

Reset.

Come for the memes, stay for the Kremlin propaganda

Bait-and-switch disinformation
campaigns in Francophone Africa

July 2023

Introduction

In the quest for global influence amidst its illegal war on Ukraine, the Kremlin's interest in Africa is higher than ever before. Russia's recent attempts at manipulating African information environments and pushing out disinformation to mass audiences are well documented.¹ This strategy has allowed Russian propaganda to fill a news vacuum left by the exit of many Western media outlets from the Sahel due to repression and violence against journalists.² In the last year alone, the African Center for Strategic Studies reports³ sixteen Russia-linked disinformation campaigns across the continent.

These propaganda operations are part of the Kremlin's hybrid war, which builds on unconventional weapons such as disinformation and resource supplies. Last winter, Russia diminished gas exports to many Central and Eastern European countries, while unleashing propaganda campaigns on local audiences that framed the US and the EU as culprits for the skyrocketing energy prices.⁴ Now, as before, in many African countries, Kremlin-aligned propaganda outlets have been blaming "the West" for shortages in food supplies to the continent, which in fact are caused by Russia's attacks on Ukrainian grain export infrastructure and refusal to allow shipments.⁵

Nearly all of the Kremlin's information operations in African countries leverage social media, and Facebook in particular, as an unregulated vector for swiftly and covertly influencing millions. This report presents evidence for the Kremlin's large-scale and continuous manipulation of Meta's products in Francophone Africa. Building on Reset's extensive monitoring and analysis of Kremlin information operations, we examine the form and impact of a "bait-and-switch" disinformation distribution strategy employed by pro-Kremlin actors since early March 2023 as well as the insufficiency of Meta's actions to prevent the spread of such campaigns.

Though our investigation focuses on one coordinated disinformation network, our findings suggest the existence of a much larger manipulation marketplace on Facebook that can be activated by Kremlin assets at any time to rapidly disseminate political propaganda. In African countries, these threats appear to be largely unmitigated to date. There are numerous policy instruments designed to tackle harmful disinformation and information manipulation in other regions, including the EU's Code of Practice on Disinformation (to which Meta is a signatory) and the Digital Services Act. These new product safety rules should establish standards that benefit not only Europeans but also African markets and consumers.

1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/13/world/africa/russia-africa-disinformation.html>

2 https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/medias/file/2023/04/What%20it%20is%20like%20to%20be%20a%20journalist%20in%20the%20Sahel_EN.pdf

3 <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-disinformation-in-africa/>

4 <https://apnews.com/article/technology-politics-united-states-government-us-department-of-the-treasury-russia-6277b515a552c980c262c72731dccdbe>

5 <https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-disinformation-africa-europe-sergey-lavrov/>

Key findings

- *The existence of a coordinated network of at least **57 Facebook pages** that disseminate and amplify Kremlin propaganda targeting French-speaking audiences in Africa with a combined follower base of **5.1 million**. The network parrots the Kremlin's narratives against Ukraine, NATO and the West. A key narrative targeting local audiences is that Russia is Africa's true friend and ally, ready to help African countries stand up to French hegemony. The network often posts footage taken directly from Russian government and state media sources as well as various Russian Telegram channels.*
- *Between the 1st of March and 25th of June 2023, the network received **9.2 million interactions** (likes, shares, comments) and published **11.7K posts** (mostly videos dubbed in French). It increased its cumulative follower base by 60%, adding **1.9 million new followers** within this three-month period.*
- *The pages in the network share hallmark characteristics of coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) that are in direct violation of Meta's policies: all pages use fictitious identity (pose as media outlets), have similar branding and posting patterns and accumulate engagement and follower base inauthentically. They all leverage a common "bait-and-switch" content strategy for attracting users with entertaining content first before starting to amplify pro-Russian disinformation at scale.*
- *New pages are continuously being added to the network. Only four pages have been deleted since we started monitoring the network's activities in April 2023. At the time of publishing this report, the network at large remains undetected by Meta.*

Our preliminary findings suggest that the network is just a small fraction of a much larger ecosystem of active Facebook assets (pages, groups and individual profiles) that have been recently utilised to promote pro-Kremlin content to French-speaking audiences in Africa specifically and Francophone communities in general.

- Come for the memes, stay for the Russian propaganda

Identification and analysis of the coordinated network

Behavioural patterns

By applying a standard set of metrics used to identify changes in volume, engagement and exposure of content, we were able to conduct a quantitative analysis to identify hallmark characteristics of inauthentic behavior within individual pages in the network.

Our analysis found that 30% of the entire network, or 17 out of the analysed 57 pages, was **created very recently**, between February and June 2023. These pages quickly amassed more than 670,000 combined followers, with many pages getting tens of thousands of followers within days of being created. Such steep growth is indicative of **inauthentic follower acquisition**, such as purchasing followers or leveraging fake accounts.

Our quantitative analysis also identified a distinct pattern present within the network: an atypical ratio between number of “shares” and number of other types of engagements. Many posts receive a disproportionately high number of “shares” compared to a relatively low number of “likes” (see Figure 1). On organic social media posts, “likes” typically outnumber all other types of user engagement because they require the least effort from users and can be performed with a single click. The higher number of “shares” on the posts indicates that extra efforts are being taken to further amplify the content, suggesting **inauthentic engagement** and artificially boosted virality.

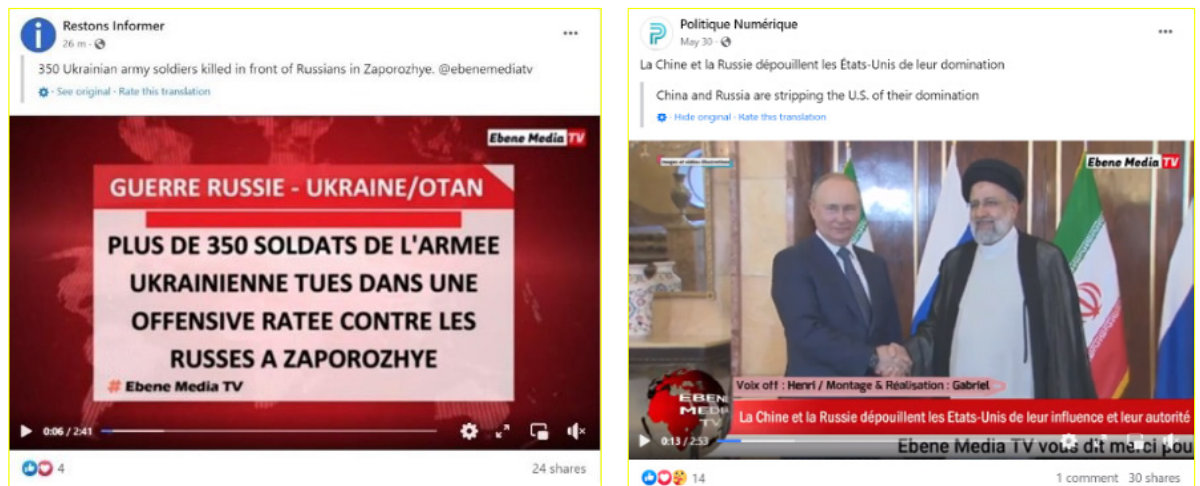


Figure 1: Examples of posts with atypical ratio of shares vs “likes”: shares outnumber likes and comments, which indicates coordinated attempts to promote the posts.

A qualitative analysis of the posting activity, visual identity and other behavioral patterns of the individual pages points to coordinated activity across the network. These characteristics and patterns include:

1. *Uploading identical video content taken from various sources.*
2. *Mutual re-sharing of posts across pages in the network to amplify the combined exposure of the content, often happening within minutes after the original posts are published.*
3. *Clear “publisher” and “amplifier” roles allocated between the pages, identifiable by their posting activity.*
4. *Displaying similar branding identity (identical cover photos and/or logos, similar usernames) or listing the same contact details (email, phone number) and location⁶.*
5. *Posts with identical copy or which use very similarly worded phrases.*
6. *Using the tactic of keyword obfuscation⁷ to evade content moderation systems.*
7. *A content strategy that leverages a “baiting phase” (during which the pages accumulate followers by sharing content with high viral potential such as memes, funny posts, personal stories, photos of female models, etc.) followed by a sudden switch to posting political videos.*
8. *Deletion of “baiting” posts across pages in the network before shifting the strategy to Kremlin propaganda content.*

Content patterns

All pages in the network underwent a **drastic shift in their content strategy** and a major overhaul in their visual identity (changing their names, logos, cover photos) before beginning to publish pro-Russian content. For most of the pages this happened in March or April 2023.

Prior to posting pro-Russian content, the pages featured exclusively light and entertaining content targeting African audiences (see Figure 2), likely aiming to grow in size quickly by luring users organically. Many pages in the network shared the exact same content during the “baiting” phase. This phase lasted only a few weeks for some pages, though others were actively posting entertainment content for months before being re-purposed to spread pro-Russian content.

6 The first “cluster” of pages are mostly driven by admins located in Belgium, Germany and Cameroon. A second “cluster” of pages is operated mostly from France, the DRC, Poland, South Africa, Romania and Ukraine. We could not identify a shared ownership of the entire network, but several pages appear to have been driven by the same actor as they feature the same email address as contact information.

7 Keyword obfuscation involves the intentional alteration of problematic words using alternative characters, symbols, or misspellings, and is employed with the intention of evading the detection of specific content (mostly about violence, in this case, words in reference to the war). Some of the obfuscated words referred to violence: “fr@pper” – instead of “frapper” (FR: to hit), “b@taille – instead of bataille (FR: battle), “arm£ment” – instead of “armement” (FR: weaponization), “B0mbes” (bombs), “guerre” (war), “m!ss!les” (missiles), “@rmée” (army). Others obfuscated the names: “Vl@dimir P0uti :e – instead of “Vladimir Poutine”, Zel£nsky, Z£l£nsky, Z£l£psky -- instead of Zelensky.

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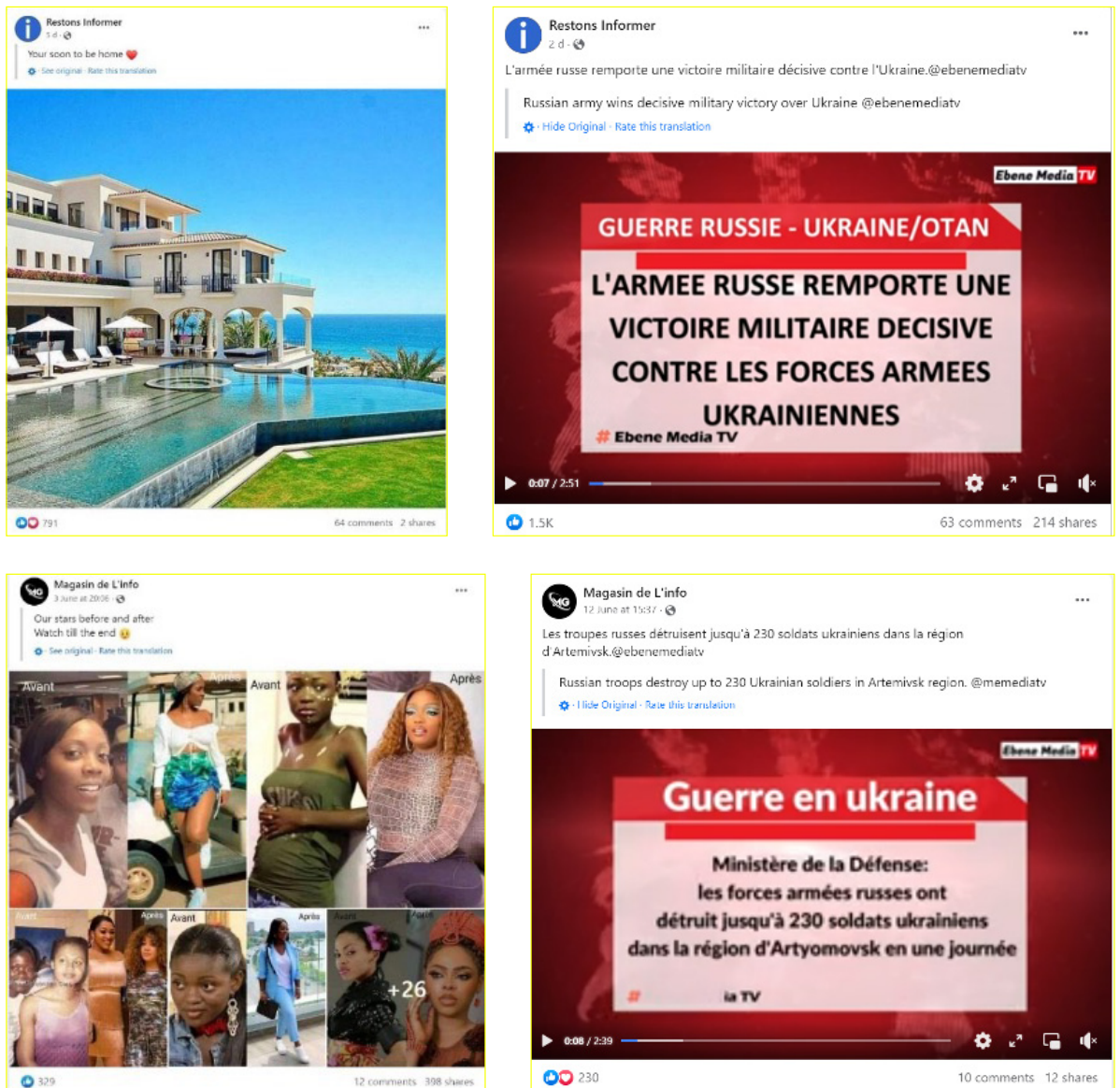


Figure 2: Before and after screenshots of “baiting” content vs pro-Russian posts shared by two of the pages.

At the end of the “baiting” phase, the pages rapidly underwent a **visual rebranding** to appear as media outlets, including changing the page’s name, creating a new logo and uploading it as a profile photo, as well as changing the cover photo. Many pages also switched their Facebook page category to “Media/News company”.

Most pages in the network underwent **several name changes** throughout their existence, often choosing very similar names: e. g. several pages have the French ending “de l’info” to refer to their new role as information outlets: Planete de l’Info⁸ (Planet of information), Tourbillon de l’Info⁹ (Whirlwind of information), Le Monde de l’info¹⁰ (World of information).

8 <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/0Hz84>

9 <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/ZKlzs>

10 <https://ghostarchive.org/archive/q9fJf>

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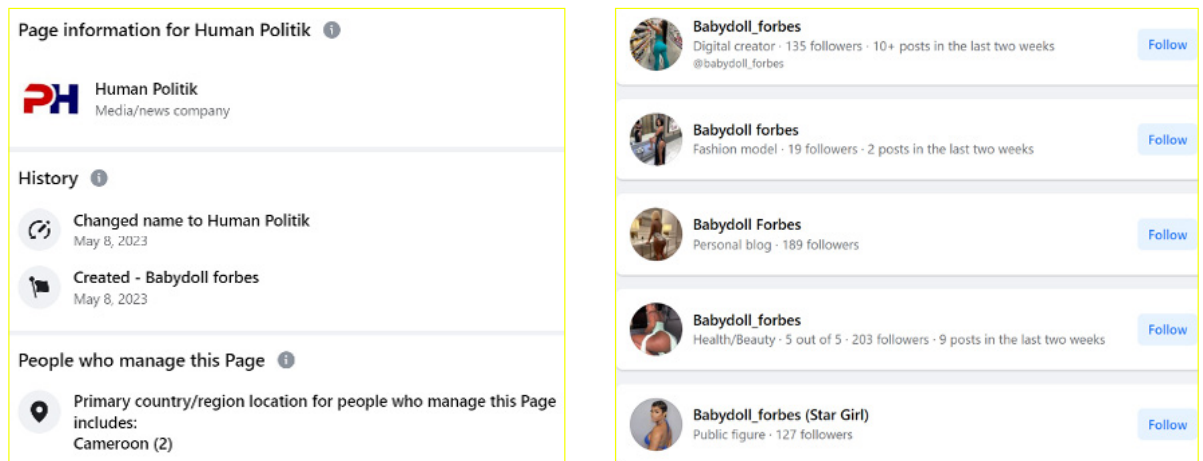


Figure 3: Name changes of the page “Babydoll forbes” before switching to pro-Russian content. List of pages with the same name being used for soft pornography.

Some pages belong to networks that publish adult content. A page created on 8 May under the name “Babydoll Forbes” was immediately renamed to “Human politik” (see Figure 3). A search for the name “Babydoll Forbes” on Facebook yielded 11 similar pages featuring visual content of female African pornography stars and models. All of these pages were created between March and June 2023 and currently publish soft pornography content, likely with the aim to expand their follower base and possibly be repurposed for other campaigns in the future.

Identical or similar cover photos are frequently used by multiple pages within the network, many of which are clearly aligned with pro-Russian sentiments, such as Western political leaders appearing “weak” and Chinese and Russian leaders appearing “strong” (see Figure 4).

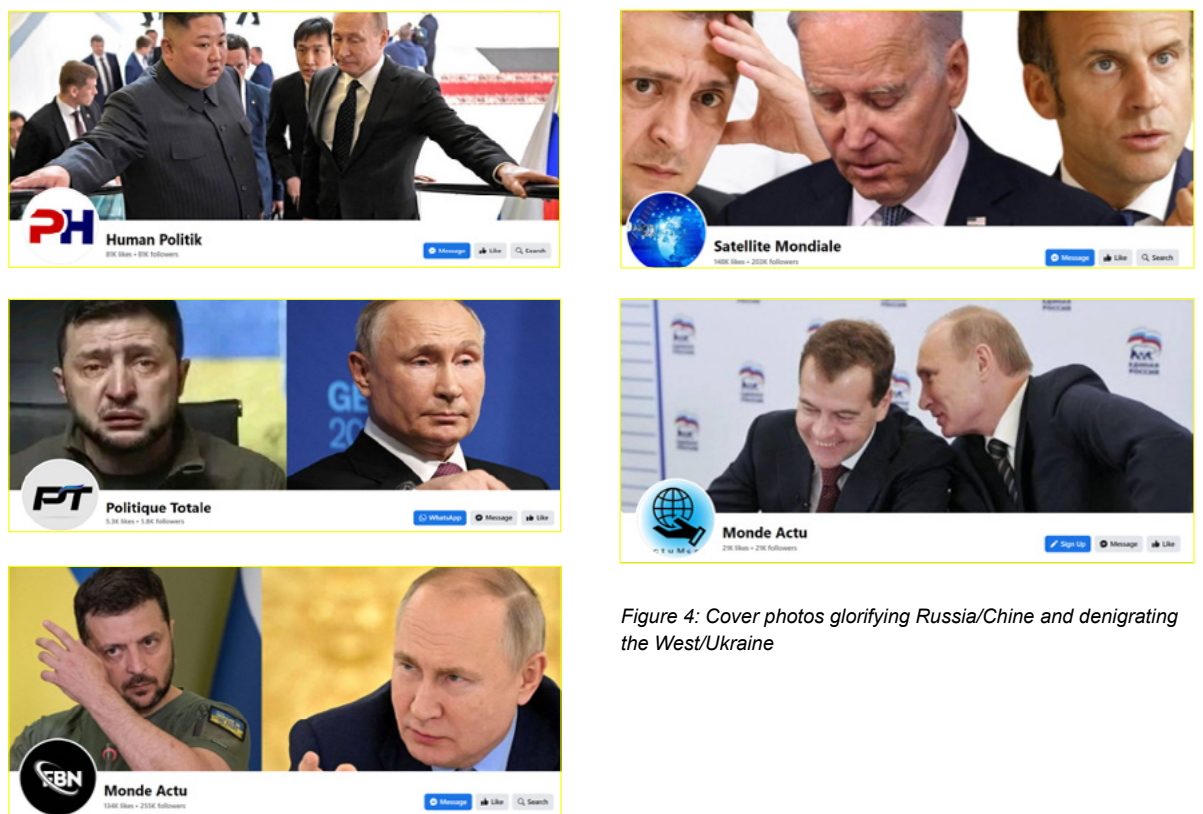


Figure 4: Cover photos glorifying Russia/China and denigrating the West/Ukraine

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Often **within a day** after the rebranding, the pages begin publishing exclusively pro-Russian videos. These videos are downloaded from other YouTube channels and natively uploaded by the pages as their own posts. The videos are short, dubbed in French and appropriated from different sources, including:

1. Videos from **marginal media outlets** targeting French-speaking African countries.
2. Videos downloaded from the YouTube channels of **reputable Western media** such as France24, Euronews (accompanied by posts with a clear pro-Russian twist and re-branded with the newly-created logos of the pages).
3. Videos downloaded from the channel of the French far-right politician **Florian Philippot**.
4. Videos taken directly from **Russian state media** —see Figure 5.
5. Video collages compiled from **various media** directly by the pages themselves, and re-branded with their new logos.

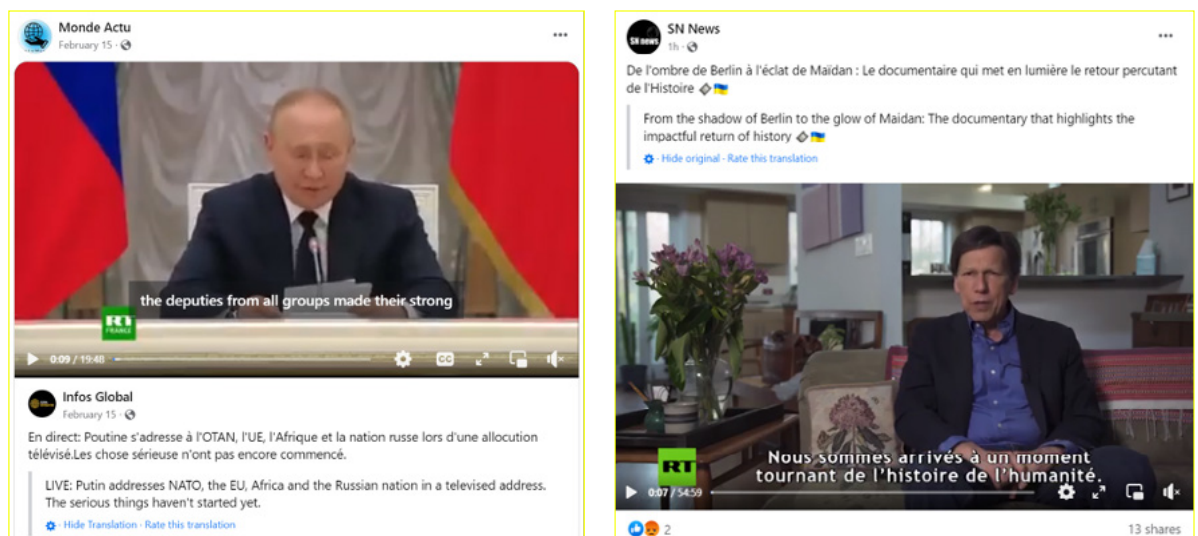


Figure 5: Pages from the network sharing footage directly taken from Russian state media (RT)

One media outlet that has been disproportionately amplified by the network since March 2023 (nearly all of the analysed pages have shared videos produced by the outlet, some pages exclusively focused on sharing these videos) is Ebene Media TV. The website [ebene-media.com](https://www.ebene-media.com) was created in 2021¹¹ and operated from an editorial team based in Cameroon, France, Canada, and Cote d'Ivoire. The website has significantly ramped up its publishing activity in 2023, focusing an entire video section¹² as well as its influential¹³ YouTube channel¹⁴ (+360K subscribers) on video updates about Russia's war in Ukraine.

11 <https://www.whois.com/whois/ebene-media.com>

12 <https://archive.ph/WFey4>

13 Created in August 2020, the YouTube channel is 788th in popularity in France: *SocialBlade, June 2023*

14 <https://archive.ph/aVCJ7>

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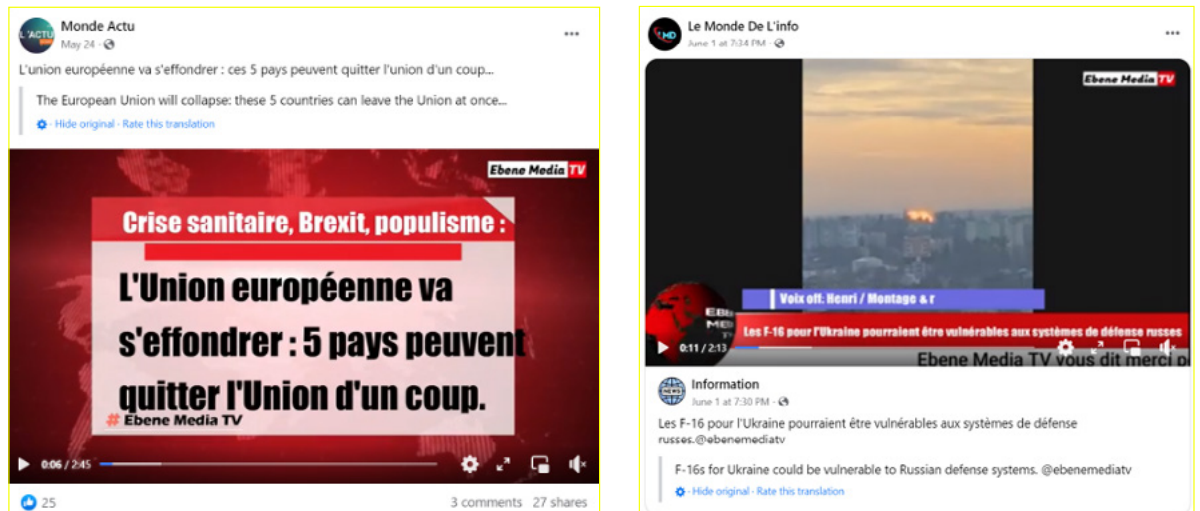


Figure 6: Pro-Russian videos by EBENE MEDIA TV amplified by pages from the network

The videos are dubbed in French using **text-to-speech technology** and are edited to include the logo of Ebene Media TV; however, the original footage is taken from various Russian sources, incl. footage by the Russian Ministry of Defence¹⁵ (mil.ru) or Kremlin's press service kremlin.ru¹⁶, Russian state-sponsored media and state-affiliated media (RT¹⁷, Sputnik¹⁸, IZ.ru¹⁹, ZVEZDA, etc), as well as Russian Telegram channels. The logos of these sources often remain visible in the footage shared by Ebene Media TV, co-existing with their own brand identity (see Figure 6).

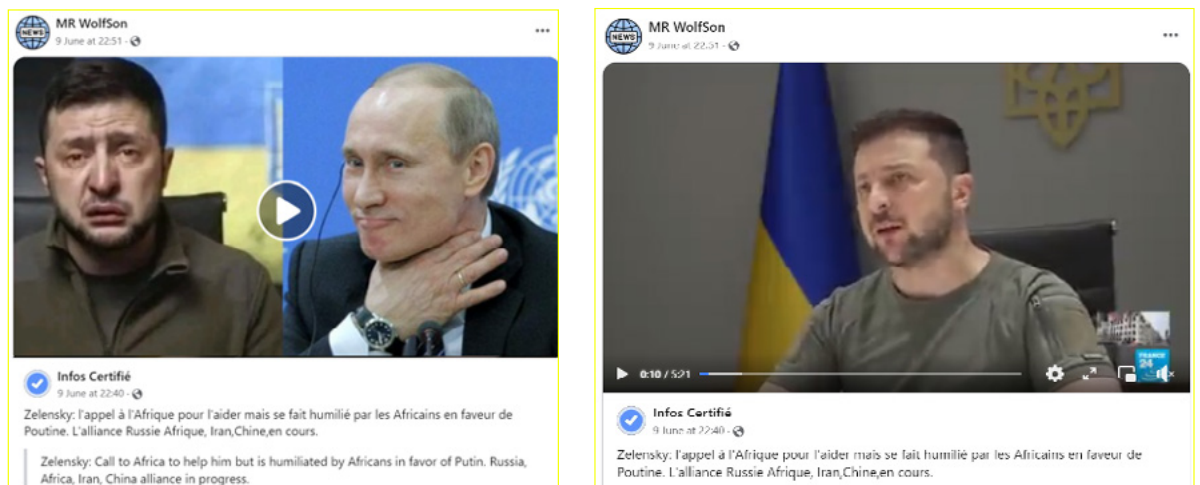


Figure 7: Video originating from reputable Western media (France 24) shared by the network, with added photo thumbnail (left) aimed to denigrate Ukrainian President Zelensky.

15 <https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/7UrABeVeDt8>

16 <https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/Tx0YXgcAa9s>

17 <https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/6Et5G2m1lew>

18 <https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/-zOuhrwa3jM>

19 <https://ghostarchive.org/varchive/LZzJqiywU4Y>

The network also promotes short videos directly downloaded from the YouTube channels of reputable Western media such as France24, TF1 INFO (LCI), Euronews, BFM TV. Those videos at times appear as genuinely neutral reporting, yet evidently pro-Russian messages are written into the copy of the post and the accompanying thumbnails which appear for a second or two before the actual video starts playing. These thumbnails are added to all videos and the photos are identical across the different pages (see Figure 7).

Between April and May 2023, several pages in the network began publishing collages of “geopolitical” video updates that use footage taken from various media, including both Western and Russian sources. Those video collages are all branded with the logo “H”, and are primarily spread by six of the biggest pages from the network (with a combined audience of 1.9 million followers). Each of these pages had the same visual identity and created their logos and cover photos shortly before they began publishing the video collages (see Figure 8 in the Appendix).

Analysis of Meta’s mitigation efforts

Meta’s policies explicitly prohibit the creation and use of fake or misleading accounts, spam and/or clickbait content that aims to mislead or deceive users and the use of artificial means to amplify content (such as the use of fake accounts, likes, shares or comments). Aside from an explicit prohibition, Meta also states in its policies that it “takes action” against networks or groups of accounts that engage in coordinated efforts to spread misinformation, manipulate public opinion, or disrupt conversations, and that it applies “penalties” to individual accounts that engage in spamming or manipulative behaviours.

Meta’s January 2023 report to the European Commission under the updated Code of Practice on Disinformation provides additional information about the company’s approach to limiting impermissible manipulative behaviors and practices across their services, in line with Commitment 14 of the Code. Meta states that their approach to inauthentic behavior, and covert influence operations is grounded in behavior and actor based enforcement—meaning that they look for specific violating **behaviors** exhibited by violating actors, rather than violating content. The company also states that they rely on both expert investigators to find and take down more sophisticated and emerging adversarial behaviors, as well as on scaled solutions to help detect and remove networks engaged in inauthentic behaviors.

Our analysis of this network identifies clearly identifiable patterns of inauthentic behavior that are in direct violation of Meta’s policies. In spite of this, the network remains active and continues to grow, suggesting that the company’s mitigation measures have failed to identify this network of clear inauthentic behavior.

Further, our mapping has revealed several other networks of Facebook pages that employ the same “baiting” tactics to grow their audience before swiftly rebranding themselves as credible news sources for updates about the situation in Ukraine.

To further explore this trend and the scale of the potential problem on Facebook, we looked at the activity of 40 randomly selected, recently created Facebook “comedy” pages and discovered that those anonymous entities expand their presence and influence on Facebook with the regular announcement of follow-for-follow or like-for-like activities, which may constitute violations under Meta’s spam policy. Thousands of these self-described “comedy” pages and groups exist in the French-speaking Facebook information space, targeting communities across different African countries and sharing the same memes, photos, status updates. Although it is impossible to predict whether all of these accounts will eventually join the pro-Russian manipulation marketplace, the similarities in their behavior and in some of the shared content pieces is evident (see Figure 9 in Appendix).

Conclusion

The findings in this investigation are not isolated examples. They are part of the Kremlin’s well-documented influence playbook that is designed to exploit vulnerabilities in media systems worldwide (including on social media) to further Russia’s strategic objectives while evading detection. While Meta’s policies prohibit many of the behaviors within this playbook, a consistent track record of undetected coordinated inauthentic behaviour campaigns suggests that the company has much more work to do to sufficiently enforce their policies. At present, these enforcement failures allow a manipulation marketplace to thrive across Meta’s platforms, which can be activated by any actors who have the money and the motivation to leverage it. Unfortunately, these policy breakdowns are having very real geopolitical consequences: last year, a near majority of African countries abstained from a U.N. vote condemning Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine.