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# DISINFORMATION IN NIGER

## TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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# DISINFORMATION IN NIGER

## TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Cover photo:** A tailor checks for messages. Niamey, Niger (Credit: Katya Tsvetkova)

### DISCLAIMER

This report was produced by Manisha Aryal, Senior Advisor for Digital Development at Chemonics with inputs from Atlantic Council's Digital Forensics Research Lab, DucoExperts, Logically.ai and Nigerian researchers. The authors' views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of the United States Agency for International Development or the United States government.

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# ACRONYMS

AFRICOM	United States Africa Command
AJN	<i>Association des Journalistes du Niger</i>
ANEPI	<i>Association Nigérienne des Editeurs de la Presse Indépendante</i>
ANLC	<i>Lutte contre la Corruption</i>
APRPN	<i>Association des Promoteurs des Radios Privées du Niger</i>
AQIM	Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ARTI	<i>Association des Radios et Télévisions Indépendantes</i>
CfA	Code for Africa
CGTN	China Global Television Network
CNNC	China National Nuclear Corporation
CSC	Conseil Supérieur de la Communication
CSO	Civil society organization
CT	Counterterrorism
CVE	Countering violent extremism
DFRLab	Atlantic Council Digital Forensics Research Lab
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
GON	Government of Niger
HACP	High Authority on the Consolidation of Peace
ISGS	The Islamic State in the Greater Sahara
ISWAP	Islamic State West Africa Province
JNIM	<i>Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen</i>
KI	Key Informant
NCCI	Niger Community Cohesion Initiative
PNDS	<i>Parti Nigérien pour la Démocratie et le Socialisme</i>
ROSATOM	Russian Atomic Energy Agency
SGI	Security Governance Initiative
SORAZ	<i>Société de Raffinage de Zinder</i>
SSG	Security Sector Governance
SYNTRAPRESSE	<i>Syndicat des Travailleurs de la Presse</i>
TOC	Transnational organized crime
UN	United Nations
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USG	United States Government
VEO	Violent extremist organization

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Coordinated disinformation campaigns – online and offline – seek to sow discord in democracies by subverting elections, undermining trust in public institutions, and shaping public perceptions about politically controversial issues. Among tactics, operators seek to plant and amplify false narratives designed to deepen existing social fractures and create distrust of institutions (and the government, in particular). These tactics leverage disposable social media assets and co-opted “influencers,” often to devastating effect in fragile societies.

Information warfare, unfortunately, does not dissipate without effective counter action. Disinformation tactics are destructive because they manipulate societies through the creation of a majority illusion (wherein perpetrators project the appearance that an idea, opinion, or narrative is more popular than it is) that contributes to societal harm, influence critical decisions, and at the same time erode trust in the very processes used to generate solutions to challenging issues.

Building on an earlier study on transnational organized crime (TOC) in Niger that had identified the increasing spread of disinformation as a threat to stability and an impediment to addressing organized crime, this research sought to answer three questions affecting Niger’s information ecosystem:

- Are the Russians, Chinese, and/or other foreign influence operations running coordinated disinformation campaigns to influence Nigerien elections? Is there evidence of coordinated campaigns? What do they look like online and what purposes do they serve offline?
- What does Covid-19-related misinformation/disinformation look like to social media consumers in Niger? What narratives do they draw from?
- Can we help Nigeriens combat the flow of disinformation into Niger’s media landscape? If yes, how? What short- and long-term strategies might be effective?

While this short-term research (November and December 2020) did find election-related mis- and disinformation in Niger’s social media ecosystem, with periodic spikes corresponding to world events, it did not find instances of election disinformation emanating from Russia or China, nor any evidence of coordinated disinformation campaigns or foreign influence operations related to elections. However, research did find evidence of Russia pushing self-serving narratives to delegitimize U.S. presence in Niger and China using soft power strategies to enhance its legitimacy and protect its political and business interests in Niger.

At the same time, the research found Nigeriens vulnerable to disinformation when actors (including state and non-state actors, and foreign governments) were willing to prey on these weaknesses by targeting populations with false and misleading information. However, the research uncovered opportunities upon which other mechanisms could build to combat the flow of disinformation within the Nigerien information ecosystem by:

- Drawing on the strength of Niger’s close community networks and culture of “*parenté à plaisanterie*,”<sup>1</sup>
- Monitoring emerging disinformation narratives on an ongoing basis;
- Supporting the civil society voices advocating on behalf of democratic norms and processes;
- Supporting a growing press and independent media;
- Leveraging and building on existing disinformation-related programs;
- Investing in ongoing research and targeting disinformation approaches (online and offline) to the specific security situation, foreign military presence, and ethnic makeup of each region.

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<sup>1</sup> “*Parenté à plaisanterie*” is an oral tradition and social practice common in Niger, in which two parties—across ethnicity, village, neighborhood, or social class—poke fun at each other without consequence. This encourages non-violent responses to relieve daily tensions, breaks down barriers in communities, and is an indigenous source of social cohesion, while teaching the parties that they are strongly linked and responsible for the other’s well-being.

## SECTION I

# BACKGROUND, OBJECTIVES, CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGY

## BACKGROUND

The purpose of the Security Sector Governance (SSG) task order, under the International Rule of Law Technical Assistance Services Contract, is to provide technical assistance and analysis on justice, security sector governance, and the rule of law and assist USAID to more effectively assess, design, implement, monitor and evaluate security sector assistance projects. Through the program, USAID is also able to respond to requests for technical assistance in key partner states in support of the August 2014 Presidential Security Governance Initiative (SGI), an initiative to improve justice and security sector governance to address the key domestic and transnational security threats, including violent extremism, illicit trafficking, and domestic and regional conflict.

SGI is an interagency U.S. Government initiative that works in partnership with African governments to strengthen justice and security sector institutional capacity. The project was designed to support SSG activities in the five SGI partner countries, namely Ghana, Kenya, Mali, Niger, and Nigeria, with the goal of building justice and security sector institutional capacity to protect civilians and confront security challenges and threats.

## OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research is to provide USAID with a better understanding of disinformation in Niger. The research is built upon the identification of disinformation as an emerging concern in Niger through an earlier study conducted by the SSG project related to TOC.

This research will serve to:

- Aid in identifying the producers/disseminators of disinformation, understanding types of disinformation,<sup>2</sup> and the pathways of disinformation in the media ecosystem of Niger;
- Provide recommendations for how the U.S. government, Nigerien government, donors, citizens, and their Nigerien partners including local civil society organizations (CSOs) and media could mitigate and/or counter the influence of deliberate disinformation; and
- Explore options for enhanced public, media, civil society, and Nigerien governmental collaborations to mitigate and/or counter the destabilizing effects of TOC and violent extremist organizations (VEOs), specifically in the context of these groups using/leveraging disinformation to further their cause(s).

## CONTEXT

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<sup>2</sup> *Disinformation* is false information deliberately created and strategically deployed to harm people, organizations, communities or countries. It causes social chaos, brings volatility to markets and disrupt political order. Disinformation spreads quickly on social media platforms and through chat apps. *Misinformation*, on the other hand, is false information that is spread regardless of intent to mislead.

An earlier study on TOC in Niger identified the increasing spread of disinformation as a threat to stability and an impediment to addressing organized crime in Niger. The devolving security situation in the Sahel, with limited presence of State institutions in Mali and Burkina Faso, has resulted in increasing terror attacks against civilians and security forces alike. Jihadist groups and VEOs in Mali and Burkina Faso have sought to destabilize democracy in Niger, as well as in the littoral states further to the south along the Gulf of Guinea. These groups have focused on attacking security forces, fueling farmer-herder conflicts, and developing targeted disinformation campaigns aimed at fraying social cohesion. These disinformation campaigns have centered around divisive issues including foreign military presence, minority ethnic groups (e.g. the Tuareg and the Fulani), and the origins of the COVID-19 virus.

Disinformation was among the most prominent concerns cited in multiple national polls in the continent in 2020, especially as many countries have weakened or nonexistent regulations related to privacy and data protection.<sup>3</sup> Research has shown that “African audiences have low levels of trust in the media, experience a high degree of exposure to misinformation, and contribute – often knowingly – to its spread.”<sup>4</sup> Political candidates, foreign governments, and private organizations, among others, have been accused of shaping national polls to alter election outcomes and of creating false profiles or pages to share disinformation and/or slander candidates.

While there are multiple information producers in Niger, including the Nigerien government, private media outlets, foreign governments (including Russia, China, Turkey, France and the U.S.), jihadists, and nomadic ethnic groups (including the Tuareg), desk research did not locate any previous studies that specifically examined the actors and/or the factors in Niger's disinformation ecosystem.

Disinformation requires focused attention because it muddies the media landscape, disrupts established and emerging information pathways, and creates distrust amongst people who need accurate, verifiable, and usable information to live their daily lives. These conditions create an environment where conspiracies thrive and VEOs are able to spin their narratives and garner support – eroding the means to address organized crime.

To begin to address this, it is necessary to understand how people receive their information and disinformation; what types of mis/disinformation is being spread, by whom, and for what purposes; and finally, what strategies and tactics can be deployed to effectively counter mis- and disinformation.

## METHODOLOGY

To understand the spread of disinformation in Niger and its effects on the government, civil society, and the December 2020 elections, this research employed a four-tiered methodology:

- I. **Baseline research** was conducted via interviews with 12 French-speaking experts from Niger, the U.S., and Europe to establish a preliminary understanding of top-line dynamics and trends, and to obtain an initial reading on regional disinformation challenges. The experts were queried on the state of foreign engagement in Niger, and on disinformation,

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<sup>3</sup> Nigerien journalists revamp skills in preparation for the critical 2020 election cycle, NDI, 11 Oct 2019, <https://www.ndi.org/our-stories/nigerien-journalists-revamp-skills-preparation-critical-2020-electoral-cycle>

<sup>4</sup> Madrid-Morales, Dani et al. “Study sheds light on scourge of “fake” news in Africa.” *The Conversation*. (Nov. 2018).



violent extremism, and state capacity. These interviews were conducted by **DucoExperts**, an online marketplace for targeted intelligence gathering.

2. The baseline research was then used to inform the geographic areas where local researchers conducted **key informant (KI) interviews**. Three local researchers with in-depth understanding of sociopolitical dynamics and media research backgrounds were hired to carry out a total of 100 interviews in Niamey and four key regions of Niger: Agadez, Diffa, Maradi, and Tillabéri. In each of the 5 locations listed above, 20 interviews were completed (eight KIs and 12 citizen interviews).
3. Concurrently, **Logically.ai**, an extended intelligence firm conducted **social media reconnaissance** for the research, using artificial intelligence, machine learning and human analysis. Logically set up dashboards using Boolean queries with popular phrases, keywords, and other likely trigger words to probe online chatter emanating both from Niger and neighboring countries. The dashboards were configured to enable Logically to monitor conversations *about* Niger that may travel in/out of Niger’s social media ecosystem, with their investigators *zeroing-in* on information of interest from within that chatter.
4. However, while monitoring dashboards can capture a majority of social media conversations, there are limitations to what a social listening application can access from Facebook, WhatsApp and other closed channels. For example, Facebook only offers analytics for public groups/pages and verified profiles. To fill this gap, the **Digital Forensics Research Lab** (DFRLab) at the Atlantic Council then carried out **social media ecosystem analysis** using open-source investigative techniques to conduct a deeper study of disinformation narratives linked to Niger and its political environment during the leadup to the December elections, and to track indicators of influence operation from countries seeking to direct/manipulate election results. Working with Code for Africa (CfA), DFRLab monitored:
  - a. viral social media posts to identify the authenticity of the information being shared,
  - b. social media networks to identify coordinated behavior and profiling of key influencers spreading disinformation narratives,
  - c. indicators of possible bot or fake persona use on social media platforms in amplifying invested narratives, and
  - d. assets and outlets previously used to influence elections in countries such as Libya and the U.S.

Online disinformation travels fluidly between regions – with broad strokes of disinformation narratives remaining intact, while simultaneously localizing to each region’s vulnerabilities including desertification, farmer-herder conflicts, interethnic friction, and foreign military presence. The SSG project chose this multi-tiered approach to cast a wide net for a comprehensive data sweep and to cross-check information obtained from online as well as offline, on-the-ground sources.

## SECTION 2

# CHALLENGES IN NIGER'S INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

## RULE OF LAW

Niger has staggering poverty and extreme vulnerability to growing climate shocks, stemming from land degradation and severe water shortages. The country has one of the highest population growth rates in the world (with the fertility rate at 6.9 children per woman), resulting in a youth bulge that puts pressure on resources, service delivery and resilience. Compounding this is Niger's geographic position, surrounded by countries experiencing resource conflicts, organized crime, and the increasing influence of VEOs such as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP).

The security situation in Niger continues to deteriorate, with jihadists intensifying their assaults. While there have been losses for the Nigerien army, the *lack* of military presence in most of the country has further fueled frustrations with people losing trust in the government's ability to protect them. On January 9 2020, terrorists killed 89 Nigerien soldiers at their base in Chinegodrar, Tillabéri. Violent criminal groups from Nigeria (from where thousands have fled to Niger due to violent raids on villages, kidnappings, sexual violence, and killings), have crossed over to the southern region of Maradi near the Nigerian border and, since 2019, have started to commit similar attacks. A reliance on non-state armed groups to conduct counterterrorism operations has inflamed intercommunal tensions near the Niger-Mali border, leading to an increase in violence. Furthermore, attacks along the Burkina Faso border have prompted concerns about the potential for a new jihadist hotspot in that area. Attacks against foreign powers is also growing with ISWAP taking responsibility for the August 2020 gunning down of nine French aid workers visiting a giraffe reserve in the Koure region southwest of the capital. Meanwhile, as the government repeatedly extends the state of emergency in the regions of Diffa, Tillabéri, and Tahoua in response to ongoing attacks, civil society groups are alarmed that the government is using the need to meet security challenges posed by active militant groups as an alibi to further restrict civil liberties.

## MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Reporters Without Borders ranks Niger 57<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries and territories in the 2020 World Press Freedom Index. This represents a decline in ranking since Niger's democratic transition in 2010-2011, at which time the country ranked 29<sup>th</sup> and was hailed as an example for its respect for freedom of the press.

Article 100 of Niger's 2010 constitution states that "the Law determines the fundamental principles... of the protection of the freedom of the press and of the access to public information and administrative documents," yet Nigerien journalists report experiencing continued restrictions when covering government decisions and actions. Although Niger's constitution includes freedom of the press, the government and police forces have repeatedly taken action against journalists critical of the government. For example, leaders of the Nigerien

media organization Alternatives Espaces Citoyens, as well as Association Nationale pour la Lutte contre la Corruption (ANLC)'s Mamane Kaka Touda have received repeated threats for their work addressing disinformation and corruption around farmer-herder conflicts, migration, and illicit trade.

Low literacy rates, little to no electricity outside of urban areas, and mobility of the medium makes **radio the media of choice** in Niger. According to in-country KI interviews, Nigeriens list the most reliable sources of information in order of priority as: radio, television, word of mouth, religious leaders and traditional chiefs, followed by social media and chat apps. In addition, this research found that:

- 100% of Diffa interviewees found radio to be the most reliable medium of news; 87% said TV.
- In Niamey, people looked to social media, chat apps, and religious leaders for information.
- For international news, radio was considered the most reliable (e.g. BBC Sahel, Deutsche Welle).
- Citizens primarily depended on their trusted networks of friends and family for local news and information.

In recent years, Nigerien authorities have arrested several journalists and suspended many independent media outlets in an arbitrary manner. Journalist Mamane Kaka Touda of ANLC, for example, was detained in Niamey for having published a social media post in March 2020 about a presumed COVID-19 case at a hospital in Niamey. Journalists are tried and imprisoned under the criminal code instead of under the media law which decriminalizes media offences. The Conseil Supérieur de la Communication (CSC), the main regulatory body in Niger, has been ineffective in protecting media outlets against government abuses. Media organizations such as Association des Journalistes du Niger (AJN), Association Nigérienne des Editeurs de la Presse Indépendante (ANEPI), Association des Promoteurs des Radios Privées du Niger (APRPN), Association des Radios et Télévisions Indépendantes (ARTI) and Syndicat des Travailleurs de la Presse (SYNTRAPRESSE) have united under the umbrella organization “Maison de la Presse” to fight against abuses by the government against the media, but thus far have been ineffective in protecting their journalists.

The information environment is weak with media outlets severely under-resourced. Journalists having limited understanding of political, regional, and international dynamics, and media workers facing threats from multiple state and non-state actors with little legal protections. This has resulted in a weak information ecosystem, with citizens often distrusting the available media content, yet desperately seeking trustworthy and credible information that the Nigerian media seems ill-equipped to provide.

While distrust in media varies by geography and ethnicity, the following are the most **distrusted**:

- State-run media operated by government or military officials (i.e. Le Sahel, Le Républicain, and Sahel Dimanche) – seen as one-sided;
- Opposition run or politically funded media – seen as party-driven and polarizing (i.e. Radio Bouclier, Radio Tenere);

- Foreign media (e.g. RT, China Central TV (CCTV), etc.) – seen to be pursuing their own agenda
- Even independent media was not always viewed as trustworthy due to its limited resources and resultant inability to carry out adept, consistent and investigative reporting. For instance, Radio Sarounia’s news director Moussa Kaka was arrested for interviewing Tuareg rebel leaders. Since then, Radio Sarounia has not been able to mobilize enough financial resources to continue its tradition of in-depth investigative reporting. Facebook and WhatsApp – cited as the *most common* platform of information (close to 100% of KI across regions), *but not viewed as professional and/or credible* sources of news by the majority of KI and the citizens interviewed for this research.

## URBAN-RURAL DIVIDE

In urban areas, WhatsApp and word of mouth were considered the most trusted forms of communication, followed by Facebook, Friday prayers at the mosque, radio, and SMS. There was less agreement on the trustworthiness of phone calls, print media, television, and church groups. In rural areas, radio is seen as the most trusted form of communication, followed closely by word of mouth. There was less agreement on the trustworthiness of phone calls, SMS, Facebook, offline Bluetooth transfer, and television in rural areas.

The trustworthiness of forms of communication in rural areas is also linked to the ability to consume information with limited barriers. For example, forms of communication that do not require high bandwidth, electricity, literacy, or access to complex infrastructure (e.g. radio) are more likely to be routinely used and, over time, considered more reliable and trustworthy.

## DISINFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

January 2020 figures show that less than half of Niger’s 24 million people have mobile phones, but the ownership rate is increasing by 12 percent every year. With the ubiquity of smartphones, cost of connections decreasing, and popularity of social media growing, Nigeriens are steadily migrating to social networks. With the median age at 15.2 years, literacy rate at 20 percent, and years in school less than seven, this wholesale adoption is likely to create even more challenges in the information ecosystem.

Those carrying out disinformation campaigns often target specific populations by capitalizing on and/or exploiting the grievances, vulnerabilities, incentives, and/or suspicions that make each group susceptible to manipulation. For instance, in Diffa (with significant French military presence through Operation Barkhane, and jihadist groups training new recruits) individuals may be more likely to be influenced by security issues, while individuals who live in Niamey may be more likely to be affected by messaging surrounding political affiliations. Similarly, those living in rural areas outside of the capital may be more likely to be influenced by the specifics of local conflicts. Due to this complexity, it is essential to look at social vulnerabilities at multiple levels, including which social groups are most at-risk for specific vulnerabilities, and how these vulnerabilities make people susceptible to influence from others.

## HIGH LIKELIHOOD OF EXPLOITATION BY DISINFORMATION ACTORS

- **Corruption** in the government, both reported and perceived, diminishes trust in local and national authorities. Corruption in media can have an amplifying effect on lack of trust in media itself.

- **Weak rule of law and government institutions** contribute to lack of trust in the government to provide basic services and manage counter terrorism (CT) efforts. Weak institutions contribute to impunity for extrajudicial violence, lack of accountability (particularly for the military), and limited application of rule of law.

#### MODERATE LIKELIHOOD OF EXPLOITATION BY DISINFORMATION ACTORS

- **Poor education and journalistic standards** contribute to lack of rigor around verifying stories before publishing. Low levels of education of most living in rural areas make it more difficult for Nigeriens to critically assess claims in the media. Literacy rates, particularly among women in rural areas, are among the world's lowest.
- **Weak media institutions** contribute to an inability to apply journalistic standards, increasing the likelihood of the infiltration of false stories, rumors, mis- and disinformation, exaggerated accusations, or doctored images into the media. When media is under-resourced, they have limited access to high-quality information to evaluate government performance and understand the nuances of political, social, and economic issues.
- **Insecure reporting environment.** With media organizations facing threats from state and non-state actors, the quality of reporting goes down. Organizations like ANLC and Alternatives Espaces Citoyens who do good investigative work, for example, report they receive constant threats from state and non-state actors
- **Historical cleavages** include both those between Nigerien actors (e.g. disputed land claims rooted in ethnic and/or tribal divisions) and those between Nigerien and foreign actors, including the French colonial legacy.
- **Ethnic Conflicts** contribute to the potential for specific groups to benefit from, support, and/or suffer from discrimination based on affiliation, historical conflicts, and competition over resources. Jihadist groups displaced from Mali, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso have capitalized on ethnic marginalization in the North, further alienating the Tuareg population through targeted disinformation campaigns in order to recruit them into their ranks.
- **Poverty** increases vulnerability to influence from radical groups (e.g. Boko Haram) especially in the border areas with Nigeria. Limited economic opportunities makes it more likely that vulnerable populations will be drawn into illicit activities (e.g. TOC). While poverty does not in itself necessarily lead to crime and extremism, it is a factor which could increase one's susceptibility to seeking lucrative opportunities offered by jihadist groups, including e-cigarette smuggling and small arms trafficking.

#### LOWER LIKELIHOOD OF EXPLOITATION BY DISINFORMATION ACTORS

- **Political affiliations** can exacerbate differences between groups and stir discontent, though given the limited government presence outside of Niamey, farmer-herder conflicts between ethnic groups remain more prominent vulnerabilities to be capitalized upon by VEOs and jihadist groups.
- **Religion** is a shared experience for most Nigeriens in Sunni or non-denominational Islam. While Nigeriens may be susceptible to radicalizing appeals to religion, as demonstrated by the riots following the Charlie Hebdo cartoons, Niger is known for its culture of tolerant

Islam and *parenté à plaisanterie*. Because of this, VEOs such as ISWAP have had difficulties recruiting people on religious grounds, opting instead to fuel ongoing farmer-herder conflicts and aiming to attract youth particularly in Tillabéri, Diffa, and Agadez through economic incentives including e-cigarette trade.<sup>5</sup>

## IDENTIFYING VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Nigeriens, regardless of economic, social, tribal, and political affiliation, from the urban elites to the rural poor, experience some of these societal vulnerabilities on a daily basis. However, several groups were singled out as being most affected by these vulnerabilities:

- Those living in rural environments, specifically the poor rural youth living in border regions that are vulnerable to cross border banditry, terrorist attacks, and limited socioeconomic opportunities, particularly near Tillabéri, the Malian border, and Diffa
- Minority ethnic groups, marginalized nomadic pastoralist minorities, and disenfranchised groups including Tuareg and Fulani nomadic herders, Kanuri farmers in Diffa, women, refugees, and displaced persons from neighboring conflicts in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Nigeria
- Journalists, NGO workers, and CSO and human rights organizations who are vulnerable to harassment from state actors and VEOs including ISWAP

In sum, susceptibility to external influence due to socioeconomic vulnerabilities is rarely the result of one factor. Multiple overlapping and mutually reinforcing vulnerabilities, over time, create a space for influence by non-state and state actors. These vulnerabilities are exploited as levers of influence for disinformation campaigns. Both state and non-state actors exploit vulnerabilities in Niger by spreading disinformation. These include:

## DISINFORMATION ACTORS

### Nigerien Actors

- **Nigerien state actors**, such as politicians, the incumbent government, and opposition leaders who exploit social weaknesses in Niger including interethnic conflicts

### Non-state Actors

- **Jihadist groups and VEOs** such as Boko Haram (particularly in Diffa), ISWAP, Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Al Murabitoun, Ansar Dine, Jamaat Nusrat al-Islam wal Muslimeen (JNIM), Islamic State in the Greater Sahel (ISGS) (particularly in Tillabéri), and others. These groups exploit socioeconomic vulnerabilities to fuel ongoing farmer-herder conflicts, recruit from the local population, and create local discontent which, in turn, creates an environment ripe for fraying social cohesion, political instability, and insurgency
- **Criminal organizations** involved in TOC networks (e.g., involved in e-cigarette trade, small arms and light weapons smuggling, migrant smuggling to Libya by Toubou and Tuareg tribes, or cocaine and cannabis resin sale as seen under the now-deceased Cherif Ould Abidine in Agadez)

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<sup>5</sup>[https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Rapport%20de%20l%27e%CC%81tude%20sur%20les%20facteurs%20de%20radicalisation\\_%20CNESS%20%28I%29.pdf](https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/Rapport%20de%20l%27e%CC%81tude%20sur%20les%20facteurs%20de%20radicalisation_%20CNESS%20%28I%29.pdf)

## Foreign Governments

- **Chinese state and private actors** are adept at recognizing where societal vulnerabilities create economic opportunities. They seize these through a comprehensive engagement strategy that includes governmental, economic, social, developmental, and military engagements. China develops the media spheres of countries it invests in, targeting the Nigerien population in an attempt to generate broad support for their activities. Experts reflected on the success of China's policy on non-interference in domestic political affairs (such as democracy promotion and human rights) in successfully ingratiating itself with leaders who are themselves partially the cause of societal vulnerabilities. For example, China National Nuclear Corporation (CNNC)'s investments into Niger are predominantly infrastructure investments and other support have included road improvement to help connect to markets and for trade. These efforts have made China the privileged partner of the ruling class in Niger. This is significant because while the Chinese presence in Niger is more limited compared to other African countries, it is likely to expand with increased investment.
- **Russian state and private actors.** The extent of Russian exploitation of Nigerien societal vulnerabilities to date is unclear. However, elsewhere in Africa, Russia has acted as a spoiler to U.S. and Western interests, and has interfered in domestic politics in Ghana, Nigeria, Mozambique, Cameroon, Sudan and Libya through Facebook influence campaigns. There is also evidence that Russia has attempted to sway election results in Africa through online disinformation campaigns. Similarly, Russia is also likely to attempt to generate public support for their activities.

### PAN-AFRICAN ACCOUNTS

Pan-African groups are one of the primary sources of the anti-Western and predominantly anti-French sentiment. We identified several Facebook groups in French; there are few [Twitter accounts](#) in English. The French segment seems to be more active and aggressive.



Example from Twitter



Example from Facebook: "What are they still doing in Africa? We the people demand the departure of this retrograde, colonial and predatory force."

- **The French, the U.S., and the E.U.** were seen as attempting to promote a positive perception of their security role in Niger and, in some cases, ensuring access to Niger’s mineral resources. (The U.S. Air Base 201 is some three miles southeast from Agadez; France has four bases: in Niamey, in Aguelal and Madama near the Algerian and Libyan borders, and one in Diffa, with Operation Barkhane).
- **Turkish state and private actors:** Turkey leans on shared religious beliefs, economic investments, and diplomatic engagements to generate public support for activities in Niger.

The chart below highlights findings on the type of messaging spread by these actors:

Actor	Example of Messaging Topics	Goal
<i>VEOs</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nigerien human rights violations</li> <li>• Provision of humanitarian support to underserved population</li> <li>• Stigmatization of migrants and refugees</li> <li>• French and U.S. concealment of civilian casualties</li> <li>• French and U.S. exploitation of minerals sector</li> <li>• Glorifying recent terror attacks</li> <li>• Undermining Nigerien government on the basis that it is insufficiently Islamic</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain influence, sympathizers, and recruits</li> <li>• Undermine Nigerien government</li> <li>• Undermine Western countries</li> </ul>
<i>TOC</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Travelling to Europe</li> <li>• Successful migration stories</li> <li>• Economic opportunities</li> <li>• Employment from joining TOC network</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage migration</li> <li>• Support human trafficking</li> <li>• Generate recruits</li> </ul>
<i>Local Actors</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• History of land rights / claims</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Generate support for land claims</li> </ul>
<i>Russia</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bolster or tarnish reputation of political leader or party</li> <li>• Exaggerate local conflicts</li> <li>• CT civilian casualties</li> <li>• Benefits of resource extraction initiatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain strategic influence</li> <li>• Weaken perception of the U.S.</li> <li>• Influence Nigerien politics</li> <li>• Promote resource extraction initiatives</li> </ul>
<i>China</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• US interference in domestic politics</li> <li>• Benefits of resource extraction initiatives</li> <li>• Benefits of Chinese partnership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain strategic influence</li> <li>• Weaken perception of the U.S.</li> <li>• Promote economic initiatives</li> </ul>
<i>France</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong partnership with government</li> <li>• Importance of CT operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain strategic influence</li> </ul>
<i>Turkey</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Benefits of bilateral engagements</li> <li>• Benefits of infrastructure development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain strategic influence</li> </ul>
<i>Govt. of Niger</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Successful CT efforts</li> <li>• Anti-corruption campaigns</li> <li>• Positive development milestones</li> <li>• Tarnishing opposition party members</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustain influence, legitimacy</li> <li>• Demonstrate competence</li> <li>• Serve the interests of the party</li> </ul>
<i>United States</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong partnership with government</li> <li>• Importance of CT operations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain strategic influence</li> </ul>



Several potential impacts of disinformation in Niger include:

- Undermining the legitimacy of the Nigerien government and contributing to instability
- Manipulating the integrity of democratic processes including free and fair elections
- Creating confusion, fear, and stigma surrounding public health issues, including COVID-19
- Harming CT efforts by sowing suspicion about French and U.S. activities and intentions
- Disrupting social cohesion by fomenting unrest and triggering violence around sensitive issues

## CONTEXT SPECIFIC DISINFORMATION

It may be important to focus on the trends in disinformation in each region and the intent of the disinformation actors to assess future trigger points in the region:

- Regional disinformation campaigns focused on *Operation Barkhane* – a French-led military operation to support G5 Sahel countries in the fight against violent extremism – emanates both from Niger and from neighboring Mali. Both Russia and China amplify disinformation surrounding *Operation Barkhane* to fuel anti-French sentiment.
- In regions like Diffa, campaigns against *Operation Barkhane* are highly effective because they focus their frustrations towards the French military presence, rather than against the Russian and Chinese mining operations in the region.
- In Agadez, campaigns target the U.S. Air Base 201 to drive anti-American sentiment.
- Most gold and uranium mining operations are more than 500 miles northeast of the capital Niamey on the southern border of the Sahara Desert, where there is practically no government presence. It is possibly a strategic calculation by the Russians and the Chinese that elections make no difference, thus are not worthy of disinformation investment.

Focusing on region-specific trends that might be less present on social media is important because they allow one to better assess future trigger points to inform programming.

## MEDIA REGULATION

In a plenary session on June 25, 2019, the Niger National Assembly adopted Bill 0267 (on the fight against cybercrime) with an aim to regulate the use of digital technology in Niger. "In the light of the recurring abusive behavior observed in the use of digital technologies, it is not exaggerated to consider that these constitute today a vector of potential and permanent risks for the security of States, for the achievement of business, for the competitive strategy of businesses and above all for the privacy of citizens," a GON spokesperson explained.

Some provisions of the law criminalize specific offenses around online defamation committed under the following Articles:

- *Article 28: Blackmail by electronic means of communication* "Shall be punished with a term of imprisonment of two (2) to seven (7) years and a fine of five million (5,000,000) to twenty (20,000,000) CFA francs,<sup>6</sup> anyone who, by means of the threat of breaches of confidentiality, the integrity of computer data or by any form 'breach of confidentiality or

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<sup>6</sup> At the time of writing, \$1 USD was equal to 539.825 CFA francs (Oanda, accessed on January 15, 2021).

the functioning of the computer system, extorts or attempts to extort, either the delivery of funds or values, or the signature or delivery of written documents.”

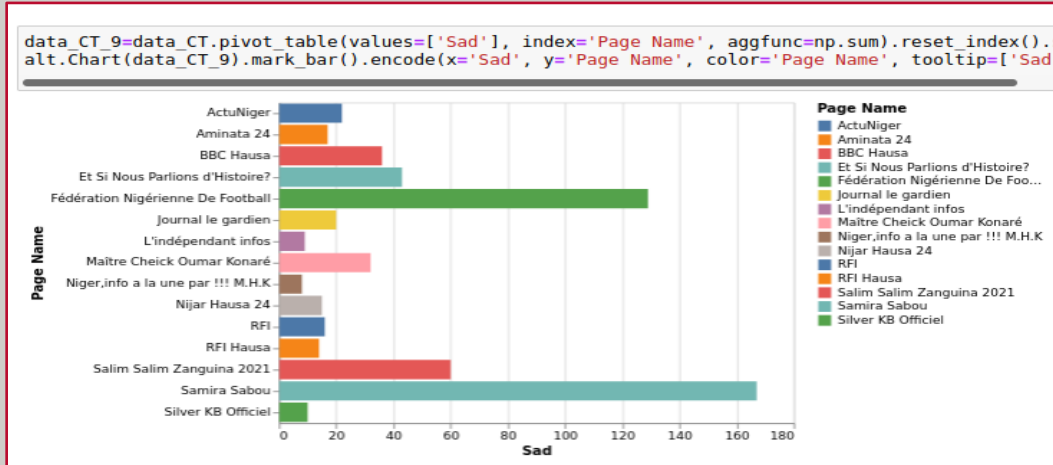
- *Article 29: Defamation by means of communication* "Shall be punished with imprisonment of six (6) months to three (3) years and a fine of one million (1,000,000) to five million (5,000,000) CFA francs, anyone who commits a defamation by means of electronic communication.”
- *Article 30: Injury by electronic means of communication* "Shall be punished with a prison sentence of six (6) me to three (3) years and a fine of one million (1,000,000) to five million (5,000,000) CFA francs, whoever utters any offensive expression, any term of contempt or any invective which does not include the attribution of any fact, by the means of an electronic means of communication.”
- *Article 31: Dissemination of false news* "Is punished by a prison sentence of six (6) months to three (3) years and a fine of one million (1,000,000) to five million (5,000,000) CFA francs, when a person to produces, make available to others or disseminate data likely to disturb public order or undermine human dignity through an information system.”
- *Article 32: Comments of a racist, regionalist, ethnic, religious or xenophobic nature* "Is punished with a prison sentence of one (1) to five (5) years and one million (1,000,000) to five million (5,000,000) CFA francs fine, whoever creates, disseminates or makes available, in any form whatsoever, writings, messages, photos, sounds, videos, drawings or any other representation of ideas or theories, of a racist, regionalist, ethnic, religious or xenophobic nature, through of an information system.”

The bill defines cybercrime as "all criminal offenses committed by means of or over a telecommunications network or information system" and provides guidance mandating sentences of 3 months to 7 years, depending on the type of case above. The adoption of this law sparked controversy with the public, especially on social media networks, on the risks of hindering freedom of expression or opinion, rights guaranteed by Niger’s constitution.

## CASE STUDY

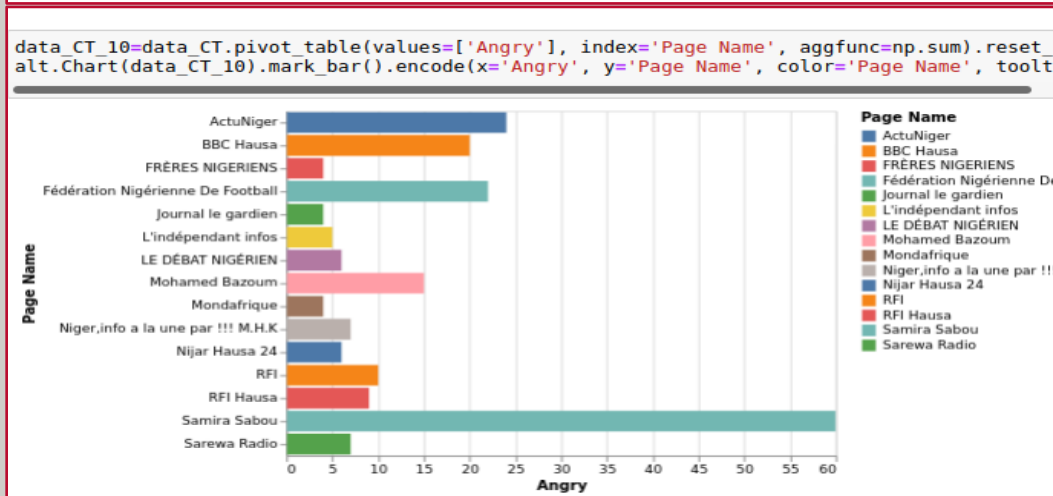
DFRLab analyzed the trending topics on Facebook and identified the top Nigerien pages that have the biggest audience in the country. Analysis of the reactions to posts revealed that, of pages dedicated to individual people, those for Mohamed Bazoum (the ruling party's candidate for president) and Samira Sabou (a journalist) received some of the highest volume of interactions.

Facebook page “Samira Sabou” was dedicated to a journalist who was indicted and charged with defamation by means of electronic communication on June 10, 2020, and immediately transferred to prison in Niamey.



The accounts with the most “sad” (top) and most “angry” (bottom) reactions to posts on Facebook.

(Source: CfA via CrowdTangle)



Sani Mahamadou Issoufou, son and deputy chief of staff of the president of Niger, had filed a complaint against her after a Facebook user mentioned his name in a comment responding to Sabou's post. The post and comment discussed allegations of corruption after an audit of the Ministry of Defense revealed embezzlements amounting to 76 billion CFA francs (around €115 million) from the public coffers between 2017 and 2019. The funds were intended for purchase of military equipment. Notably, Sabou had not mentioned Mahamadou by name.

Amnesty International called it a crackdown on human rights defenders, activists, and journalists who spoke about allegations of corruption after the ministry's audit report leaked.

## SOCIAL MEDIASPHERE

In Niger, an analysis of the general interactions on Facebook for the period October 1, 2020, and December 31, 2020, showed that there were periodic spikes in social media chatter corresponding to real-world events (in order left to right in the graph below):



Readout showing the seven spikes in interactions around the major events listed below. (Source: CFA via CrowdTangle)

1. October 31, 2020: Rescue of a U.S. citizen taken hostage in Niger by U.S. special operations forces;


2. November 8-10, 2020: The submission of presidential applications by 41 candidates:

3. November 14, 2020: The approval and rejection of presidential candidates;

4. November 25, 2020: The death of Mamadou Tandja, former president of Niger:

**Nigerian Music Promo**  
Nov 25, 2020 at 3:16 AM

Biography of the former president of the Republic of Niger Mamadou Tandja Source: By ngrzamani in President Mamadou Tandja on January 9, 2014 at 03:32 President Mamadou Tandja - December 1999 to February 2010....  
[See more](#)



**The Fatu Network**  
Nov 25, 2020 at 4:36 AM

NIAMEY, Niger -- Former Niger President Mamadou Tandja has died at age 82, the government said Tuesday. Tandja, who was elected to lead Niger twice from 1999 to 2010, was eventually overthrown in a coup d'etat...  
[See more](#)

438 210 22

**Calls on News - RFI**  
Nov 25, 2020 at 2:12 PM

Niger is in mourning. Former President Mamadou Tandja has died at the age of 82. From his election in 1999 to his overthrow by a military putsch in 2010 after having wanted to cling to power, what will be remembered...  
[See more](#)

501 123 31

5. December 13-16, 2020: Local, municipal, and regional elections in Niger;

**Oumarou Abdourahmane**  
Dec 13, 2020 at 2:17 PM

Nigerien, Nigeriens My dear compatriots I wanted to address you on the occasion of these local elections, This Sunday, December 13, you are called to vote for your municipal and regional councilors. At the UNPP INCIN...  
[See more](#)



**Presidency Of The Republic...**  
Dec 13, 2020 at 2:50 PM

Local and regional elections this Sunday, December 13, 2020 in Niger The President of the Republic asks all voters to go out on a massive scale to carry out their duty in peace and congratulates all the political parties...  
[See more](#)



**Mahamadou Issoufou**  
Dec 13, 2020 at 2:51 PM

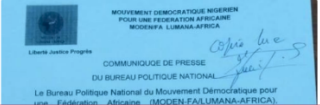


797 68 47

6. December 13-16, 2020: Opposition party leader and disqualified presidential candidate Hama Amadou issues his endorsement of presidential candidate Mohamane Ousmane:


**Hama Amadou**  
Dec 23, 2020 at 1:23 AM

SUPPORT FROM MODEN / FA LUMANA AFRICA TO PRESIDENT MAHAMANE OUSMANE IN THE FIRST ROUND OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF DECEMBER 27, 2020 The Political Bureau of the Democratic...  
[See more](#)



**Mohamed Bazoum**  
Dec 23, 2020 at 1:10 AM

Niger: Mohamed Bazoum, objective, "Reduce poverty and give jobs to young  
WAKATSER.A.COM




868 79 53

**RFI**  
Dec 23, 2020 at 4:00 PM

A few days before the #Niger elections, the opposition party calls on its supporters to vote for former president Mahamane Ousmane

**Presidential election in Niger: the Moden Fa Lumana party calls for a vote for Mahamane**  
RFI.FR




700 63 29

**Hama Amadou for the Presi...**  
Dec 23, 2020 at 12:53 AM

7. December 27, 2020: Presidential elections in Niger:

**Dr. Malika Issoufou -First La...**  
Dec 27, 2020 at 3:25 PM

The presidential couple of Niger, voted this Sunday morning, December 27, 2020 within the framework of the legislative and presidential elections, The President of the Republic and the First Lady Dr. Lalla Malika...  
[See more](#)



4.8K 435 278


**PLO Lumumba**  
Dec 27, 2020 at 12:16 PM

We wish the People of Central African Republic(CAR) and Niger well as they vote today,Sunday 27th December, 2020. Let peace and justice prevail. ~ Prof. PLO Lumumba

3.3K 133 58

**Mohamed Bazoum**  
Dec 27, 2020 at 6:16 PM


**Presidential Niger: Mohamed Bazoum, between satisfaction and serenity after**  
KPAKPATOMEDIAS.COM



1.8K 184 65


**Mahamane Ousmane**  
Dec 27, 2020 at 12:57 PM

Militants, militants and allies, We have just exercised our civic and electoral duty for the first round of the presidential election. Let us remain united around the ideals and programs of RDR-Tchanji. We expect a...  
[See more](#)



**Pdci24**  
Dec 27, 2020 at 8:39 PM

NIGER: PRESIDENTIAL AND LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS 2020 President Mahamadou Issoufou voted for the last time as President of the Republic. He thus ends his second and last term. He did not tamper with the...  
[See more](#)



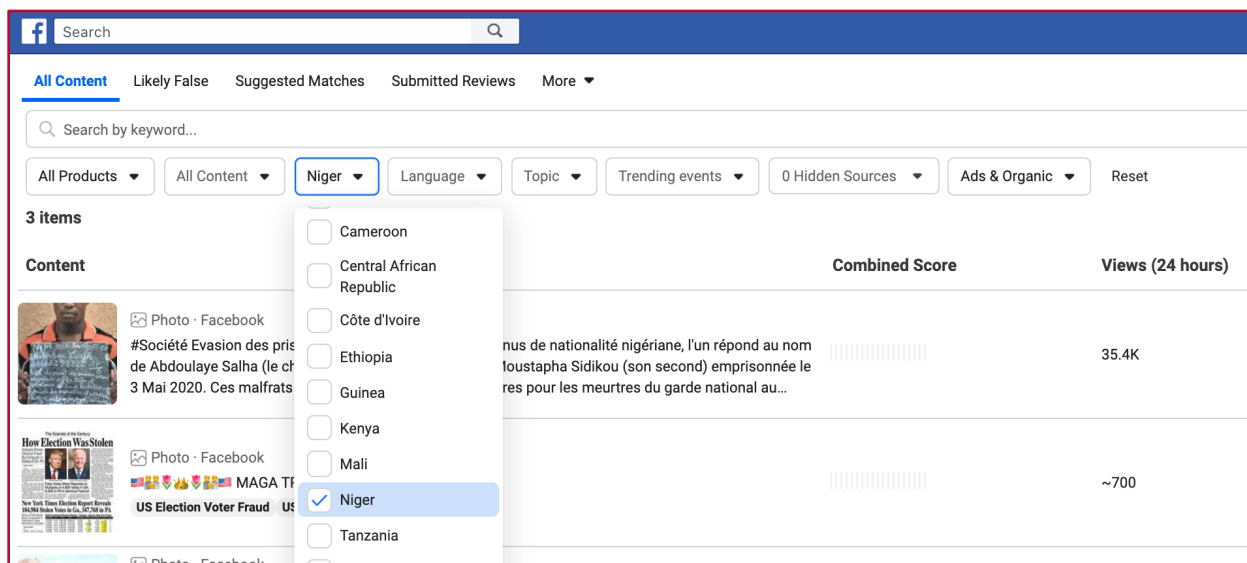
## SECTION 3

# RESEARCH, ANALYSIS, AND INSIGHTS



This research looked at mis- and disinformation targeting the Nigerien general election, held on December 27, 2020. Mohamed Bazoum, the ruling party candidate for president, won 39.3 percent of the vote, according to provisional results announced by the nation's electoral commission on January 2, 2021. However, this fell short of the 50 percent needed to win the presidency and a second round of voting will occur in February, in which Bazoum, an ally of current President Mahamadou Issoufou, will square off against former president Mahamane Ousmane in the runoff. Ousmane collected 17 percent of the vote in the first round. The runoff vote is set for February 21, once the results of the first round have been validated by the constitutional court.

## DISINFORMATION ACTORS AND PATHWAYS

During preliminary analysis, the in-country researchers confirmed that the two primary platforms used to disseminate information publicly in Niger are Facebook and WhatsApp. These platforms were the main focus for DFRLab when identifying, monitoring, and reporting on mis- or disinformation and influence operations in Niger. Together with [PesaCheck](#), an independent fact-checking network incubated by CfA, DFRLab monitored the AI-driven Facebook misinformation and disinformation queue (composed of flagged posts taken from Facebook) to identify what might warrant further investigation.



The screenshot shows the Facebook search interface with a dropdown menu open for the 'Niger' filter. The search results table is as follows:

Content	Combined Score	Views (24 hours)
 Photo · Facebook #Société Evasion des pris de Abdoulaye Salha (le cf 3 Mai 2020. Ces malfrats	nus de nationalité nigériane, l'un répond au nom Ioustapha Sidikou (son second) emprisonnée le res pour les meurtres du garde national au...	35.4K
 Photo · Facebook US Election Voter Fraud US		~700

Screenshot from Facebook queue showing the results of a search for Niger. (Source: Facebook)

One post included the use of a manipulated image attempting to portray the court as aligned with the ruling PNDS-Tarayya party in its approval of, and support for, presidential candidates. However, this seems to have been an isolated case of an opposition supporter who manipulated the image and shared it on social media.

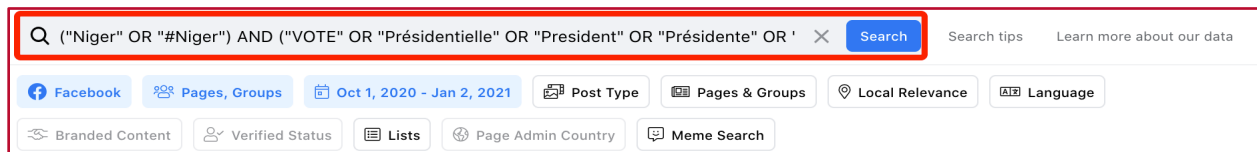
DFRLab also identified a case in which a Facebook user account posted a false claim that opposition leader Hama Amadou was still in the presidential race, despite the fact that the viability of his candidacy had been rejected by the constitutional court.

Other identified claims included:

- A fake political poster claiming that Niger’s first lady, Dr. Lalla Malika Issoufou, was a candidate for parliament; and
- A false claim that a judge in a court in Diffa, who presided over Mohamed Bazoum’s court case that cast doubts around his nationality and eligibility to participate in the presidential race, had declared himself incompetent.

DFRLab also monitored other social platforms such as Twitter, and closed communication platform WhatsApp. The level of interaction on Twitter indicated that the platform is not widely used in the country. Identification of suspicious viral or trending topics, hashtags, and terms on Twitter are usually a key indicator for manipulation. They provide key insights on coordinated behavior, whether authentic or inauthentic, and give a clear indication of influence operations from foreign actors. This is mainly through use of bots and fake personas on the platform. For the period monitored, DFRLab did not identify any topics that trended on Twitter in the country.

During the monitoring period, both DFRLab and Logically.ai used a variety of search terms to identify election-related posts on Facebook, using publicly available data from CrowdTangle. However, they were unable to find any coordinated attempts to target the elections at the time of the report.



Example search string (cut off by search bar) using CrowdTangle. (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle)

## WHAT EFFECT/IMPACT ARE WE SEEING ON THE GROUND?

The research did not find any disinformation operation or coordinated influence campaign directly attributable to Russia or China that targeted the Nigerien elections. The insignificant number of social media posts and media articles from Russia and China reflects a lower dedication of resources to covering the presidential elections in the country, rather focusing instead on protecting their economic interests outside of the capital by targeting foreign military presence.

However, social media landscape monitoring did find evidence that the two countries exhibited a stronger preference for the ruling party candidate Mohamed Bazoum, considered both locally and internationally to be the frontrunner for the presidency. Articles published on Russia-owned outlets, such as *RT* and *Sputnik*, as well as the Chinese Embassy in Niger’s posts regarding China’s relationship with the GON, were the strongest signs of possible support for Bazoum.

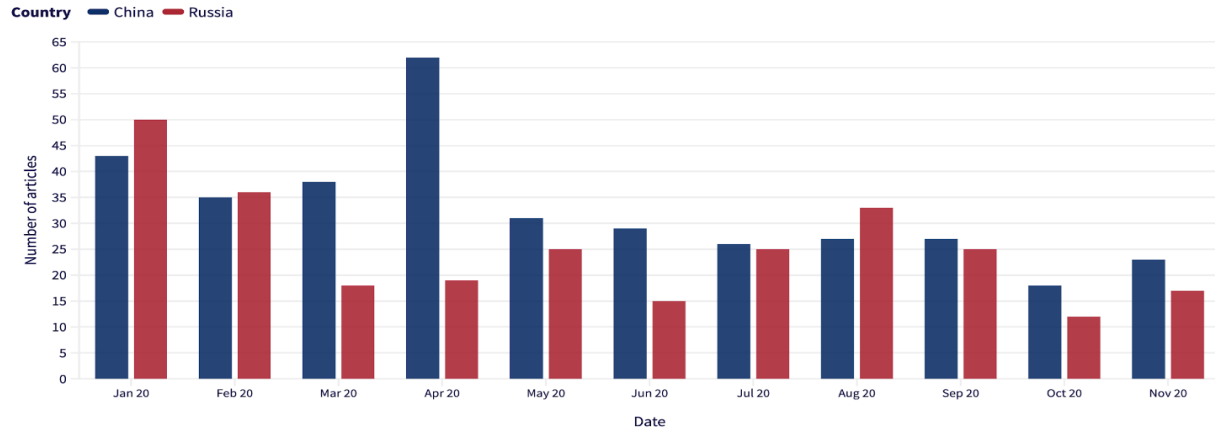
As a possible indicator of the level of interest both Russia and China have in Niger, DFRLab collected articles posted on previously identified propaganda or disinformation media outlets

from both countries and assessed the level of interactions on Facebook to identify articles that had more than a thousand interactions.

Between January 2020 and November 2020, Chinese outlets published significantly more articles discussing Niger in comparison to Russian outlets.

### Volume of news articles on Niger

Between January and November 2020, Chinese news sites published significantly more articles on Niger as compared to Russian news sites



Sources: Articles published on RT, Sputnik(Russia),CCTV, CGTN, China Daily and Xinhua(China)

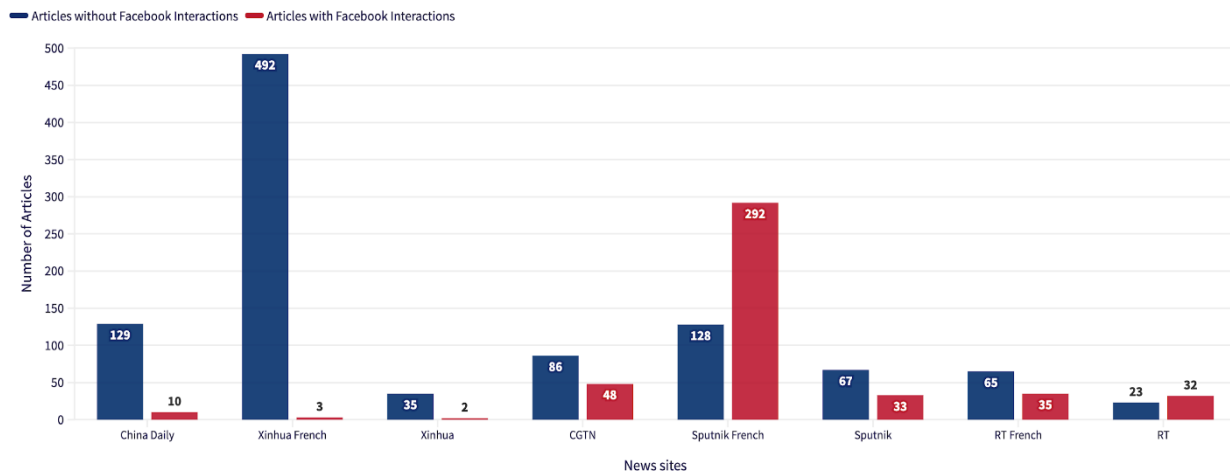


Monthly volume of articles from Russian and Chinese state-owned news outlets. (Source: CfA via Flourish)

Despite this difference, however, the articles published on Russian outlets received a greater volume of interaction on Facebook in comparison to those from Chinese outlets.

### Volume of news articles on Niger with Facebook interactions

Articles published on Russian outlets had more Facebook interactions as compared to articles from Chinese outlets



Sources: Articles published on RT, Sputnik(Russia),CCTV, CGTN, China Daily and Xinhua(China)

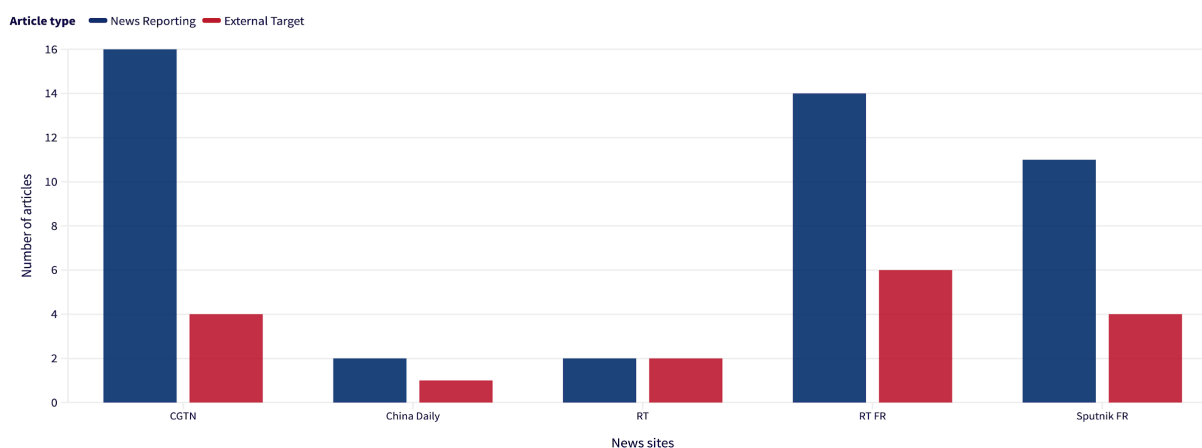


Facebook interactions with articles from Russia and China state-owned news outlets. (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle/ Flourish)  
All articles that had more than 1,000 interactions on Facebook were then divided into one of three categories (based on the article content or the writer’s tone):



- **News Reporting** - Straight reporting; articles that only shared events that happened in the country or internationally with no clear intent to target specific individuals or share specific disinformation narratives.
- **Targeting Niger** - Articles that targeted the Nigerien information space, mainly covering events happening in the country and empowering the relationship between Russia/China and Niger.
- **External Target** - Articles that targeted countries that have a relationship with Niger. This included articles that discredited the involvement of countries such as the U.S. and France in the fight against extremism in the country.

#### Classification of news articles on Niger



Sources: Articles published on RT, Sputnik(Russia),CGTN and China Daily



*Classification of articles with more than 1,000 interactions on Facebook, in terms of percent of overall articles published by the outlet that mentioned or focused on Niger. (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle/ Flourish)*

## INFLUENCE OPERATIONS FROM RUSSIA

Russia’s pivot to Africa has been well documented by a range of European and North American policy analysts and specialist think tanks, indicating a pursuit of strategic mineral access and trade relations. However, despite growing momentum behind this pivot, Russia’s footprint on the continent is still modest from an economic perspective. Russian trade with sub-Saharan Africa stood at \$3 billion in 2017, just before the pivot was announced. The latest statistics put it at \$4 billion in 2018. Although this is a 25 percent year-on-year increase, it is still not comparable with the scale of sub-Saharan Africa trade with the U.S. (\$27 billion) or China (\$56 billion) in 2018. China’s growth in investment over the five years to October 2019, for example, increased by \$24 billion and overtook the U.S. in doing so. Investment volumes by the U.S. and the U.K. hardly changed over this period, while overall French investment decreased by \$3 billion.

Analysts have used a number of indicators to assess the risk posed by Russian influence operations in Africa, including a set of signals developed by the Center for New American Security that help identify unique Russian influence operations, along with a threat matrix developed by Joseph Siegle for identifying Russia’s target countries and thematic issues as

shown.<sup>7</sup> In Siegle’s table, below, it appears that Niger is not currently conventionally considered a primary target for Russia.

Initiative	Key African Target Countries
Natural Resources	Angola, Botswana, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Egypt, Ghana, Guinea, Libya, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sudan, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Arms Sales	Algeria, Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Nigeria, Sudan, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe
Security Cooperation	Angola, Central African Republic, Egypt, Madagascar, Mozambique, Somalia, Somaliland, South Africa, Sudan
Counter Terrorism	Chad, Nigeria, Somalia
Nuclear Power Technology	Angola, Egypt, Ethiopia, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Sudan, Zambia
Hydropower Construction	Angola, Equatorial Guinea, Namibia, Zambia
Railway Construction	Angola, Guinea, Nigeria

Siegle’s Russia Influence Threat Matrix. (Source: NSI)

The threat matrix does, however, include a number of other West African and regional countries who are directly involved with Niger, including Libya, Algeria, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, and Chad.

There are early indications that Russia may be preparing to deepen relations with Niger, leveraging already established ties with the current Nigerien government and banking on the successful election of Mohamed Bazoum. Elsewhere in the world, Russia has cemented its influence and bolstered local political decision-makers most sympathetic to Russian interest by using information warfare to discredit Western interests and show itself as a preferred business partner. This usually includes the use of disinformation campaigns spearheaded by four principal sets of actors:

- *Russian government institutions*, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and, occasionally, President Vladimir Putin himself;
- *Russian state-owned media outlets*, RT (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik*, which have French, Spanish, English, and Arabic language publications, as well as a constellation of Russian-controlled proxy media outlets;
- *Private political advisory or private military companies (PMCs)*, such as Wagner Group, which engage in military assistance and disinformation tactics on behalf of Moscow; and
- *Co-opted or client African media*, such as the Russian-funded Lengo Songo FM in the Central African Republic

<sup>7</sup> Siegle, Joseph. “Russia Strategic Intentions White Paper.” *Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)* publication series, NSI. (May 2019). <https://nsiteam.com/sma-white-paper-russian-strategic-intentions/>

## THEMATIC ISSUES

The following articles show indicators of Russian interests, inclination of support for the ruling party candidate, and continuous sowing of influence operations in Niger.

**[“Clean & honest broker lacking colonial baggage: Russia investing in Africa's huge energy potential,” RT, May 16, 2019.](#)**<sup>8</sup> (Targeting Niger and African countries in general)

The article did not garner significant engagement on Facebook (16 interactions from two public posts to Facebook pages). It focused on energy problems, specifically electricity distribution, on the continent and highlighted how Russian deals to finance, construct, and operate nuclear facilities is particularly appealing to African countries such as Niger. With a focus on the Russian Atomic Energy Agency (ROSATOM), Russia's state corporation headquartered in Moscow that specializes in nuclear energy, the contract terms would entail a “build-own-operate” format in which Russia retains ownership of the plant while the energy is sold to the host country. Such deals are particularly attractive for countries lacking the necessary infrastructure, in part because Moscow is responsible for disposal of the nuclear waste, relieving host countries of the burden of nuclear waste storage.

The article, echoing Kremlin messaging, says that Moscow is reusing its “successful” Middle East strategy consisting of diplomacy, energy, and security. Research performed by the RAND Corporation described contemporary Russian strategy in the Middle East as a resource and opportunity dependent approach that seeks short-term economic, political, and security advantages while reducing those of its prospective competitors, particularly the United States.<sup>9</sup> This strategy is already at play in African countries - including the Central African Republic, Libya, and Sudan - where Russia has established a presence. The Kremlin also presents itself as a “clean” and honest broker lacking the colonial background of most Western countries. This portrayal is somewhat accurate when it comes to Africa, given Russia's lack of interest in the continent - unlike many other European countries - during colonial times. Africa's relative instability and need for cheap energy makes it a good match for Russia, which is looking to expand its global presence and find new markets for critical industries such as energy.

**[“Guardian cries ‘Russians are coming’ amid new scramble for Africa,” RT, June 11, 2019.](#)**<sup>10</sup> (Targeting Niger and African countries in general)

This article did not garner significant interactions on Facebook (184 total interactions from four public posts to pages) either. The article highlighted how “Western powers” that once colonized Africa keep finding themselves drawn back to the continent over its vast mineral riches and, in order to divert attention, blame Russia instead for exploiting African countries for the same reason. It further mentions that Moscow's military cooperation deals with African states are depicted to have sinister motives, though they basically involve maintenance of legacy weapons systems and the purchase of new ones. Quoting a former British diplomat, the article

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<sup>8</sup> “Clean & honest broker lacking colonial baggage: Russia investing in Africa's huge energy potential,” RT, May 16, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/business/459478-russia-invest-africa-energy-potential/>

<sup>9</sup> “The limits of Russian strategy in the Middle East,” RAND Corporation, November 2019, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE340/RAND\\_PE340.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE300/PE340/RAND_PE340.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> “Guardian cries ‘Russians are coming’ amid new scramble for Africa,” RT, June 11, 2019, <https://www.rt.com/news/461642-guardian-russia-coming-africa/>

mentions that Russia’s actions are not different from what the U.S. or the U.K. have been doing on a much greater scale. The RT article also attacks - including through unsupported charges - the writers of an article published by British newspaper *The Guardian* that focused on Russian interests in Africa, saying “[co-author Jason] Burke is a Guardian correspondent based in Johannesburg, South Africa, while [co-author Luke] Harding was based in Moscow, and is known as a purveyor of many a tall tale about Russia.” RT’s article was rife with other errors, exaggerations, and name-calling.

## QANON AND RUSSIA CONNECTION

Several instances of QAnon conspiracy theories were found in the region’s social media. While QAnon is not popular in Niger, pro-Russian groups, such as the Facebook group Africa Supports Vladimir Putin incorporate QAnon messages into their content.

The image shows two screenshots of Facebook posts. The left screenshot is from a post by 'L'Afrique soutient Vladimir Poutine' dated December 17, 2020. The text in the post reads: "Ya des choses qui se passent dans ce monde. 'Ils disent que nous sommes une secte. Nous ne sommes pas une secte.' Eux, ce sont les QAnon, un mouvement de plus en plus influent dont la cible principale est 'l'État profond' qui se cacherait derrière l'assassinat de JFK ou le 11-Septembre. Voilà ce en quoi ils croient...". Below the text is a video thumbnail showing a large red sign that says 'QANON' with 'Brut.' and 'Tous.' overlaid. The right screenshot is from a post by 'Pour La Paix Dans Le Monde' dated December 17, 2020. The text in the post reads: "Info Écouter ça MASQUES LIBÉRÉS: COVID 19 - DESTRUCTION SPÉCIALE Ce n'est rien de plus qu'une guerre mondiale de destruction totale. Les gens commencent à comprendre que l'auto-isolément n'est rien de plus que l'autodestruction de la part des propriétaires d'argent. Et ils essaient de transformer cette autodestruction en autodéfense et en auto-organisation. Leurs plans échouent déjà et l'humanité du monde entier se réveille progressivement. Valentin Katasonov. QAnon Russie". Below this is another post by 'Вячеслав Туманов' dated December 17, 2020, with text in Russian: "МАСКИ СБРОШЕНЫ: КОВИД 19 - СПЕЦОПЕРАЦИЯ НА УНИЧТОЖЕНИЕ Это ничто иное, как Мировая война на полное уничтожение. Люди начинают понимать, что самоизоляция - это ничто иное, как самоуничтожение от хозяев денег. И пытаются превратить это самоуничтожение в самооборону и самоорганизацию. Их планы уже терпят крах, а человечество всего мира постепенно пробуждается. Валентин Катасонов. QAnon Россия". At the bottom of the right screenshot, it says "1 lietotājs dalījās".

Interestingly, the groups were not espousing support for QAnon, but rather reposting French-speaking reports about QAnon (specifically from [Brut media](#)) as an example of what Americans believe – implying that if such outlandish theories could be allowed to take hold in home soil, they could not be trusted in Africa. Another source of the QAnon conspiracy theory is French-speaking groups with pro-Russian content that do not specifically target Africa. However, many Nigeriens are among these groups' subscribers.

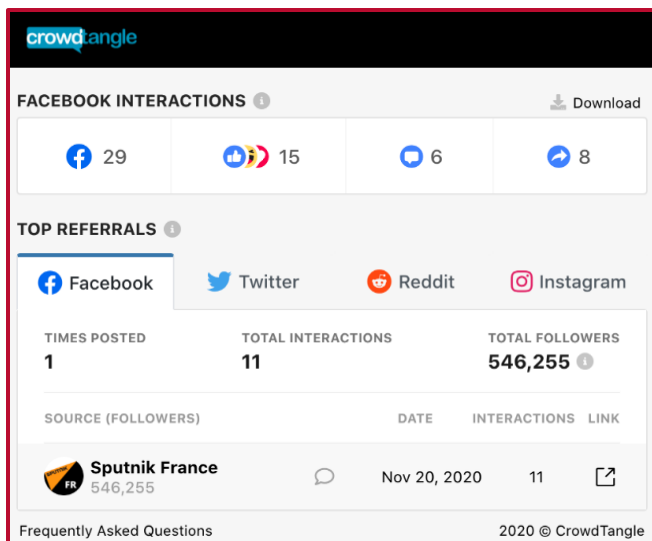
The article concluded with a statement that Russia had zero military bases in Africa at the date of publishing, while the U.S. maintained at least 25 declared ones across the continent, along with an entire combatant command, U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). While Russia may not technically have bases by agreement with representative governments on the continent, their military is both overtly and covertly on the ground in Africa, including *de facto* control of some bases in Libya.<sup>11</sup> The writer further added that much of the U.S. activity in Africa was virtually unknown until 2017, when a Navy SEAL died under dubious circumstances in Mali and several special operations personnel and civilians were killed in a fatal ambush by Islamic State militants in Niger.

<sup>11</sup> “Russia raises stakes with ‘brazen’ military intervention in Libyan conflict,” CNN, June 9, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/09/world/russia-libya-military-intervention-intl/index.html>.

**“Niger: Can Mohamed Bazoum lose the presidential election of December 27?” (headline translated), Sputnik, November 20, 2020.**<sup>12</sup> (Targeting Niger)

The article presented the ruling party candidate as a favorite among Nigeriens. Referring to him as “a man of networks who knows all the codes in force in power and in Nigerien society,” the article highlighted Bazoum’s candidacy in a way that implied him to be the Kremlin’s preferred candidate. The article also noted that the candidate is preferred by France, quoting a Sahel consultant as saying, “Today, France needs a stable Niger with elections organized in a peaceful climate. After what happened in Côte d’Ivoire and Guinea, it was necessary to hammer home this objective in order to avoid slippages [...] which would further weaken an already destabilized Sahel region.” Current President of Niger Mohamadou Issoufou chose Bazoum as his preferred successor, igniting his campaign for the presidency.<sup>13</sup>

Outgoing President Issoufou initiated relations with Russia, having attended the Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum at the Black Sea resort town of Sochi, Russia, on October 23, 2019. During the summit, it was announced that Russia and Niger had signed a deal for Moscow to supply 12 Mi-35 attack helicopters to Niger, as confirmed by a senior official at Russia’s federal military-technical cooperation service<sup>14</sup>.



Sputnik only posted the article to their official French-language Facebook page, which did not receive many interactions. The tone used in the article indicated that the Kremlin considered French efforts in the fight against terrorism groups insufficient and used words in quotes to show the control that France had on the African nation under G5 Sahel.

Screengrab showing CrowdTangle stats for the article posted on Sputnik France. (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle)

**Emmanuel Macron parle d'invitation. Mais le message du Président français conviant cinq homologues africains à une réunion autour de l'engagement antidjihadiste de la France au Sahel a été perçu comme une dégradante «convocation» par beaucoup dans les pays concernés.**

“Emmanuel Macron speaks of invitation. But the message from the French President inviting five African counterparts to a meeting around France’s anti-jihadist engagement in the Sahel was seen as a degrading ‘summons’ by many in the countries concerned.” – [Sputnik](#) headline in French

<sup>12</sup> Niger: Can Mohamed Bazoum lose the presidential election of December 27?, Sputnik French, 20 November 2020, <https://fr.sputniknews.com/afrique/202011201044805475-niger-mohamed-bazoum-peut-il-perdre-la-presidentielle-du-27-decembre/>

<sup>13</sup> Presidential election in Niger: Mohamed Bazoum invested candidate of the ruling party, RFI France, 4 January 2019, <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190401-presidentielle-niger-mohamed-bazoum-investi-candidat-parti-pouvoir>

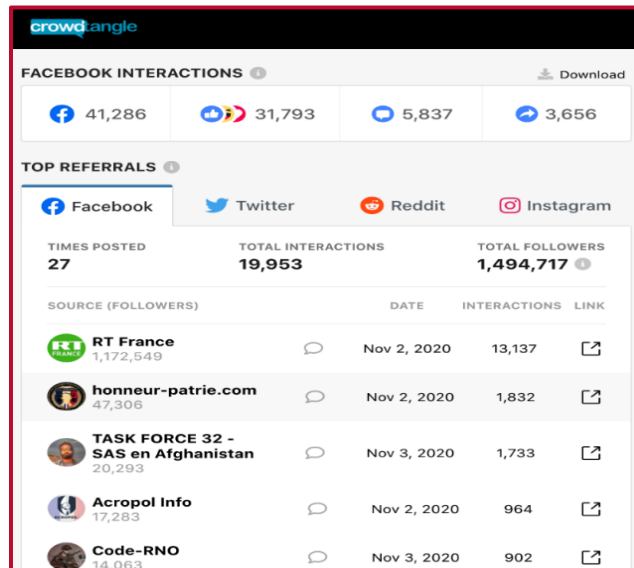
<sup>14</sup> Russia signs deal to supply Niger with 12 attack helicopters - RIA, Reuters, 23 October 2019, <https://fr.reuters.com/article/africaTech/idAFKBNIX2228-OZATP>

## Using social media interaction rates

The following articles mentioning Niger had the highest interactions on Russian media assets. It is noteworthy that the articles with higher interactions were mainly news reporting and did not target the country explicitly.

[“Mali: French army kills more than 50 jihadists near the border with Burkina Faso” \(headline translated\), RT French, November 2, 2020.](#)<sup>15</sup> (News reporting)

This article garnered approximately 20,000 interactions from 27 public posts to Facebook pages. The article, focused on France, celebrated how Barkhane forces that operate in G5 Sahel countries, including Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, Mauritania, and Niger, carried out an operation that made it possible to neutralize more than 50 jihadists and that confiscated weapons and equipment. The article was posted to pages and groups that frequently celebrate military action against terrorism.



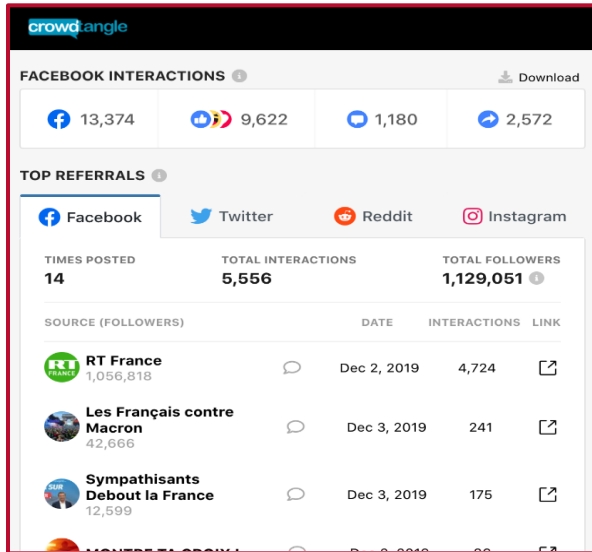
Screengrab of CrowdTangle readout showing 19,953 Facebook total interactions with posts of the article. (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle)

[“Burkina Faso: murderous attack on a Protestant church, 14 dead including children” \(headline translated\), RT French, December 2, 2019.](#)<sup>16</sup> (News reporting)

The article highlights the Jihadist attack on a Protestant church in eastern Burkina Faso.

<sup>15</sup> Mali: French army kills more than 50 jihadists near the border with Burkina Faso,” RT, November 2, 2020, <https://francais.rt.com/france/80289-mali-armee-francaise-tue-50-dihadistes-frontiere-burkina-faso>

<sup>16</sup> “Burkina Faso: murderous attack on a Protestant church, 14 dead including children,” RT, December 2, 2019, <https://francais.rt.com/international/68479-burkina-faso-attaque-meurtriere-contre-eglise-protestante>



With approximately 5,500 interactions on Facebook, the article described an attack that took place in Hantoukoura, in the commune of Foutouri, which borders Niger’s Komondjarie province. The attack reported around 12 noon on December 1, 2019, was perpetrated by "ten heavily armed individuals” and led to the deaths of 14 individuals, including the pastor of the church and children.

The article highlights the Jihadist attack on a Protestant church in eastern Burkina Faso.

*Screengrab showing a total of 5,556 Facebook interactions of posts of the RT article. (Source: CfA via CrowdTangle)*

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## ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS FROM THE RUSSIAN EMBASSY

From the posts on the Russian Embassy in Mali and Niger's official Facebook page, the Russian ambassador to Mali and Niger, Igor Gromyko, met with Niger's [president](#), [Minister of Culture](#), and [Minister of International Affairs](#) in September 2020.

### THE RUSSIA – BOKO HARAM CONNECTION

Though predominantly found in a thread on Nairaland – a Nigerian forum – this conspiracy has the potential to spread well beyond geographic borders. The forum is ranked as #9 in Nigeria, attracts over 30M monthly visits and includes users claiming to be from the border region, and posts specifically concerning Niger.

There are a number of vectors for this. The thread initially links to a Sahara Reporters article alleging that Col. Sagir Musa is suggesting that Boko Haram are part of an 'international conspiracy'. Statistics for Sahara Reporters include a 7M monthly page visit and a #48 rank in Nigeria's web traffic. Though the thread itself initially greets the article with an equal amount of belief and skepticism, later conversation turns to anti-West sentiment. This is helped by the sharing of a YouTube video from 2015.

The video, with nearly 70,000 views, is from Eleet Magazine - a publisher that, apparently, has not produced anything else. Despite this, the video has been featured many times in Nairaland threads, as well as a variety of top domain fringe discussion sites and WikiVisually's 'CIA activities in Chad' page; a risk in itself as the page trades on Wikipedia's design language for legitimacy. An article published in 2018 on Defense Nigeria uses the video's title and echoes its claims.

Analytics reveal that the website's traffic comes primarily from the US, though this may be due to its status as a WordPress site, which obfuscates certain analytic details. Their Twitter profile shows significant reach with high influence and activity, but flags for suspicious behavior. They have over 25k followers and an average of 8 retweets and 33 likes per post.

The narrative suggested by the video and article is, however, rooted in Russian disinformation efforts, with an article in Globalresearch.ca (a known hub of Russian geopolitical and fringe disinformation) asserting the same claims in 2015. Similar sentiment has been expressed on Alexandr Dugin-affiliated far-right disinformation website Katehon - going as far as to suggest that former president Barak Obama was using the threat of Boko Haram to leverage policy changes in Nigeria.





Screengrab of images posted to the official Facebook account showing the Russian Ambassador to Niger Igor Gromyko meeting with Niger's President Mahamadou Issoufou (left) and Minister of Culture Oumarou Hadary (right). (Source: Facebook)

## THE RUSSIA-FRANCE CONNECTION

Content of Russian messaging related to the region echoes and intensifies already existing narratives on anti-French and anti-U.S. sentiments, vaccination issues, and promote Pro-Russian sentiments, along with pan-Africanism.

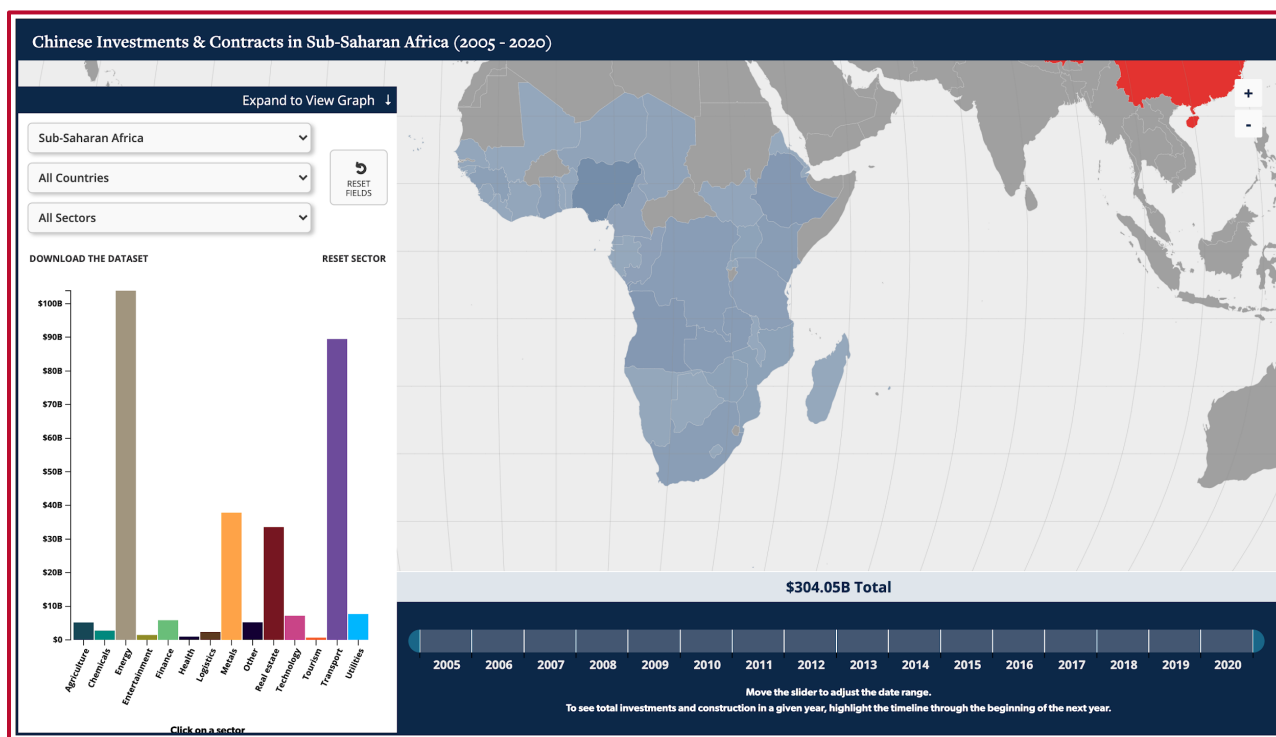
Of the two message types, the first one targets **France** and is based on anti-French sentiments and post-colonial grievances. One recent example is an [RT opinion piece](#) headlined "Muslims are strangely obsessed with cartoons, all while there are very real crimes over which they should be angry at France." Another is related to the [US](#) military strategy and presence in the region. There are numerous claims, including about [secret operations](#) in Africa, and speculations on casualties.

While the short-term effect of the recent English-language articles is very low (as this information is not widely shared in the Niger social media networks), there is significantly higher popularity of the French content from RT and Sputnik. This information is distributed by unverified social media pages with pro-Russian bend. For example, a Facebook group Africa supports Vladimir Putin in French (with 136,855 followers) advocates for the cooperation of African countries with Russia. A strong anti-French sentiment is present. The page promotes the Central African Republic as a model for other African countries.

However, older conspiracy theories with anti-US sentiment are still present in the Nigerien social media landscape. An older conspiracy theory about Boko Haram as an international plot to split Nigeria continues to be discussed in forums.

## INFLUENCE OPERATIONS FROM CHINA

Over the last decade, China has become a central player in Africa’s urbanization push, as a huge percentage of the continent’s infrastructure initiatives are being driven by Chinese companies and/or backed by Chinese funding, many as a part of the country’s Belt and Road Initiative. China is now Africa’s biggest trade partner, with Sino-African trade topping \$200 billion per year. According to McKinsey, over 10,000 Chinese-owned firms are currently operating throughout the African continent. The value of Chinese business in Sub-Saharan Africa since 2005 amounts to approximately \$300 billion in investment.



Readout of Chinese investment in sub-Saharan Africa. (Source: <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>)

## CHINESE INFLUENCE IN NIGER

The total investments and contracts in Niger between 2005 and 2020 are estimated at \$8.65 billion USD, including \$7.89 billion in the energy sector, \$620 million in metals, and \$140 million in real estate. Chinese companies have dug over 200 oil wells in Niger since 2010, discovering a billion barrels of oil in the process. Chinese companies also built the Société de Raffinage de Zinder (SORAZ) refinery and the domestic pipeline leading to it. Niger presents a significant geostrategic location for China in terms of oil and rare earth metals such as uranium. Politically and diplomatically, these loans and investments serve to bind countries to China, with the debt obligations creating a type of leverage in the form of political “soft power” that China uses to influence these countries to support its global ambitions, including influencing these nations to support China’s policy of breaking off their relations with Taiwan.


Chinese Communist Party-affiliated outlets in traditional and social media run a consistent “hearts and minds” campaign, building on China’s already relatively high sympathy in the region. Most of the narratives pushed concern the developmental activities and welfare of Chinese

citizens and how China-facing policies are beneficial. Chinese media in local languages help to promote these narratives, portraying China as a model nation that has helped other nations in alleviating poverty. News websites show China’s technological advancements such as space capabilities and development. China is promoting itself as a global contributor to anti-terrorism, de-radicalization, and human rights. In addition to the promotion of China, there is significant anti-U.S. sentiment, even when the criticism of the U.S. is not the main narrative.

On social media, there were two channels with significant reach:

- China Radio International (CRI) - CRIHausa has 1,032,985 followers,
- Windhen Djanghen Es Hala Pular – Facebook page with 35k followers, managed from China

CRI’s Hausa language Facebook page has over a million followers. Besides the promotion of the Chinese culture and lifestyle, this Facebook page also posts political content.



16A Shijingshan Road  
100040 Beijing, China

SHIJINGSHAN

Sashen Hausa na Gidan Rediyon Kasar Sin  
<http://hausan.cri.cn/>

1 010 754 cilvèki like this

1 033 042 people follow this

165 cilvèkiem checked in here

<http://hausan.cri.cn/>

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**CRI HAUSA**  
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Chinese security agency speaker Ren Guoqiang says, his country hopes America will open its eyes on things happening in the world, and watch China without selfishness, and go with modernization. Together with your dance to peace and development of the world.  
<http://hausan.cri.cn/.../6c9c6b49-54d3-a5f2-7555...>

⚙️ · See original · Novèrtè šo tulkojumu

China uses its soft power, as well as infrastructure development support, in Niger and Africa more broadly, to improve cross-cultural relationships between states and to enhance the legitimacy of its governing regime. This is an important attribute of China's soft power, because its economic policies notionally serve as an alternative to Western models of economic development. This in turn has enabled China to gain support in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations (UN). For example, without the African voting bloc, China would likely not have succeeded in transferring the UN Security Council seat from Taiwan to itself. Relatedly, China's philosophy of discourse power explicitly dictates that the country must propagate pro-China messaging and, when that is not possible or deemed to be less effective, narratives that paint Western democratic systems as corrupt, chaotic, or incompetent.<sup>17</sup>

This research did not find any cases of disinformation directly attributable to China that targeted Niger. Drawing from information identified in previous investigations into Chinese disinformation, articles mentioning Niger were collected and analyzed. This analysis used the same categories as the Russia analysis, with a focus on news reporting targeting Niger and its relations with other countries. The levels of interaction on articles posted by Chinese media outlets provide a possible indication of lack of awareness or interest by the public, or that they were not pushed into user feeds by the platforms' algorithms. Notably, the articles with the most interactions were those highlighting strong Sino-African relationships.

The following articles published on Chinese media outlets mentioning Niger had the highest interactions on Facebook:

**[“China Media Group ranks 2019's top 10 international news stories,” CGTN, June 11, 2019.](#)**<sup>18</sup>

This article garnered 94,508 interactions from three public posts to Facebook pages – [China Global Television Network \(CGTN\)](#), [The China Africa Project](#), and the [Belt and Road Advisory](#). One of the stories in the top 10 was the official launch of the operational phase of the African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement at the 12th Extraordinary Summit of the African Union Heads of State and Government, which was held in Niamey, the capital of Niger, on July 7, 2019.

**[“African leaders, experts hail Xi's remarks t Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19,” CGTN, June 18, 2020.](#)**<sup>19</sup> (Targeting Niger and Africa in general)

This article garnered 89,617 interactions from eight public posts to Facebook pages - [CGTN](#), [The Dragon and the Bear Eurasia's Rise](#), [Al-Jazeera World News](#), [kashmir gulistan news](#), [L'Afrique - إفريقيا](#), [Humura Burundi BI](#), and [the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the](#)

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<sup>17</sup> Countering Chinese disinformation reports, DFRLabs, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/dfrlab-china-reports/>

<sup>18</sup> “China Media Group ranks 2019's top 10 international news stories,” CGTN, 11 June 2019, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-18/African-leaders-hail-Xi-s-remarks-at-China-Africa-Summit-on-COVID-19-RpLaGS92xy/index.html>

<sup>19</sup> “African leaders, experts hail Xi's remarks at Extraordinary China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19,” CGTN, 18 June 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-06-18/African-leaders-hail-Xi-s-remarks-at-China-Africa-Summit-on-COVID-19-RpLaGS92xy/index.html>

[Republic of Latvia](#). The article highlighted how African leaders and experts spoke highly of Chinese President Xi Jinping's remarks at the China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19, hailing achievements of China-Africa cooperation in fighting the pandemic. Boubacar Abdou, technical advisor to the president of the Economic, Social and Cultural Council in Niger, said that China had played a decisive role in the fight against COVID-19 worldwide and particularly in Africa. Early in the virus' spread, China pushed a narrative of "mask diplomacy" - a geopolitical reputation-building effort that provides Chinese COVID-19 prevention resources to countries with less access to them<sup>20</sup> - as a means of distracting attention away from the fact that it was the epicenter of the outbreak by quickly pivoting the conversation.

Echoing Chinese messaging (vis-a-vis mask diplomacy), Abdou said, "It must be recognized that in the fight against the pandemic, China has been an important partner for Africa in general and West Africa in particular. After successfully stemming the spread of the disease in their own territory, the Chinese quickly flew to the aid of other countries by first sending doctors, then medical supplies, to really deal with the pandemic." Adding that, "the Chinese aid has enabled African countries, which are not well-equipped for the pandemic, to benefit from the expertise of Chinese doctors and have prevention equipment."

## ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS FROM THE CHINESE EMBASSY

One form of Chinese soft power is direct funding of local news outlets, which subsequently are inclined to treat topics regarding China more deferentially (at a minimum). This application of soft power as a means of influencing coverage needs to be cause for concern for any country that purports to have a free press.



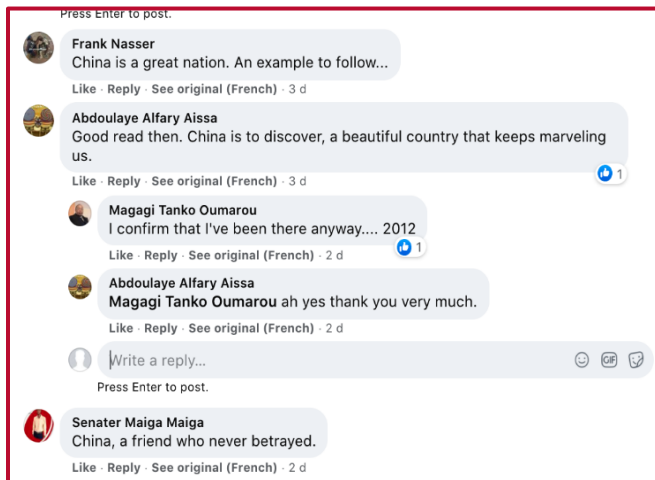
Screengrab showing the front page and contents of the December 7, 2020, edition of *Niger Inter* magazine, which featured an interview with the Chinese Ambassador to Niger.

(Source: Facebook)

The official Chinese Embassy in Niger Facebook page published a [post](#) on December 7, 2020, highlighting a 16-page exclusive interview with Zhang Lijun, Chinese Ambassador to Niger, published by Nigerien magazine *Niger Inter*. According to the post, speaking on behalf of the Chinese government (and echoing its messaging), "the Ambassador responded to questions by commenting on the development and great success of the People's Republic of China during its 71-year history and of China-Nigerien cooperation in all areas."

<sup>20</sup> For more, see: Brian Wong, "China's Mask Diplomacy," *The Diplomat*, March 25, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/chinas-mask-diplomacy/>.

Further, a [post](#) published on December 10, 2020, to the Chinese Embassy's Facebook page declared a strategic move by the Chinese Government to grant the Nigerien Government 12 new scholarships - seven bilateral and five China-Africa Friendship Scholarships - for the 2021-2022 academic year.



Screengrab showing comments on the Embassy's Facebook post. (Source: Facebook)

The scholarships are distributed through the Nigerien Agency of Allowances and Scholarships, through which Nigerien students are encouraged to apply.



Screengrab showing a letter with Chinese offer for scholarship opportunities. (Source: Facebook)

Scholarships and positive coverage in local media houses are usually a key part of a country's influence toolkit. However, the post did not describe the specific courses covered by the scholarships, and it was not clear if the Chinese scholarships or grants could be benefiting journalists or media in Niger.

A core component of China's soft power application is to provide scholarships to foreign journalists and nurture pro-China sentiment during the course of their study, after which they are sympathetic to pro-China narratives.

## COVID-19 VACCINE

There have been documented instances of the Kremlin “taking advantage of the anxiety and uncertainty to advance a myriad of false narratives and disinformation about COVID-19 to generate deliberate and tailored disruptive effects, such as inciting violence against government authorities and fracturing military partnerships.”<sup>21</sup> This research examined the COVID-19 related conspiracies online to understand message-manipulation related to COVID-19 and how disinformation narratives are spreading in Niger’s social media ecosystem.

The research found COVID-19 and vaccination-related conspiracy theories are key emergent threats. In the region, where there are already pre-existing suspicions and doubts about vaccines, the growing global community of anti-vaxers and COVID-19 conspiracy theories are affecting the Nigerien disinformation sphere.

A variety of COVID-19 and vaccination conspiracy theories overlap and build on each other. This multi-faceted and re-combinatory form of conspiracy and disinformation occurs at both a local and global level. The COVID-19/vaccine conspiracy theories in Niger are informed by global trends that then undergo narrative localization. Global ‘plots’ that are present in Niger include:

- Specific ethnic groups being carriers of COVID-19 (particularly targeting the Tuareg and Fulani ethnic groups)<sup>22</sup>
- COVID-19 ‘origin’ speculation (U.S./China ‘bioweapon’ etc.)
- Big pharma narratives (Lack of corporate oversight/the West taking advantage of Africa)
- Anti-Bill Gates narratives (Gates Foundation/depopulation)
- Speculation from U.S./European websites about the first vaccinations being a hoax is also being shared within the local communities.

The mouthpieces are fully aware and only push wearing a mask to make people bend the knee to their Marxist demands to prepare the public to take the poisoned **vaccine**/mark of the beast they Including "Bill" Gates have planned for us.

*Nairaland forum  
vaccine skepticism  
example*

<sup>21</sup> <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/typhons-song-examining-russias-employment-covid-19-disinformation-generate-disruptive>

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/sahel/niger/289-sidelining-islamic-state-nigers-tillabery>

## CASE STUDY: LOCALIZATION CASES

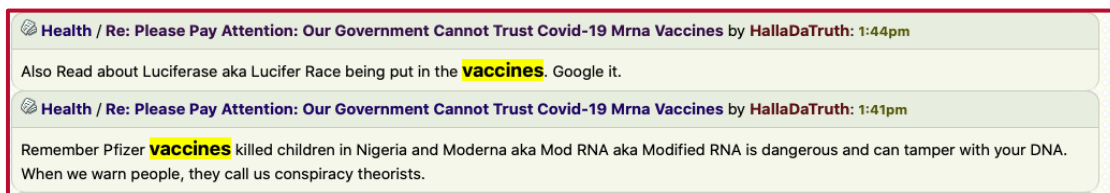
**Depopulation/Sterilization.** A major narrative that migrated from U.S. and European conspiracy groups is speculation about depopulation, sterilization, and DNA changes as ulterior motives behind a COVID-19 vaccine deployment. This trend shows a localization tendency, as these are specifically discussions about sterilization and depopulation of African countries. One of the biggest sources of the depopulation conspiracy in English is Voice TV Nigeria, a YouTube channel with 328,000 subscribers. The video content of this YouTube channel targets several African countries and promotes the conspiracy theory of the depopulation of the continent.



Viral [video](#) about Bill Gates' supposed plan to depopulate Africa

One of the main localization cases is a comparison of the COVID-19 vaccine to issues with previous vaccines. The most discussed cases are polio, measles, and meningitis vaccines. Vaccine disinformation also has a strong religious component. There are claims that the 'Bill Gates vaccine,' supposedly designed for depopulation/sterilization/chip implantation, contains an ingredient called Luciferase, which according to the champions of the theory, is a devil's mark. This information is often shared with religious messages. This element of conspiracy has carried over strongly from influential accounts in the U.S., indicating that the spread of overarching COVID-19 conspiracy theories is not constrained to geographical boundaries; but instead undergoes narrative localization to adapt to new audiences.

Though there are instances of Bill Gates 'microchip' conspiracies, the somewhat prevalent '5G-COVID' conspiracy (that wireless network technology is fueling the coronavirus pandemic) that accompanies it in European and U.S. instances is absent. Skepticism over vaccines *in general* is also informed by an anti-West and anti-colonial sentiment, bolstered by anti-Big Pharma narratives.



Nairaland forum vaccine conspiracy theories example

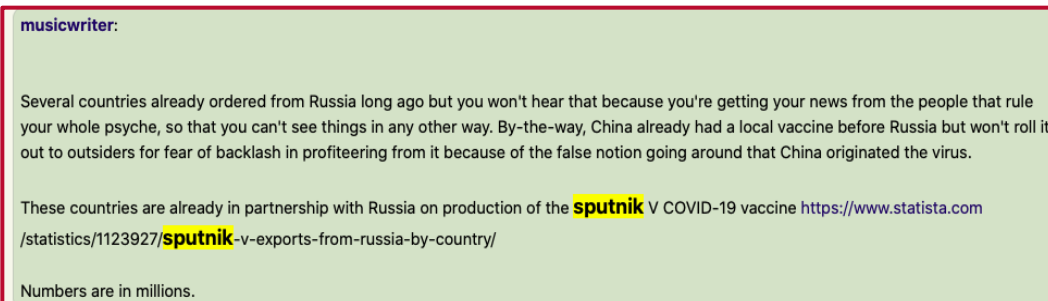


There are cases of vaccine disinformation linked to both Russia and China. At the time of this research, the RT was running a disinformation campaign targeting recent COVID-19 vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna, with clear examples of disinformation targeting Africa in particular with statements such as: [Pfizer tested](#) dangerous drugs in Africa, and the Pfizer vaccine [cannot be used in Africa](#) due to the cold storage requirements. The number of reports about the benefits of the Russian vaccine and the side effects of other vaccines has also increased. Similar messages can be found in pro-Russia social media pages. For example, in the French-language group, 'Africa supports Vladimir Putin', with 136,855 followers, initial vaccine-related content could be found as early as April 2020. The messaging was based on the idea that the vaccine would be unsafely tested on the African population. The same group shared a classical anti-vax narrative about Bill Gates and his vaccine experiments. Recent vaccine skepticism developed into doubts about the vaccine produced in the U.S. Often the vaccine skepticism is mixed with political narratives, e.g. anti-U.S. sentiment. It also can be found in local Facebook communities with widespread reach, e.g. Niger News (with ~71,100 followers).



Several English-language websites targeting Africa, for example, Legit.ng, posted a promotion article about the Russian COVID-19 vaccine Sputnik V. The Sputnik V coverage also included an article from the Chinese CGTN. More active promotion of the Russian vaccine in social media started in December. Promotion is mixed with skepticism about other vaccines.

*'Africa supports Vladimir Putin' group shares vaccine skepticism*



*Sputnik vaccine promotion from the Nairaland forum*

Windhen Djanghen Es Hala Pular

Page transparency


**Page history**

- Page name has not changed
- Page created – Windhen Djanghen Es Hala Pular  
16 April 2017

Name changes can help you to see if the Page's purpose has changed over time. If Page merges have occurred, that means that the Page has combined its followers with another Page.

**People who manage this Page**

Primary country/region location of people who manage this Page includes:  
China (2)



Windhen Djanghen Es Hala Pular  
Facebook page

Windhen Djanghen Es Hala Pular Facebook page (with 32 525 followers) is managed from China and has shared several anti-U.S. posts, including Covid-19 conspiracy theories. Corona Virus, the post says, was created in a U.S. lab, and with E.U. complicity, to destroy African and Asian countries. It goes on to state that this was done because the U.S. is “jealous of African riches and Chinese economic progress.”

### INFLUENCE OPERATIONS FROM FRANCE

On December 15, 2020, Facebook announced that it had taken down three separate networks that it had discovered for “coordinated inauthentic behavior” that targeted communities across Africa, including Niger. Facebook identified one of the networks as a French operation focused on Mali, the Central African Republic, and, to a lesser extent, Niger, Burkina Faso, Algeria, Côte d’Ivoire, and Chad. According to Facebook’s statement, the network was linked to “individuals associated with French military.”

The French operation avoided discussing the upcoming election and its candidates and instead focused on counterterrorism operations and pro-France messaging. The French assets mainly posted about the security situation, praising the Sahel and French armed forces and attacking the jihadist groups they are combatting. According to the report, “a handful of assets focused on Niger, Burkina Faso, and Chad; these typically posted about news and security incidents in their respective countries.”

The assets identified in Niger disseminated pro-France content in local groups. The posts often celebrated both the French and the French-led Operation Barkhane for their efforts to make Sahel a region “free from terrorism” and a “better place,” presenting them as heroes and saviors

of Sahelians. This comes at a time where Facebook has become riddled with ghost accounts with names like “L’Afrique cachée” that vehemently criticize French military presence throughout Niger, with a particular emphasis on French operations in Diffa and Tillabéri. Popular anti-French social media pages including “Winniemark24 – La Grande Afrique,” “The African Way Official,” “Les patriotes du Mali,” and “Mali Info #1” have gained significant traction since 2019, propagating fake news about foreign presence throughout G5 countries.

The operation appeared to be exclusively focused on the security situation in the region and not on the Nigerien election. While Niger was not the primary focus of these campaigns, these two (France and Russia) actors’ tactics (actively engaging, including by befriending, commenting and criticizing each other for being fake; relying on local national in the target countries to generate and manage content; and co-opting authentic voices to join their influence operations, likely to avoid detection and help appear more authentic, etc.) provide insights into how similar campaigns could be expanded, and actions USAID and the Mission could take for early warning and response.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Removing Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from France and Russia, December 15, 2020  
<https://about.fb.com/news/2020/12/removing-coordinated-inauthentic-behavior-france-russia/>

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**Niger is vulnerable to disinformation due to growing environmental, security, governmental and structural weaknesses.** These challenges include an increasing number of security threats due to the presence of terrorist and non-state armed groups fueling ongoing farmer-herder conflicts. Government weakness, such as the inability to respond effectively to insurgent and terrorist attacks (particularly in Diffa and Tillabéri), weak democratic institutions, and limited application of rule of law threaten stability and negatively impact government legitimacy. There are multiple actors already preying on these weaknesses by targeting populations with false information. They differ in type (from VEOs to states) and have different goals (including delegitimizing the government, furthering economic agendas, and further splintering divisions between ethnic groups), but are all becoming increasingly sophisticated. However, Niger can take advantage of the following opportunities to stem and combat the flow of disinformation in the Nigerien information landscape.

- **Draw on the strength of close community networks.** Nigerien society is comprised of robust community networks based on village, mosque, tribe, clan, and other forms of kinship. These networks include *fadas* (youth groups), large and small prayer spaces including the Grand Mosque of Niamey and village mosques, and extended community, family, tribal networks sustained through gatherings, word of mouth and mobile apps such as WhatsApp. There are opportunities to strengthen the resiliency of Nigeriens to disinformation by leveraging these decentralized community networks via activities such as supporting radio programs, community theater, etc.
- **Support the development of the democratic voices.** Niger's presidential and legislative elections will usher in a new government for the first time in ten years. A peaceful transfer of power – the first since the 2010 military coup and subsequent election of President Issoufou for two five-year terms – could introduce a new set of possible counter-disinformation partners at the government level.
- **Support a growing media.** Despite serious shortcomings needing to be addressed, (such as a trend toward pro- and anti-government polarity), Niger's media is relatively vibrant and diverse. There are opportunities to further develop and support a pluralistic media environment, that will not only inform and educate the population but also serve as a buffer to disinformation efforts from within and abroad. These opportunities include helping to develop a more independent, non-partisan media and supporting inclusive and pluralistic content.
- **Leverage and build on existing disinformation-related programs.** While Niger has limited counter-disinformation specific initiatives, there are several ongoing government and non-government programs that can be bolstered, expanded, and specialized to counter the disinformation threat. These initiatives include government's countering violent extremism (CVE) efforts and development initiatives that seek to address underlying vulnerabilities like the High Authority on the Consolidation of Peace (HACP) and efforts like the USAID and German Federal Foreign Office- funded Niger Community Cohesion Initiative (NCCI), and coordination with local community leaders to identify individuals at-risk for radicalization and disinformation efforts.

- **Target disinformation approaches appropriately (online and offline).** Having identified media and information consumption patterns for specific regions, ages, and population centers, there are opportunities to design the best ways to reach segments of the population in a successful and trustworthy manner. For example, having established that a combination of radio, WhatsApp, and word of mouth are both common and trusted forms of communication, it is logical to assume that disinformation actors will try to exploit these mediums. Counter-disinformation efforts should therefore aim to safeguard and strengthen these forms of communications. This can be done by technically and financially supporting the independence of radio stations, supporting counter-disinformation initiatives targeting WhatsApp users, and training local facilitators to carry out focus groups on understanding disinformation and building critical thinking skills at the community level.
- **Invest in ongoing research.** Fund targeted open-source research to address critical knowledge gaps, such as ramping up funding for rigorous social science analysis of how online interference, including from China and Russia, shapes the perceptions of citizens in Niger. This can be done by strengthening the ability of three different sets of in-country institutions:
  - Investigative media – Build extensive fact-checking mechanisms in local media that monitor emerging narratives on Russian and Chinese media, among others, and debunk them through local information channels such as radio, television, or magazines - which act as the main source of news for many in the country - before they gain any traction among the broader public. The media will also act as a counterpoint for identified disinformation and influence operation campaigns.
  - Analytical academia – Engage with academic researchers to undertake both qualitative and quantitative research on Russian and Chinese interests in the country.
  - Civil society initiatives – Support to civil society watchdog organizations to conduct in-depth monitoring of and analytical research into disinformation campaigns and influence operations in real time. This would include development of machine learning platforms with trends dashboards and search interfaces, with keyword tracking/alert watchlists for real-time topic tracking and media analysis. This will alert researchers of “media capture” by bad actors, and propaganda or disinformation planted in credible media.
- **Monitor emerging narratives on an ongoing basis.** Devote resources to monitor emerging narratives on Russian and Chinese media and debunk them through local information channels such as radio, television, or newspapers (which act as the main source of news for many in the country), before they gain traction among the broader public. This effort, however, would need to pay careful attention to not providing “the oxygen of amplification<sup>24</sup>” - i.e., elevating public awareness of something that would otherwise not garner much attention, thereby creating the very problem we are trying to mitigate.

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<sup>24</sup> The oxygen of amplification, Data & Society, 22 May 2018, <https://datasociety.net/library/oxygen-of-amplification/>

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