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“DOWN WITH NEOCOLONIALISM!”

RESURGENCE OF A STRATEGIC NARRATIVE IN WARTIME RUSSIA

Maxime Audinet, PhD

Research Fellow at IRSEM

REPORT – No. 119



**MINISTÈRE
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“DOWN WITH NEOCOLONIALISM!”
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IN WARTIME RUSSIA

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military institutions; the notion of commitment and its evolution; how youth is socialised and integrated into society; and the rise of radicalism. In addition to its research activities, the “Defense and Society Team” also intends to promote defense issues within civil society, including in academia.

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BIOGRAPHY

Maxime Audinet is a Research Fellow at IRSEM and a specialist of Russian politics. He holds a PhD in Political science and Slavic studies from the University of Paris Nanterre (2020) and a MPhil in political theory from the Doctoral School of Sciences Po Paris (2014). His research focuses on the role of influence in the foreign policy of authoritarian states, following on from his PhD work on Russia’s public diplomacy (cultural diplomacy and international media). He takes a particular interest in the actors and practices of Russia’s information influence in the post-Soviet space, in Europe, and in sub-Saharan Africa. In 2021, he published a book on the Russian international news network RT (*Un média d’influence d’Etat : Enquête sur la chaîne russe RT*, INA), which received the Research on Journalism book award from the Assises du journalisme de Tours (2022) and was reissued in 2024.

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ABSTRACT

This report explores the narrative dimension of foreign policy and influence strategies, using the resurgence of anticolonial rhetoric in Russian political discourse since the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 as a case study. It aligns with the “narrative turn” in International Relations and the conceptual framework of “strategic narratives,” which aim to “construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future in international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.” Unlike most empirical studies that begin by analyzing key actors to identify the narratives they construct, this research reverses the approach by starting with the narrative itself and then tracing it back to its creators and disseminators, thereby clarifying their intentions and foreign policy objectives.

The analysis first identifies the political “narrators” of Russia’s anti-(neo)colonial strategic narrative, including President Putin, political elites, diplomatic channels, and members of the Russian parliament. It then examines how this narrative is promoted by Russia’s ecosystem of information influence—such as transnational state media RT and Sputnik, the “Prigozhin galaxy,” and the organization African Initiative—focusing on its diffusion into sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, the study highlights three key objectives Russia seeks to achieve through this strategic narrative: legitimizing its current foreign policy by creating a historical link to Soviet anti-imperialism; renewing criticism of Western interventionism, often through accusatory inversion; and appealing to audiences in the “global South” by aligning discursively and ideologically with their perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

The West is ready to cross every line to preserve the neo-colonial system which allows it to live off the world [...]. While we – we are proud that in the 20th century our country led the anti-colonial movement, which opened up opportunities for many peoples around the world to make progress, reduce poverty and inequality, and defeat hunger and disease. To emphasise, one of the reasons for the centuries-old Russophobia, the Western elites’ unconcealed animosity toward Russia is precisely the fact that we did not allow them to rob us during the period of colonial conquests.¹

This fierce diatribe was delivered by Vladimir Putin in a speech from the Grand Kremlin Palace on September 30, 2022, just after the ratification of the annexation treaty of four Ukrainian regions – Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia – occupied by Russian forces. A closer look at Russian political discourse since February 24, 2022, reveals that alongside the bellicose language that has accompanied Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there has been a notable resurgence of a rhetoric from another era: anticolonialism. As the Russian President’s statement shows, this discourse is most often used to denounce the “neo-colonial” interventionism of Western nations and the geopolitical entity – dominated by the United States and NATO – that Russian officials refer to as the “collective West.”²

This rhetorical shift is intriguing for several reasons. First, Russian political discourse in the post-Soviet era already boasts a diverse repertoire of anti-Western talking points,³ including the “unipolar West,” “hegemonic West,” “Russophobic West,” “globalist West,”

1. See, on the Kremlin website: “Signing of treaties on accession of Donetsk and Lugansk people’s republics and Zaporozhye and Kherson regions to Russia,” September 30, 2022, <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/69465>.

2. Emmanuel Dreyfus, Victor Violier, “La Russie, ‘forteresse assiégée’ par l’Occident collectif’. Vision du monde et justifications russes de la guerre en Ukraine,” *Revue Défense Nationale*, vol. 7, no. 862, 2023, p. 77-83.

3. Joanna Szostek, “Defense and Promotion of Desired State Identity in Russia’s Strategic Narrative,” *Geopolitics*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2016, p. 571-593; Andriy Tyushka, “Weaponizing Narrative: Russia Contesting Europe’s Liberal

“obsolete liberalism,” “decadent West,” and even “Gayropa”.⁴ Second, while anticolonialism was central to Soviet foreign policy’s internationalist and anti-imperialist agenda, it all but vanished from Russia’s diplomatic lexicon following the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Lastly, this discourse is paradoxical, as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is widely seen outside the country as a form of “neo-imperial” adventurism or even a “neo-colonial” extension of its foreign policy.⁵ The academic debate over the “colonial” nature of Russian and Soviet imperialism, as well as calls to “decolonize” the field of Slavic studies, has gained significant traction since February 2022.⁶ Meanwhile, in contemporary Russian official discourse, any reference to “colonialism” is strictly avoided when discussing the expansionism of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, and the topic is increasingly sidelined in Russian academic circles.

In previous research on Russia’s influence strategy in French-speaking sub-Saharan Africa, we observed a growing reliance on the concepts of colonialism and neo-colonialism, starting in the late 2010s. This rhetoric was notably employed by individuals and groups associated with the Wagner Group and the broader network of entities linked to its founder, Yevgeny

Identity, Power and Hegemony,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2021, p. 115-135.

4. This homophobic neologism combining the words “Gay” and “Evropa” (Europe in Russian) was popularized alongside the conservative assertion of Vladimir Putin’s third term. See: Andrew Foxall, “From Evropa to Gayropa: A Critical Geopolitics of the European Union as Seen from Russia,” *Geopolitics*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2017, p. 174-193.

5. Kseniya Oksamytna, “Imperialism, Supremacy, and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2023, p. 497-512; Ruslan Zaporozhchenko, “The End of ‘Putin’s Empire?’ Ontological Problems of Russian Imperialism in the Context of the War against Ukraine, 2022,” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 71, no. 2, 2023, p. 119-130.

6. The theme of the 2023 conference of the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES), the leading international conference in the field, was “Decolonization”: <https://aseees.org>. See also: Madina Tlostanova, “Postsocialist ≠ Postcolonial? On Post-Soviet Imaginary and Global Coloniality,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 48, no. 2, 2012, p. 130-142; James Krapfl, “Decolonizing minds in the ‘Slavic area,’ ‘Slavic area studies,’ and beyond,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2023, p. 141-145.

Prigozhin (later referred to as the Prigozhin galaxy), particularly in the Central African Republic and the Sahel region.⁷ Similarly, the objective was to undermine the legitimacy of the Western—mainly French—presence in countries where Wagner’s mercenaries were active, while facilitating in parallel the expansion of Russia’s influence across the continent. The simultaneous reemergence of this anti-colonial lexicon and the strengthening of Russia’s ties with sub-Saharan Africa calls for closer scrutiny.

With this in mind, the working hypothesis of this research is that this anti(neo)colonial argument⁸ has become a new *strategic narrative* for Russian foreign policy since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

NARRATIVES, FOREIGN POLICY, AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Like other disciplines, International Relations and its sub-fields, including foreign policy analysis and security studies, have embraced the “narrative turn” in the social sciences. This approach, primarily driven by critical constructivist and post-structuralist currents in International Relations, emphasizes the importance of narratives as a means of understanding, explaining, and analyzing international politics.⁹ “Narratives

7. Maxime Audinet, *Le lion, l’ours et les hyènes: Acteurs, pratiques et récits de l’influence informationnelle russe en Afrique subsaharienne francophone*, IRSEM Report, no. 83, 2021, 92 p.; Maxime Audinet, Colin Gérard, “Les ‘libérateurs’: comment la ‘galaxie Prigojine’ raconte la chevauchée du groupe Wagner au Sahel,” *Le Rubicon*, February 2022; Maxime Audinet, Kévin Limonier, “Le dispositif d’influence informationnelle de la Russie en Afrique subsaharienne francophone: un écosystème flexible et composite,” *Questions de communication*, vol. 1, no. 41, 2022, p. 129-148.

8. The adjective “anti(neo)colonial” is used in the study to refer to a posture of hostility to both colonialism and neo-colonialism.

9. Geoffrey Roberts, “History, Theory and the Narrative Turn in IR,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2006, p. 703-714; Jelena Subotić, “Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 12, no. 4, 2016, p. 610-627; Linus Hagström, Karl Gustafsson, “Narrative Power: How Storytelling Shapes East Asian International Politics,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 4, 2019, p. 387-406; R. Crilley, I. Manor, C. Bjola, “Visual narratives

matter,” as Ronald Krebs argues in his work on “security narratives,”¹⁰ because narratives – widespread, socially constructed, and intrinsically normative forms of discourse through which we make sense of reality and experience – can significantly shape political behavior and public policy.¹¹ Literary theory, particularly its “narratological” branch, identifies several elements that constitute a narrative: its selective nature, highlighting some events while omitting or marginalizing others; the organization of these events in a specific temporality (one event following another) and within a causal chain (event *x* causing event *y*); the presence of a plot (or rather a “*mise en intrigue*,” [*emplotment*] to use philosopher Paul Ricœur’s term) that brings coherence to disordered reality; and the existence of characters who act, experience, or react to their environment.¹²

Building on this “narrative turn,” Miskimmon, O’Loughlin, and Roselle introduced the concept of “strategic narratives,” which question the narrative dimensions of foreign policy, influence, and

of global politics in the digital age: an introduction,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2020, p. 628-637; Daniel G. Deudney, John Ikenberry, Karoline Postel-Vinay (eds.), *Debating Worlds: Contested Narratives of Global Modernity and World Order*, New York, Oxford Academic, 2023; Katja Freistein, Frank Gadinger, Stephan Groth, “Studying Narratives in International Relations,” *International Studies Perspectives*, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isp/ekae019>.

10. Ronald Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015 (a), p. 2; Ronald Krebs, “Tell Me a Story: FDR, Narrative, and the Making of the Second World War,” *Security Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2015 (b), p. 131-170.

11. Molly Patterson, Kristen Renwick Monroe, “Narrative in Political Science,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 1, 1998, p. 315-316; Krebs, 2015 (a), op. cit.

12. Krebs, 2015 (a), op. cit., p. 11. Krebs draws in particular on the work of Roland Barthes on the structural analysis of narratives and Paul Ricœur on “*mise en intrigue*.” See Roland Barthes, “Introduction à l’analyse structurale des récits,” *Communications*, no. 8, 1966, p. 1-27; Paul Ricœur, *Temps et récits*, t. 1, *L’intrigue et le récit historique*, Paris, Seuil, 1991. For Ricœur, *mise en intrigue* refers to “the social process by which individual or collective actors bring together disparate facts and events in a narrative form that gives meaning to the present, the past and the future,” quoted by Karoline Postel-Vinay, in “From the Region to the Global and its Many Narratives,” CERI/Sciences Po, November 23, 2023, <https://www.sciencespo.fr>.

soft power.¹³ This concept has gained significant traction in the literature, including work on Russian practices.¹⁴ Strategic narratives possess a strong temporal dimension and involve political actors constructing a “shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics in order to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors.”¹⁵ The analysis of strategic narratives examines three key phases of their existence: formation, projection, and reception. This study focuses on the first two phases and opens up potential avenues for exploring the third.

Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle identify three interconnected levels of strategic narratives: 1) *system narratives*, which reflect how political actors conceptualize the international order and narrate the organization of world politics; 2) *identity narratives*, through which actors project their own identity – values, history, memory, role in global affairs – and those of others into international relations; and 3) *policy narratives*, formulated to explain and legitimize a specific public policy, whether domestic or foreign.¹⁶

Strategic and security studies have also embraced the narrative turn. Krebs demonstrates how American political elites routinely employ narrative forms to shape national security policies, articulate strategic objectives, and define allies and adversaries.¹⁷ Walldorf, in turn, examines the evolution of the “liberal” and “anti-terrorist”

13. Laura Roselle, Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, “Strategic Narrative: A New Means to Understand Soft Power,” *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2014, p. 70-84.

14. Szostek, 2016, op. cit.; Charlotte Wagnsson, Magnus Lundström, “Ringing true? The persuasiveness of Russian strategic narratives,” *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 16, no. 3, 2023, p. 383-400; Natalia Chaban, Svitlana Zhabotynska, Michèle Knodt, “What makes strategic narrative efficient: Ukraine on Russian e-news platforms,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2023, p. 419-440; Maria Hellman, *Security, Disinformation and Harmful Narratives: RT and Sputnik News Coverage about Sweden*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2024.

15. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, Laura Roselle, “Strategic Narratives: A Response,” *Critical Studies on Security*, vol. 3, no. 3, p. 341-344; Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, Laura Roselle (eds.), *Forging the World: Strategic Narratives and International Relations*, Ann Arbor, The University of Michigan Press, 2017.

16. Miskimmon et al. 2013 and 2017, op. cit.

17. Krebs, 2015 (a), op. cit.

strategic narratives developed by the United States during the war in Afghanistan, illustrating the importance of strategic narratives in wartime to frame “traumatic” events, define threats, assign responsibility, and propose lessons to prevent future occurrences.¹⁸

Beyond their formation and projection, the narrative approach in International Relations also addresses how these narratives are received by their intended audiences and their overall effectiveness. When strategic narratives are accepted or even appropriated by target audiences, they become powerful tools for shaping preferences, setting the agenda, or generating support for foreign, security, or other public policies. Various scholars, including Schmitt, Chaban et al., Szostek, Tolz, Hutchings, and Feklyunina, have demonstrated – particularly in the context of Russian practices – that strategic narratives are most effective when they align with existing local political myths;¹⁹ are historically contextualized and resonate with the recipient’s memory and historical references;²⁰ are communicated by narrators with whom the audience shares a cultural or personal connection;²¹ and when both the narrator and the audience perceive themselves as part of the same socially constructed reality, with potential convergences or compatibilities between their respective identities and interests.²²

While these studies examine the reception of Russian strategic narratives in Europe, this research shifts the focus to their

18. William C. Walldorf, “Narratives and war: Explaining the length and end of U.S. military operations in Afghanistan,” *International Security*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2022, p. 93-138.

19. Olivier Schmitt, “When Are Strategic Narratives Effective? The Shaping of Political Discourse through the Interaction between Political Myths and Strategic Narratives,” *Contemporary Security Policy*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2018, p. 487-511.

20. Chaban et al, 2023, op. cit.

21. Joanna Szostek, “The Power and Limits of Russia’s Strategic Narrative in Ukraine: The Role of Linkage,” *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2017, p. 379-395; Vera Tolz, Stephen Hutchings, “Truth with a Z: Disinformation, War in Ukraine, and Russia’s Contradictory Discourse of Imperial Identity,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 39, no. 5, 2023, p. 347-365.

22. Valentina Feklyunina, “Soft power and identity: Russia, Ukraine and the ‘Russian world(s),’” *European Journal of International Relations*, vol. 22, no. 4, 2016, p. 773-796.

projection toward non-Western audiences, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, it reverses the usual approach in research on influence and propaganda, including those specifically focused on Russian practices. Typically, such studies begin by examining the actors and their practices to identify the narratives they produce and disseminate. This investigation, however, begins with the observable anti-(neo)colonial narrative and traces it back to its producers and disseminators, thereby shedding light on their intentions and foreign policy objectives.

QUESTIONS AND METHODOLOGY

The study focuses on the agency, formulation, circulation, and significance of the anti-(neo)colonial narrative in Russian foreign policy after 2022. It is driven by the following research questions: How is this narrative constructed in Russian political discourse? Who are its narrators and intended audiences? How is it disseminated abroad through Russia’s ecosystem of information influence? Finally, why is this narrative reemerging in the context of the war in Ukraine, and what does it reveal about the framing of the international system by Russia’s political elites, and and the role they envision for themselves within it?

To explore these questions, the research employs a mixed, predominantly qualitative methodology, relying primarily on discourse analysis and the examination of textual and audiovisual data. The analysis draws on multilingual corpora (Russian, French, English) composed of both primary sources (political speeches, doctrines, media content, parliamentary reports, images, social media posts) and secondary sources (articles, reports, policy papers). Digital data from larger corpora – including Putin’s speeches and texts produced by the actors of Russian influence – were extracted and analyzed using digital investigation and computational analysis tools,²³ such as Octoparse for data scraping and

23. See, on digital fieldwork and the exploitation of “digital footprints” in a Russian-speaking context: Kevin Limonier, Maxime Audinet (eds), “OSINT: Enquêtes et terrains numériques,” *Hérodote*, vol. 186, no. 3, 2022.

IRaMuTeQ and Television Explorer from the GDELT database for textual and lexicometric analysis.²⁴

The study is structured into three parts, which aim to build an anatomy of the new strategic narrative of Russian foreign policy. The first section examines the political “narrators” behind this anti-(neo)colonial narrative. The second part analyzes how this narrative is appropriated and disseminated by the various actors of Russia’s ecosystem of information influence, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. The third section synthesizes the findings of the first two parts to emphasize the key objectives of this strategic narrative, which has emerged in the context of the war in Ukraine and Russia’s increasing activism towards different nations in the “Global South.”

Finally, it is important to clarify that this study does not aim to contribute to the already extensive theoretical debates surrounding the concepts of colonialism and neo-colonialism.²⁵ Rather, it focuses on how these concepts are appropriated and disseminated within Russian foreign policy discourse.

24. I would like to thank my research assistant Lise Dabrowski for her invaluable contribution and help in the data collection phase and the synthesis of certain secondary sources.

25. The study is therefore based on a strict understanding of colonialism, defined as “an ideology advocating the exploitation by a political power of territories that are not part of its national space and are considered underdeveloped (economically, technologically, and culturally). This ideology justifies colonization based on differentialist arguments [...] regarding the granting or withholding of rights within the colonial system,” in Cécile Van den Avenne, “Colonialisme,” *Langage et société*, Hors série no. 1, 2021, p. 47-50; Frederick Cooper, *Le colonialisme en question. Théorie, connaissance, histoire*, Paris, Payot, 2010 (2005). The essence of neocolonialism, “the last stage of imperialism” in the famous phrase of Ghanaian pan-Africanist leader Kwame Nkrumah, lies in the fact that “the State which is subject to it is, in theory, independent and has all the outward trappings of international sovereignty, [but] in reality its economic system and thus its political policy is directed from outside.” In Kwame Nkrumah, *Neocolonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism*, New York, International Publishers, 1966.

I. THE POLITICAL NARRATORS: ANTI-(NEO) COLONIALISM IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

The construction of a foreign policy narrative is the result of a complex process involving various state and non-state actors.¹ From its creation to its formulation, the contemporary Russian anti-(neo)colonial narrative is driven by political actors and embedded within their discourse. This section focuses on these political “narrators,” examining statements from President Vladimir Putin, key regime figures, parliamentary debates, diplomatic communications, government doctrines and, towards the end of the article, the conceptual contributions of experts and “political technologists” close to the regime – akin to what Subotić terms “narrative entrepreneurs.”² Marlène Laruelle has described the Kremlin’s relationship with Russia’s competitive “market” for political ideas and ideologies as “a two-way street”: on the one hand, the Russian Presidential Administration draws from the conceptual and ideological pool provided by “political technologists,” intellectuals, or ideological entrepreneurs to integrate these ideas into official discourse and doctrines; on the other hand, these actors absorb and amplify certain narratives promoted by the Kremlin, reformulating them within public debate.³ The contemporary Russian anti-(neo)colonial narrative, popularized by the Wagner Group in Africa before becoming part of presidential and official discourse, seems to follow this pattern.

1. Subotić, 2016, op. cit., p. 615-616.

2. *Idem*.

3. Marlène Laruelle, “Putin’s Regime and the Ideological Market: A Difficult Balancing Game,” Carnegie Endowment for Democracy, 2017; Marlène Laruelle, “Russia’s Ideological Construction in the Context of the War in Ukraine,” *Russie.Eurasie.Reports*, no. 46, Ifri, March 2024.

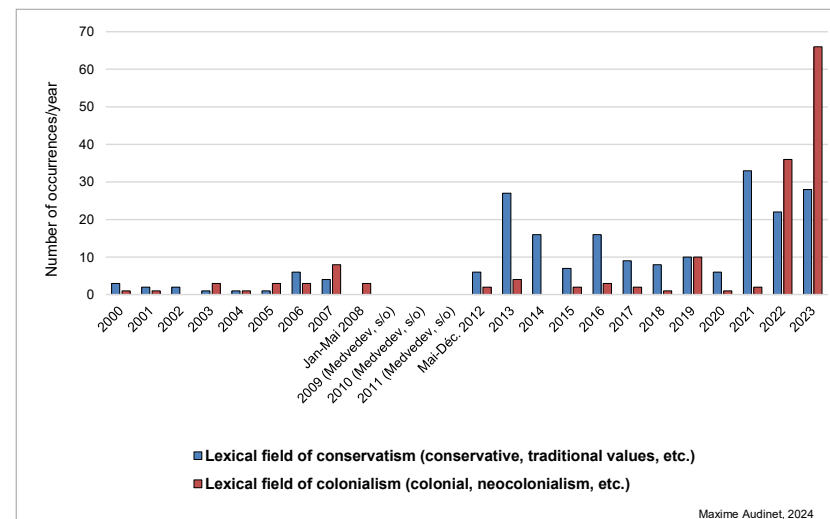
A BREAKTHROUGH IN PUTIN’S DISCOURSE

In his work on the narratives crafted by Franklin Delano Roosevelt during World War II, Ronald Krebs observes that “the presidency is a source of great narrative authority, particularly regarding foreign policy and national security.”⁴ Similarly, in Russia, the Kremlin—personified by Vladimir Putin and his presidential administration—is a key producer of discourse, language, and narratives.⁵ A central question arises: to what extent has the anti-(neo)colonial narrative infiltrated Putin’s discourse?

To explore this, we examined the extensive corpus of Vladimir Putin’s statements, spanning from his rise to power in December 1999 to December 2023, which includes 7,396 texts.⁶ These texts—comprising speeches, interviews, meetings, and press conferences—were extracted from the English-language version of the Kremlin’s official website (kremlin.ru). Notably, Dmitri Medvedev’s presidency from June 2008 to April 2012 is excluded from this analysis. Figure 1 presents the frequency of terms related to two distinct lexical fields: the first, focused on colonialism, tracks occurrences of words such as “colonial,” “neocolonial,” “colonialism,” “neocolonialism,” “colony/colonies,”⁷ and “colonization.” As a counterpoint, and to offer a comparative perspective, we also track terms related to conservatism and “traditional values,” a notable ideological framework in Putin’s discourse since his third term,⁸ using terms like “conservatism,” “conservative,” and “traditional values.”

Figure 1

The use of the lexical fields of conservatism and colonialism in Vladimir Putin’s statements (2000-2023)



The results of this analysis are interpreted using Marlène Laruelle’s categorization of “Putinism”: early Putinism (2000–2008), characterized by a liberal-conservative ideology focused on stability, modernization, and global integration; late Putinism (2012–2021), marked by reactionary conservatism, isolationism, and increasing hostility toward the “collective West;” and wartime Putinism (since February 2022), defined by the intensification of these trends following the invasion of Ukraine.⁹

Both lexical fields appear infrequently during early Putinism. However, conservatism becomes prominent in Putin’s rhetoric following his 2013 conservative manifesto, with 208 total occurrences by the end of the period under study. In contrast, the colonialism-related lexicon was rarely used before 2022, except for a brief surge in 2019 during the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi. It is only after the invasion of Ukraine that this lexicon gains

of Reactionary Modernism: Aleksandr Prokhanov’s ‘Spiritualization of Technology’,” *Journal of Political Ideologies*, vol. 26, no. 3, 2021, p. 356-379.

9. Laruelle, 2024, op. cit., p. 9.

4. Krebs, 2015 (b), op. cit.

5. Elisabeth Sieca-Kozłowski, *Poutine dans le texte*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2024.

6. As the textual corpus also contains statements from various interlocutors of the Russian president—such as politicians, journalists, and economic figures—the lexicometric analysis was exclusively focused on the portions of text spoken by Vladimir Putin himself.

7. References to penal “colonies,” one of the most widespread types of prison in Russia, are irrelevant to the story under analysis and are therefore not counted.

8. Elena Chebankova, “Contemporary Russian Conservatism,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 1, 2015, p. 28-54; Juliette Faure, “A Russian Version

significant traction, with 36 occurrences in 2022¹⁰ and 66 in 2023. In sum, Putin invoked (neo)colonialism twice as often in two years (102 occurrences in 625 statements) as he had in the previous 21 years of his presidency (51 occurrences in 6,771 statements).

In addition to this general observation, a few emblematic examples illustrate how Putin has mobilized this vocabulary, often in forceful terms, for both domestic audiences and international interlocutors. These instances offer insight into how Russia, its allies, adversaries, and enemies are portrayed in the international arena by the highest levels of Russian leadership.

On one hand, Vladimir Putin has recently recontextualized his longstanding critique of Western foreign policy within the framework of anti-(neo)colonialism. At the Moscow Conference on International Security in August 2022, he condemned “Western globalist elites” for “retain [non-Western] countries and peoples in the grip of what is essentially a neocolonial order” through what he described as “neoliberal totalitarianism.”¹¹ During his speech at the May 9, 2024 parade on Red Square, Putin attacked Ukrainians for “distort[ing] the truth about the Second World War” and drawing inspiration from “those who have developed a habit of basing their effectively colonial policy on duplicity and lies.” In his October 2023 address at the Valdai Club, Russia’s premier international discussion forum, Putin spoke directly to his “Western colleagues,” amplifying this narrative.

All the time we hear, “you must,” “you are obligated,” “we are seriously warning you.” Who are you to do that? What right do you have to warn others? This is just amazing. Maybe those who say all this should get rid of their arrogance and stop behaving in such a way towards the global community that perfectly knows its objectives and interests, and should drop this colonial-era

10. The first mention in 2022 appears on February 21, and the other 35 after the invasion began.

11. See, on the Kremlin website: “Obrašenie k učastnikam i gostâm X Moskovskoj konferencii po meždunarodnoj bezopasnosti” [Speech to participants and guests of the X Moscow International Security Conference], August 16, 2022, <http://kremlin.ru>. The original Russian text is cited, with the translation provided by the Kremlin’s official English-language website.

thinking? I want to tell them sometimes: wake up, this era has long gone and will never return.¹²

Putin’s rhetoric on post-2022 Russian-African relations is also shaped by this anti-(neo)colonial narrative. During a government meeting on July 19, 2023, he invoked it in the context of Russia’s suspension of the Ukrainian grain deal, or “Black Sea Grain Initiative”: “[Western countries] blame Russia for almost all the disasters befalling the populations of African countries and several others, which the West once robbed and pushed into the abyss of wars, hunger and poverty, and now continues to plunder these states under its neo-colonial system. It profited shamelessly from the grain deal and completely distorted the meaning of these agreements and their essence.”¹³ Unlike the first Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in 2019, anticolonialism played a significant role – with nine occurrences – in Putin’s plenary speech to African heads of state and government at the second summit in St. Petersburg in July 2023. “When we are told that we must live by the rules written by who knows who, it is an attempt to preserve this neocolonialist system, because they do not want to change these rules, and you have just called for changing the rules that have developed over the past decades. I completely agree with you here,” he told his audience, answering to the then President of Senegal Macky Sall.¹⁴ A few weeks later, at the 8th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, held in the presence of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, Putin referenced the Russian-African diplomatic summit in greater detail:

The Russia-Africa summit took place recently [...]. You see, the point is not only that we did something for Africa, helping their people regain freedom and independence and fight against colonialism, although this also important. They remember that,

12. See, on the Kremlin website: “Zasedanie diskussionnogo kluba ‘Valdaj’” [Valdai discussion club meeting], October 5, 2023, <https://www.kremlin.ru>.

13. “Sovešanie s členami Pravitel’stva” [Meeting with members of the government], July 19, 2023, <http://kremlin.ru>.

14. See the transcript of the plenary session on the Kremlin website: “Sammit Rossiâ-Afrika” [Russia-Africa Summit], July 28, 2023: <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

but they also remember other things. What do I see as the main point? The main point is that we have never acted as colonisers anywhere. Our cooperation has always been based on equality or a desire to provide help and support. The countries that are trying to compete with us, including now, had a completely different policy. When people look at what happened in the past during their cooperation with Russia, or the Soviet Union [...] and with other countries, their scales are tilted in favour of Russia [...]. What did the former colonisers do? Back in 1957 – I was recently been shown a photograph – they brought people from Africa in cages to European countries, for example, Belgium. It is an ugly sight, children put up on display in cages. And now they are trying to issue commands and pursue their neo-colonial policy there. They have put all African countries in debt, which runs into trillions of dollars. In other words, they have created a financial credit system for Africa under which the African countries can never pay off their loans.¹⁵

In summary, the Russian president employs the anti-colonial narrative both domestically and internationally to characterize Western foreign policy, not only in relation to formerly colonized nations but also more broadly in its global interactions.

DISSEMINATION IN POLITICAL AND PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE, DIPLOMATIC COMMUNICATION, AND FOREIGN POLICY DOCTRINE

While Vladimir Putin has played a significant role in bringing the anti-(neo)colonial narrative to prominence, its dissemination has extended far beyond the presidential discourse. Notably, among the seventeen priority topics for film production subsidies defined by the Russian Ministry of Culture in 2023 was the “neo-colonial policy of the Anglo-Saxon world and the formation of a multipolar world.”¹⁶ This section demonstrates how the anti-(neo)colonial narrative has resonated in the speeches

15. “Plenarnoe zasedanie vos'mogo Vostochnogo èkonomičeskogo foruma” [Plenary Session of the Eighth Oriental Economic Forum], September 12, 2023, <http://www.kremlin.ru>.

16. “Minkul'tury Rossii opredelilo prioritetye temy gospodderžki kino-proizvodstva v 2023 godu” [The Russian Ministry of Culture has identified

of other key regime figures, parliamentary debates, diplomatic communications, and in the 2023 foreign policy doctrine.

Other prominent political and military figures have adopted this narrative. Yevgeny Prigozhin, founder of the Wagner Group, and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov were early proponents, using this terminology before February 2022, as Russian-African relations intensified. In a meeting with his Malian counterpart Abdoulaye Diop in Moscow on November 11, 2021, just weeks before Wagner's deployment in Mali, Lavrov contrasted Russia's actions with the West's, which he portrayed as duplicitous and responsible for regional instability: “The legacy [of Russian-Malian relations] includes, in particular, the fight against colonialism, against colonial dependence, and then against the neo-colonialist recurrences that we observed in Africa, and that we unfortunately continue to observe.”¹⁷ Since then, Lavrov has frequently employed this rhetoric in bilateral and multilateral meetings, particularly during his African tours.

Similarly, at the opening of the 2022 Moscow Conference on International Security, former Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu condemned the “desire of member countries of the collective West to restore the order and rules of engagement characteristic of the colonial period” in Africa, asserting that their “neo-colonialism” manifests in “support for separatist and terrorist movements.”¹⁸ In a June 2024 op-ed published in the government daily *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*,¹⁹ former president and current Deputy Chairman of the Security Council Dmitry Medvedev, known for

priority topics for state support of film production in 2023], <https://culture.gov.ru>.

17. State Duma Committee for International Affairs, “Vystuplenie Sergeja Lavrova v hode sovmestnoj press-konferencii c Ministrom inostrannyh del Mali A.Diopom po itogam peregovorov” [Speech by Sergei Lavrov delivered during the joint press conference with his Malian counterpart A. Diop], November 12, 2021, <https://interkomitet.ru>.

18. “Zapad hočet vernuť kolonial'nyj porjadok v Afrike, zaâvil Šojgu” [The West wants to restore the colonial order in Africa, said Choïgou], *RIA Novosti*, August 16, 2022, <https://ria.ru>.

19. “Vremâ metropolij isteklo” [The time of metropolises is over], *Rossijskaâ Gazeta*, June 14, 2024, <https://rg.ru>.

his inflammatory rhetoric since 2022, also declared that “humanity should get rid of the colonial system heritage” (see illustration 1). Medvedev’s statement echoed anti-imperialist tones reminiscent of the 1960s and 1970s:

The meeting starkly demonstrated the urgent need to drastically intensify cooperation among all progressive forces against neocolonialism, which hinders many countries from embarking on a path of steady and just development. [...] Neocolonialism has long been a challenge in human history. The term was firmly established in the mid-20th century to describe the strategies employed by former colonial powers to contain the development of younger nations that had recently gained formal independence. These strategies were implemented in order to compensate for the metropolises’ own losses caused by de-colonisation. There is brazen interference in the affairs of independent states, which, unfortunately, still continues in various forms. Despite humanity’s persistent efforts to eradicate neocolonialism, the Western world vehemently resists it. It aims to transition from isolated and national to global neocolonialism – a system of unequal economic and political relations imposed by Western countries on the rest of the world, a system that rests upon their military power, Western capital, international financial organisations and multinational corporations. The former colonial powers persist in exploiting dependent countries, enhancing their own comfort through the humiliation and oppression of others – albeit employing more sophisticated tools and methods. This is not a new phenomenon.²⁰

20. The translation is provided by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which published Dmitry Medvedev’s article on its official website: <https://mid.ru>. As such, it is presented as is, despite any imperfections in the translation.

Illustration 1

Screenshot from the front page of *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, June 14, 2024: “The Era of Metropolises is Over”



Medvedev goes on to elaborate on the “subversive practices of the neo-metropolises” in his pamphlet, which contains 73 occurrences of the lexical field of colonialism. He specifically targets the United States in Latin America, France’s “monetary neo-colonialism” in the “Françafrique” states, the Netherlands in Indonesia, the United Kingdom’s “legal neo-colonialism,” and Italy’s “Mattei plan” for Africa. Medvedev’s critique extends to Western interference in the post-Soviet space, where he provocatively labels Ukraine a “neo-colonial stronghold” (*neokolonial'nyj platsdarm*) of the West.

This extensive denunciation follows several parliamentary works and events organized within the Duma since 2023, focusing

on the fight against neo-colonialism. The Russian Parliament has played a prominent role in promoting the Russian anti-(neo) colonial narrative by hosting numerous national and international events. One notable round-table discussion, held during the “Russia-Africa” parliamentary conference in March 2023 – prior to the second Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg – was entitled “Western Neo-colonialism: How to Avoid History Repeating Itself.”²¹ Introduced by Vladimir Putin, the event gathered Russian and African parliamentarians (from countries like Central Africa, Burkina Faso, and Mali), alongside conservative Russian intellectuals such as Vyacheslav Nikonov (Russkiy Mir Foundation) and Natalia Narotchnitskaya (Foundation for Historical Perspective). It also featured African activists identifying as “pan-Africanists,” widely promoted by Russian propaganda, such as Kemi Seba and Nathalie Yamb.

In February 2024, the ruling party United Russia, led by Dmitry Medvedev, launched the international “Forum of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neo-colonialism” in Moscow. Supported by the Kremlin and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the summit attracted political, parliamentary, and government leaders from around 50 countries, including Central African President Faustin-Archange Touadéra.

The event also marked the launch of the movement “For the Freedom of Nations!” (see illustration 2), an initiative backed by United Russia, with the declared aim of convening every two years to unite political parties opposed to Western “neo-colonial” interference.²²

21. See the conference report on the Duma website, “Rossiâ i strany Afriki hotât ravnopravnogo mira bez navâzyvaniâ zapadnoj paradigmy soznaniâ” [Russia and African countries want an equitable world without the imposition of Western cognitive paradigms], March 19, 2023: <http://duma.gov.ru/news/56645/>; “Députés africains et russes unis contre le ‘néocolonialisme’ occidental,” *Jeune Afrique*, March 20, 2023.

22. See, on the United Russia website: <https://er.ru>.

Illustration 2

Poster for the International Forum of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practices of Neo-colonialism, Moscow, February 15-17, 2024

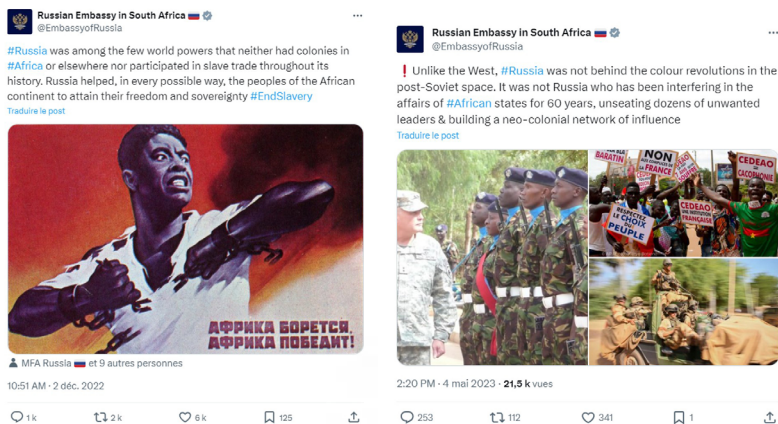


In parallel, the Russian diplomatic network, through both traditional channels and digital diplomacy, has been instrumental in shaping and disseminating the anti(neo)colonial narrative. Since 2022, Russian embassies’ online communications have become notably more assertive,²³ particularly in Africa. The Russian embassy in South Africa, for instance, has been especially active on X (formerly Twitter), where its account ranks among the most followed in Russian digital diplomacy. Recent posts highlight Russia’s historical support for African sovereignty: “Russia helped, in every possible way, the peoples of the African continent to attain their freedom and sovereignty” and “It was not Russia who has been interfering in the affairs of African states for 60 years [...], building a neo-colonial network of influence” (see illustrations 3, 4, and 5).

23. Alessandra Massa, Giuseppe Anzera, “‘Outrageous’ Diplomacy: Investigating the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter,” *Global Society*, 2024, p. 1-23.

Illustrations 3, 4 and 5

Screenshots of tweets posted by the Russian Embassy in South Africa on December 2, 2022, May 4, 2023 and June 28, 2023



In June 2024, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a damning critique of French colonization and its contemporary foreign policy on its official website.²⁴ The document, entitled “France’s historical and international legal responsibility

24. See, on the website of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, June 28, 2024: <https://www.mid.ru>.

for colonial and post-colonial crimes,” was later echoed by other Russian embassies, including the one in Paris. The introduction of the article, available in French, Russian, and English, asserts that “The colonial model imposed by Paris was particularly brutal and caused enormous damage to the peoples of the Americas, Africa, Asia and Oceania”. The text goes on to meticulously detail the crimes of French colonization, while condemning what it describes as “Modern-day French neo-colonialism,” evident in regions like the Sahel, Lebanon, and French overseas territories, including New Caledonia. The latter, according to the document, is where “France is using every avenue to suppress the independence movement” and “has consistently worked to sabotage the decolonization process in New Caledonia.”

Finally, the formalization of anti(neo)colonialism as a strategic narrative of Russian foreign policy was further solidified by its inclusion in the latest *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, adopted in 2023.²⁵ This doctrinal text, drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and ratified by the President, defines Russia’s major foreign policy orientations. This doctrinal text, drafted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and approved by the President, outlines Russia’s key foreign policy objectives. The anti(neo)colonial narrative plays a central role, appearing six times – whereas it was entirely absent from the previous 2016 doctrine – and is closely tied to Russia’s long-standing aim of fostering a multipolar and polycentric international order. The relevant sections are as follows:

Russia, taking into account its decisive contribution to the victory in World War II and its active role in shaping the contemporary system of international relations and eliminating the global system of colonialism, is one of the sovereign centres of global development performing a historically unique mission aimed at maintaining global balance of power and building a multipolar international system (art. 5).

25. Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023, <https://www.mid.ru>. Translation by the author.

Humanity is currently going through revolutionary changes. The formation of a more equitable multipolar world order is underway. The imbalanced model of world development which has for centuries ensured the advanced economic growth of colonial powers through the appropriation of resources of dependent territories and states in Asia, Africa and in the Occident is irrevocably fading into the past (art. 7).

The changes which are now taking place and which are generally favourable are nonetheless not welcomed by a number of states being used to the logic of global dominance and neocolonialism. These countries refuse to recognize the realities of a multipolar world (art. 8).

In order to help adapt the world order to the realities of a multipolar world, the Russian Federation intends to make it a priority to eliminate the vestiges of domination by the US and other unfriendly states in global affairs [and] create conditions to enable any state to renounce neo-colonial or hegemonic ambitions (art. 19).

The Russian Federation intends to give priority to disseminating accurate information abroad about the role and place of Russia in world history and the formation of a just world order, including the decisive contribution of the Soviet Union to the victory over Nazi Germany and to the founding of the UN, its extensive assistance in decolonization and the formation of statehood of the peoples of Africa, Asia and Latin America (art. 44).

The anti(neo)colonial narrative finally makes its formal appearance in Article 57 of the Concept, which focuses on relations with sub-Saharan Africa. Compared to previous versions, Africa’s importance has been significantly elevated. The article asserts that “Russia stands in solidarity with the African states in their desire for a more equitable polycentric world and elimination of social and economic inequality, which is growing due to the sophisticated neo-colonial policies of some developed states towards Africa.” It also emphasizes Russia’s commitment to supporting African “sovereignty” and “independence.” This narrative is further reinterpreted by Russian think tanks and expert circles close to the Kremlin, notably through the concept of the “world majority” (see below).

II. PROMOTING ANTI-(NEO)COLONIALISM: THE ROLE OF RUSSIA’S ECOSYSTEM OF INFORMATION INFLUENCE

The Russian ecosystem of information influence consists of a complex network of state and non-state actors that deploy a range of practices—including public diplomacy, propaganda, information operations, and disinformation—and mobilize informational resources and technologies to reach a target and achieve a result in line with the preferences, will or interests of their sponsors.¹ This ecosystem is primarily controlled by the state through transnational media outlets like RT and Sputnik,² as well as offensive digital diplomacy efforts³ and intelligence service units responsible for information operations—such as the FSB’s 5th Service, the GRU’s Unit 54777, and the SVR’s MS Directorate.

In addition to these state actors, Russia also relies on a variety of semi-autonomous players described in academic literature as “influence entrepreneurs,” “influence contractors,” or “disinformation providers.”⁴ These actors have been delegated some state functions or subcontracted to carry out influence operations

1. Maxime Audinet, Colin Gérard, “Undercover: Crisis, reorganization and clandestinization in Russia’s ecosystem of information influence after the invasion of Ukraine,” *Réseaux*, vol. 3, no. 245, 2024, p. 111-153.

2. Ilya Yablokov, Precious Chatterje-Doody, *Russia Today and Conspiracy Theories: People, Power and Politics on RT*, London, Routledge Focus, 2021; Maxime Audinet (a), *Un média d’influence d’État: Enquête sur la chaîne russe Russia Today*, Bry-sur-Marne, Editions de l’INA, coll. “Médias et Humanité,” 2024(a) (2021).

3. Ilan Manor, “The Russians are Laughing! How Russian Diplomats Employ Humour in Online Public Diplomacy,” *Global Society*, vol. 35, no. 1, 2021, p. 61-83; Alessandra Massa, Giuseppe Anzera, “‘Outrageous’ Diplomacy: Investigating the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Twitter,” *Global Society*, 2024, p. 1-23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13600826.2024.2350999>.

4. Marlene Laruelle, Kevin Limonier, “Beyond ‘Hybrid Warfare’: A Digital Exploration of Russia’s Entrepreneurs of Influence,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2021, p. 318-335; Audinet and Gérard, 2024, op. cit.

on behalf of the government. The so-called “Prigozhin galaxy,” connected to the Wagner group, is a prominent example of this model.

Given the authoritarian nature of the Russian regime, increasing restrictions on media pluralism, and the state’s growing control over information—particularly since 2022—the actors within Russia’s influence ecosystem are, with few exceptions, highly receptive to official discourse. This section explores how this new anti-colonial narrative has been absorbed and disseminated by this information ecosystem.

A PIONEER: THE PRIGOZHIN GALAXY IN AFRICA

The “Prigozhin galaxy” has emerged as a pioneer in the resurgence of Russia’s anticolonial rhetoric. This term refers to the network of entities controlled by Yevgeny Prigozhin, established in tandem with the expansion of the Wagner Group. His business model rests on three pillars:⁵ first, the provision of security services, praetorian guarding, and combat participation, drawing on what Vadim Volkov described in post-Soviet Russia as an “entrepreneurship of violence;” second, economic entrepreneurship, primarily through the extraction of resources and raw materials in exchange for these services; and third, influence entrepreneurship, notably through the “Lakhta project,” which conducts information operations and employs various political technologies to legitimize Wagner’s presence and that of its local allies, discredit adversaries, and promote a positive image of Russia.

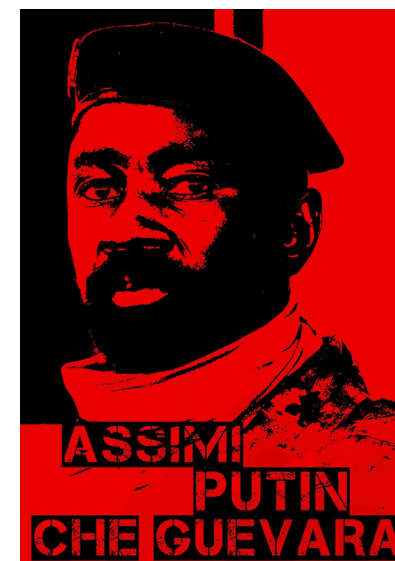
It is in this latter capacity that the Prigozhin galaxy appears to be a precursor player in the dissemination of the Russian anti(neo)colonial narrative in Africa, even before the large-scale invasion of Ukraine. The founder of Wagner himself used his communication channels to endorse his mercenaries’ actions in the Central African Republic (CAR) and the Sahel. “The time of the colonels” has come, heralding a “new era of decolonization,”

5. Laruelle and Limonier, op. cit., 2021; Audinet and Gérard, 2022, op. cit.

Prigozhin proclaimed on January 25, 2022, via his Concord company’s Vkontakte account, referencing the military officers who had seized power through coups in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. He and his associates also portrayed Mali’s transitional president, Assimi Goïta, as the “African Che Guevara,” invoking the metaphor once used to describe the revolutionary, anti-imperialist Burkinabé leader Thomas Sankara (see illustration 6).

Illustration 6

Montage published on January 25, 2022 on the VK account of the press service of Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Concord company



In a December 2021 post on his Vkontakte account, as Wagner’s mercenaries began arriving in Mali, Prigozhin contrasted “corrupt, salivating Western politicians [who] hurl baseless accusations” with the “glorious Russian fighters [who] save the world from violence and injustice” in Africa.

This narrative also permeates content produced by media outlets connected to the Lakhta project. A prominent example is the “news agency” RIA FAN, part of Prigozhin’s media holding, which was sanctioned by Western authorities and shut

down following the Wagner group’s mutiny in June 2023. RIA FAN played a key role in legitimizing Wagner within Russia, embedding correspondents with the mercenaries and portraying Russia’s engagement in Africa as a genuine “alternative to Western neo-colonialism” (January 20, 2021), widely supported by the authorities and the population (January 19 and 25, 2021). The agency depicted the Russian flag as a “symbol of the liberation movement” for African nations (January 27, 2021), while its coverage of Operation Barkhane highlighted alleged French duplicity toward jihadist groups and the “plundering” of mining resources as the true motivation behind France’s intervention (January 30, 2022).

At the local level, Prigozhin’s influence extended to outlets like Lengo Songo and Ndjoni Sango, a Central African radio station and news website funded by his network via the mining company Lobaye Invest. These outlets have since disseminated and laundered Wagner’s propaganda in CAR in French and Sango.⁶ Lengo Songo began heavily featuring anti-colonial rhetoric in February 2021,⁷ after the re-election of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra and during a counteroffensive by the Central African Armed Forces (FACA) and Wagner against rebel groups. France, in particular, was targeted for its colonial past and “neo-colonial” interventions:

France in the Central African Republic has never been well-regarded for its neo-colonial policies, and there has been a recent surge of popular indignation [against] France, especially as relations between the CAR and Russia set an example of honest, open, and successful cooperation. The people saw real help from Russia, while from France, only manipulation and self-interest. In this context, France began to lose significantly, and this is the only thing Russia can be accused of (Lengo Songo, May 31, 2021).⁸

6. Audinet, 2021, op. cit.

7. These findings result from two textual analyses conducted on a corpus of 440 articles published on the Lengo Songo website between February 2020 and June 2021, where 30 occurrences of the colonialism lexical field were identified. A second analysis of 452 articles published between December 2023 and May 2024 revealed an increase, with 51 occurrences of the same lexical field.

8. Translation from French by the author, here and thereafter.

Radio France Internationale (RFI) has also been labeled a “neo-colonial propaganda radio” (Lengo Songo, May 7, 2021) after its correspondents in the Central African Republic (CAR) reported numerous abuses committed by the Wagner group during the counteroffensive. In an article entitled “President Touadéra Fights for the Total Liberation of the Central African People from the Yoke of Modern Neo-colonialism,” Lengo Songo highlighted his participation in the above-mentioned International Forum of Supporters of the Struggle Against Modern Practice of Neocolonialism, held in Moscow in February 2024:

Will this Forum be the means of securing the Central African Republic’s complete liberation from the yoke of imperialism imposed by its former colonizer? The answer is certainly ‘YES.’ This is the will of the entire Central African people, without exception, apart from a few political leaders, manipulated and corrupt to the core, who continue to serve as France’s henchmen, pandering to this former colonial power for their own selfish interests (February 20, 2024).

Information operations carried out on social networks by the “troll factories” of the Lakhta project,⁹ including its Africa Politology branch,¹⁰ have also contributed to amplifying this narrative. Propaganda materials such as the “Bear and Lion” cartoon, produced by Lobaye Invest and shown in schools in Bangui,¹¹ or several video clips circulated on social media—like “the Rat Emmanuel” in Mali (see illustrations 7, 8, and 9)—employ

9. Colin Gérard, “‘Usines à trolls’ russes: de l’association patriotique locale à l’entreprise globale,” *La Revue des médias*, 20 juin 2019, <https://larevuedes-medias.ina.fr>.

10. Sanctioned by the US State and Treasury Departments, Africa Politology “develops strategies and mechanisms to induce countries that promote human rights and good governance to withdraw their presence in Africa and is involved in a series of Russian influence tasks in the CAR and Mali, to include discrediting the UN and carrying out lawsuits against press outlets that report on the consequences of Wagner’s activities.” See: “Treasury Sanctions Illicit Gold Companies Funding Wagner Forces and Wagner Group Facilitator,” June 27, 2023, <https://home.treasury.gov>.

11. See the YouTube channel *Ulibayemsia i mashem*, which is linked to the Prigozhin galaxy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCZ0YSyWVhk>.

anthropomorphism, a recurring propaganda technique. In these examples, the French presence is personified as scavengers (hyenas) or pests (rats), plundering the resources of the local population.

Illustrations 7 and 8

Screenshots of the English and French versions of the *LionBear* cartoon, released in 2019

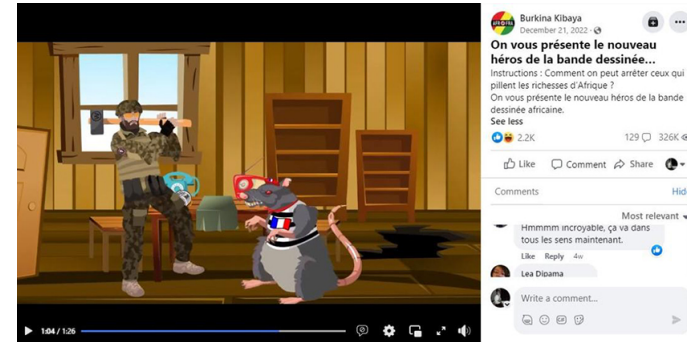


Source: YouTube/Graphika¹²

12. The English version has been removed from the channel. See: “More-Troll Kombat: French and Russian Influence Operations Go Head to Head Targeting Audiences in Africa,” Joint Report by Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory, December 2020, p. 10-11.

Illustration 9

Screenshot of the *Rat Emmanuel* clip, released in 2022



Source: Facebook

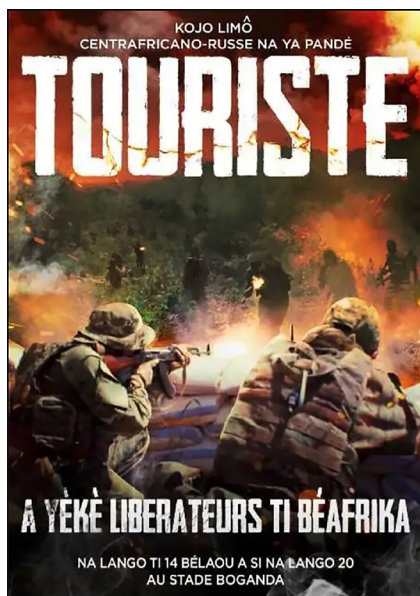
Often depicted as a bear or represented by a Wagner mercenary, Russia is on the contrary portrayed as the force called upon to eliminate scavenging or pest animals. This narrative of Russia as a “liberating” power is extensively featured in films produced by the Aurum production company, linked to the Prigozhin network.¹³ A prime example is the 2021 film *Touriste*, which glorifies Wagner mercenaries in their fight against Central African armed groups,¹⁴ portrayed as covertly supported by the French secret services (see illustration 10). The film premiered at the Bangui stadium in May 2021 and continues to be regularly screened in Mali and Burkina Faso.

13. Audinet and Gérard, 2022, op. cit.

14. See, on this subject: Thierry Vircoulon, “Ecosystème des groupes armés centrafricains,” Notes de l’Ifri, Ifri, April 2020.

Illustration 10

Screenshot of the Sango version of the film *Touriste*



Source: Africa Defense Forum, Aurum

Other entities within the Prigozhin network are also involved in promoting this narrative. The Russian House in Bangui, an organization linked to the Wagner Group, engages in cultural diplomacy and is headed by Dmitri Sytyi, a prominent figure in Russia’s presence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and leader of Wagner’s so-called “civil branch.” In March 2024, the Russian House organized a roundtable on “modern practices of Western neo-colonialism,” chaired by CAR’s Minister of Higher Education.¹⁵

Wagner-linked Russian operatives also seek to embed themselves within local media, cultural, and political ecosystems to establish their influence, co-produce narratives, and find

15. “La lutte contre le néocolonialisme moderne en Afrique: la RCA et la Russie en première ligne!” *Lengo Songo*, March 6, 2024, <https://lengosongo.cf>.

local actors to disseminate and legitimize their messages.¹⁶ The Foundation for the Defense of National Values (FZNTs), led by political technologist Maksim Shugaley, plays a key role in this regard by co-opting political and activist figures in host countries. Wagner has engaged with, and at times financially supported, African actors who identify as Pan-Africanists (or “neo-Pan-Africanists”¹⁷), with a portion of their discourse focused on denouncing “Western neo-colonialism” (see below).

These actors, who vary in their levels of influence, include Blaise Didacien Kossimatchi’s *Galaxie Nationale* in the CAR, the Malian group *Yerewolo-Debout sur les remparts* led by Adama Ben Diarra (also known as “Ben le Cerveau,” who was eventually arrested by Malian transitional authorities in September 2023), and entrepreneur Harouna Douamba, who leads disinformation networks such as ANACOM, a subsidiary of the association *Aimons notre Afrique* (ANA), and GPCI (Groupe panafricain pour le commerce et l’investissement).¹⁸

More prominently, Swiss-Cameroonian and French-Beninese activists¹⁹ Nathalie Yamb, known as the “Sochi Lady” following her speech at the first Russia-Africa Summit in October 2019,²⁰ and Kemi Seba, head of the organization *Urgences Panafricanistes* (URPANAF), have played crucial roles in co-producing and amplifying an anti-neocolonial narrative aimed at condemning French influence in Africa. The WagnerLeaks revealed that Seba received €400,000 from Yevgeny Prigozhin between 2018

16. Audinet and Dreyfus, 2023, op. cit.

17. See, on pan-Africanism and its mutations: Amzat Boukari-Yabara, *Africa Unite! Une histoire du panafricanisme*, Paris, La Découverte, 2017; and the op-ed by philosopher and historian Achille Mbembé in *Le Monde*, “Les putschs en Afrique de l’Ouest annoncent la fin d’un cycle qui aura duré près d’un siècle,” August 4, 2023.

18. “Comment fonctionne la machine de propagande russe en Afrique,” *Le Monde Afrique*, July 28, 2023. Also see the rich work conducted by the collective “All Eyes on Wagner” on these different actors.

19. Kemi Seba lost his French nationality by decree on July 8, 2024.

20. See Nathalie Yamb’s YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com>.

and 2019, as part of the “Kemi project,” to promote pro-Russian stances alongside his activism.²¹

ANTICOLONIALISM ON RT AND SPUTNIK

Since February 24, 2022, the transnational state media outlets RT and Sputnik have been sanctioned and subsequently banned within the European Union, leading to the dismantling of their delocalized network in Western countries, which had been developed throughout the 2010s. In response to the increasing conflict within the information environment, these media outlets have adapted by employing various circumventing methods to continue broadcasting their content to European audiences.²² Their reorganization has also included a strategic reorientation towards new, non-Western audiences, especially in regions where they previously had little or no engagement, such as sub-Saharan Africa. For example, Sputnik France was rebranded as Sputnik Afrique in 2022, while RT’s English- and French-language channels significantly expanded their coverage of African news. Both media outlets have also signed numerous cooperation agreements with media organizations across the continent.²³ Among these partners, Afrique Média stands out for its “pan-African” and openly anti-Western editorial stance. In December 2022, RT and Afrique Média formalized their collaboration with an agreement in Moscow aimed at “combating false Western propaganda,” according to the communications department of this Cameroonian, Douala-based web TV.

In this context, the question arises: how have the editorial teams of RT and Sputnik contributed to disseminating the anti-(neo) colonial narrative? Figure 2 below, generated using the GDELT

21. “Projet Kemi: quand Evgueni Prigojine finançait Kemi Seba pour servir ses ambitions africaines,” *Jeune Afrique*, March 30, 2023.

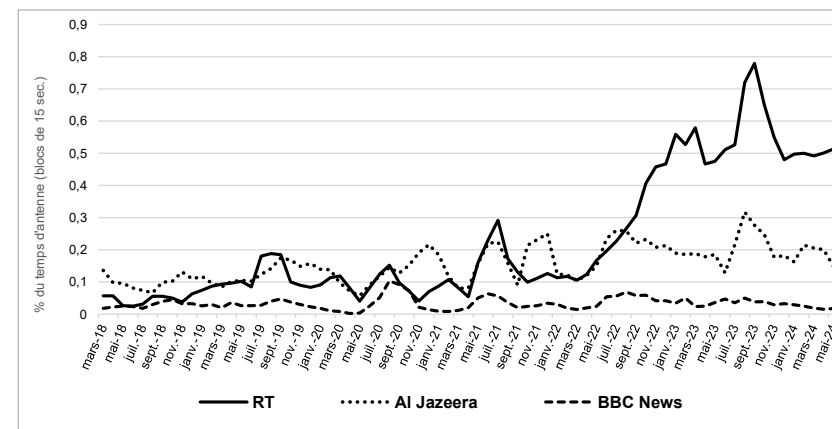
22. Audinet and Gérard, 2024, op. cit.

23. Maxime Audinet, “Les médias dans l’action internationale de la Russie en Afrique: présences, influence, récits,” *Annuaire français de relations internationales*, 2024.

database’s Television Explorer tool, compares the frequency of the terms “colonial,” “colonialism,” “neocolonial,” and “neocolonialism” across the English-language channels of RT, Al Jazeera, and the BBC. While the use of these terms remains stable on Al Jazeera and the BBC, their frequency rises sharply on RT from spring 2022 onwards. The presence of these terms in RT’s broadcast content increased from 0.1% to 0.8% of total airtime between March 2022 and September 2023, before stabilizing around 0.5% in 2024. In terms of raw data, the number of times these terms were mentioned on air over the entire period stands at approximately 3,800 for the BBC, 18,200 for Al Jazeera, and 25,800 for RT.

Figure 2

Frequency of the terms “colonial,” “colonialism,” “neocolonial” or “neocolonialism” on RT, Al Jazeera, BBC News English-language channels between March 2018 and May 2024 (w/ Television Explorer & Internet Archive)

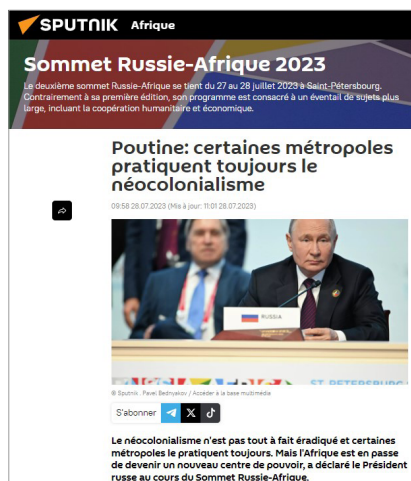


The analysis reveals that RT is particularly receptive to anti-(neo) colonial narratives and, by extension, responsive to official discourse. There are 491 articles published across Sputnik Afrique (180), Sputnik Africa (160), and Sputnik International (151) websites tagged with “colonialisme” and “colonialism.” Significantly, 75% of these articles (372) were published after February 24, 2022. RT and Sputnik regularly cover the French presence in

sub-Saharan Africa through this narrative to critique French military and diplomatic interventionism.²⁴ Headlines such as “Return to Colonial Thinking’: Sergei Lavrov Denounces France’s Attitude Towards Mali” (RT France, May 20, 2022), “Niamey Reacts to the Withdrawal of French Troops, These ‘Imperialist Forces’ and ‘Neocolonialists’” (Sputnik Afrique, September 25, 2023), “Farewell, Colonizer: France’s Malign Influence Still Hangs Over Africa, and That Needs to Change” (RT, February 20, 2024), and “La Colonisation: French History of Death, Torture and Indescribable Violence in the Pearl of Its Evil Empire” (RT, April 10, 2024) typify this coverage. RT also headlines analyses such as “Neocolonialism: France Made ‘the Largest Marine Cemetery in the World’ Just to Contain Russia and China,” published by a lecturer from the Russian Peoples’ Friendship University (RUDN) in Moscow (RT, December 4, 2023).

Illustration 11

“Putin: some metropolises still practice neo-colonialism”, screenshot from Sputnik Afrique’s website during the Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg, July 28, 2023



24. See also: Maxime Audinet, Emmanuel Dreyfus, *A Foreign Policy by Proxies? The Two Sides of Russia’s Presence in Mali*, IRSEM Report, no. 97.

Other Western countries, and “the West” as a whole, are also critiqued under this framework. Examples include “Stopping Neo-Colonialism: Moscow Explains Why Mali Aligns With Russia Despite Europe’s Anger” (Sputnik International, January 29, 2023), “King Charles Keeps British Colonial Legacy Mindset Alive” (RT, November 6, 2023), “Paradise of Lies: How the West Manipulates Africa Through Neocolonial Media” (RT, May 10, 2024), and “Global Apartheid: How the Colonial West Continues to Betray the Rest of the World” (RT, November 17, 2023). Additionally, RT launched an advertising campaign in 2023 in major Indian cities, with posters that read, “Why Does the West Still See India as a Third World Country?” under the slogan “They Think You Believe. We Believe You Think.”²⁵ Conversely, RT frequently points out that Russia has never been a colonial power in Africa: “Valday Club: ‘Russia Has Never Had a Colonial Past, It Has Truly Helped Africa’” (RT France, July 19, 2023), and “Saint-Petersburg: Russians and Africans Agree on a Multipolar World Without ‘Neocolonialism’” (RT France, July 29, 2023).

More recently, RT has made the anti-(neo)colonial narrative central to its communications strategy in Africa. This is exemplified by an outdoor advertising campaign in the summer of 2024 across several primarily English-speaking African cities aimed at increasing its online audience (see illustrations 12 and 13). Below, we share two photographs with the permission of their authors, one by researcher Anton Barbashin in Accra, Ghana, and the other by journalist Damien Roulette in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania.

25. See “They think you believe. We believe you think,” December 27, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231231114404/https://swentr.site/news/589709-rt-campaign-challenges-western-media/>.

Illustrations 12 and 13

Photographs of RT billboards in Ghana and Tanzania from the *Your Values. Shared* campaign



Source: Anton Barbashin²⁶ and Damien Roulette

The first billboard shows a portrait of President Kwame Nkrumah, Ghana’s first president and a prominent figure in pan-Africanism and African socialism, featuring a paraphrase of his famous quote: “Neo-colonialism, the last stage of imperialism,” which was inspired by Lenin’s phrase, “Imperialism, the supreme stage of capitalism.” The second poster features a quotation from Julius Nyerere, the first president of independent Tanzania and another prominent pan-Africanist leader²⁷: “The anti-colonial struggle is in essence a struggle for human dignity.” This campaign, also disseminated in Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, and Zimbabwe, includes quotations from leaders such

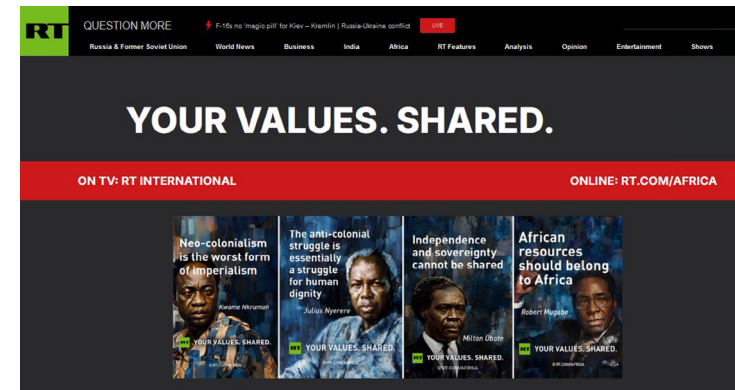
26. Anton Barbashin has authorized me to share this picture published on his X account on July 13, 2024, <https://x.com/ABarbashin/status/1812183832981835786>.

27. Boukari-Yabara, 2017, op. cit., chap. 17, “De Nkrumah à Nyerere: la relève panafricaine?,” p. 226-237.

as Milton Obote and Robert Mugabe, former presidents of Uganda and Zimbabwe, reinforcing a sovereigntist message (see illustration 14).

Illustration 14

Screenshot of the RT International website introducing the campaign *Your Values. Shared* (summer 2024)



RT’s communications teams emphasize the slogan “Your Values. Shared,” reflecting a concerted effort to align their messaging with local narratives. They suggest that “RT is raising the level of discourse around the essential values of liberty, sovereignty and independence” carried by these African leaders to take them to its “vast international audience,” before concluding: “The time for neo-colonialist narratives is over.”²⁸ This campaign’s tone marks a stark departure from the sarcastic rhetoric of previous RT advertising campaigns in Western countries, such as the *Question More* campaign—RT’s editorial motto—and the *This Is What Happens When There Is No Second Opinion* campaign in the UK and US (2009 and 2014).²⁹ It also underscores Russian transnational state media outlets’ strategic pivot towards African

28. See the campaign page on RT’s website: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240802002551/https://www.rt.com/rt-promo-2022-en/#RTAfrica2024>.

29. Audinet, 2024 (a), op. cit., p. 200-211.

audiences, where they seek to present themselves not just as an alternative to local mainstream media but as a sovereignist voice opposing Western interference.

AFRICAN INITIATIVE, THE NEW AGENT OF RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN AFRICA

An analysis of content produced by the organization “African Initiative” complements this section on the dissemination of the contemporary Russian anti-(neo)colonial narrative. This self-described “news agency,” which publishes near-identical content in English, French, Russian, and Arabic, was established in October 2023 and has emerged as a key agent of Russia’s influence operations in Africa following the deaths of Yevgeny Prigozhin and Dmitri Utkin. African Initiative is the flagship project of the Russian company Initsiativa-23, headquartered in Moscow’s Moskva City business center. It serves as the flagship project of the Russian company Initsiativa-23, headquartered in Moscow’s Moskva City business district. Initsiativa-23 is led by Artem Kureev, a member of the Valdai Club think tank, who has been described by independent Russian media as an operative of the Fifth Service of the Federal Security Service (FSB), responsible for foreign operations.³⁰

African Initiative is also linked to the Africa Corps (*Afrikanski Korpus*), a new Russian “expeditionary force” deployed in Africa since autumn 2023, with operations in Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali.³¹ Under the supervision of the Russian Ministry of Defense and its military intelligence service, the GRU, this umbrella organization aims to replace or absorb, with varying degrees of success, the Wagner Group contingents in the post-Prigozhin era.

30. Christo Grozev, Roman Dobrokhoto, Dada Lyndell, “Intercontinental lies: FSB launches disinformation and conspiracy campaign in Africa,” *The Insider*, February 8, 2024.

31. Jędrzej Czerep, Filip Bryjka, “Africa Corps – a New Iteration of Russia’s Old Military Presence in Africa,” PISM Report, May 2024; Audinet and Gérard, 2024, op. cit.

According to Igor Korotchenko, a military expert closely aligned with the Russian Ministry of Defense and a frequent commentator on state television, the Africa Corps “will undertake large-scale military operations across the continent to help countries finally free themselves from neo-colonial dependence, expel Western influence, and achieve full sovereignty.”³² In providing information support to the African Corps, African Initiative draws inspiration from entities linked to Project Lakhta, which sought to legitimize Wagner’s activities in Africa and discredit its opponents.³³ Like Lakhta, this press agency relies on local entities and outlets in the countries where the combatants of the Africa Corps are deployed. In January and February 2024, African Initiative was activated to support the arrival of Russian troops in Ouagadougou, through an operation that accused France of backing a coup attempt and an assassination plot against Ibrahim Traoré, the interim president who rose to power after the September 2022 coup.

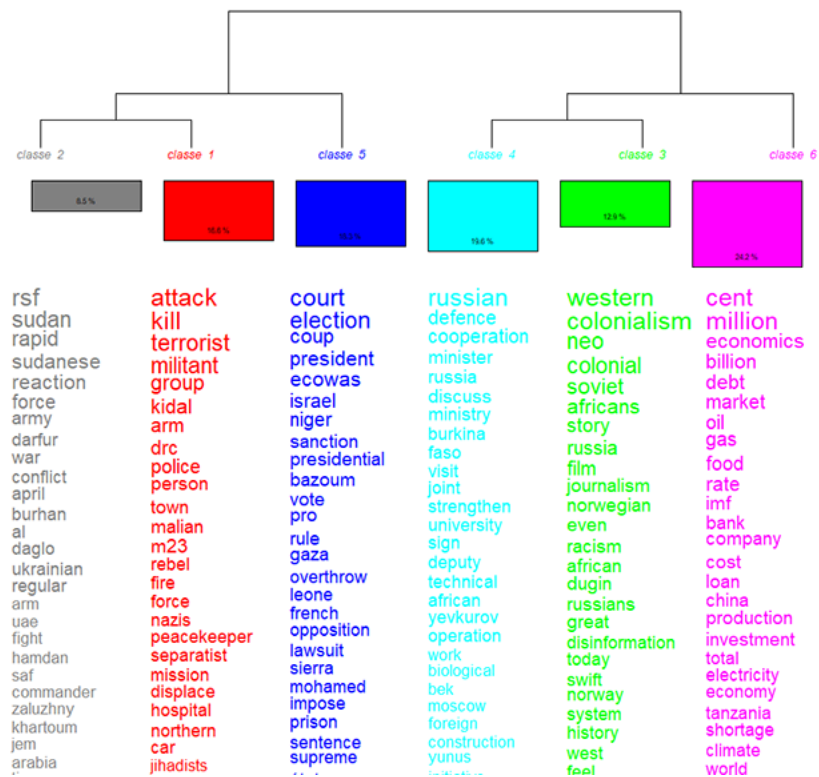
I conducted a textual analysis and unsupervised topic modeling on a corpus of 493 articles published on the English-language version of the African Initiative website (www.afrinz.ru/en/) between its founding in September 2023 and February 2024. This corpus was extracted using the Octoparse data extraction software and subsequently analyzed with IRaMuTeQ textual data analysis software, employing its “hierarchical top-down classification” algorithm (Alceste method). This algorithm divides the corpus into textual segments and categorizes them into several lexical clusters based on the proximity and co-occurrence of its lexical forms. These clusters correspond to the main topics of the corpus—referred to as “lexical worlds” by linguist Max Reinert, the creator of the Alceste method—reveal the dominant discourses or narratives presented in the content produced by African Initiative. The results are shown in Figure 3 as a dendrogram, which identifies six lexical clusters within the corpus.

32. These words are reported in *Le Monde Afrique*, “Africa Corps, le nouveau label de la présence russe au Sahel,” December 15, 2023.

33. Audinet and Gérard, 2022, op. cit.

Figure 3

Lexical clusters of the African Initiative corpus (493 articles), Sept. 2023-Feb. 2024 (with IRaMuTeQ)



Class 3 (in green), which accounts for nearly 13% of the corpus, prominently features the terms “Western,” “colonialism,” and “neo-colonialism.” This lexical cluster highlights the frequent resurgence of the anti-(neo)colonial narrative in discussions of Western involvement in Africa, alongside other pejorative terms like “racism” and “disinformation.” By contrast, Russia’s official presence in Africa is more clearly represented in Class 4 of the dendrogram, which adopts a more favorable tone, reflected in terms such as “cooperation” (e.g., “defense,” “technical,” “university”).

Below, we provide the three text segments that most closely align with Class 3, offering further insights into the discourse advanced by African Initiative regarding the roles of Russia and Western countries in Africa:

This opens up prospects for Russia and is of great concern to Western elites, as it destroys the neo-colonial system that was built up over decades and under which neither the interests nor the lives of Africans mattered [November 2023].

Military co-operation between Russia and African countries goes back to the history of the Soviet Union. At that time, the USSR was ready and helped all African countries that sought to get rid of colonialism and the domination of Western capital [November 2023].

Western countries promote in Africa only educational programmes designed to form pro-Western elites of journalists and political scientists ready to serve the neo-colonial system. Russia, where more than 35,000 African students study, trains doctors, teachers, agronomists, scientists, those who will break this neo-colonial model! [January 2024].

This messaging, aimed at both Russian and African audiences and reflected on the African Initiative’s Telegram channels (see illustration 15), is also explicitly outlined in the “About” section of its website:

Our goal is to mutually expand the knowledge of Russians and Africans about each other. We tell the Russian audience about the many opportunities for Russia in Africa, about the people of the continent, about the neo-colonial legacy that African countries have been struggling with for decades, about the activities of our military, businessmen, doctors, and journalists on the continent. At the same time, we aim to open Russia to our partners in Africa, to tell them about our country’s opportunities, about projects in which Africans can take part, about our joint cooperation.

Illustration 15

Capture of the Telegram channel of the English version of African Initiative, October 16, 2023



De Gaulle has finally been replaced by an African Che Guevara!

A little but nice news about the fight against neo-colonialism from Burkina Faso! The capital, Ouagadougou, yesterday 15 October, renamed Boulevard De Gaulle to Boulevard Tom Sankara, the leader who died in office.

"The African Che Guevara", as he is increasingly called around the world, fought corruption, the consequences of French colonisation, developed the country and cut the salaries of officials. Actually, for this he was killed, and by his closest friend, who was actively assisted by the French, who did not tolerate the independent policy of the young president.

De Gaulle, a hero of the French resistance during the Second World War, became president and did a lot to strengthen neo-colonialism, at the same time turning one and a half million French people living in Algeria into powerless refugees in their own country, while "surrendering" the French settlements in northern Africa.

In addition to its information activities, African Initiative plays a role akin to that of Maksim Shugaley’s FZNTs within the Lakhta project. Often framed in Russian discourse as “humanitarian cooperation” (*gumanitarnoe sotrudnichestvo*), these activities involve organizing events and co-opting local activists, media figures, cultural leaders, and sports figures who are favorable to closer ties with Russia and who can serve as vehicles for expanding its influence. For instance, in January 2024, African Initiative co-organized a sambo tournament in Ouagadougou, showcasing a Soviet martial art originally practiced by the Red Army. This initiative to cultivate loyalty extends back to Russia itself. In May 2024, the leaders of African Initiative brought Malian bloggers to Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, and the occupied Ukrainian city of Mariupol, including bloggers from the media outlet *Ghandi malien*.³⁴ On the same tour, Artem Kureev’s organization collaborated with Rossotrudnichestvo, the Russian Foreign Ministry’s federal agency responsible for coordinating Russian cultural diplomacy, to screen the documentary film *The End of Neo-colonialism: Central African Republic* at Moscow’s Illuzion cinema, which extolled the role of “Russian instructors” in the CAR.³⁵

34. “D’importants blogueurs maliens se sont rendus à Moscou et à Marioupol,” *African Initiative*, May 20, 2024.

35. “V Moskve sostoãlas” prem’era fil’ma ‘Konec neokolonializma – CAR’” [The premiere of the film “The end of neocolonialism: CAR] was held in Moscow,” *African Initiative*, May 14, 2024.

III. RUSSIA'S RENEWED ANTICOLONIALISM AND THE "DE-WESTERNIZATION" OF THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

The anatomy of the new Russian anti-(neo)colonial strategic narrative, from its formation in official discourse to its dissemination through Russia's broader influence ecosystem abroad, reveals three interconnected "sub-narratives." These sub-narratives present three principal "characters:" contemporary Russia as the heir to Soviet anti-imperialism, the "collective West" and its hegemonic ambitions encapsulated in a "neo-colonial" foreign policy, and the "Global South" and Russia's current or potential non-Western partners, which are a priority target of this narrative.

THE LEGACY OF SOVIET ANTI-COLONIAL MEMORY

The first sub-narrative centers on Russia's foreign policy, legitimized by historical precedent. As many examples indicate, the anti-(neo)colonial narrative invokes various memorial and historical references, drawing a line of continuity between contemporary Russian foreign policy and the Soviet Union's support for national liberation and decolonization movements.¹ Nikita Panin, a researcher at the Institute of Africa of the Academy of Sciences—Russia's premier research institute for African studies—notes, "the discourse of neo-colonialism became critical for Russian policy after the start of the special military operation in Ukraine; with regard to African countries, this approach,

1. See, on Soviet foreign policy in Africa and modes of engagement between the USSR and Africa during the Cold War: Alessandro Iandolo, *Arrested Development The Soviet Union in Ghana, Guinea, and Mali, 1955-1968*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2022; Elizabeth Banks, Robyn d'Avignon, Asif Siddiqi, "Introduction: The African-Soviet Modern," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2021, p. 2-10.

according to Russian officials, establishes a certain continuity between the USSR’s role in Africa and contemporary Russian actions.”²

Soviet anticolonialism, which emerged as part of Marxist-Leninist discourse from the 1920s, called on nations colonized by West European powers to join the World Revolution. It also condemned the internal colonialism carried out by the Russian Empire, a critique that arose from the Pokrovsky school³ but has not been mobilized in contemporary times. As Laruelle explains, other distinct Russian intellectual traditions – ranging from the 19th-century Slavophiles to dissident nationalists of the 1960s and 1980s, like Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and the founding fathers of Eurasianism in the 1920s – also contributed to constructing an anti-colonial narrative based on the idea that Russia itself had been “colonized” by Europe.⁴ The prominent Russian writer Leo Tolstoy also emerged in the 1890s as a sharp critic of European colonial expansion, and his writings on non-violent resistance influenced both Mahatma Gandhi and South African leading figures.⁵ Anticolonialism became institutionalized in Soviet foreign policy during the Khrushchev era (1958–1964), designed to win the favor of the “Third World” and non-aligned states:

Over the years, the Soviet Union has gained great prestige in the eyes of all people who fight for peace, progress, and liberation from colonialism. The goal of our foreign policy hasn’t been to enrich our own state at the expense of other states; we have never believed in the exploitation of man by man, of state by state. On

2. Nikita Panin, “Afrikanские стратегии: сопоставление подходов ключевых игроков на континенте на современном этапе” [African strategies: a comparison of the contemporary approaches of the main players on the continent], *Journal of the Institute for African Studies*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2023, p. 29-47.

3. Alexey Golubev, “No Natural Colonization: The Early Soviet School of Historical Anti-Colonialism,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 65, no. 2, 2023, p. 190-204.

4. Laruelle, 2024, op. cit.

5. Boris Gorelik, “Antikolonial’nye vzglâdy L.N. Tolstogo i ih vozdeystvie na osvoboditel’nye dvizheniâ v Afrike” [Leo Tolstoy’s anti-colonial positions and their influence on liberation movements in Africa], *Journal of the Institute for African Studies*, vol. 66, no. 1, 2024, p. 6-18.

the contrary, both by our stated policies and by our deeds, we have encouraged countries not only with our counsel and by the example we have set, but we have also given them gratuitous material aid or sold them goods and equipment at reduced prices. Our foreign policy is rooted in our conviction that the way pointed out to us by Lenin is the way of the future, not only for the Soviet Union, but for all countries and all peoples of the world [Nikita Khrushchev, 1955].⁶

Similar to the Soviet Union’s stance towards the “Third World,” post-Soviet Russia positions itself as being in the vanguard in defending the sovereignty of the countries of the “Global South,” subjected to Western “neo-colonialism.” The revival of this Soviet anti-imperialist memory is part of a broader movement in which the Kremlin instrumentalizes the “history of the Fatherland” (*otechestvennaya istoriya*) and selectively constructs a heroic, mythologized past to legitimize its domestic policies, identity, and international role. This approach is evident in the “denazification” narrative used to justify the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, invoking the memory of the “Great Patriotic War” (1941–1945) and reframing the fight against fascism in contemporary terms.⁷

Narrators and disseminators of the Russian anti(neo)colonial narrative in Africa also suggest, by extension, that Russia and the USSR before it were never colonial powers on the continent. While academic literature has extensively debated the colonial nature of Russian and Soviet expansionism in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Eastern Europe, this aspect is entirely omitted from contemporary Russian official discourse and its strategic narratives.⁸

6. Quoted by Iandolo, 2022, op. cit., p. 26.

7. See: Jade McGlynn, *Memory Makers: The Politics of the Past in Putin’s Russia*, London, Bloomsbury, 2023.

8. Iandolo notes that the final declaration of the 1955 Bandung conference called for an end to “colonialism in all its manifestations,” implicitly equating the USSR’s involvement in Eastern Europe with the Western colonial presence in Africa, op. cit., 2022, p. 46.

A RENEWED CRITIQUE OF THE “COLLECTIVE WEST”

The second sub-narrative focuses on the countries that make up the “collective West,” which are accused of perpetuating their colonial practices towards formerly colonized nations and other non-Western countries in a contemporary form known as neo-colonialism. Here again, this narrative posits an intrinsic historical continuity between past and present Western practices, a concept widely disseminated in official discourse and the content produced by Russian influence actors. While these practices have been documented,⁹ their narration—based on real, exaggerated, or fabricated grounds—primarily allows Russian elites to reformulate their critique of Western political, economic, cultural, and normative interference, which has been articulated for years through denunciations of its “hegemonic” and “unipolar” character. Additionally, this narrative emphasizes Russia’s selective and variable¹⁰ sovereigntist positioning on the international stage,¹¹ particularly in its critique of the legacy of Françafrique and France’s neo-colonial attitudes in Africa, which are seen as opposed to the effective sovereignty of African nations, notably in the CAR and the Sahel.

9. See, among recent publications on the history of Françafrique and “French neocolonialism:” Thomas Borrel, Amzat Boukari-Yabara, Benoît Collombat, Thomas Deltombe, *L’Empire qui ne veut pas mourir. Une histoire de la Françafrique*, Paris, Seuil, 2021; Alain Gabet, Sébastien Jahan, “La Françafrique, un néocolonialisme français,” *Cahiers d’histoire. Revue d’histoire critique*, no. 157, 2023, p. 13-21.

10. According to Laruelle, “Russian political culture has gradually taken the form of a conspiratorial worldview, a cynical reading of power relations in which the great powers confront each other in zero-sum games, while smaller countries have no strategic autonomy,” *Le Grand Continent*, February 17, 2024, <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

11. Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin, “Russia’s Narratives of Global Order: Great Power Legacies in a Polycentric World,” *Politics and Governance*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2017, p. 111-120. This perspective aligns with Putin’s sovereigntist, anti-Western interventionist stance, which was most prominently articulated in his speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. In this address, Vladimir Putin delivered an emblematic indictment of American foreign policy and NATO’s actions, characterizing them as unilateralist, overly coercive, and destabilizing to the international system.

Moreover, this narrative enables a kind of accusatory inversion in the context of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine,¹² suggesting that aggressive and “neo-imperialist” interventionism is a trait of the West, and not a Russian characteristic, whose posture would be reactive and defensive. Russian actors exploit the differing perceptions of the war in Ukraine among Western nations and many African, Latin American, and Asian countries. Ueli Staeger observes that most African governments view the war as a result of “great power rivalry between the West and Russia,” arguing that maintaining “equidistance from these powers” is a preferable foreign policy choice to preserve margins for maneuver in the pursuit of African agency.¹³

In this way, the anti(neo)colonial narrative serves as a means to divert the attention of part of its target audience. It aligns with “whataboutism,” a typically fallacious technique of argumentation whereby a speaker discredits their interlocutor by highlighting their own shortcomings or suggesting that they share culpability for actions that undermine their legitimacy. Characteristic of contemporary Russian official discourse and Putin’s rhetoric,¹⁴ whataboutism is extensively employed by Russia to denounce the “double standard” (*dvoynoy standart*) of Western countries, which are alleged to judge supposedly similar situations differently. This argument echoes the anti-American propaganda of the USSR and was satirized in Soviet political cartoons with the phrase “*A zato u vas negrov linchuyut!*” (“And you are lynching Negroes!”).

12. Céline Marangé, “Un nouvel impérialisme masqué: Poutine et le retour de la rhétorique ‘anticoncoliale’,” *Le Grand Continent*, March 10, 2024, <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

13. Ueli Staeger, “The War in Ukraine, the African Union, and African Agency,” *African Affairs*, vol. 122, no. 489, 2023, p. 559-586. See also: “Two Years Later: LAC and Russia’s War in Ukraine,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024, <https://www.csis.org>.

14. See: James Headley, “Challenging the EU’s claim to moral authority: Russian talk of ‘double standards’,” *Asia Europe Journal*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2015, p. 303; Neil Buckley’s op-ed, “The return of Whataboutism,” *The Financial Times*, June 11, 2012; Aleksandra Srdanovic, “Two Decades of Russian ‘Whataboutism’: A Partial Rundown,” *Russia Matters*, Belfer Center of Harvard Kennedy School, October 21, 2021, <https://www.russiamatters.org>.

SEDUCING THE “GLOBAL SOUTH” AND THE “WORLD MAJORITY”

Thirdly, through this narrative repertoire, Russia seeks to appeal to non-Western countries belonging to the heterogeneous entity of the “Global South”,¹⁵ allying them to its vision of a transitional, “de-Westernized” international system. This draws on a metanarrative that has already been developed, mobilized, and expressed elsewhere in the world, of which Russia does not have a monopoly: “Why do many countries share Russia’s views? Because Russia is actively working towards a fairer multipolar world order. Why do they support Russia? Because Russia is at the forefront. And why do they refuse to support something else? Because nobody, for example, in Africa, has forgotten the colonial era,” enthused the Russian president on October 12, 2023, at the plenary session of the Russian Energy Week (REN), Russia’s leading international forum dedicated to the energy sector, held annually in Moscow.¹⁶

Attacking “Western neo-colonialism” fundamentally aims to unite those who collectively denounce the dominant, unilateralist, inequitable, and “anti-democratic” role played by Western countries in international relations, undermining the emergence of a multipolar international system. “the constructive, trustful, forward-looking partnership between Russia and Africa is especially significant and important [...]. We are sure that a new multipolar world order, the contours of which are already seen, will be more just and democratic. And there is no doubt that Africa, along with Asia, the Middle East and Latin America, will take its worthy place in it and finally free itself from the bitter legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism, rejecting its modern practices,” writes Vladimir Putin in this context, in an article published a

15. See, on this controversial notion coined in 1969 by Carl Oglesby and revived since the large-scale invasion of Ukraine: Kevin Gray, Barry K. Gills, “South-South Cooperation and the Rise of the Global South,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4, 2015, p. 557-574; Erica Hogan, Patrick Stewart, “A Closer Look at the Global South,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 20, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org>.

16. See the forum’s plenary session on the Kremlin website, October 12, 2023, <http://en.kremlin.ru>.

few days before the Russia-Africa summit in Saint Petersburg in July 2023.¹⁷

Again, the expansion of Russia’s presence in sub-Saharan Africa offers a promising backdrop for observing this attempt at narrative convergence between Russian and African actors. In addition to echoing the common memorial references mentioned above, these actors strive to articulate the traditional repertoires of pan-Africanism¹⁸ and sovereinism to converge and legitimize their respective positions around a mutual denunciation of Western “neo-colonialism.” Historically, Pan-Africanism has been built around the debate – indeed, the “dilemma” – between supporters of continental unity and defenders of national sovereinities. It accommodates both a defense of multilateralism and a sovereinist vision of the international order, according to Abrahamsen.¹⁹

Thus, Pan-Africanism can resonate with the sovereinist positions defended by Russia on the international stage, despite the paradox that its armed forces have attacked Ukraine and profoundly challenged this country’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.²⁰ This rhetorical combination, indeed this attempt at ideological synthesis, permeates the content produced by the actors of Russia’s information influence aimed at African

17. “Rossiâ i Afrika: ob’edinââ usiliâ dlâ mira, progressa i uspešnogo budušeġo” [Russia-Africa: uniting our efforts for peace, progress and a prosperous future], July 24, 2023, <http://kremlin.ru>.

18. A “historical enigma” with multiple ramifications, a political idea as much as a “movement in history,” Pan-Africanism is defined by its historian Amzat Boukari-Yabara as “a philosophical concept born with the emancipatory and abolitionist movements of the second half of the XVIIIth century, a socio-political movement built and developed by African-Americans and West Indians between the end of the XIXth century and the end of the Second World War, or a doctrine of political unity formulated by African nationalists as part of anti-colonial and independence struggles,” 2017, op. cit., p. 5.

19. Rita Abrahamsen, “Internationalists, Sovereinists, Nativists: Contending Visions of World Order in Pan-Africanism,” *Review of International Studies*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2020, p. 56-74.

20. It was in this context that French President Emmanuel Macron denounced, at the Ambassadors’ Conference on August 28, 2023, the “outlandish alliance between the Pan-African pretenders and the neo-imperialists,” <https://www.elysee.fr>.

audiences and appears to be one of the hallmarks of Russian foreign policy in Africa. The resulting attempt at discursive convergence is central to RT’s recent advertising campaign in Africa, *Your values. Shared*. Because it aims to construct “a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics,” the strategic anti(neo)colonial narrative ultimately represents one of the key resources of Russia’s “niche” soft power²¹ and “power of attraction” in the countries of the “global South.”

These three features of Russian anti-(neo)colonial strategic narrative are aligned with a concept that has gained traction in Russia since its large-scale invasion of Ukraine: the “world majority” (*mirovoye bol’shinstvo*). Unlike the anti(neo)colonial framework, the term “global South” is notably absent from Russian doctrinal language and is infrequently used in official rhetoric. Vadim Grishin attributes this omission to an incompatibility between Russia’s identity as a “state-civilization” – emphasized in the latest Foreign Policy Concept and rooted in Samuel Huntington’s theories,²² which resonate with many Russian elites – and an identification with the geographically distinct and historically complex entity of the “Global South,” which would exclude “Northern” and “Eastern” Russia.²³

In place of the “Global South,” the notion of “world majority,” proposed in 2022 by influential Russian IR expert and spin doctor Sergei Karaganov has emerged as a narrative framework for Russian foreign policy.²⁴ This concept has since been widely

21. Marlène Laruelle, “Russia’s Niche Soft Power: Sources, Targets and Channels of Influence,” *Russie.Nei.Visions*, no. 122, Ifri, April 2021.

22. See: Henry E. Hale, Marlène Laruelle, “Rethinking Civilizational Identity from the Bottom Up: A Case Study of Russia and a Research Agenda,” *Nationalities Papers*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2020, p. 585-602.

23. Vadim Grishin, “Russia and the Global South, or the Mystery of Political Semantics,” *Russia Post*, March 14, 2024, <https://www.russiapost.info>.

24. Sergey Karaganov, “Ot ne-Zapada k Mirovomu bol’shinstvu” [From the “Non-West” to the “World Majority”], *Russia in Global Affairs*, September 2022, <https://globalaffairs.ru>; Sergey Karaganov et al. (ed.), “Russia’s Policy Towards World Majority,” Moscow, *HSE Report*, 2023. See also Marlène Laruelle’s analysis of this document: “Dés-occidentaliser le monde: la doctrine Karaganov,” *Le Grand Continent*, April 20, 2024, <https://legrandcontinent.eu>.

discussed among political technologists and “narrative entrepreneurs” close to the government, and is regarded as a seemingly more adaptable option by the Kremlin:

It’s all based on the well-known principle of “divide and conquer.” Meanwhile, [the West] continues to talk about an obscure “new world order” which, in reality, is essentially the same as before: hypocrisy, double standards, pretensions to exceptionalism and global domination, preservation of what is in essence a neo-colonial system. The West is well aware that the emergence of a multipolar world order is gathering pace, and it deploys the same means every time, such as Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and Russophobia, to hinder the progress of independent sovereign countries and divide the global majority (V. Putin, meeting with representatives of religious authorities, October 23, 2023).

The term “world majority” is seen as a more fitting concept for Russian elites aiming to position Russia within an entity less geographically specific than the “Global South” while also underscoring Moscow’s role in shaping a new, multipolar international order. Combining both the “Global South” and the “Global East,”²⁵ the “world majority” is positioned in this storytelling in opposition to the Western “world minority,” also referred to as the “golden billion” (*zolotoy miliard*). This notion, introduced by economist Anatoli Tsikunov (Kouzmitch) in 1990 and later popularized by “anti-globalist” sociologist Sergei Karaganov,²⁶ suggests that Western powers deploy all means necessary to channel a large share of the world’s wealth to a select “billion” residents in Western nations, thereby sidelining the rest of the world’s population. This expression, central to various conspiracy theories,²⁷ has been frequently used by Russian

25. See, on the notion of “Global East” proposed by Martin Müller, “In Search of the Global East: Thinking between North and South,” *Geopolitics*, 2018, vol. 25, no. 3, p. 734-755.

26. Anatoliy Kuzmič, “Zagovor mirovogo pravitel’sstva: Rossiâ i ‘zolotoy milliard’” [The world government conspiracy: Russia and the “golden billion”], 1994; Serguei Kara-Murza, “Konceptiâ ‘zolitogo milliarda’ i Novyj mirovoj porâdok” [The concept of the “golden billion” and the new world order], 1999.

27. Ilya Yablokov, *Fortress Russia: Conspiracy Theories in the Post-soviet World*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2018.

power elites since 2022, including Vladimir Putin and Nikolai Patrushev, the former secretary of the Security Council and key figure among the *siloviki* (or “institutions of force”: intelligence, military, law enforcement sectors, etc.) In this context, the “golden billion” concept often interlocks with the “world majority” idea and aligns with Russia’s anti(neo)colonial narrative.²⁸

We have reviewed 26 articles mentioning the notion of “global majority,” published between October 2022 and January 2024 on the websites of two of the most influential, now government-aligned Russian sources in International Relations—the journal *Russia in Global Affairs* and the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC).²⁹ Alongside figures like Sergei Karaganov and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, these articles feature prominent Russian foreign policy experts, such as Fyodor Lukyanov (Editor-in-Chief of *Russia in Global Affairs*), Dmitri Trenin, Timofei Bordachev, Kirill Babaev, and Ivan Timofeev (Director General of RIAC). Together, these experts outline two core arguments linked to the “global majority” concept and the anti-(neo)colonial narrative. The first argument, both political and normative, advocates for a “de-Westernization” of the international system³⁰ by rejecting “American-Western global hegemony” and calling for a democratization of international institutions established in 1945. According to this view, the “world majority” must work toward a more equitable, inclusive, and “polycentric” world order that gives greater voice to non-Western countries, which are currently subject to “neo-colonial” forms of dependence. The second argument, moral and ideological in nature, promotes the conservative and “traditional” values purportedly shared within the “world majority,” contrasting them with the liberal, “post-humanist,” and “anti-human” values championed by the West.

28. See, for example, Dmitri Medvedev’s op-ed above, or this article by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, “Genuine Multilateralism and Diplomacy vs the ‘Rules-Based Order’,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. 21, no. 3, p. 104-113.

29. See: <https://globalaffairs.ru/> and <https://russiancouncil.ru/>.

30. Maxime Daniélou, “La ‘désoccidentalisation’ comme stratégie russe de transformation de l’ordre international,” *Hérodote*, vol. 3, no. 190-191, 2023, p. 237-249.

CONCLUSION

In summary, anticolonialism has emerged as a new, central strategic narrative in support of Russia’s foreign policy since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This narrative is largely negative, denouncing Western “neo-colonialism” as it affects the former colonized nations of the “Global South”. By positioning itself as a defender against such exploitation, Russian authorities have reoriented their critique of the “collective West” since 2022, transferring the blame for aggressive interventionism to its member states. Yet the success of this narrative also relies on a positive political and normative basis, embedded within the idea of the “world majority.” Through this framework, Russia aims to lead a broad movement to restructure the international system and resist Western dominance, a sentiment that Ivan Timofeev has termed the “revolt of the discontented” (*bunt nedovol’nykh*).¹

1. Ivan Timofeïev, “‘Rossijskij bunt:’ lokal’nye i global’nye posledstviâ” [The Russian revolt: local and global consequences], quoted by Laruelle, op. cit., 2023, p. 21.

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“DOWN WITH NEOCOLONIALISM!”

RESURGENCE OF A STRATEGIC NARRATIVE IN WARTIME RUSSIA

Maxime Audinet, PhD

An analysis of Russian political discourse since February 2022 reveals a compelling resurgence of rhetoric drawn from a past era: anticolonialism. From President Vladimir Putin to members of parliament, from the RT news channel to Wagner Group mercenaries stationed in Africa, a spectrum of Russian voices has invoked the critique of Western “neo-colonial” interventionism on a near-daily basis, both domestically and abroad, since the onset of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Why has anti-(neo)colonialism—once central to Soviet internationalist ideals—reemerged in Russia’s political lexicon over two decades after the collapse of the USSR, and in the context of the war in Ukraine? Who is framing and promoting this rhetoric, how is it crafted, and for whom is it intended? What insights does it offer into the Russian elite’s perception of the international order, and how does it function as a new “strategic narrative” for Russia’s foreign policy ambitions?

This report probes these questions through the lens of the “narrative turn” in International Relations and the conceptual framework of “strategic narratives.” It examines the key narrators of this anti-(neo)colonial discourse and its dissemination by the actors of Russia’s ecosystem of information influence. The analysis reveals three core objectives, at a time when Moscow purports to “de-Westernize” the international system: to legitimize Russia’s current foreign policy through a selective memory of Soviet support for anti-colonial movements; to renew anti-Western critiques via a process of accusatory inversion; and to appeal to audiences in the “Global South” by seeking ideological and discursive resonances.