STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC RESILIENCE TO KREMLIN INFLUENCE ACROSS AFRICA

ABOUT NDI

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization that responds to the aspirations of people around the world to live in democratic societies that recognize and promote basic human rights. Since opening its doors in 1983, NDI and its local partners have worked to support and strengthen democratic institutions and practices by strengthening political parties, civic organizations, and parliaments, safeguarding elections, and promoting citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government.

With staff members and volunteer political practitioners from more than 100 nations, NDI brings together individuals and groups to share ideas, knowledge, experiences, and expertise. Partners receive broad exposure to best practices in international democratic development that can be adapted to the needs of their own countries. NDI's multinational approach reinforces the fact that while there is no single democratic model, all democracies share certain core principles.

The Institute's work upholds the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It also promotes the development of institutionalized channels of communication among citizens, political institutions, and elected officials and strengthens their ability to improve the quality of life for all citizens. For more information about NDI, please visit www.ndi.org.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background

In February 2024, building on a report on <u>Russia's Influence in Africa: Scenarios to Inform Greater Democratic Resilience</u>, the National Democratic Institute (NDI) gathered representatives from African civil society and the international democracy support community to review a series of discussion papers by subject matter experts and exchange perspectives on ways to build democratic resilience to Kremlin influences that undermine democracy on the continent in three key areas:

- Information influence operations;
- Insecurity and military contractors; and
- Illicit, opaque financial flows.

This report outlines the outcomes from those deliberations, an initial step in engaging African civil society on ways to shore up democratic resilience across the continent.

During the exercise, experts noted increased awareness among African civil society groups of Russia's exploitation and human rights abuses, its support for unpopular predatory regimes, and its role in the surge of military coups. They also emphasized Russia's long standing relations with elites in several African countries and how these historical ties enable current Kremlin influences that erode democracy. Almost half of the countries in Africa have experienced Kremlin-backed information influence operations that exploit existing grievances to skew facts, sow confusion, tilt political playing fields, erode support for democratic norms and increase support for or minimize criticism of Russia. Acting as proxies for the Russian state, so-called "private" military and security companies offer security services to regimes in such countries as the Central African Republic (CAR), Mali and Niger, often at the expense of marked increases in human rights abuses and in ways that fail to address the underlying causes of conflict - predatory states and resulting marginalization. These companies, part of a broader network of banks and investors with Kremlin ties, also engage in illicit financial and resource flows that deepen corruption, contribute to substantial losses in national revenue and help maintain compromised elites in power.

Workshop Outcomes and Recommendations

The Russian government has stated that Africa is integral to its foreign policy, and current trends point to expanded Russian engagement to offset sanctions and enhance its global

profile. The Kremlin gains influence through governance gaps – especially corruption and insecurity – in various countries on the continent, working with domestic elites for mutual gain. Given the exploitative nature of these influences, which exacerbate existing domestic problems, the assessment of the benefits of engagement with Russia is increasingly mixed. While strengthening key aspects and institutions of democracy would yield much broader benefits for the continent, they would also enhance African resilience against foreign influences that undermine the democratic norms, ideals and outcomes that Africans want *(1)* and that are enshrined in several of the continent's country-specific, subregional and continent-wide protocols and conventions *(2)*.

The majority of the recommendations emanating from the workshop require action by combinations of actors including civil society, research institutions, public officials and regional organizations in Africa and the international democracy support community. They include four cross-cutting areas for action as well as recommendations to shore up resilience in each of the three areas that the workshop examined.

Cross-Cutting Recommendations

- Reassess international partnerships to address mistrust and contradictions, strengthen the agency of continental actors and improve duty of care considerations.
- Expand African-led research and awareness-raising both at country levels and across the continent.
- Tailor strategies based on the nature and extent of Kremlin influence in different countries as well as the risks and opportunities in various operating contexts.
- Strengthen regional bodies to uphold democratic norms, enforce existing conventions and advance approaches to emerging challenges and opportunities.
- Elevate transparency and access to information to counter the opacity that allows corruption, foreign authoritarian influences and other erosive practices to thrive and undermine trust in public institutions.

Resilience to Information Influence Operations

- Invest in research to strengthen the evidence base for effective approaches to countering information influence operations in African countries.
- Enhance digital and civic literacy among leaders, influencers, and the general public, integrating these skills into education systems.
- Highlight the tangible negative impacts of information manipulation on everyday life to help raise awareness and heighten the public's sense of urgency about the risks involved in participating in information influence operations.

- Expand public education campaigns on information validation and promote civic education to foster longer term resilience rather than simply responding to particular influence campaigns in the short-term.
- Streamline and link established fact-checking platforms in various countries through national and regional networks to enhance the impact of existing efforts.
- Place greater emphasis on the development of citizen-led tools for independent verification.
- Equip journalists with investigative skills to uncover covert operations and foreign influence, supporting innovative and ethical media models.
- Promote ethical journalism practices and professional training, emphasizing the importance of subscription-based and transparent media platforms.
- Support civic actors and think tanks to develop narratives that challenge key themes in information influence operations and that affirm democratic values in ways that resonate in different contexts and with different populations.
- Advocate for responsible content moderation on social media, demanding transparency in platform operations.
- Oppose restrictive regulations, instead promoting non-restrictive educational approaches by, for instance, strengthening partnerships for public awareness and use of content reporting mechanisms, while encouraging governmental and institutional information sharing to counter misinformation.

Resilience to Insecurity and Military Contractors

- Push for greater transparency in security partnerships, especially with foreign military entities, to safeguard state sovereignty and uphold democratic standards.
- Allocate support to local think tanks and research institutions for in-depth studies on the influence and consequences of mercenaries and "private" military and security companies, to shape effective policy responses.
- Collaborate with the African Union (AU)'s Peace and Security Committee to create and implement strict protocols against the use of mercenaries and PMCs by member states, ensuring alignment with both historical conventions and contemporary policy needs.
- Collaborate with the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to strengthen mechanisms for early detection and response to unconstitutional changes in governance.
- Advocate for and enforce term limits to prevent governance dysfunctions and the erosion of democratic resilience.
- Encourage regional bodies like the AU and the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) to support fair and transparent electoral processes, and conflict resolution efforts that are inclusive and sensitive to local grievances.

- Review and amend regulatory frameworks to cover new and existing assets, including cryptocurrencies and real estate, and mandate public disclosure in high-value sectors.
- Introduce measures to strengthen judicial integrity, beneficial ownership transparency and the integrity of public procurement processes.
- Expand support and training to help investigative journalists uncover and expose the adverse impacts of illicit resource extractions and human rights violations by foreign entities.
- Strengthen enforcement of the disclosure of political financing and establish mechanisms to void odious debt, preventing financial exploitation by authoritarian regimes.
- Seek ways to standardize sanctions and implement penalties for non-cooperation, including fines, to uniformly penalize violations of financial and political norms.
- Build support for the implementation of a global standard for the automatic exchange of financial information and require beneficial ownership registration to enhance asset ownership transparency.
- Advocate for unified legal definitions and international financial reporting standards to ensure consistent enforcement across borders and prevent profit shifting and tax evasion.
- Collaborate with international partners and organizations to address illicit financial flows, recover stolen assets, and support governance reforms.
- Build support for the prohibition of secretive financial services and impose penalties for jurisdiction shopping, aiming to close loopholes used for tax evasion and money laundering.
- Explore effective approaches for international partnerships to advocate for sanctions, asset seizure and other actions in third countries, especially when restrictions limit domestic options and also given the transnational nature of illicit nature of resource flows.

Conclusion

Despite growing awareness among African civil society about the ways in which Kremlin influences undermine democracy on the continent, a tested knowledge base of responses and best practices is still emerging. Nevertheless, the discussion papers and workshop deliberations served as an important initial step in identifying potential strategies for greater democratic resilience. Future initiatives should consider examining lessons learned from other regions and their potential relevance to African countries and Kremlin failures in such countries as Libya, Moldova and Mozambique. They should also explore the development of more targeted plans to shore up democratic resilience to Kremlin influences.

II. KREMLIN INFLUENCE AND DEMOCRACY IN AFRICA

In March 2023, based on a participatory scenario-building exercise, NDI released a report outlining how Kremlin influence threatens democracy in Africa and how those risks might evolve from 2023 to 2025 due to Russia's war on Ukraine. To build on that report, NDI subsequently commissioned discussion papers from subject matter experts based in Africa or with significant experience working on related issues on the continent. During a workshop in February 2024, representatives from African civil society and the international democracy support community reviewed key points from the various discussion papers and exchanged perspectives on ways to build democratic resilience to Kremlin influences that undermine democracy on the continent. In addition, one expert shared valuable insights and comparative experiences building resilience to Kremlin influences in the Republic of Georgia. The discussion and resulting recommendations centered on three broad, interrelated areas where Kremlin influences threaten democracy in Africa:

- Information influence operations;
- Insecurity and military contractors; and
- Illicit, opaque financial flows.

This report outlines key themes and outcomes from the discussion papers and the workshop. It is not intended as an exhaustive review of Kremlin influence in Africa. Instead, the remainder of this section provides a brief overview of the Kremlin operations in Africa and how they threaten democracy. Section III summarizes outcomes and recommendations from the February 2024 workshop. In addition, participants in the exercise identified a number of questions meriting further examination that are included in the conclusion.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, its presence in Africa has been described in contradictory ways: a return versus a resurgence; and as highly exploitive and transactional versus strategically choreographed and executed. The African experts that NDI engaged for this workshop emphasized Russia's long-standing relations with the continent and their multifaceted nature, looking beyond the current fixation on the Wagner Group and its on-going transformation into Africa Corps. Analysts also overlook or dismiss the continent's history of non alignment between East and West, its longstanding and growing demands for increased representation in multilateral institutions and its hope to secure the maximum benefit for its people by doing business with all sides. This sometimes results in an oversimplification of Russia's relationships with various African countries. Russia's soft power appeal and historical ties with the continent are central elements of a

strategic approach that has critical implications for democracy on the continent. Russia's historic resistance to the United States, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the European Union, and its support for African liberation movements in the 1960s has positioned it as a fellow champion of anti-colonial, anti-American, anti-Western European movements on the continent. Moscow's long-standing arms and financial networks in Africa, dating from the Soviet Union, provide a basis for alliances that help champion the Kremlin's political interests and those of its allies in national, regional and multilateral institutions. They also deepen international networks that lessen the impact of sanctions on Moscow. Under these powerful alignments between the Kremlin and certain African elites, significant capital outflows combine with legal and financial secrecy to confer economic privilege on a selected few, privatize national resources and contract opaque debts that become public burdens.

Information Influence Operations

The Kremlin is a primary purveyor of information influence operations in Africa, backing efforts by mercenary groups and networks of prominent domestic influencers while amplifying messages through Russian state-backed media. These campaigns target almost half the countries in Africa and account for an estimated 40 percent of all such known operations on the continent *(3)*. They help to undermine democracy by disrupting elections, inflating support for extra-constitutionalism and particular parties and candidates and skewing facts *(4)*. These sophisticated efforts are part of a calculated strategy to increase Kremlin influence, sow confusion and deepen societal divisions by leveraging existing socio-political and economic grievances including trust deficits between: citizens and their governments; African countries on the one hand and the United States and Europe on the other; and various African governments with differing commitments to democracy.

Despite differences across regions, Kremlin-backed information influence efforts in different parts of the world share certain common elements that could help raise awareness about these operations, their impact and resilience strategies. For instance, Georgia faces significant influence operations from Russia, which occupies 20 percent of the country's territory. Kremlin-backed information influence operations targeting the country draw upon a combination of historical, religious, cultural, economic and anti-Western themes and appeals to "traditional" values to erode public support for Georgian integration in the EU and NATO and to portray Russia as the country's primary partner. Similarly, information influence operations in African countries reflect a strong understanding of local contexts, grievances and motivations. While much more can be done to combat these efforts, Georgian civil society and democracy defenders have experienced some success in

strengthening resilience by working together to research and expose these efforts, engage tech companies on increasing transparency around sponsored content and strengthen fact-checking and debunking.

Insecurity and Military Contractors

Moscow uses low cost and under the radar "private" security and military companies that in fact, deploy a range of hybrid warfare tactics: information influence operations, security services and illicit financial and resource flows. These efforts help destabilize countries and erode their democratic resilience. In addition to supporting information influence campaigns and providing political advice to regimes in the Sahel and Central African Republic, Kremlin-backed mercenaries are providing security assistance to beleaguered governments facing insurgency yet dissatisfied with American, French and United Nations support. Following the demise of Yevgeny Prigozhin and other senior members of Wagner's leadership, Wagner and other similar groups are increasingly under the Kremlin's control. For instance, Wagner has been renamed as Africa Corps and has been brought under the control of Russia's Defence Ministry *(5)*. Given previous claims that Wagner was an entirely private enterprise, these changes make it more difficult for the Kremlin to distance itself from these groups and their impact in the countries where they operate. Greater recognition of these groups as state actors may open up new options for holding them accountable.

Under opaque agreements with their clients, Kremlin-backed security groups have driven significant increases in human rights violations and civilian deaths while terrorizing populations *(6)*. While such partnerships – which appear to violate the African Union's Convention to Eliminate Mercenarism in Africa – may offer short-term security gains, they pose significant risks to democratic integrity by possibly entrenching authoritarian regimes and sidestepping the need for democratic and human rights norms within security collaborations. These interventions are also unlikely to help address the underlying governance failures that cause conflict; if anything, they are more likely to exacerbate them. The Wagner Group's failures in Libya and Mozambique highlight the limitations of this approach.

Illicit, Opaque Financial Flows

In part, by capitalizing on historical ties forged with liberation movements, arms and financial networks, and political elites during the Soviet Union, the Kremlin has found stable partners in authoritarian regimes. Especially in countries experiencing conflict, shady investments and opaque activities in the mining sector serve as bargaining chips and as a

means to evade sanctions and accumulate wealth. In the CAR for instance, in addition to recouping costs through access to precious minerals, mercenary groups and their allies have expanded their illicit operations to encompass businesses spanning gold, coffee, whiskey, sugar and timber sectors. While coverage of these activities has primarily focused on the impact in CAR, researchers have not paid as much attention to the ripple effects in neighboring countries. For instance, access to the port in Douala, Cameroon enables Wagner and its in-country allies to import heavy machinery including cranes and excavators, while exporting diamonds, gold and timber, with plans to explore the potential for coffee exports *(7)*. As a result, their operations in CAR represent a portion of a broader set of networks and operations that extend into at least one neighboring country.

Meanwhile, Sudan, a key country for Russia, serves as a transcontinental hub for the Kremlin's illicit gold trafficking, facilitating gold transfers to the United Arab Emirates. The involvement of Kremlin-backed entities in the Sudanese gold sector *(8)*, particularly through controversial mining concessions, the operation of gold processing plants and smuggling operations *(9)* highlights similarly predatory behavior. This exploitation is facilitated by a network of off-the-books transactions and collaborations with the military leadership, ensuring that significant portions of the gold produced in Sudan are smuggled out of the country to Russia, bypassing official government records and contributing to a substantial loss in national revenue, undermining Sudanese financial institutions and deepening corruption *(10)*.

There are also recent and historical examples of Russian involvement in opaque, unfavorable and illicit public debt and financial investments with "liberation political parties" across Africa. Soviet-era channels for funding African liberation movements, many of which are still in power today, are leveraged by the Russian oligarchy to offshore their capital and sustain their privatized banks. These opaque lending schemes fund government development plans with shadow loans that are conduits for official kick-backs, in the same way that arms and financial arrangements operated previously in Soviet times.

III. WORKSHOP OUTCOMES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While there is consensus that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine will have considerable implications for Kremlin operations in Africa, there is little agreement on what those impacts will be in terms of Moscow's foreign policy objectives, and for Africa itself. Russia has stated that Africa is integral to its foreign policy, and current trends point to expanded Russian engagement to offset sanctions and its increasingly limited access to previously Soviet countries now wary of Russia's expansive interests in the Eurasia region. However, a number of factors are still in play. Experts noted increased awareness among African civil society groups of Russia's exploitation and human rights abuses, its support for unpopular predatory regimes, and its role in the surge of military coups. The assessment of the benefits of engagement with Russia is increasingly mixed. For example, the Kremlin's activities in the Sahel have increased citizen suffering while doing nothing to address the root causes of instability, such as poor governance and the proliferation of armed groups.

Experts at the workshop noted that the Kremlin gains influence through governance gaps, democratic weakness and grand (state) corruption. Across all of the areas the workshop examined, it is clear that addressing the roots of the Kremlin problem for African democracy and African citizens, therefore, is about a strategy for increasing democratic resilience, which should be prioritized as the Kremlin's expanding operations are increasingly exposed, their extractive nature is increasingly understood and African civil society is mobilized to the threat. It is also clear that the three areas of Kremlin influence that this exercise focused on are mutually reinforcing vectors for undermining democracy that are rarely deployed in isolation from each other. As a result, while the recommendations emanating from the workshop are grouped according to the three themes, they should be viewed as complementary steps that would yield overall benefits for democracy in Africa while also shoring up resilience to Kremlin influences that exploit and exacerbate existing vulnerabilities.

The remainder of this section begins with crosscutting recommendations and continues with recommendations in each of the three areas that the discussion papers and workshop examined. The majority of the recommendations require action by combinations of actors including civil society, research institutions, public officials and regional organizations in Africa and the international democracy support community. As a result, they are not disaggregated by actor.

Crosscutting Recommendations

Reassess international partnerships to address mistrust and contradictions, strengthen the agency of continental actors and improve duty of care considerations. The Kremlin is exploiting a widespread distrust in Africa of the United States and Europe that allows Moscow to position itself as the anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic alternative to the West. The prosecution of the War on Terror in ways that led to human rights abuses, the scapegoating of marginalized ethnic groups and partnerships with authoritarian leaning regimes in Africa has undermined trust that the West is a steadfast champion of democracy, African citizens' preferred form of political rule. The failure of Operation Barkhane in the Sahel to provide security, strengthen the Malian democratic government and advance the peace process has undermined elite and citizen belief in the West as a reliable security and governance partner, as conflict spreads on the continent and governments seek alternative avenues for assistance.

Given that the Kremlin has found willing allies among elites in certain African countries, civil society and other democracy advocates have natural roles to play in creating pressure for greater transparency and reforms and counterbalancing entrenched power structures that erode democracy and act in collusion with the Kremlin. Strengthening civil society through networking, training and financial support is essential for enabling robust advocacy against information manipulation, diligent monitoring of illicit financial flows and pushing for vital democratic reforms. However, democratic elites and regional institutions also have important roles to play in advancing reforms and upholding democratic standards. African democracy advocates and their countries do not want to be pawns in broader geopolitical battles between the United States and Western Europe on the one hand and the Kremlin on the other. Efforts to support democracy resilience need to focus on the overall benefits of democracy and the particular aspects of Kremlin engagement with African countries that undermine democracy. Further, in certain contexts, knowledge of foreign donor support can undermine perceptions of the legitimacy of recipient groups or expose them to additional risk. Actions to limit foreign authoritarian influence may also elicit backlash from Kremlin-affiliated actors. Duty of care principles require international partners to weigh the risk factors in each context and to implement remedial measures. Supporting African democracy advocates' efforts to counter Kremlin influence operations will require awareness of the costs to African democracy of Western policies, and a relationship reset, such as that promised in part by the *US Strategy for Sub-Saharan Africa (11)*.

Expand African-led research and awareness-raising both at country levels and to develop a deeper understanding of the broader, ripple effects of Kremlin influence and their transcontinental impacts. Fostering the development of specialized research units within

academic and policy institutions, focusing on the detailed analysis and exposure of information manipulation efforts by groups such as Wagner (now Africa Corps), and transcontinental illicit financial and resource flows facilitated by Russian oligarchic finance and industry entities is essential for generating and strategies tailored to the African contexts. While the extent and scope of Kremlin influences vary from one country to another, focusing primarily on countries as the unit of analysis risks overlooking connections between influences across countries. Further, given that Russia plays on the transcontinent to adapt its operations, democratic resilience efforts are more likely to be successful if they recognize that activities in specific countries are part of a broader strategy involving influences in other countries in Africa. In addition to transcontinental considerations, the anti-corruption and kleptocracy community is placing increased emphasis on strategies to address the role that a variety of enablers in American, Caribbean and European countries play in helping their clients hide illicit gains through tax havens, secrecy jurisdictions and offshore financial centers.

Tailor strategies based on the nature and extent of Kremlin influence in different countries as well as risks and opportunities in various operating contexts. While the Kremlin's engagement is most intensive and expansive in the Sahel, the CAR, and Sudan, spanning multiple areas that affect democracy, in countries like Madagascar for instance, it has primarily been limited to electoral and political interference and information influence operations. These differences create challenges as well as opportunities for strengthening democratic resilience. The countries where Kremlin influence is most significant are also the countries where political space is most restricted, conflict is higher and where options for building democratic resilience are most difficult. In countries where that influence is less significant, the sense of urgency on the part of democratic activists and the international community may be lower. Yet these places play important roles in showcasing African commitment to and support for democracy – a set of principles that the Kremlin and other authoritarian regimes describe as Western ideals. These countries could also play important roles in supporting embattled democrats in closed countries and elevating their voices without compromising safety. For instance, in countries where political space is greater, seek and leverage opportunities to: reinforce African commitment to democratic ideals; support investigative journalists and other researchers in exposing the extent and consequences of Kremlin influences for democracy; showcase solidarity with and elevate the voices and aspirations of embattled democrats in closed spaces.

Strengthen regional bodies to uphold democratic norms, enforce existing conventions and advance approaches to emerging challenges and opportunities. Regional and subregional bodies like the Africa Union (AU), and the Economic Community of West Africa States

(ECOWAS) boast long-standing conventions and protocols on democracy, human rights, the elimination of mercenarism, combating corruption and reinforcing peace and security that provide entry points for addressing several areas where Kremlin influences are helping to erode democracy. Despite challenges, regional and subregional bodies continue to champion democracy, monitor elections, and mediate conflicts. For instance, in a break from standard practice, the Southern African Development Community (SADC) election observer mission to the 2023 elections in Zimbabwe noted that several aspects of the polls fell short of the standard set out on regional protocols. In partnership with the United Nations Development Program, in 2023 the AU launched the Africa Facility to Support Inclusive Transitions that is designed to pre-empt, respond and address complex transitions in member states. Its first priority area is unconstitutional changes in government. The Horn's Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) has a long-standing mandate to harmonize the policies of member states on democracy, governance and elections. In 2023, it convened a workshop of member state's election monitoring bodies with a commitment to developing a regional platform to strengthen their collaboration and coordination *(12)*. However, member states have failed to adopt an already negotiated Protocol on Democracy, Governance and Elections to provide IGAD with a strategic agenda on governance in fulfillment of its mandate *(13)*.

Following ECOWAS efforts to hold coup leaders accountable to the group's Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance by suspending their countries from the subregional bloc and threatening military action, military rulers in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger announcing the creation of a new Alliance for Security in the Sahel and plans for their countries to leave the subregional community. The recent split in ECOWAS illustrates how differences in commitment to democracy at elite levels can complicate intergovernmental relationships and weaken the regional organizations' ability to enforce democracy norms and protocols. Experts and workshop participants noted that continent-wide and subregional organizations seem increasingly disconnected from the demands and interests of African citizens. They noted the need for these organizations to redouble efforts to rebuild public trust and uphold existing democracy conventions/protocols while helping to advance responses to emerging challenges on the continent.

Elevate transparency and access to information to counter the opacity that allows corruption, foreign authoritarian influences and other erosive practices to thrive, undermining trust in public institutions. Access to transparent and accurate information is a foundational element of healthy democracies. It facilitates accountability, enables informed citizen participation and makes it possible to expose and deter authoritarian influences. To counter the opacity

that external powers like Russia leverage to entrench their influence, several of the recommendations reference the need for increased transparency in such areas as public contracts, sovereign debt, and security budgets. They also reference the need for judiciaries marked by independence and integrity. Such reforms not only enhance accountability but also disrupt the avenues through which foreign entities can manipulate democratic processes and governance structures to their advantage.

Thematic Recommendations

Resilience to Information Influence Operations

"Information disorder in Africa is threatening the social fabric of multi-ethnic societies. While the problem is not new, the current phase is particularly challenging, given the scope of the manipulation, the ease with which information can be shared, the multiplicity of techniques adopted to do so and the proliferation of actors — individuals, state actors, foreign governments and specialist firms" *(14)*. This summary outlines the specific threat that foreign information manipulation and interference poses to wider democratic progress and resilience across Africa. Positioning people as informed members of the public who are able to critically evaluate information is a first line defense against information manipulation. As a result, civic and digital education emerged as a top priority. It is also worth noting that despite growing evidence of the effectiveness of "prebunking" and "debunking" in combatting disinformation in the "Global North" there is a significant gap in the evidence of what works in other parts of the world, including African countries *(15)*. Ongoing initiatives in parts of Africa include a number of fact-checking platforms, and efforts to equip journalists with the skills to investigate and expose online influence networks. The following would build on these efforts.

Digital Literacy, Civic Engagement, and Public Awareness
- Invest in more research to strengthen the evidence base for effective approaches to countering information influence operations in African countries.
- Enhance digital and civic literacy among leaders, influencers and the general public, integrating these skills into education systems.
- Highlight the tangible negative impacts of information manipulation on everyday life to help raise awareness and heighten the public's sense of urgency about the risks involved in participating in information influence operations.
- Expand public education campaigns on information validation and promote civic education to foster longer-term resilience rather than simply responding to particular influence campaigns in the short-term.

Fact-checking, Media Development, and Ethical Journalism

- Streamline and link established fact-checking platforms in various countries through national and regional networks to enhance the impact of existing efforts.
- Place greater emphasis on the development of citizen-led tools for independent verification.
- Equip journalists with investigative skills to uncover covert operations and foreign influence, supporting innovative and ethical media models.
- Promote ethical journalism practices and professional training, emphasizing the importance of subscription-based and transparent media platforms.
- Support civic actors and think tanks' efforts to develop narratives that challenge key themes in information influence operations and that affirm democratic values in ways that resonate in different contexts and with different populations.

Social Media Regulation, Transparency, and Accountability

- Advocate for responsible content moderation on social media, demanding transparency in platform operations.
- Oppose restrictive regulations, instead promoting non-restrictive educational approaches by, for instance, strengthening partnerships for public awareness and use of content reporting mechanisms, while encouraging governmental and institutional information sharing to counter misinformation.

Governance, Legal Standards, and International Cooperation

- Oppose restrictive regulations, promoting non-restrictive, educational approaches to misinformation.
- Explore effective approaches for international partnerships to advocate for sanctions, asset seizure and other actions in third countries, especially when restrictions limit domestic options and also given the transnational nature of illicit nature of resource flows.

Resilience to Insecurity and "Private" Military Contractors

Many of the conflicts that the Kremlin is exploiting and exacerbating are ultimately the result of governance problems, such as insecure leaders who have gained tenure and position by corrupting democratic processes, and governments' inability to address the popular grievances underlying rising insecurity and instability in their countries. With the rapidly shifting geo-political dynamics on the continent, African regimes can leverage security support from a growing number of external competitors, some of whom, like Russia, implement their security assistance through illicit, opaque avenues that further erode

democracy and further exploit governance problems. Paradoxically, overly securitized responses such as those that the Kremlin offers and that have been part of American and European responses to violent extremism exacerbate the very same governance lapses that drive conflict. Going forward a direct, competitive response to addressing Wagner Group operations – the alternative provision of arms and security arrangements by the West – could also strengthen backsliding regimes, fuel conflict and raise the risk of geopolitically-aligned security rivalries. Improving governance, and aligning external partnerships with the continent's democratic and socio-economic developmental aspirations would help address the roots of discontent and conflict. A democracy resilience strategy is the best approach to countering the Wagner Group, and other Kremlin-backed military and security companies in Africa.

Mercenaries and Military Contractors
- Push for greater transparency in security partnerships, especially with foreign military entities, to safeguard state sovereignty and uphold democratic standards.
- Allocate support to local think tanks and research institutions for in-depth studies on the influence and consequences of mercenaries and PMSCs, including Wagner, to shape effective policy responses.
- Collaborate with the AU's Peace and Security Committee to create and implement strict protocols against the use of mercenaries and PMCs by member states, ensuring alignment with both historical conventions and contemporary policy needs.

Governance and Institutional Strengthening
- Collaborate with the AU and Regional Economic Communities (RECs) to develop mechanisms for early detection and response to unconstitutional changes in governance.
- Advocate for and enforce term limits to prevent governance dysfunctions and the erosion of democratic resilience.
- Encourage regional bodies like SADC and AU to support fair and transparent electoral processes, and conflict resolution efforts that are inclusive and sensitive to local grievances.

Resilience to Illicit, Opaque Financial Flows

The complex network of illicit and opaque financial flows involving Kremlin-backed security contractors, defense contractors and enablers in Africa and elsewhere around the world deprives people in such countries as CAR, Mali and Sudan of a fair share in their country's natural resources while helping to keep unaccountable elites in power. A continent-wide kleptocratic political economy rooted in Kremlin-backed oligarchic

(financial and industrial) relations with dominant political parties and authoritarian regimes enriches the elite while exploiting all societies: natural resources and public wealth plundered in Africa, in fact, deepen the Kremlin's power base. These illicit networks also allow the Kremlin to blunt the effect of sanctions, increase the risk of conflict in source and transit countries and saddle African citizens with high levels of public debt that has been contracted by and enriched individual government officials.

Measures to Protect Financial and Political Ecosystems
- Review and amend regulatory frameworks to cover new and existing assets, including cryptocurrencies and real estate, and mandate public disclosure in high-value sectors.
- Introduce measures to strengthen judicial integrity, beneficial ownership transparency and the integrity of public procurement processes.

Measures to Counteract Financial Exploitation and Corruption
- Expand support and training to help investigative journalists uncover and expose the adverse impacts of illicit resource extractions and human rights violations by foreign entities.
- Strengthen enforcement of the disclosure of political financing and establish mechanisms to void odious debt, preventing financial exploitation by authoritarian regimes.
- Seek ways to standardize sanctions and implement penalties for non-cooperation, including fines, to uniformly penalize violations of financial and political norms.

International Cooperation
- Build support for the implementation of a global standard for the automatic exchange of financial information and require beneficial ownership registration to enhance asset ownership transparency.
- Advocate for unified legal definitions and international financial reporting standards to ensure consistent enforcement across borders and prevent profit shifting and tax evasion.
- Collaborate with international partners and organizations to address illicit financial flows, recover stolen assets, and support governance reforms.
- Build support for the prohibition of secretive financial services and impose penalties for jurisdiction shopping, aiming to close loopholes used for tax evasion and money laundering.
- Explore effective approaches for international partnerships to advocate for sanctions, asset seizure and other actions in third countries, especially when restrictions limit domestic options and also given the transnational nature of illicit nature of resource flows.

IV. CONCLUSION

Amid growing awareness about the ways in which Kremlin influences interact with domestic vulnerabilities to erode democracy, African civil society is still scoping and developing a full understanding of the full extent and nature of the problem; conceptually the problem is understood but it has been harder to pinpoint concrete responses. Therefore, there is not yet a tested base of response, best practice, and lessons learned as to what works in countering Russia and other illiberal actors within Africa that are sensitive to domestic political and threat contexts. While African and international democracy advocates are still playing catch up in these areas, Russia is rapidly adapting its operations on the continent. Finally, while the Kremlin poses transnational threats, differences between various countries and subregions on the continent and language barriers limit the sharing of analysis and lessons learned.

Despite these challenges, the discussion papers and workshop deliberations and outcomes served as an important initial step in identifying potential strategies for greater democratic resilience. To build on these efforts, future initiatives on similar topics should consider examining:

- The extent to which lessons learned from other regions are applicable to Africa and could provide a foundation for peer-to-peer learning and reinforce African civil society response;
- The conditions in which Russia and its proxies have failed – Libya, Moldova, Mozambique and Ukraine – and drawing relevant lessons learned to inform strategies for greater democratic resilience;
- Existing and required African civil society capacity to address the Kremlin threat; and
- Priorities for shoring up democratic resilience and the development of targeted assistance plans.

V. ENDNOTES

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