wording when they discuss Syrian and Ukrainian refugees

Source: Twitter

ILLUSTRATION 81.



Source: Twitter

Putin's leadership style also resonates with many in Africa as a modern incarnation of a strong, fearsome, and effective leader, capable of resisting global pressure:

ILLUSTRATION 82.



With 4,600 followers on Twitter, agitates for the Biafra secessionist movement (from Nigeria), mainly by posting calls for the release of the militant leader Nnamdi Kanu

Source: Twitter

He also offers inspiration for ambitious young African politicians:

ILLUSTRATION 83.



Brian Mutiga, with 3,000 followers on Twitter, is a former Kenyan county official from Meru, political commentator

Source: Twitter

Putin's example, as a political leader but also a wartime leader, validates the voices of those awaiting circumstances that let them shake off their uncomfortable democratic dressing. In

the July 2022 VPRO documentary “Central African Republic: Russia’s Testing Ground,” a presidential advisor asked about the differences between the French and Russian approach praised the change that came with the Wagner Group’s arrival in the country. He hailed the abandonment of talk of human rights and openly pushed an extremist agenda: “We want a total annihilation [of our enemies]. We don’t want any prisoners of war. It’s about physical elimination. As brutal as possible.” Smiling, he compared the fight against rebels in his country to the war in Ukraine, referring to it as a “special operation.” Although the video was meant to expose Russia’s malicious influence, African commentators largely applauded the Russian means to bring “stability.”

ILLUSTRATION 84.



Nouah Oyembo 3 miesiace temu

I support the Russians for sure, their presence in the CAR has brought much stability

37 Odpowiedz

Natnael Tibebe 3 miesiace temu

From what i watched the CAR peoples aspire to live in- peace above anything else, so they hired a group who can deliver their aspiration. And they seem pretty happy with the wagner's. I understand why the French are Ranting(It seems their days of exploitation gloaming). I want to reiterate what the President said 'You don't complain about the color of the water, when your house is burning and your neighbor is trying to put out the fire'. Good job Russian's.

40 Odpowiedz

Following sports, international and Kenyan media

Following Ethiopian and international news sites, music, lectures on economics

Source: YouTube

Similarly, the Russian example has encouraged some advocating for forced revision of borders to speak up. Russia’s actions would serve here as confirmation that rebuilding fallen empires or pursuing expansionist projects by grabbing the territories of neighbours is not completely off the table.

ILLUSTRATION 85.



From Angola, often referring to pre-colonial Great Congo, posting on black history, criticising Christian churches in Africa, accusing Rwanda of being a U.S. proxy

Source: Facebook

Box 3. Kherson Withdrawal—A Cold Shower

The withdrawal from Kherson became an important factor in the disputes about Russian strength in the war in Ukraine. So far, it seemed that previous Russian failures, like the inability to capture Kyiv and withdrawals from its surroundings, passed as elements of a wider plan that would soon reveal Russia's tactical mastery. After the Russian army withdrew from Kherson, some mainstream Arab and African media continued with this narrative. Articles in *Al Mayadeen*⁶² and *Asharq al-Awsat*⁶³ maintained that leaving Kherson was a tactical withdrawal that additionally prevented another urban battle from breaking out and therefore saved the lives of civilians.

However, on social media, the withdrawal from Kherson shortly after the pseudo referendum and Russia's annexation of the oblast, provided an opening to question this reasoning. Although pro-Russian influencers continued to frame the withdrawal as part of the Russian strategy, the reactions, even by otherwise devoted anti-Western and pro-Russian users, were more sceptical of this narrative than before. It exemplified the limitations of influencers in keeping their audiences subscribing to the black-and-white picture they paint. The case of Kherson also encouraged critics of Russia to join conversations in otherwise homogenous and hostile bubbles, which provided a rare opportunity for different ideas to be presented. Such comments were clearly pointing out the:

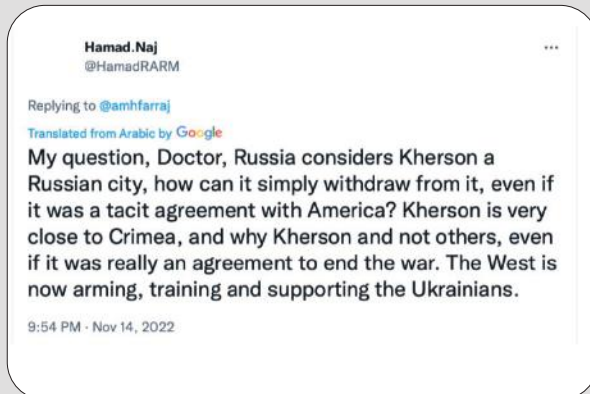
- Inconsistency of such an action in view of the recent referendums, and thus Kherson becoming “Russian”;
- Incoherence of arguments about the withdrawal as a means to protect civilians given the narrative about “Ukrainian Nazis” in this region being a threat for its Russian inhabitants;
- Another withdrawal (after the ones from Kyiv and Kharkiv areas) being final proof of Russian incompetence.

The following expression of doubt by @HamadRARM, a Twitter user who routinely slams U.S. policies and praises Russia in Ukraine, was placed as a comment under a post by Ahmed Farraj (a very vocal anti-West influencer, see Chapter 1.3) about the U.S. alleged calls for President Zelensky to negotiate with Russia.

⁶² “إزفستيا: ماذا بعد الانسحاب من خيرسون” Al Mayadeen, 15 November 2022, www.almayadeen.net/press/-من-إزفستيا: ماذا بعد الانسحاب من خيرسون.

⁶³ “انسحاب خيرسون اكتمل... والروس يعتبرونه تراجعاً مؤقتاً قبل عودة التقدم” Asharq al-Awsat, 12 November 2022, <https://aawsat.com/home/article/3982061/انسحاب-خيرسون-اكتمل-والروس-يعتبرونه-تراجعاً-مؤقتاً-قبل-عودة-التقدم>.

ILLUSTRATION 86.



Source: Twitter

Another comment, a reaction of disgust to Nyamsi's comparison of Kherson to a prostitute (see Chapter 4.2) by a West African, otherwise pro-Russian and anti-French commentator, highlights that even some diehard African Russia supporters saw the withdrawal as proof of Russian weakness:

ILLUSTRATION 87.



Source: Twitter

4. THE EVOLVING DISCOURSE

Debating a distant war has its own dynamics. Often, more than looking at the conflict itself, participants in the debates in Africa and the Arab world absorb the language surrounding it and see the figure of its protagonist as symbols of local political divides. In this context, they become an additional layer, or sometimes a substitute, to the ongoing local disputes. Therefore, the intensity and direction of commenting on Ukraine is subject to an evolution of the political landscape in such places and the changing applicability of such comparisons.

The debates also evolve in homogeneous environments. When online communities establish themselves around certain topics, be it criticism of the West or some other subject, with little access for opposing voices, they tend to radicalise. This, on the one hand, changes the tone on the Russian interventions in Ukraine and pushes the boundaries of what is accepted in the discussion, but on the other, exposes the limitations of such argumentation and drives away some debaters.

Both environments continue to evolve in ways in which the same ground is either more or less fertile for accepting pro-Russian discourses.

4.1. A DIVIDED ETHIOPIA SEEKING A RATIONALE FOR ITS OWN WAR—SAYING MOSCOW, THINKING ADDIS

The Western support for Ukraine determines the ways in which the Russian-initiated war is perceived in countries where both Russia and the West support—or sympathise with—different sides of the local political divide. For example, Ugandan oppositionist Bobi Wine has been attacked for his pro-Ukrainian declarations by pro-government activists. They went on a social media offensive using pro-Russian narratives because they saw Wine's criticism of Russia as a means to mock his local adversary, the pro-Russian Gen. Muhoozi Kainerugaba, the son and wannabe successor of Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni. Similarly, in Sudan, the pro-Ukrainian stance by the civic protest movement developed because Sudan's unpopular military junta leaders had been close to Moscow—key paramilitary leader Gen. Mohammed Daglo worked extensively with Wagner and visited Moscow at the start of the invasion, where he publicly supported Putin.

By far the most extensive and emotional instrumentalisation of the Russia/Ukraine opposition has been visible in Ethiopia. There, the conduct of the central government's and Eritrea's war in the Ethiopian Tigray province, the world's most severe armed conflict in 2020–2022, alarmed the West over gross human rights abuses against the province's inhabitants. In the nationalistic pro-government discourse in Ethiopia, siding with Russia would be a function of the widespread disappointment with the West's attitude, exemplified by the U.S. suspension of Ethiopia from its trade preference programme, the UN Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) investigations of the government and its allies in war crimes, and Western media reports on civilian victims of government-instigated starvation in the province. The West is routinely accused of betrayal (just two years earlier, "the West" granted the Ethiopian prime minister the Nobel Peace Prize), bias, and barely hidden support for the Tigrayan rebels. Russia, on the other hand, voting against the proceedings at the UNHRC or sending its Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to Addis Ababa in July 2022 to support the government from quickly sliding into pariah status, was seen as a country similarly reading the global and regional situation. As with Russia in Ukraine, the Ethiopian leadership felt entitled to push on with full force

to reclaim control over what it saw as its possession, even if it meant a conquest resulting in the massive suffering of citizens in the regions concerned. Therefore, the pro-government Ethiopian, Eritrean or diaspora-based, often English-language speaking public would uphold justifications for Russia's invasion as means to justify Ethiopia's own war.

ILLUSTRATION 88.



With 26,200 followers on Twitter, is a Washington, D.C.-based community organiser originally from Eritrea. Defender of the Ethiopian/Eritrean war alliance

Source: Twitter

The #NoMore hashtag primarily referred to “no more Tigrayan rule,” but also represented resistance to Western “neocolonial” diplomatic interventions seen as supportive of the Tigrayans. This campaign was initiated before the war in Ukraine broke out, but it was later accommodated into pro-Russian posts on Ukraine, stressing Russia's stance against former colonisers.

ILLUSTRATION 89.



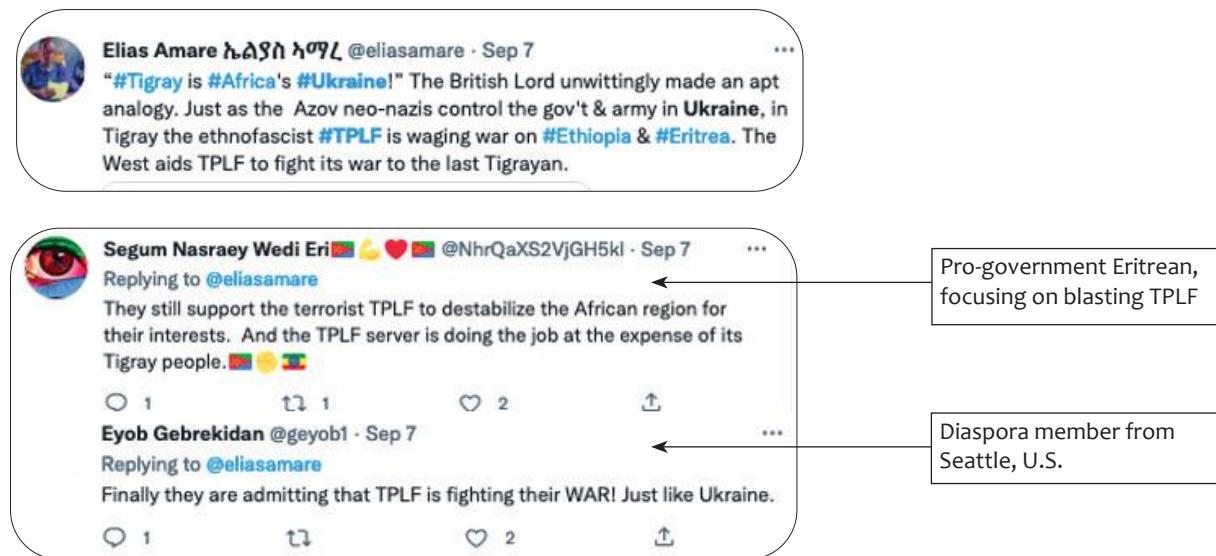
ILLUSTRATION 90.



#NoMore outside the internet in Addis Ababa. Photos: Kinga Turkowska

For Ethiopian pro-war nationalists, voices from the West sympathising with Tigrayan civilians and comparing their situation to that of Ukrainians (similarly targeted by an intervening army) serve as proof of Western complicity against both Russia and Ethiopia. Use of Russian symbolism, or language clichés derived from Russian pro-war propaganda, serve to rebuke this perceived Western plot. In this line, the writer Elias Amare (32,500 followers on Twitter), a co-founder of the #NoMore movement, compared the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), a leading Tigrayan political force, to supposed Ukrainian “neo-Nazis” as an ethnic extremist group.

ILLUSTRATION 91.



Source: Twitter

A popular Amharic-language Facebook account, “Being An Ethiopian” (204,000 followers), shared a doctored picture of President Zelensky with his face pasted onto an earlier picture of Debratsion Gebremichael, the TPLF political leader and Ethiopian nationalists’ enemy Nr 1. This Zelensky-Gebremichael “fighting the Russian Army” was eventually deleted from this account, which otherwise is not too political and focused on sports and culture, and definitely not pro-Russian.

ILLUSTRATION 92.



ILLUSTRATION 93.

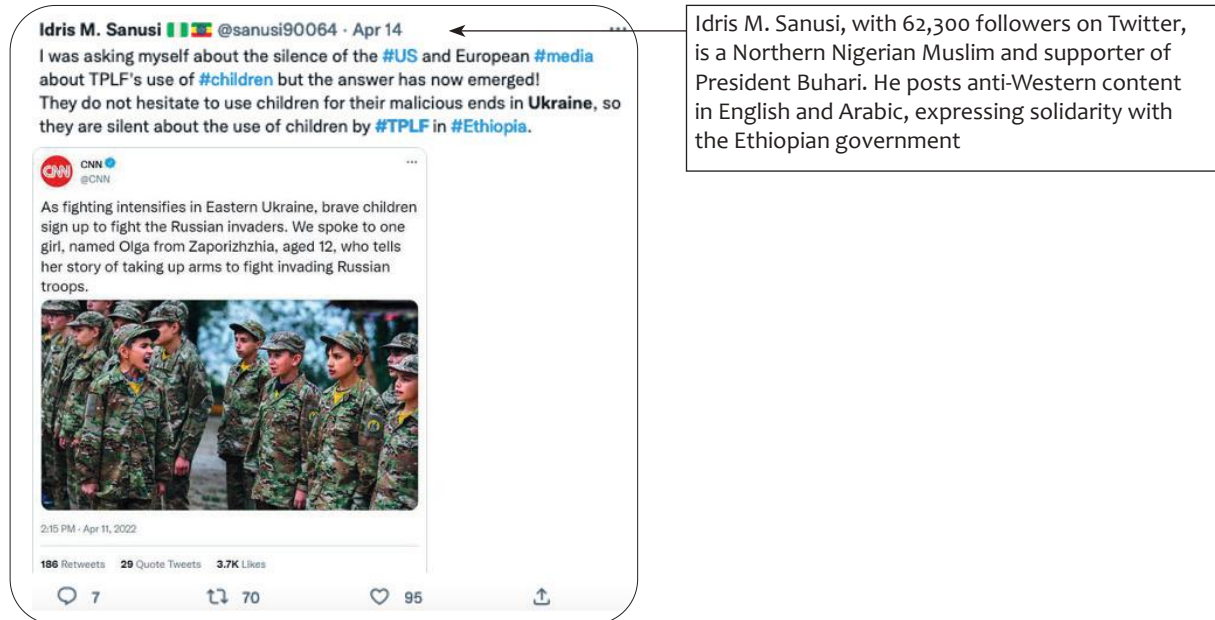


The doctored photo (left) of Ukrainian President Zelensky’s face on the body of Debratsion Gebremichael (right) on a Being an Ethiopian Facebook profile, 26 February 2022. The photo on the right has been used in media reports since at least 2020, in this case, in The Nation (15 November 2020).

Earlier links between Ukraine and the previous TPLF-dominated government (until 2018) of Ethiopia would have been discussed as further proof of a TPLF/Ukraine/Western conspiracy-in-the-making. A fake screenshot of an alleged CNN report on child soldiers fighting for

Ukraine⁶⁴ is also instrumental in explaining the perceived uncritical Western support of the Tigrayans, whose forces have included some underaged fighters. By extension, Russia's policies against the "barbaric" Ukraine are justified.

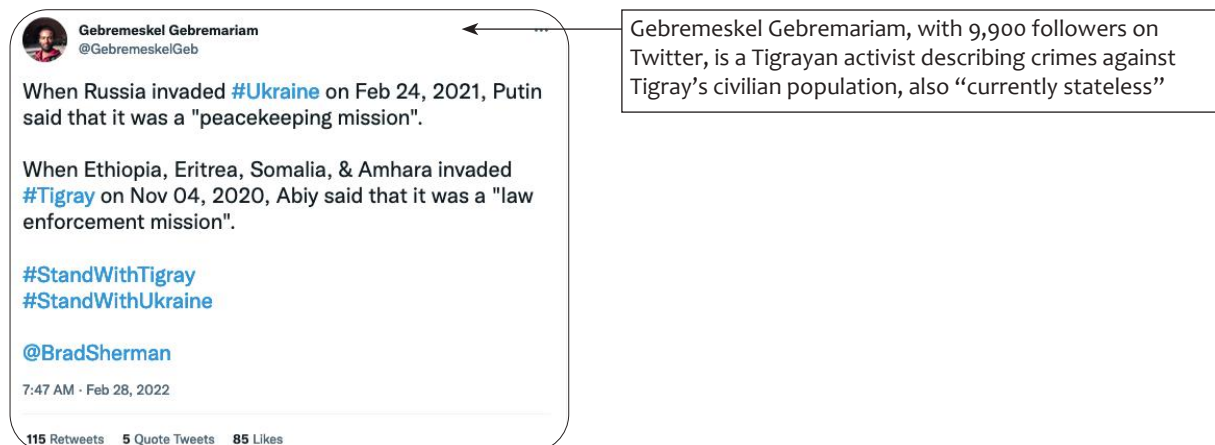
ILLUSTRATION 94.



Source: Twitter

While the pro-government Ethiopian nationalists exploited the history of TPLF-Ukraine contacts and present-day comparisons to mobilise against Tigrayans, Tigrayans themselves (particularly in the diaspora) have been doing the same. They were hoping to win the world's sympathy by pointing to the similarities in their defence against an overwhelming attacker, and of collusion between Russia and Ethiopia, the world's leading state-aggressors, both avoiding naming their actions as "wars."

ILLUSTRATION 95.



Source: Twitter

⁶⁴ "Fact Check-Screenshot purporting to show CNN tweet claiming that child soldiers are fighting in eastern Ukraine is digitally altered," *Reuters*, 15 April 2022, www.reuters.com/article/factcheck-alteredtweet-cnn-idUSL2N2WD0I1.

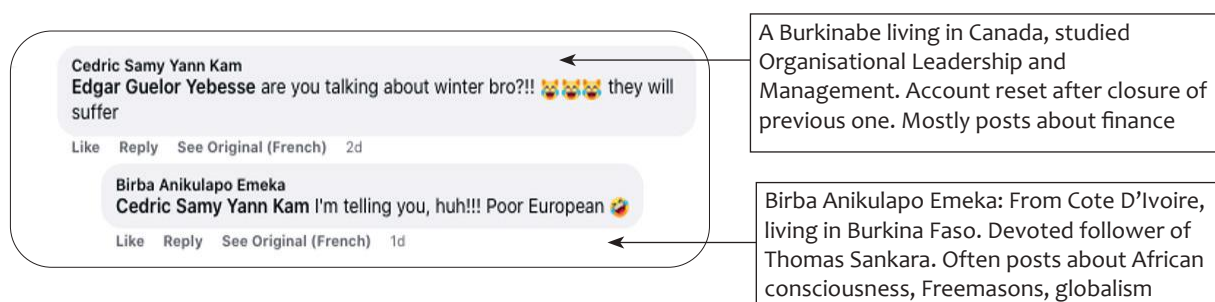
In the Ethiopian case, adopting Putin-like language in describing Ukraine and the West was a side effect of the growing international pressure on Ethiopia and frustrations with its inability to “sell” the rationale of its own war to the global public. Conversely, Tigrayans used the “hot” comparisons while unsuccessfully trying to garner any viable foreign support. Silencing the guns on the Tigray front after the Pretoria accord of 2 November 2022 could be changing that context and making the Russia-Ukraine analogies irrelevant in Ethiopia. This is expected to result in Ethiopian social media users taking a step back from justifying Putin’s invasion. But the possibility of a new, Tigray-like conflict around the Oromia province, which by early December seemed to be unfolding, signalled a likelihood that the same social media game would be recycled soon, within a new local frame.

4.2. RADICALISATION OF DISCOURSE. SOCIAL MEDIA CROWD BEGINS TO ENJOY CRUELTY

The conduct of the debate itself produces certain dynamics, especially as it is largely one-sided. As pro-Russian statements become identity markers, produce reactions beneficial for their authors, and reward them with popularity, it should come as no surprise that many top opinion-makers keep on amplifying new Russia-Ukraine developments to satisfy the online crowd. They are quick to offer a satisfactory “analysis” of the developing story to their followers and impregnate them from doubts. Irony, and even open mockery of Ukrainians, helps to keep their status as online stars within their self-radicalising bubbles.

For example, while Egouchi Behanzin enthusiastically embarked on making pro-Russian opinions and commentaries in his live entries since the launch of invasion on 24 February 2022 and kept this as the prime focus of his social media activity, he notably chose to stay silent on the Bucha massacre, first reported on 1 April 2022. A similar approach of keeping one eye closed began to change among African Ukraine watchers into the second half of 2022 when Russian cruelty became openly celebrated. Followers of the *Les panafricains* Facebook fanpage (258,000 followers, with its main focus Senegalese politics), who usually would probably have little interest in the region, by November were laughing at the prospect of a cold winter for civilians, deprived of heating after Russian strikes on Ukraine’s infrastructure.

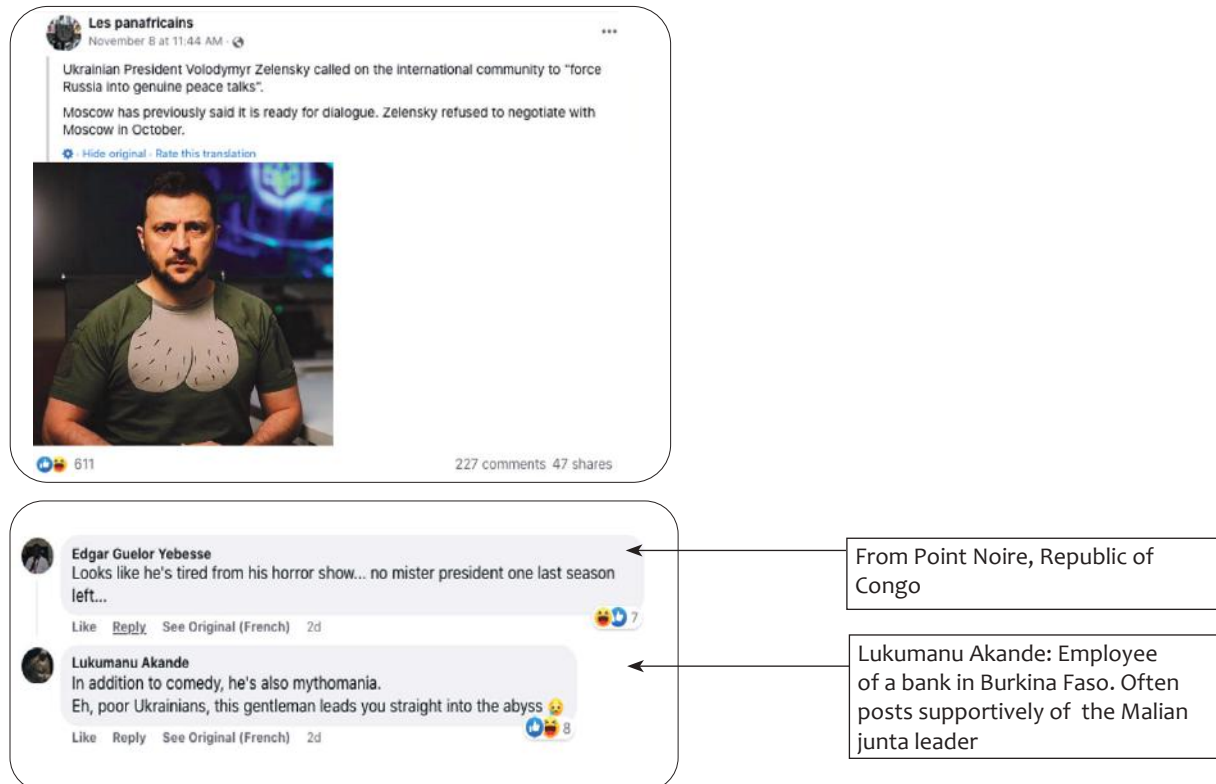
ILLUSTRATION 96.



Source: Facebook

This came with dehumanising Ukraine's President Zelensky. A post elaborating Ukraine's conditions for negotiations was accompanied with this clearly photoshopped, ridiculing image.

ILLUSTRATION 97.



Source: Facebook

The same Behanzin, who would avoid going too far at the beginning of the conflict, later began routinely call Zelensky a “narco-fuhrer,” leader of the “Ukro-Nazi regime,” pushing the red-lines of his language further to deprive the attacked country's people of any potential sympathy from his audience.

A writer, Franklin Nyamsi, who from February to October 2022 rarely picked up Russia-Ukraine topics, and when he did, he treated it rather informatively, but always favourably towards the Russians, was quick to compare Kherson city, abandoned by the Russian army and awaiting liberation, to a prostitute. To illustrate that, he used the Ivorian slang word *djandjou*, which means a woman who lets herself be seduced for material gain.

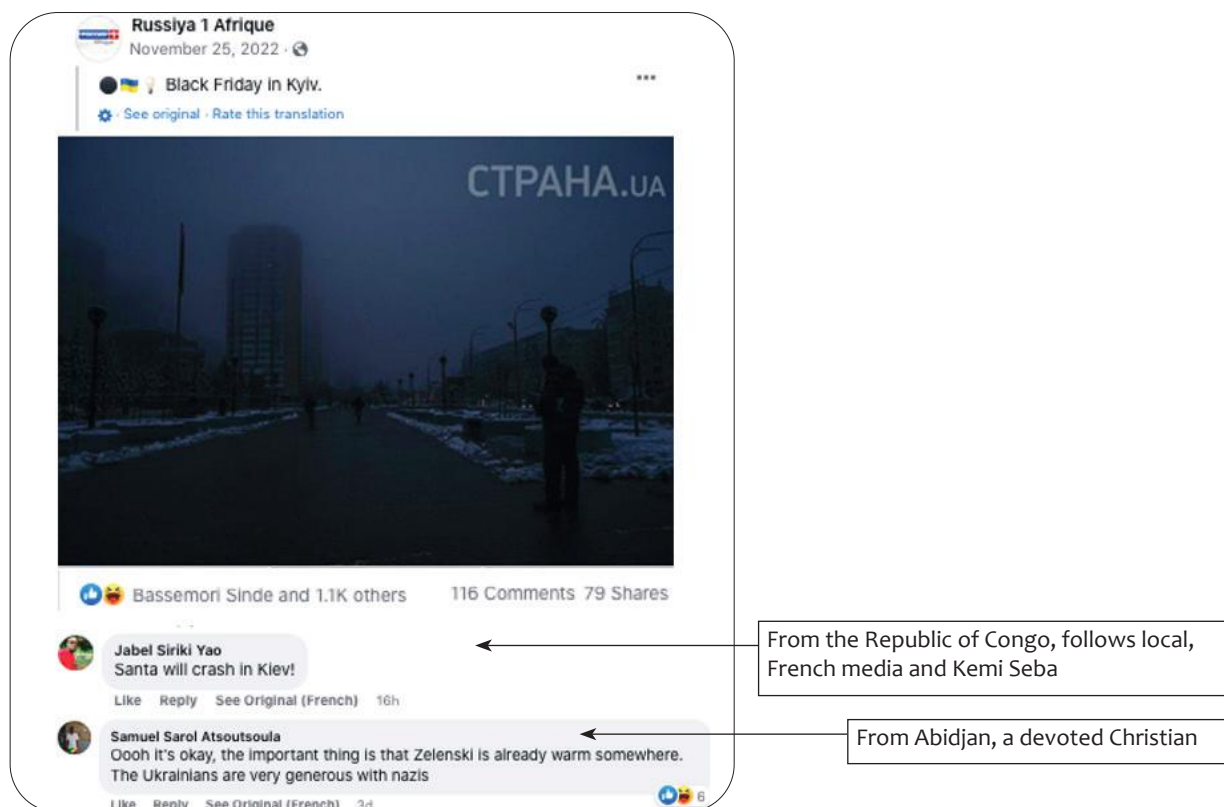
ILLUSTRATION 98.



Source: Twitter

Such a change in the tone of the discourse also could have been influenced by the evolution of messaging by Africa-oriented Russian propaganda channels such as the “Russiya 1 Afrique” Facebook page (92,000 followers, imitating the state-run Rossiya 1 TV channel, by early 2023 under the name “R1 Afrique”), generating significant sharing also among genuine users. It “jokingly” referred to the dark night in Kyiv after 25 November 2022 deliberate attacks on its electricity infrastructure as “Black Friday,” which is the global shopping craze occurring on the same date.

ILLUSTRATION 99.

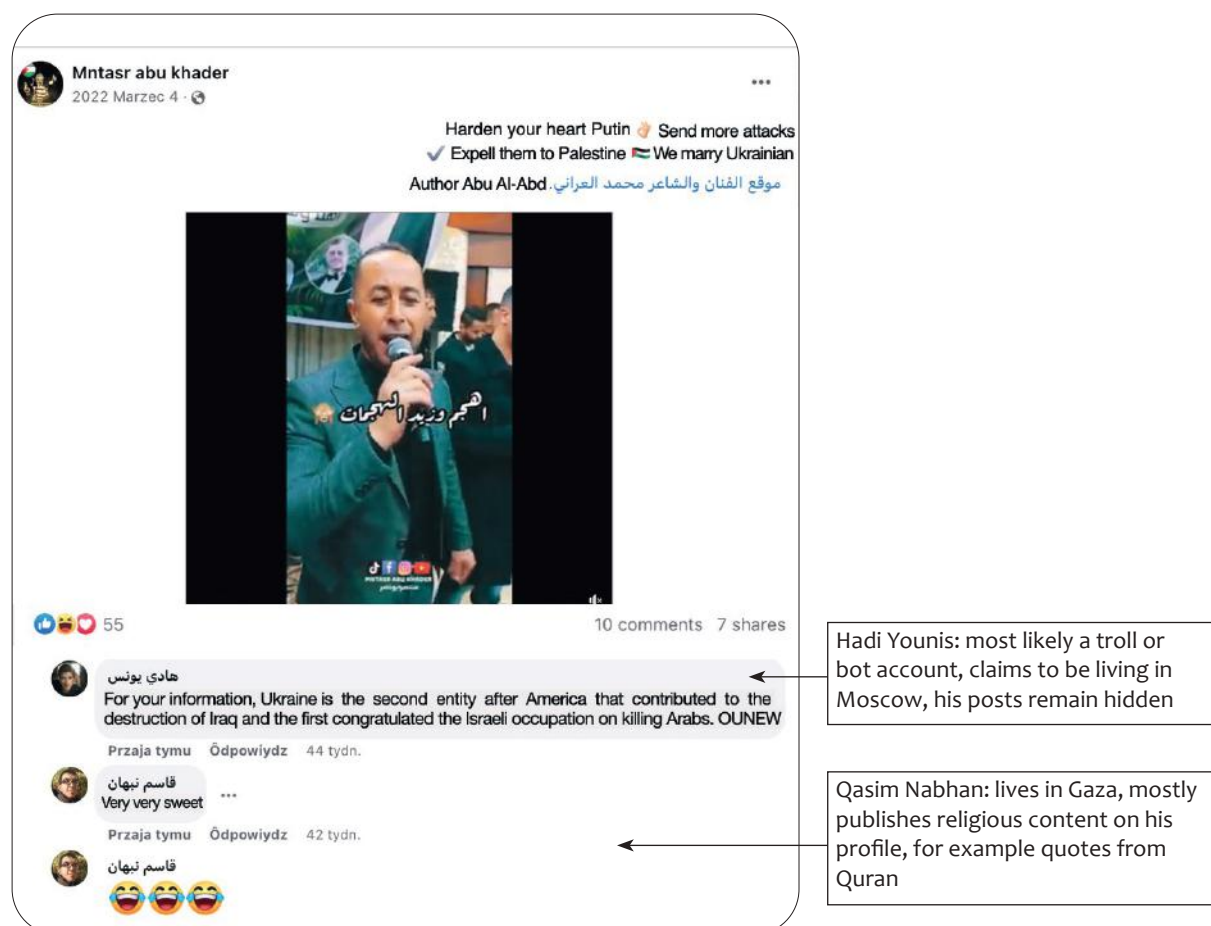


Source: Facebook

In the most striking examples of the Arab hostility towards the Ukrainian cause and Western politics on the war, there is visible celebration of Putin’s war. At the beginning of March, a video of Muhammad al-Arani, a Palestinian wedding singer from Jenin, went viral. The short video presented him performing a song praising Putin and asking him to increase attacks on Ukraine and banishing Ukrainians to Palestine so that men there could marry Ukrainian women. The

song did attract some attention, but compared to the general popularity of Arani's fanpage, it was not very significant. The video gained 55 likes and no negative reactions on Al-Arani's Facebook fanpage. Among the 10 comments below the post, only one criticised Al-Arani as not representing the Palestinian way of thinking. At the same time, the song was also viewed by an international audience on YouTube, where the comments are almost solely praising the song and Putin. The most popular video post had 241,000 views and around 1,000 comments.

ILLUSTRATION 100.



Source: Facebook

Although the cruelty of the refrain is outrageous, the song also resonates due to the rest of the lyrics which are less radical and reflects the grievances of Palestinians (described in detail in a separate chapter) towards what they see as Western double standards and its colonial heritage, cited as the root cause of Palestinian hardship. Similarly, attacks on Ukraine became a point of reference for the radical users who pointed to the alleged U.S. use of white phosphorus munitions in Syria. The user “Sulaiman.am” shared a tweet showing the aftermath of a Russian bomb attack. One of the comments puts it within the framework of retaliation for the American actions in Syria. The comment denies any agency of Ukrainians and equates their country's losses with American losses, though Ukraine was not participating in the Syrian war in any form. It falls within the narrative of the U.S. imposing its will on Ukraine and framing the war as a superpowers' conflict, which works against mobilising support for Ukraine in the Arab world in the most radical way.


ILLUSTRATION 101.

sulaiman.am @sulaiman_am0

Translated from Arabic by Google

Russian aviation uses incendiary ammunition (WP) on the besieged Ukrainian forces Inside the Ozovestal factory.

One bomb kills and burns every living being.



0:28 539.9K views

Save Azov Save Mariupol

From **Illia Ponomarenko**

5:33 PM · May 15, 2022

19 Retweets 89 Likes

43,400 followers, from Saudi Arabia, interested in the military and sports. In his posts he is not radically pro-Russian, but does portray the war in a way highlighting Russian strength

عزوز @AAB511AA

Replying to @sulaiman_am0

Translated from Arabic by Google

May God be generous and increase them, let them taste what our brothers in Syria tasted for 11 years on phosphorus bombs and explosive barrels, they are all burning, they are all racists, and you see themselves increasing.

3:09 AM · May 16, 2022

1 Like

Azuz (@AAB511AA): with 173 followers, writes mostly about Saudi affairs and sports, and his activity is mostly replies

Source: Twitter

Box 4. Do Guns for Ukraine Arm Jihadists in Nigeria? Nigerians: No; Pan-Africanists: Yes

On 29 November 2022, Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari was hosting the 16th Chad Basin Commission summit in Abuja. In the opening address, he said that weapons from the Ukrainian war were slipping into the Lake Chad region and fuelling the armed conflicts there.

ILLUSTRATION 102.



The front page of the newspaper Daily Trust from 30 November 2022

Lake Chad (bordering Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Chad) is where jihadist insurgencies had been raging since 2009. The violence, first attributed to a “Boko Haram” group and then its successors—the Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP) and Jama’at ahl al-sunnah li’l-da’wah wa’l-jihād (JASDJ)—have killed more than 35,000 people and displaced 2.5 million. In 2015, Buhari promised to defeat the jihadists within six months but failed. Today, ISWAP and JASDJ continue to expand and mount deadly attacks on state functionaries and civilians.

The initial discussion about Buhari’s revelations developed on the Twitter feed of “Sahara Reporters,” a renowned U.S.-based news source, which posted a link to its article on the matter on 30 November. By 13 December, it was liked 444 times, retweeted 144 times, and generated 243 comments, almost exclusively by genuine Nigerian Twitter users. Only two commentators seemed to have accepted the version provided by Buhari, who was nearing the end of his tenure. The overwhelming majority rebuked his claims, reading them as:

- Inconsistent (arms were widely available before the Ukraine war);
- Instrumentalising Ukraine war (an unpopular president shying away from domestic problems);
- Elections-driven (Buhari was campaigning for the ruling APC candidate);
- Recycled (officials stated the same on Libya and Syria in the past).

Fourteen commentators referred to their belief Buhari himself was sponsoring violent groups, which is an example of how widespread conspiracy thinking is in the Nigerian public debate. Still, the story did not resonate with any notable surge in voices blaming the West or Ukraine for insecurity in Nigeria, or supporting Russia in the war. The lack of pre-existing strong narratives that could “connect the dots” and distrust of Buhari’s claims within the all-too-familiar local context, proved critical.

While audiences in Nigeria didn’t change their view of Russia or Ukraine, the same story resonated differently in French-speaking Africa. On 3 December, “Afrique Mère” a new agency associated with Kemi Seba’s NGO Urgences Panafricanistes, which widely publishes pro-Russian content, tweeted about the matter, quoting excerpts from Buhari’s speech. By 13 December, the tweet had received 375 likes and 123 retweets. More than 60% of the commentators picked up Buhari’s revelations, developing them into a number of locally relevant frames:

- The West, unsurprisingly, intends to destabilise other parts of the world;
- It could have been facilitated by the French;
- Ukraine’s grain diplomacy is just a smokescreen for its malicious impact;
- Col. Assimi Goita (Mali) knew it all in advance;
- Rwandan president Paul Kagame (in the anti-Western narratives often named a U.S. proxy) is probably benefiting.

Further discussions, in a similar line and proportion, followed on Twitter and Facebook pages reposting or referring to “Afrique Mère’s” tweet, which included renowned pro-Russian activists such as Egountchi Behanzin, who further speculated on French involvement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The West needs to highlight the benefits of defending the rules-based international order for non-Western states. While trying to build collective support for Ukraine, Western countries use the argument that standing against Russian aggression on Ukraine is about defending the rules-based international order and democracy. In the West, this assessment is mostly taken for granted, but debates in social media among the Arab and African public prove this argumentation largely fails to build solidarity among them with Ukraine. This is because of the dominant perspective of African and Arab users of social media platforms in which the West lacks credibility as a global political and moral leader. This view results in clear scepticism towards Western policies, also in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Hence, apart showing the illegality of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the criminal nature of its actions in Ukraine, including the deliberate targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, the U.S. and the West should stand up for the promise of a universally applicable rules-based order. This would require sending clear signals that Western states are ready to use as much determination as in the case of Ukraine to address crises that occupy the central place in the debate the debate in Arab and African countries, like those in Palestine, Sudan, or Ethiopia, as in the case of Ukraine.

The European Union should play a bigger role in Western strategic communication regarding the Russian invasion of Ukraine directed towards Arab and African countries. The discourse about the war in Ukraine on Arab and African social media proves that the legacy of colonial era, the Cold War, and recent foreign interventions in these regions embedded the idea of “zones of influence” as a central feature of international relations. This belief increases the effectiveness of Putin’s narrative that the attack on Ukraine served to defend Russian borders from Western or NATO “expansion.” As the EU institutional system avoids realistic concepts of zones of influence, it is crucial to highlight to the Arab and African audiences the unwavering EU support, both political and material, for Ukraine’s defence. This can affect the perception of the war being fought in defence of Ukrainian sovereignty, not as part of an alleged “expansionist project of the West.” To support this line, especially the EU countries of Central and Eastern Europe, which suffered from Russian imperial policy throughout the 20th century, should intensify strategic communication directed towards African and Arab countries, presenting their view of the Russian aggression and their citizens’ willingness to, and historical reasons for becoming members of the EU. This would also make the West seen as supportive to smaller states’ agency and sovereignty in making choices.

The West should leverage the inconsistencies in the pro-Russian narratives among Arab and African audiences. While on one hand some commentators point to the need to create a multipolar world, with Russia balancing the West, on the other they reinforce its uni- or bipolarity by insisting that Ukraine is in fact a mere object of American influence. To counter this, it is important to highlight Ukrainian agency in making geopolitical choices, which was the original reason behind the Russian aggression.

While Ukraine’s supporters need to maintain pressure on “hedging” countries, they should refrain from communication based on a “with us or against us” argument. Western criticism of the October 2022 OPEC+ decision was met with negative reactions among the Arab public, which pointed out the centrality of national (and economic) interests, which is the prism through which the war in Ukraine is viewed. Hence, for the African and Arab states, more distant from the war, decisions that the West views as pro-Russian are not taboo as long

as they serve the national interest. For this reason, Western demands that Arab and African leaders join the sanctions regime or increase oil production are perceived as an attempt to infringe on their sovereignty. Therefore, the West should rather focus on highlighting the benefits derived from stability and predictability, which are threatened by Russia.

The West should highlight how a Russian victory in the war will threaten the stability and development of Arab and African states. Opening space for forced changes of borders threatens international and regional consensus on respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity that prevents a stream of revisionism and potential armed conflicts. Cementing Russia's position as a superpower with global ambitions, competing with the West at the expense of smaller, weaker states of Africa and (partially) the Middle East would increase their vulnerabilities and limits their economic options. Russian war practices enable normalisation of the use of hunger as a weapon of war and backsliding in standards of governance and justice. These perspectives will be helpful in renewing the global commitment to a rules-based order as beneficial to Arab and African countries.

Western strategic communication, with particular focus on social media activity and public diplomacy, should vigilantly observe the dynamics of the discussion about the Russian invasion of Ukraine in African and Arab countries. While the pro-Russian narratives seem to have taken root, the discussants themselves sometimes question the foundations of their beliefs. Situations like that open the window of opportunity for Western strategic communication, which should not only focus on debunking Russian disinformation but also proactively shape the perception among the Arab and African audiences of the current global order being at stake.

The quest for Ukrainian victory should be presented towards the Arab and African public in the context of the broader goal of enhancing a greater role for the Global South in the international order. While the drive for "multipolarity" became a mantra of the whole spectrum of the Arab and African Russia-leaning discussants, a clear and credible perspective of a fairer distribution of political and economic power across the globe, being the result of the successful defence of the rules-based international order, could counterbalance Russian inroads.

Western states need to maintain military support for Ukraine also because it indirectly helps in fighting the pro-Russian narratives among the Arab and African audiences. Cases of major Russian military failures prove to be effective in turning the Arab and African debate from pro-Russian to Russia-sceptical discussions. Images and reports on Russian military debacles undermine the popular image of Putin as a powerful, credible, and competent leader and weaken the perception of Russia as a global power, which can counterbalance the West. By enabling Ukraine to defeat Russia on the battlefield, the image of Russian military power is further eroded. This helps to counterbalance both the notion of Russia as an attractive strategic partner of African and Arab countries, able to strengthen their security through military and defence-industrial cooperation, and the concept of Russia as a great power, able to balance the West to the benefit of the Global South.

To build consistency around the view of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the West needs to more decidedly stand against its MENA allies' decisions that violate international law. For the Arab discussants, Palestine and Iraq continue to be the main points of reference in assessing the credibility of any major Western involvement in a distant conflict zone. They point out Western indifference towards illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank, or Saudi involvement in Yemen as proof of Western hypocrisy. To counterbalance this narrative,

examples of Ukraine and many of Ukraine's allies voting in the UN in favour of Palestinians and other vulnerable populations should be highlighted.

The quasi-colonial nature of Russia's involvement both in Ukraine and in Africa must be exposed to challenge the notion of a "Russian alternative." The latter widely resonates, particularly in French-speaking Africa, carrying a promise of a more just partnership. Careful analysis of the local contexts of the Russian appeal must be conducted against Russia's (and the West's) performance, to come up with a credible "alternative to the alternative."

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Grasping the ways in which social media discourse reflects popular sentiments is challenging. According to a few polls run within the context of Ukraine, both Arabs and Africans tend to view the Russian actions critically. Shortly after the invasion, a slim majority (43–40%) of Palestinians blamed Russia rather than Ukraine for starting the war,⁶⁵ and in mid-2022 around 75% of Saudis criticised the Russian aggression.⁶⁶ A November 2022 poll in South Africa showed 74% of its citizens condemned the aggression and less than 13% saw it as an acceptable use of force.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the authors noticed that content presenting pro-Russian, or an anti-Western leaning, tended to gain traction and attract significant attention. Also, the low visibility of credible and prominent pro-Ukrainian opinion leaders might have made many users go silent and opened the space for pro-Russian voices to dominate.

The authors also noticed that studies that attempted to quantify attitudes towards the war in Ukraine in Arab or African social media proved unsatisfactory due to their basic assumptions and methodology. The existing studies tended to focus on one social media channel (most often Twitter), use of hashtags, and type of sentiment (wording disclosing positive or negative attitudes) embedded in posts as a means to measure the popularity of certain opinions. However, internet penetration and use of social media varies in the regions. While in Sub-Saharan Africa, for example, Twitter might be prominent as a messaging and discussion board in a handful of countries (Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Ghana, South Africa), Facebook dominates in others. The same differences apply to the Gulf (Twitter) and Maghreb (Facebook). It is impossible to assess the extent to which these pair with exchanges in groups and individual users of WhatsApp, which is more private and less traceable but has become extremely relevant channels in many parts of the regions concerned. Rural and less educated users often prefer audio messages (shared on WhatsApp) recorded in their native languages. This reflects the prominence of radio as a prime source of information for the majority, for example in the Sahel. Hashtags are rarely used in grassroots conversations in the regions concerned, while they are a characteristic of the online language of trolls and bots. Algorithms analysing the linguistic contents of posts are not able to properly assess multi-layered and multithreaded statements involving different sentiments, like those in which users expressed in the same message support for Palestine and a lack of support for Ukraine. The authors found this kind of messaging not only popular among commentators from the regions under study but also key to understanding the complexity and paradoxes of their worldviews. Considering that, they decided to explore the dynamics and contexts of this part of the discourse rather than seek a clean-cut *correlation* or *causal relationship* between the views and features (demographic or ideological) of those who expressed them.

This report is an analysis of the Russia-leaning social media discourses that relate to the war in Ukraine. It covers countries of sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab states and relates to discourses developed following the 24 February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine but grounded in earlier processes. The research material was collected between November 2022 and January

⁶⁵ "Public Opinion Poll No (83)," *Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research*, 22 March 2022, <https://pcpsr.org/sites/default/files/Poll%2083%20English%20press%20release%20March2022.pdf>.

⁶⁶ "New Saudi Poll Shows Biden's Visit Barely Budged Skepticism," David Pollock, *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, 26 August 2022, www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-saudi-poll-shows-bidens-visit-barely-budged-skepticism.

⁶⁷ R. Hartley, G. Mills, "Brenthurst survey shows vast majority of South Africans condemn Russia," *Daily Maverick*, 20 November 2022, www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-11-20-brenthurst-survey-shows-vast-majority-of-south-africans-condemn-russia.

2023 from English-, French-, Arabic- and Amharic-language social media. It is presented in English using the automatic translation features offered by Twitter or Facebook (in individual cases slight editing was needed to keep the original meaning intact).

This report uses qualitative research techniques for analysing social media content, but it is not strictly focused on the *randomness* of the sample or its *representativeness* (this type of filtering is used in Chapter 1b where Facebook's "most relevant" option illustrates the dominant type of comments). The main attention of this report is steered towards end-users of social media—the grassroots-driven online influencers, readers, and commentators on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and other outlets who, for different reasons, keep on interpreting the war through Russia's lens. Extensive exploration of the different spaces where discussions on Russia and Ukraine are held led the authors to illustrate the described phenomena, threads, tropes, and case studies with excerpted examples from online conversations. The authors did their best to ensure that the selected samples of these discussions are always relevant and distinctive at the same time. While acknowledging that bots and trolls populate social media and contribute to distorting or pushing the debate on Russia and/or Ukraine in Africa and the Arab World forward, as they do elsewhere, the authors' focus was on the organic sections of this debate as much as possible. Still, they acknowledge that from the end-users' perspective, posts by fake accounts or trolls still matter as long as they are seen as part of the real debate.

On the "source" side, the priority was to map the ecosystem of popular commentators or influencers who presented particular views of Russian politics. To identify key social media users in the Arab and African worlds, the authors developed their research based on previous knowledge and observations of the social media discourse in Africa and the Arab world acquired over years.⁶⁸ Mapping was crosschecked and completed through consultations with renowned media-watchers from the regions concerned. Beyond that, Boolean searches were performed in Twitter using keywords related to the war in Ukraine and/or local issues evoked when relating to the Russian aggression. The aim was to identify popular users, often those who published with a pro-Russian leaning while also legitimising their views with experiences of the Arab and/or African countries that comprised their audience. The number of their followers, retweets, and comments to their posts were considered an estimate of the potential popularity of a given influencer. As each thread investigated here had its own dynamic, it was difficult to define a clear threshold above which a commentator is popular enough to look into what he/she is posting. In the end, the content itself and reactions it generated was more important for the goals of this report. Nevertheless, in most of the cases of posts presented here, they belong to authors who have more than 10,000 followers, while the most popular ones have up to 5-6 million followers on Twitter or Facebook.

Content analysed in the report mirrors some of the demographic characteristics of social media users in the Arab and African world. A significant number of examples of Arab Twitter voices presented in the report came from Saudi Arabia. Saudi Twitter accounts constitute an overwhelming majority of the general Arab Twitter users and therefore they dominate some of the discussions held on the platform. Needless to say, this is paired with the wider digital divide in the region, where nearly 100%⁶⁹ of the GCC population has access to the internet

⁶⁸ See, for example: J. Czerep, "Social Media Dynamics as a New Factor in African Politics," *Hungarian Journal of African Studies (Afrika Tanulmányok)*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Special Issue (Winter 2018), ISSN 1788-6422 pp. 160-170; J. Czerep, "Uganda Demonstrates the Growing Influence of Social Media on Politics in Africa," *PISM Bulletin*, No 42 (1738), 2021.

⁶⁹ M.O. Jones, "The Two Faces of Digitalization in Politics: The Role of Social Networks in Political Mobilization and the Threat of 'Digital Authoritarianism' in the MENA Region," *Mediterranean Yearbook 2022*, IEMed, Barcelona, 2022.

compared to, for example, Jordan with only 67%⁷⁰. The divide is even more visible in Africa where internet penetration varies between 7-8% (Central African Republic, Eritrea) to 68% in South Africa and 84% in Morocco.⁷¹ There is also high asymmetry in the number of male and female active social media users in the Arab world, which translated into the presentation of a rather insignificant number of posts and comments by Arab women in this report.

Some discussions more than others reflect wider changes in states' perception of social media as a politically useful tool. Saudi or Emirati states' involvement in moderating Twitter content to serve the monarchies' interests influences the dynamics of the discussions and differentiates them from other Arab states. This was especially visible in the analysis of the correlation between the opinions on the war in Ukraine and democracy.

⁷⁰ S. Kemp, Digital 2022: Jordan, *Data Reportal*, 15 February 2022, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-jordan>.

⁷¹ L. Kamer, "Share of internet users in Africa as of January 2022, by country," *Statista*, 21 July 2022, www.statista.com/statistics/1124283/internet-penetration-in-africa-by-country.

ANNEX

Illustration 1

Source: “Yerewolo debout sur les remparts” Facebook profile, 17 December 2021, www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0skYvnzPjRJFyf83YenpS6GrpuyQVwNu3byNNGcPt9HmB6rABoPUC1LfagEzsRVtl&id=109533897262632.

Illustration 2

Source: Meschac Kadima’s (@mkadimart) Twitter account, 28 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/mkadimart/status/1597156512774094849>.

Illustration 3

Source: “PAPA Koudou Gbagbo” Facebook profile, www.facebook.com/PAPAGBAGBO225.

Illustration 4

Source: “PAPA Koudou Gbagbo” Facebook profile, 28 November 2022, www.facebook.com/PAPAGBAGBO225/posts/pfbid0aXTKKpTKpbSG8f618GtTwTnkosAn4UmU7V8qNuMPfms5nZyeXstqYT9hgZXRrkcPl.

Illustration 5

Source: “L’Afrique Mon Beau Pays” Facebook profile, 28 September 2022, [www.facebook.com/ profile.php?id=100063629666899](https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063629666899).

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Source: “Salif Keita Official Fan Page” Facebook profile, 26 November 2019, www.facebook.com/salifkeitafan/posts/pfbid02dsQmiXxuB8A8z9f8tao2ZoBtEDCyHr8qow7ECbX9SoEzXhcAnHcGcRYwWzqVvmQRL.

Illustration 7

Source: Jean Murekatete’s (@Murekatete_Jean) Twitter account, 22 November 2022, https://mobile.twitter.com/Murekatete_Jean/status/1595004529644281861.

Illustration 8

Source: “Yerewolo debout sur les remparts” Facebook profile, 18 September 2011, www.facebook.com/100071849702061/videos/609471327084292.

Illustration 9

Source: Nathalie Yamb’s Facebook profile, 17 October 2022, www.facebook.com/NathalieYambOff/posts/pfbid02z2WEe6QHnXJZ5kLKbV5SLKtqM46i8YA23gV2JySTXFyTfe5KbX6Dp63s6eXvbf1sl.

Illustration 10

Source: Franklin Nyamsi’s (@FranklinNYAMSI) Twitter account, 03 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/FranklinNYAMSI/status/1598985525460729856>.

Illustration 11

Source: Souleymane Gbagbo Koné’s Facebook profile, 11 November 2022, www.facebook.com/105342405541862/videos/895147398136316/.

Illustration 12

Source: Souley DeParis B-52’s Facebook profile, 5 October 2022, www.facebook.com/FrappeurB52/videos/806915487283643/.

Illustration 13

Source: “Burkina24” Facebook profile, 18 November 2022, www.facebook.com/Burkina24/videos/925025411841313.

Illustration 14

Source: “Mouvement Panafricain de Rejet du Franc CFA” Facebook profile, 13 October 2022, www.facebook.com/MPRFCFA/videos/453276776784486/.

Illustration 15

Source: Leader News’ (@LeaderNewsCI) Twitter account, 28 June 2022, <https://twitter.com/LeaderNewsCI/status/1541739159148167168>.

Illustration 16

Source: Afrique Mere’s (@MereAfrique) Twitter account, 16 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/MereAfrique/status/1581545879785177088>.

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Source: “Afrique Media” Facebook profile, 13 October 2022, www.facebook.com/afriquemedias.

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Illustration 19

Source: “Afrique Media” Facebook profile, 13 October 2022, www.facebook.com/afriquemedia.

Illustration 20

Source: “Afrique Media” Facebook profile, 13 October 2022, www.facebook.com/afriquemedia.

Illustration 21

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Illustration 22

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Illustration 23

Source: “Afrique Media” Facebook profile, 13 October 2022, www.facebook.com/afriquemedia.

Illustration 24

Source: Ismael Mohamed’s (@ismaelamnar) Twitter account, 14 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/ismaelamnar/status/1592147793522696192?s=46&t=dKtM-kGa0q2YZtWnd6gEGQ>.

Illustration 25

Source: Ahmed Farraj’s (@amhfarraj) Twitter account, 19 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/amhfarraj/status/1582790947707895808?s=20&t=45ewxAdFkPUec8A23uQbBw>.

Illustration 26

Source: Abu Turky’s (@Abu7urky) Twitter account, 15 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/Abu7urky/status/1514935602764001282?s=20&t=exL5VGgIWNOb7PWofRufxOQ>.

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Source: Sufian Samarrai’s (@SufianSamarrai) Twitter account, 19 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/SufianSamarrai/status/1593900917195419648?s=20&t=mJUx-qg7MNw29la2C6WJZw>.

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Source: Zizi Saleh’s (@ziziabozaid) Twitter account, 10 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/ziziabozaid/status/1579444890517524480?s=20&t=xi5QvhTTcoyy26drTAIOVQ>.

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Source: Sabah al-Khozai’s (@sabahalkhozai) Twitter account, 10 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/sabahalkhozai/status/1501896817885290497?s=20&t=Lu7LHnfs-6fgMA-ufK4Cqw>.

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Source: King KJ – “Mali Kura,” King KJ’s YouTube channel, 11 June 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBpqnXGKcIY.

Illustration 34

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Illustration 35

Source: Fier Ivoirien’s (@FiIvoirien), Twitter account, 5 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/FiIvoirien/status/1500121045067513861>.

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Khulekani Skosana’s (KhulekaniMondli) Twitter account, 25 September 2022, <https://twitter.com/KhulekaniMondli/status/1573981662161113089>.

Illustration 37

Source: “DA’s John Steenhuisen speaks to Newzroom Afrika from war-torn Ukraine,” Newzroom Afrika YouTube channel, 2 May 2022, www.youtube.com/watch?v=b6pxwnhA6DE.

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Source: Fenelon Massala’s (@rfemassala) Twitter account, 12 December 2022, <https://twitter.com/rfemassala/status/1602236813741023233>.

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Source: Sabah al-Khozai’s (@sabahalkhozai) Twitter account, 29 March 2022, https://twitter.com/sabahalkhozai/status/1508795286365347847?s=20&t=0ZizFhZ_-P8dHOuWs5vAlw.

Illustration 40

Source: Kada Benamar’s (@benamar31) Twitter account, 5 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/benamar31/status/1577759805434986496>.

Illustration 41

Source: Ayyad Al-Hamud’s (@Eyaaaad) Twitter account, 1 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/Eyaaaad/status/1498700047957078024?s=20&t=tCJ4oDX7QbRdunUIbQMmSA>.

Illustration 42

Source: Mohammed Saleh’s (@mizodjmowi) Twitter account, 6 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/mizodjmowi/status/1589132265476755456?s=20&t=Lu7LHnfs-6fgMA-ufK4Cqw>.

Illustration 43

Source: Mohammad Al-Hadi bin Saleh’s (@MOHAMEDELHDIBE3) Twitter account, <https://twitter.com/MOHAMEDELHDIBE3/status/1522983284850020354?s=20&t=9pH9CqLECZDRJzJEfK5gqw>.

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Source: Columbus’s (@columbuos) Twitter account, 5 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/Columbuos/status/1500134555411525635?s=20>.

Illustration 46

Source: Dhahi Khalfan’s (@Dhahi_Khalfan) Twitter account, 2 September 2022, https://twitter.com/Dhahi_Khalfan/status/1565546863964684288?s=20.

Illustration 47

Source: Muhammad Shahab’s (@mshabib1957) Twitter account 26 February 2022, <https://twitter.com/mshabib1957/status/1497556353769955329?s=20>.

Illustration 48

Source: Tarek Abboud’s (@Tarek_Abboud70) Twitter account, 30 September 2022, https://twitter.com/Tarek_Abboud70/status/1575856271517175808?s=20.

Illustration 49

Source: Khalid Muhammad Qaid T’aiman al-Jahmy’s (@jO0OuJC) Twitter account, 25 February 2022, <https://twitter.com/jO0OuJC/status/1497342140707479561?s=20>.

Illustration 50

Source: LARSSON’s (@ALMOHANDIS_313) Twitter account, 25 February 2022, https://twitter.com/ALMOHANDIS_313/status/1497130821953675271?s=20.

Illustration 51

Source: Ibrahim al-Amriki’s (@m_w119) Twitter account, 7 September 2022, https://twitter.com/m_w119/status/1567458889083363331?s=20.

Illustration 52

Source: Muntaha al-Ramahi’s Facebook profile, 15 August 2022, www.facebook.com/muntaha.alamahi/posts/5036145109829545.

Illustration 53

Source: Alaa Allaqta’s (@AlaaAllagta) Twitter account, 13 April 2022, <https://twitter.com/AlaaAllagta/status/1514320220336312323?s=20&t=e7o3jlTmKVKRD4t0lhXf1Q>.

Illustration 54

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Source: Sa'udiyun m'a Al-Aqsa's (@Saudis2018) Twitter account, 9 November 2022, <https://twitter.com/Saudis2018/status/1590303687968030721?s=20&t=8jlibM5EoDv1gHZJBS4w>.

Illustration 57

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Illustration 58

Source: Hafid Derradji's (@derradjihafid) Twitter account, 13 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/derradjihafid/status/1502961806515482630?s=20&t=8jlibM5EoDv1gHZJBS4w>.

Illustration 59

Source: Abdulkhaleq Abdulla's (@Abdulkhaleq_UAE) Twitter account, 21 March 2022, https://twitter.com/Abdulkhaleq_UAE/status/1505958703907880961?s=20&t=8jlibM5EoDv1gHZJBS4w.

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Illustration 61

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Illustration 62

Source: Hakeem's (@A_H_Ashe) Twitter account, 11 November 2022, https://twitter.com/A_H_Ashe/status/1591160122117877760?s=20&t=8jlibM5EoDv1gHZJBS4w.

Illustration 63

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Source: Kemi Seba's Facebook profile, 25 October 2022, www.facebook.com/KemiSebaOfficial/videos/677614766924092.

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Source: Rachid Achachi's (@Rachid_Achachi) Twitter account, 27 February 2022, https://twitter.com/Rachid_Achachi/status/1497964860235304964?s=20&t=8jlibM5EoDv1gHZJBS4w.

Illustration 68

Source: Abd Al-Aziz Al-Shahri's (@aziz_shr) Twitter account, 30 September 2022, https://twitter.com/aziz_shr/status/1575941381805133825?s=20&t=8jlibM5EoDv1gHZJBS4w.

Illustration 69

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Illustration 74

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Illustration 77

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Illustration 78

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Illustration 80

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https://twitter.com/aziz_shr/status/1495865012962959367?s=20&t=4JjsTCn1_lhpxLRKjTmStA.

Illustration 82

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Illustration 83

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Illustration 86

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Illustration 87

Source: Fofana Daouda's (@satiguiGAMALIEL) Twitter account, 11 November 2022,
<https://twitter.com/satiguiGAMALIEL/status/1591044880088076288>.

Illustration 88

Source: I Am ʿāb-ŋ (ʿāb-ŋ) (@SheabiaForever) Twitter account, 2 March 2022, <https://twitter.com/SheabiaForever/status/1499054324722413571>.

Illustration 89

Not published before, author: Kinga Turkowska.

Illustration 90

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Illustration 91

Source: Elias Amare's (@eliasamare) Twitter account, 7 September 2022, <https://twitter.com/eliasamare/status/1567451918905278465>.

Illustration 92

Source: "Being An Ethiopian" Facebook profile (www.facebook.com/actlikeethiopian), 26 February 2022, deleted, archived by Kinga Turkowska.

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Illustration 95

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Illustration 100

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Illustration 101

Source: Sulaiman.am's (@sulaiman_am0) Twitter account 15 May 2022, https://twitter.com/sulaiman_am0/status/1525862048785121280?s=20&t=wFdPb6kD2UmV9BikZL441g.

Illustration 102

"Daily Trust" newspaper front page, 30 November 2022.

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