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UK Imposes Sanctions on Russian-Backed 'African Initiative' Over Covert Influence Campaigns

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The United Kingdom has imposed sanctions on the so-called African Initiative, a Russian organization posing as a news agency, and three of its senior figures, citing their involvement in a covert influence operation across the African continent. The measures, enacted on 18 July 2025, follow an in-depth report produced by France's VIGINUM agency in cooperation with the UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office and the European Union External Action Service.

According to the joint investigation, the African Initiative is not a genuine independent media outlet, but rather a tool for Russian state-controlled disinformation. The report, titled *African Initiative: Anatomy of a State-Controlled Influence Operation*, outlines how the organisation forms part of a broader campaign attributed to the Russian authorities to sway public opinion, create division, and erode Western influence in Africa.

Founded in Moscow in September 2023, the African Initiative reportedly operates in coordination with Russian intelligence services, including the Federal Security Service (FSB) and the Main Directorate of the General Staff (GRU). The agency combines overt diplomatic messaging with hidden manipulation tactics to spread pro-Kremlin, anti-Western narratives. It is also linked to the promotion of “Africa Corps,” a group viewed as a successor to the Wagner Group, which was previously led by Yevgeny Prigozhin.

Among those sanctioned is Artyom Kureyev, editor-in-chief of the African Initiative, who was previously sanctioned in December 2024 for participating in disinformation campaigns targeting Europe and Africa. Kureyev is reported to have ties to the FSB and is a central figure in the influence network.

Another sanctioned individual, Viktor Lukovenko, acts as a liaison officer for the African Initiative’s regional offices and contributes content to its website. Lukovenko is reportedly associated with Russian military intelligence and has a past criminal conviction in Russia for a racially motivated offence. In April 2025, he was arrested in Kyrgyzstan under suspicion of mercenary recruitment.

The third individual, Anna Zamareyeva, serves as deputy editor-in-chief and previously worked as a spokesperson for the Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner Centre from 2022 to 2023. All three individuals are said to be linked to “Project Lakhta,” a digital influence campaign reportedly associated with the late Prigozhin.

European officials describe the campaign as a strategic effort to “destabilise, divide, and ultimately control narratives across Africa.” The African Initiative reportedly maintains a network of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in countries including Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. These NGOs, including Perspective Sahélienne and Ensemble main dans la main Niger-Russie, conduct cultural events, media training, and public outreach initiatives that reportedly foster pro-Russian sentiment at the local level.

A key component of the disinformation strategy is the use of AI-generated content, packaged through an information manipulation system known as “AI-Freak.” The tool is used to create synthetic text, images, and video, distributed via sites such as newstop. Africa, targeting Francophone audiences. The report highlights how the content is amplified through coordinated bot networks and false social media accounts, with technical evidence pointing to Russian origin, including Cyrillic metadata and Russian-language code.

Despite releasing over 18,000 articles by April 2025, the African Initiative’s main platform reportedly receives just 35,000 monthly visits. However, its efforts continue to expand, including the launch of a mobile social networking app called “AFree,” promoted as an alternative to Western platforms. The app has seen significant promotion in countries such as Nigeria, Kenya, Cameroon, and Morocco.

VIGINUM’s report calls for increased cooperation between African media regulators, civil society, and international partners to confront these sophisticated influence campaigns. The UK’s sanctions underline a broader effort by Western governments to push back against foreign interference that threatens democratic institutions and regional stability.