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Democracy Dies in Darkness

EXCLUSIVE

How Russian disinformation toppled government after government in Africa

This never-before-told tale reveals how covert online battles in the French-speaking Sahel region led to coups



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When Israeli businessmen Royi Burstien and Lior Chorev touched down in the busy capital of the West African nation of Burkina Faso, they had an urgent message for the country's embattled ruler.

The Israelis — one a veteran political operative and the other a former army intelligence officer — had been hired with the mission of keeping the government of President Roch Marc Kaboré in power. Their company, Percepto International, was a pioneer in what's known as the disinformation-for-hire business. They were skilled in deceptive tricks of social media, reeling people into an online world comprised of fake journalists, news outlets and everyday citizens whose posts were intended to bolster support for Kaboré's government and undercut its critics.

But as Percepto began to survey the online landscape across Burkina Faso and the surrounding French-speaking Sahel region of Africa in 2021, they quickly saw that the local political adversaries and Islamic extremists they had been hired to combat were not Kaboré's biggest adversary. The real threat, they concluded, came from Russia, which was running what appeared to be a wide-ranging disinformation campaign aimed at destabilizing Burkina Faso and other democratically-elected governments on its borders.

Pro-Russian fake news sites populated YouTube and pro-Russian groups abounded on Facebook. Local influencers used WhatsApp and Telegram groups to organize pro-Russian demonstrations and praise Russian President Vladimir Putin. Facebook fan pages even hailed the Wagner Group, the Russian paramilitary network run by Yevgeniy Prigozhin, the late one-time Putin ally whose Internet Research Agency launched a disinformation campaign in the United States to influence the 2016 presidential election.

"In six months, Putin has cleaned up all the terrorists" in the region, one meme said in French, "while for 50 years under French influence, terrorists had been able to kill 100 people a day."

Percepto didn't know the full scope of the operation it had uncovered but it warned Kaboré's government that it needed to move fast: Launch a counteroffensive online — or risk getting pushed out in a coup.

Three years later, the governments of five former French colonies, including Burkina Faso, have been toppled. The new leaders of two of those countries, Mali and Burkina Faso, are overtly pro-Russian; in a third, Niger, the prime minister installed after a July coup has met recently with the Russian ambassador. In Mali and the Central African Republic, French troops have been replaced with Wagner mercenaries.

"Russia has been running a successful disinformation campaign that was crucial in evicting French forces and U.N. peacekeepers in Mali, and in establishing a new Sahel alliance," said Ulf Laessing, the Mali-based head of the Sahel Program at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, a center-right German think tank. "They are about to pull off the same in Niger."

Percepto's experience in French-speaking Africa offers a rare window into the round-the-clock information warfare that is shaping international politics — and the booming business of disinformation-for-hire. Meta, the social media company that operates Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp, says that since 2017 it has detected more than 200 clandestine influence operations, many of them mercenary campaigns, in 68 countries.

Information for this story was gathered over two years of interviews with key participants, along with a review of extensive documentary material, including client contracts and screenshots, that supported Percepto's account. Elements of that account have been corroborated by others with knowledge of the events.

Taken together, they show how Russia spent years laying the groundwork online for political upheaval in a region overlooked by the West.

Laying a trap for the Russians

A month or so after Burstien and Chorev visited Burkina Faso, a mysterious persona appeared online. According to his Facebook profile, he was an entrepreneur who'd recently moved to the capital to start a small business — but was scant on details. He liked his national soccer team and seemed to have a growing interest in politics, particularly pan-Africanism. He always remembered to wish his many Facebook friends happy birthday. He was generically handsome, with a bald head and searching eyes.

In reality, the persona had been created by a Percepto analyst, a French-speaking 20-something working in the company's offices in the diamond district outside Tel Aviv. She had spent months building up what would appear to be an authentic life for her avatar — first creating a deepfake image to use as a profile picture, then deploying specialized technology to make the avatar look as if he had attended sporting events and concerts.

The analyst picked a local Burkinabe high school and university, and then went about making Facebook friends with people who'd attended those schools. She had her creation join Facebook and WhatsApp groups dedicated to local politics, soccer clubs and entertainers. She rehearsed scenarios for how the avatar would act if he got into conversations with real people online.

Then she put the avatar to work.

The persona — which Burstien referred to as his “budding activist” — began his mission in a private Facebook group dedicated to Friends of Russia. There, he complained about French influence, posting a meme of Putin meeting African leaders under a hashtag about Pan-African liberation. “Russian help in our country would be a huge aid!” he wrote.

He got more active as the weeks went on. One meme he posted pointed out all the great help neighboring countries received from the Kremlin. News articles he shared questioned why the United States and France are opposed to Russia at all.

He became an active member of dozens of pro-Russian Telegram and WhatsApp groups. He learned how pro-Russian demonstrations were being organized across the country — real-world rallies the Kaboré government saw as a threat.

He also discovered that the campaign appeared to go well beyond Burkina Faso: In one WhatsApp group, members' phone numbers came from all over Africa. Percepto even traced one of the numbers to an employee of a Russian cultural center in Europe.

The budding activist was so convincing that by early last year, he got a surprising message in his WhatsApp inbox: The Russians wanted to meet him.

Everyone uses disinformation

Politicians the world over — from President Biden to the head of the United Nations — have decried disinformation, calling it one of the greatest threats to democracy in modern times. But there is no consensus on how to regulate it because virtually every country engages in influence operations — even though few will admit to doing so.

An awkward moment happened in 2022, when the Stanford Internet Observatory and the research firm Graphika reported on a network of hundreds of fake social media accounts on Twitter and Facebook run by the U.S. military. A month later, the Pentagon ordered up a sweeping internal audit to reassess its use of such techniques.

A year earlier, Facebook researchers had taken down a covert online operation by the French military in the Sahel. Some of the posts blamed “Russian imperialists” for causing problems in Mali, a former French colony.

France has never officially acknowledged its influence campaign. But in 2021, the French defense minister defended such covert activity, saying that the West needed to stay competitive.

“If we’re going to not accept what Russia is doing, we need to articulate what we’re not going to do.” said Graham Brookie, senior director of the Digital Forensic Research Lab, a unit of the Atlantic Council think tank that studies disinformation.

The recently-launched European Union Code of Practice on Disinformation, Brookie noted, is voluntary and does not apply to governments: the burden of battling disinformation has fallen entirely on Silicon Valley companies.

“By far our biggest threat is Facebook,” said Burstien.

He closely studies his opponent, poring over the quarterly reports Meta produces about so-called “coordinated inauthentic behavior” it uncovers on its platform, and adapts strategies in response. “How can we create a campaign that looks authentic in the eyes of Facebook?” he asked.

The answer: highly-tailored deception. Percepto’s clients pay the company millions to operate a handful of boutique personas — “deep avatars” with extensive backstories, like the budding activist in Burkina Faso.

Burstien started experimenting with avatars and influence operations as far back as 2008, when he was on leave from the Israeli army after a 27-year intelligence career. He gained notoriety in the United States after reports that his company, Psy-Group, had pitched its services to Trump’s 2016 campaign. He shut down Psy-Group, and went back to Israel, founding Percepto with Chorev in 2021.

He says he has no ethical qualms about his work. “I like to play in the gray,” he said.

Spy vs. spy

By early last year, the “budding activist” was deep into his mission. For several weeks, he’d been sending friendly text messages to the administrators of the pro-Russian WhatsApp and Facebook groups he was part of.

“Bonjour,” he wrote, according to Facebook messages viewed by The Washington Post. He then complimented them on the great work they were doing in his country.

Within a week, he received a reply.

“Is there something I can do for you?” the administrator asked, according to the screenshots.

“Yes, I was wondering if it’s you who runs this anti-imperialist group,” the avatar asked.

“Yes, that’s me,” said the administrator, and thanked the avatar for supporting his work.

Percepto worried that would be the end of it. But soon, the administrator popped up again. He told the avatar that he was part of a fast-growing international association that would support the struggle against European imperialism. He already had lined up representatives in several countries, including Congo and Haiti.

He suggested that the budding activist could found his own chapter in Burkina Faso. There were people at the local Russian embassy who could help guide the effort.

Excited but panicked, the Percepto analyst called her boss. The trap had worked, she recalled telling him. "It worked so well, in fact, that now they want us to meet in person! What do I do?" she asked her boss.

"Stall, stall, stall," Burstien recalled saying. "And get as much information as possible."

A few days later, the conversation continued on WhatsApp.

"Hello my brother," the pro-Russian admin wrote the avatar, according to the screenshots. "Have you started the work?"

"A little," the avatar said.

Perhaps the administrator sensed some hesitation in the reply.

"Fear is not necessary," he reassured. "... Because the people wish for cooperation with Russia."

Then the administrator shared copies of paperwork that the association had filed in several other countries and indicated that he could help draw up registration documents.

The Percepto avatar didn't answer.

A few days later, the administrator reached out again.

"Hello brother. I hope you are well?" he said. "You have not responded to me regarding what I've asked of you. If you're fearful of fighting this fight, we are not going to force you."

"I'm good," the avatar wrote back. "There's no problem."

But then Percepto's creation again went dark. A few more pings came in from the administrator, this time with an offer to go to Russia for training.

"Keep stalling," Burstien told his analyst.

It was early 2022. Burstien hastily arranged another urgent meeting with their client. He flew to Ouagadougou, the Burkinabe capital.

“We have a problem,” Burstien recalled saying in the meeting. “[The Russians] want to meet us, and they want to mobilize us. But we’re not Black. We don’t speak the local language.”

“We’ve gone as far as we can go online,” he recalls telling the company’s main government contact. “To move this mission forward, we need to take this avatar to the real world.”

Burstien says the Kaboré government heeded his advice. Within days, the official had found a colleague who would play the avatar in a real-world meeting with the Russians. Percepto met with the operative, who they say bore resemblance to their online creation, and they devised a plan for a meeting at a local bakery.

But one week later, before the meeting could happen, the Kaboré government was overthrown. During the fighting that ended Kaboré’s rule, rebel soldiers stood on a seized United Nations vehicle and waved a Russian flag. The country’s current leader, Ibrahim Traoré, was hosted by Putin at an Africa-Russia summit this past July.

A massive market for manipulation

Percepto is no longer working in Burkina Faso. But the market for manipulation continues. The wars in Ukraine and Israel-Gaza have created new avenues for disinformation, as have new technologies, such as the artificial intelligence tool ChatGPT.

Chorev says he has lined up several new clients, including a government in the Middle East and two countries in Asia.

Meanwhile, researchers say it’s no accident that Russia has been able to step into the vacuum left by political instability and anti-French sentiment in Africa.

Laessing, the Konrad Adenauer analyst, pointed out that pro-Russian social media figures widely supported the July coup in Niger, showing up at the capital brandishing Russian flags and spreading disinformation that the president had been ousted even before the coup happened. Niger’s new prime minister, Ali Lamine Zeine, broadcast his meeting with the Russian ambassador this month on state TV.

Laessing said Western governments have failed to appreciate the impact of Russia's online strategy in Africa — which included both covert operations and more public ones, such as paying local influencers to fly to Russia. Small beleaguered states like Burkina Faso were completely outmatched. “This is about winning over people. If everyone thinks you're a failure and Russia is the savior because of a storm of disinformation, then you need to do something,” he said.

But Laessing's not quite certain what that is. He noted that revelations about French-run disinformation campaigns in the Sahel have turned the public even further against France.

“There's a temptation to fight fire with fire, but I'm not sure it's a good strategy,” Laessing said. “You end up getting accused of doing the same things the other side is doing.”

