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Transformation of Narrative Representation of Russia among Youth in West Africa

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Abstract. Western mainstream media narratives about Russia affect the perception of youth in West Africa regarding Russia as a global role player. The research is based on a synthesis and integration of scholarly studies, as well as newspapers and reports from selected Western media outlets. A broad literature review was first conducted to understand the body of knowledge on Western media narratives and their effects on people's perceptions of Russia. A narrative matrix was used as the main approach to map out the narratives about Russia, and thematic analysis was finally employed to identify the themes and sub-themes from the media narratives to examine how these narratives affect youth perceptions of Russia as a global player. The study identifies three competing narratives: the first is the dominant narrative in Western media, which describes Russia negatively in terms of its imperial interests. The second is the counter-narrative from several scholars, global South media outlets, dissenting politicians, and individuals who assert that NATO's expansion to the east threatens Russia's security and is the cause of the recent geopolitical crisis. The last is the alternative narrative, which assumes that Africans see Russia as a potential ally for mutually beneficial cooperation, despite the recent geopolitical crisis. The article concludes that the counter and alternative narratives have been marginalized and overshadowed by the dominant narratives propagated by Western media, which tend to shape youth perceptions of Russia as a negative global player, especially regarding narratives about the crisis in Ukraine.

Keywords: Western mainstream Media, media narratives, Societal narratives, Russia, West Africa, youth

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Трансформация нарративного представления о России среди молодежи Западной Африки

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Аннотация. Основные западные медиа-нарративы о России влияют на ее восприятие молодежью в Западной Африке как глобального игрока. Статья основана на синтезе и интеграции научных исследований, а также газет и отчетов отобранных западных СМИ. Первым этапом исследования стал широкий обзор литературы с целью выявления совокупности знаний о западных медиа-нарративах и их влиянии на восприятие населением африканских стран России. В качестве основного подхода для составления карты нарративов о России использовалась повествовательная матрица, а затем тематический анализ был применен для выявления тем и подтем медиа-нарративов, чтобы изучить, как эти нарративы влияют на восприятие молодежью России как глобального игрока. В статье определяются три конкурирующих нарратива: первый — доминирующий нарратив в западных СМИ, который описывает Россию негативно с точки зрения ее имперских интересов. Второй — контрнарратив СМИ Глобального Юга, несогласных политиков и отдельных лиц, которые утверждают, что расширение НАТО на восток угрожает безопасности России и является причиной текущего геополитического кризиса. Последний — альтернативный нарратив, который предполагает, что африканцы видят в России потенциального союзника для взаимовыгодного сотрудничества, несмотря на недавний геополитический кризис. В статье делается вывод о том, что контр- и альтернативные нарративы были маргинализированы и замещены доминирующими нарративами, распространяемыми западными СМИ, которые, как правило, формируют восприятие молодежью России как негативного глобального игрока, особенно в отношении нарративов о кризисе на Украине.

Ключевые слова: Западные СМИ, медийные нарративы, общественные нарративы, Россия, Западная Африка, молодежь

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Introduction

Africa has become increasingly important as a strategic region for global powers [Olivier, Suchkov 2015]. This explains the relevance of Africa for Russia, especially in recent times where Russia's return as a global role player in Africa is visible amidst the fading away of its Western allies and business partners due to recent geopolitical events¹. As a result, Russia has since returned to Africa, in various capacity, expanding its influence and presence in areas such as diplomatic relations, economic and military cooperation [Issaev et al. 2022; Singh 2022]. Also, the presence of Russia in Africa is viewed as a way to counter Western influence in the region, an important factor to challenge the dominance of Western powers in the region or break unipolarity [Stronski and Sokolsky 2020].

Taking into account the relevance of Africa to Russia nowadays, it is crucial to understand the media representation of Russia in Africa and its role in shaping public opinion about Russia's role as a global player. This is because, media narratives influence public opinion and perception of social and political events, especially in recent times when geopolitics has become the order of the day [Coban 2016]. The transformation of the media space has changed how people in the world see themselves and others. According to [Baum and Groeling 2010], the media is heavily influenced and controlled by the elites and governments to present a one-sided narrative, against antagonistic states. This represents the agenda-setting role of the media where reality is first received by the influential gatekeepers (elites and governments) to the media, which reflects as a one-sided narrative and opinion flow to the public (public agenda) and a polarised opinion in the media and among the elites creates a polarised public opinion. In the case of the transformative narratives of Western media against Russia, a perfect example of this one-sided discourse is seen.

In the current geopolitical climate, Russia has been labelled and framed throughout Western media news coverage (BBC, New York Times, the Guardian, etc.) negatively, i.e. advancing its imperial interests in Africa [Zollmann 2024]. The country has been condemned generally in various negative lights. This one-sided narratives about Russia in the Western media has created a united one-sided Western opinion against Russia, reflected in the Western audience and public opinion². Russia is a significant global player, and these transformative narratives in the media outlets has affected its diplomatic and economic relations across the world [Fisher 2023]. However, these negative sentiments are not uniform everywhere, as alternative media outlets, experts and some politicians see the

¹ See: Karström, V. (2024). *The Strategical Use of Othering in Western Media: How is the Russian advancement in Africa depicted in Western media?* Retrieved August 12, 2025, from <https://www.essays.se/about/italy/> ; [Singh 2022].

² Karström, V. (2024). *The Strategical Use of Othering in Western Media: How is the Russian advancement in Africa depicted in Western media?* Retrieved August 12, 2025, from <https://www.essays.se/about/italy/>

narratives of Western media outlets as agenda-setting to demonize Russia and advance Western interests³.

This paper therefore, seeks to examine the transformative narratives and representation of Russia in Western media and how these narratives shape the perception of Russia as a global player among the youth in West Africa, highlighting whether different historical contexts and political alignment lead to divergent perceptions of these narratives.

The target audience for the study being the youth is particularly interesting because statistics shows that the youth (15–35) represent the majority in West Africa⁴. Given the region's strategic importance, the perceptions of the majority (youth) on events can significantly influence societal attitudes and future trends.

Undoubtedly, the youth has become increasingly important in contemporary political discourse across the globe [Sukarieh and Tannock 2014]. This is due to the growing number of the youth (15–35) in terms of demographics globally⁵. According to [Kraftl, Horton and Tucker 2012], the increasing importance of the youth in the last decade has prompted national governments and relevant authorities in the World to develop and/or expand national youth policies, youth councils and youth ministries and agencies. In the same vein, civil society organization report an explosion of local, national and international youth-led NGOs, thinktanks and media channels [Van Dijk, de Bruijn, Cardoso and Butter 2011].

Research Methodology

The key methodological approach employed to analyze the Western media narratives on Russia and its role in shaping the perception of the youth in West Africa is narrative matrix. The narrative matrix is a qualitative research methodology or tool that can be used to systematically analyze and categorize narratives within a text or story. Therefore, the study used the narrative matrix to systematically categorize the themes, framing devices, and characterizations identified from the media contents mapped out of Western media sources for analysis [Shaw and Nickpour 2024].

The data for the narrative's matrix was collected from prominent Western media outlets, and these includes BBC news, the Guardian, CNN and the New York Times. The selection of these media outlets is guided by one of the author's personal regular

³ McCurry J, Lock S and Harding L (2022). Russiatargeting cities as strength of Ukraine's resistance 'continues to surprise', UK says. *The Guardian*, 6 March. Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/06/biden-and-zelenskiy-discuss-more-aid-for-ukraine-as-russian-attacks-intensify>; Badshag, N., & Sparrow, A. (2022). Boris Johnson says 'Putin must fail' after Cobra meeting — as it happened. *The Guardian*, 24 February. Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2022/feb/24/uk-politics-live-boris-johnson-sanctions-russia-invasion-ukraine-latest-updates>

⁴ See: World Bank Blog (2021). Youth-led healing from Africa: Amid and post-COVID. Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/youth-transforming-africa/youth-led-healing-africa-amid-and-post-covid>; [Odimeywu, Adewoyin 2022].

⁵ World Bank Blog (2021). Youth-led healing from Africa: Amid and post-COVID. Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/youth-transforming-africa/youth-led-healing-africa-amid-and-post-covid>; [Odimeywu and Adewoyin 2022].

monitoring of their reportage of the 2022 Ukraine crisis till today. In addition, these media outlets are widely broadcasted in Africa and the local media depend on such outlets for international news, hence justifiable to use Western media sources that are familiar to the target audience of the study. The timeframe considered for the selection of the media content spans the last five years (2020–2025).

Having mapped out these narratives from the selected media outlets, thematic content analysis was first employed to map themes and sub-themes across the data. The themes were later grouped and merged to create superordinate themes which was used in the second phase of the analysis.

The second phase involved the narrative matrix in which an in-depth interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was employed on the data to analyze and capture the finer nuances and meanings societal narratives hold for the youth as well as how they make sense of such narratives. At this stage, the themes identified from the first stage (thematic content analysis) were used as structures to investigate which narratives were dominant, counter and alternative under each theme (*see the lists of themes and their narrative status in Table 1*).

Research Results and Discussion

Table 1 in this section specifically populate the four key themes identified in the Western media through the first stage of the analysis, including: (1) Russia as the aggressor; (2) NATO’s expansion and Russia security threats; (3) Russia as a new ally; and (4) Russia’s role in African security. Each of these themes is categorized in Table 1 below according to its narrative status.

Table 1

Narrative theme and their corresponding narrative status

Theme	Narrative status		
	Dominant	Counter	Alternative
Western media negatives narrative on Russia	X	-	-
Western media narrative on NATO’s expansion and Russia security threats	-	X	-
Western media narrative on Russia as a new ally (Return of Russia to Africa)	-	-	X
Western media narrative on Russia’s role in African security	X	X	X

Source: compiled by Zing M.Y, Issaev L.M

Theme 1: Western media negative narratives on Russia

The emergence of the new Cold War based on geopolitical crisis has led to the re-emergence of ideology of how Russia is reported in Western mainstream media. While some news reporting in Russia focuses on accuracy and factual information outside the framework of the new Cold War, the prevailing trend in reporting tends to demonize the country [McLaughlin 2020; Boyd-Barrett 2016].

Since the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine crisis in February 2022, Russia has since dominated Western news coverage for the negative reasons. Russia is largely labelled and framed negatively across Western newspapers and news media published across the world [Zollmann 2024]. For instance, during the first two weeks of the crisis in Ukraine, nine (9) Western newspapers across the US, UK, and Germany published about 3,410 news items specifically on Russia's action in Ukraine. Out of the 3,410 news items, the majority, thus about 952 (29%) of the news items labelled Russia negatively. The German press dominated such frames, probably due to their proximity to the crisis, geographically and politically. The US and UK respectively labelled Russia negatively [Zollmann 2024].

This transformative representation of Russia has led to a portrayal by various global media outlets that characterised Russia's actions in Ukraine as an effort to advance its imperial interests. To further show how Russia was dominantly labelled negatively, specific media narratives are presented. Negative framing of Russia did not only become widespread in the 2022 crisis. In the 2014, such themes were also widespread and dominated various news coverage across the West [Boyd-Barret 2016], in his book "Western mainstream media and the Ukraine crisis: a study in conflict propaganda", painstakingly examines news reports from prominent Western media, exposing the ways in which language and images were used to present Russia negatively in the 2014 Ukraine crisis. These portrayals, among others, have contributed to a pervasive framing of Russia in the media. As a result, even attempts at impartial reporting are challenged by these widespread views, leading to consistently negative coverage across various Western media outlets.

Such labelling of Russia in the media in the ongoing crisis in Ukraine has the tendency to influence the perception of West African youth about the country. This transformation of narrative is even fuelled by the combination of local media reliance on Western media sources and the pervasive influence of digital or social media platforms, where the negative representation of Russia is amplified. As a result, many young people in West Africa are likely to develop a predominantly negative image of Russia, perceiving the country as hostile rather than a potential partner for educational and cultural exchange. The effects of these narratives extend beyond just mere perceptions, as they can have tangible effects on scholarship opportunities and exchange programs between Russia and African countries. Historically, Russia played a key role in providing countless scholarship opportunities to African students, fostering academic collaboration and strengthening cultural ties. Although this area of academic support still exists, there are questions about the number of international students in Russia or who will be willing to take educational opportunities in Russia, for the fear of being asked to fight in the crisis and with many opting for alternative places perceived to be much safer or more favourable.

Theme 2: NATO's expansion and Russia security threats

Despite the dominant negative representation of Russia in the Western media as a result of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the other part of the divide attributes the ongoing crisis to NATO's expansion to the borders of Russia. These are

seen as alternative narratives that have emerged to counter the overly one-sided dominant narratives of Russia across Western mainstream media.

Amidst the dominant narratives, several alternative media channels have reported different perspectives grounded in accuracy and factuality. Some Chinese media outlets and global South channels, such as Al Jazeera, have suggested that NATO's expansion into Russia's sphere of influence has contributed to the crisis, creating tensions and threatening Russia's security⁶. Additionally, a handful of dissident politicians and influential figures in the West (the US, UK, Germany and France) have criticized NATO's expansion, attributing it as a key factor in the Ukraine crisis. However, these individuals faced backlash from Western powers, which viewed their opinions as threatening, leading many to retract their statements⁷.

This is because, the media continually took a defensive position, often legitimizing the expansion of NATO⁸. This is further amplified when a quantitative study of 4,300 news items published in a leading quality news media in Germany between 24 February and 31 May 2022, found that 94% of the crisis in Ukraine is attributed to Putin or Russia, while the West and Ukraine are co-responsible for only 4% and 2% respectively [Zollmann 2024].

Taking various agreements that were reached in the 1990s for NATO not to expand further to the East or the sphere of influence of Russia and verse versa, the expansion of NATO to Ukraine in recent time clearly shows that NATO for that matter the West has broken its promise not to expand beyond the sphere of influence of Russia, threatening its security and should be responsible for the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. Yet, these genuine viewpoints often go unnoticed, overshadowed by the dominant narratives propagated by major Western media outlets. The resistance of NATO expansion to Ukraine is not just a called made today due to the crisis in Ukraine, but a resistance even from the time of the Soviet Union due to the implications it has on the Russian security system. This is because, NATO's expansion to Ukraine will strengthen nationalist and communist sectors in Russia, exploit Russia's military weakness and to complete the encirclement of Russia, and many others [Zollmann 2024]. As a result, the Russian side for the fear of the security threats initiates military and political measures or strategies to combat or counter NATO's expansion to its sphere of influence. This is clearly a contributory factor to the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, yet these sentiments have

⁶ McCurry J, Lock S and Harding L (2022). Russia targeting cities as strength of Ukraine's resistance 'continues to surprise', UK says. *The Guardian*, 6 March. Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/06/biden-and-zelenskiy-discuss-more-aid-for-ukraine-as-russian-attacks-intensify>

⁷ Badshag, N., & Sparrow, A. (2022). Boris Johnson says 'Putin must fail' after Cobra meeting – as it happened. *The Guardian*, 24 February. Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2022/feb/24/uk-politics-live-boris-johnson-sanctions-russia-invasion-ukraine-latest-updates>

⁸ Harvey, F. (2022). Is Putin's Ukraine invasion about fossil fuels? *The Guardian*, 24 February. Retrieved August, 12, 2025, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/24/qa-could-putin-use-russian-gas-supplies-to-hurt-europe>

been marginalised in the press, which has rarely assessed the role and implication of NATO's expansion on the crisis.

This one-sided narratives in the media highlight that the negative portrayal of Russia within Western narratives may not be entirely rooted in reality but rather serve as propaganda to further Western interests. It also shed more light on the power of the media to influence our thinking and perception. Amidst these viewpoints, the paper seeks to scrutinise why dissenting opinions have been marginalized and rarely address other factors (such as NATO's expansion to Ukraine) causing Russia's reactions, while inviting readers to recognize the potential biases inherent in these dominant narratives that distort reality, and to interact critically with media narratives and push for increased accountability in mainstream media reportage, as reiterated by [Boyd-Barrett 2017].

Theme 3: Russia as a new ally

The negative and transformative narratives and reporting by Western media mainstream (WMM) about Russia can be said to have little to no effect on Russia-Africa relations, as several African countries hold alternative view of Russia as their new ally amidst the ongoing crisis in Ukraine. In the last decade, Russia has started paying close attention to the African continent, which has even intensified in recent times⁹. Since the onset of the crisis in Ukraine and the rapid decline in the Russia and West relations, coupled with the numerous sanctions imposed on Russia by the West, Russia has since returned to Africa in various capacities and cooperations, including education, military technical cooperation, agro-economics, and diplomatic relations [Singh 2022]. Amidst the crisis and Western propaganda, Russia has been able to build stronger ties with several African nations than before and has become more prominent on the international stage due to frequent media coverage¹⁰.

Russia has since established strong diplomatic cooperation with Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, and Guinea. These cooperations largely focus on military technical cooperation, energy transmission, education, and diplomatic exchange visits, including joint projects and conferences. The agenda of Russia to strengthen its relations with Africa first saw its peak in the first ever Russia-African Summit in 2019. This summit resulted to several military technical cooperations and agreements, trade relations and even agreements on non-conditional assistance from Russia to Africa [Singh 2022]. These agreements further strengthened the Russia-Africa relations, partly because as of 2019, the first Trump's administration took

⁹ CSIS (2023). *Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa.: What's the Limit?.* Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit>

¹⁰ Karström, V. (2024). *The Stragetical Use of Othering in Western Media: How is the Russian advancement in Africa depicted in Western media?* Retrieved August 12, 2025 Retrieved from <https://www.essays.se/about/italy/>

a step backward in its support for counter-terrorism in the region, resulting to less support from the US to African countries¹¹.

Since the first Russia-Africa Summit in 2019, African countries have been active participants of this summit till date, which has been a topic of discussion in the media. A recent example is that even amidst the crisis in Ukraine and the sanctions imposed on Russia, several African countries participated in the 2023 Russia-Africa Summit. For instance, during the 2023 Russia-African Summit, several African heads of state (particularly Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso) expressed support for Russia and emphasized building a strong relationship with the country. During the same summit, the president of the Russian Federation announced free grain shipments to several African countries, which were received positively by these African heads of state, signalling robust diplomatic relations between Russia and Africa despite the ongoing crisis, WMM propaganda, and sanctions imposed on Russia. The West and for that matter the WMM show this summit, the various support of Russia to Africa and the return of Russia to Africa in generally as a new way of advancing its imperial interest, and therefore, do not mean any good for Africa.

It is important to note, in these years of strong Russia-African relations, the relationship was not induced by one side, as the relationship was also heavily driven or called for by the Africa countries. This tells you that the African continent are not passive agents, and the leaders of these countries have always sought for alternative in Russia as an ally for quite a long time. This is because, unlike the West, cooperations or agreements and support from or with Russia do not come with heavy conditionalities about democratization or human rights¹². Another reason why African countries are starting to look past the West towards alternative or new partnership is because the West has been shifting its focus elsewhere, and the Africa-West relations is more of a new-colonialism than partnership. In other words, many African countries chose to be non-aligned and for matter, perceived relationship with Russia as mutually beneficial compared to the West, which often will demand that they make a choice [Strand 2022]. As a result, many African countries hold an alternative view of Russia and perceived the country as an ally that seeks for cooperations that resembles more of a partnership, despite the dominant negative narratives about Russia in the WMM. These alternative viewpoint of Russia as an ally resonate with the youth across Africa. They are preview to the news, they are preview to what is happenings in the World and the African sub region and for that matter, advocate for their leaders to pursue cooperations with powers that seeks for mutually beneficial cooperation. This is demonstrated in the series of African protest where the youth openly call for Russia support by waving the Russia flags or holding placards of solidarity with Russia.

¹¹ CSIS (2023). Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa.: What's the Limit?. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit>

¹² Karström, V. (2024). *The Strategical Use of Othering in Western Media: How is the Russian advancement in Africa depicted in Western media?* Retrieved August 12, 2025, <https://www.essays.se/about/italy/>

Africa is the only region across the World to consistently increase imports from Russia amidst the ongoing geopolitical crisis [Singh 2022]. African mainly import produce such as wheat, coal, petroleum and electronics from Russia. Likewise, Russia also import produce such as fruits, vegetables, sugar, among others from Africa. According to CSIS¹³, Russia has started building state-own companies in Africa in the area of nuclear power plants, hydrocarbon projects among others in the quest to support the development of the power or energy sector in Africa. Even at the diplomatic front, it is clear that Africa is beginning to see a new friend in Russia. African countries form the largest voting block within the UN, and the impact of the Russia-Africa relation was fell when African countries represented the highest number of abstentions in the vote for resolutions on the Russia-Ukraine crisis [Singh 2022].

Theme 4: Russia's role in African security

The presence of Russia in African security, especially the military is viewed in different lens as it was identified as dominant, counter and alternative narrative. In the Western media discourse, Russia's presence in African security is a dominant narrative, viewed in a negative light. The Russians, however, view it as a counter narrative, which seeks to provide support and counter terrorism in Africa. Some African countries also see it as an alternative source of support to their military in order to fight terrorism and secure their borders.

In the Western media discourse, the presence of Russian mercenaries in West Africa is threatening the security of the region. The dominant narratives about these mercenaries across the WMM is that they are committing atrocities in the region, including killing of civilians, human right abuses, massacres, sexual violence, and exploitation of the precious African natural resources and inciting violence and autocratic principles in the region¹⁴ (BBC News). These narratives have gone viral and are aired even on the local news channels of the region. These kinds of narratives have affected the perception of the youth about Russia's role in Africa.

For instance, the UK's Minister for Development and Africa, Andrew Mitchell, during his visit to Ghana in 2022 said that Britain is very much concerned about the activities of Russian mercenaries in West Africa. He added that the presence of Russia in the region was neither constructive nor helpful [BBC News 2022]. These and many more negative narratives from prominent Western leaders and influential people have attributed the Russian's military presence or role in Africa.

In other to counter the dominance narratives portrayed about Russia's mercenary in West Africa, the Russian government also indicated that the presence of its military group in the African sub-region is in support of African effort to fight terrorism and

¹³ *Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa: What's the Limit?* Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit>

¹⁴ *Allafrica newsletter (2024). Africa: Russia mercenaries have a bad reputation but some African regimes still employ them-study explores why*, 24 November. Retrieved August, 14, 2025, from <https://allafrica.com/stories/202411250025.html>

extremist groups in the region. This explains why the Russian presidential advisor, Anton Kobayakov, during the two-day Russia-Africa Ministerial Conference said that *“For Russia, the role of a security provider for the African countries is practical, vital, and necessary.”* He added that the West is not ready to resolve the security issues in Africa but are rather interested in creating tensions on the continent, such that any item by Russia to resolve the security issues in Africa is viewed in a negative light from the West. This has resonated with many African countries as they view partnership with Russia as mutually beneficial and continue their pursuit of military cooperation with Russia. Russia so far has signed military technical cooperation with about 33 African countries in a joint effort to counter terrorism and violent extremist groups in the region to achieve peace and stability. Despite the propaganda and dominant narratives of Russia’s military presence in Africa by the West, which of course has instilled fear, panic and negative perception among some pockets of people, the presence of these Russian mercenaries is mostly viewed positively in the region [Ishiyama 2024].

The majority of the African countries also view the role of Russia in their country’s security as an alternative narrative and actor. Russia so far has military cooperation with about 33 countries. Active engagement among these countries includes Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Libya, Central African Republic, Mozambique among others. To some of these countries with military agreements with Russia, the presence of Russia’s mercenaries has brought visible security improvements compared to periods under the rebel groups control. For others, the arms and training received from Russia has made them offensive and able to counter terrorism in their countries¹⁵. According to V. Karström¹⁶, the reasons why there is growing military cooperation between Russia and Africa compared to the dominant narratives out there is that arms from Russia are significantly cheaper compared to the West, and these military or trade agreements with Russia are not tied to conditionalities such as democratization and human rights. This was further fuelled when the US took a step backward in their support of fighting terrorism in Africa, which resulted in less support by the US towards African countries or security¹⁷. As a result, some African countries has since found a partner in Russia in their quest to fight terrorism and extremist group in the region.

These military technical cooperation so far is viewed positively by many of these African countries in their fight against terrorism [Ishiyama 2024]. For instance, during the 2023 Russia-African Summit, the interim president of Mali, Assimi Goita said: *“Thank you for your support and friendship. Thanks to Russia, we have been able to strengthen our armed forces, our security services and our law enforcement agencies.*

¹⁵ Dukhan, N. (2020). State of prey: Proxies, predators, and profiteers in the Central African Republic. *The Sentry*, 5. Retrieved August 13, 2025, from <https://thesentry.org/reports/state-of-prey/>

¹⁶ Karström, V. (2024). The Strategic Use of Othering in Western Media: How is the Russian advancement in Africa depicted in Western media? Retrieved August 12, 2025, from <https://www.essays.se/about/italy/>

¹⁷ CSIS (2023). Russia Is Still Progressing in Africa: What's the Limit?. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). Retrieved August 15, 2025, from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-still-progressing-africa-whats-limit>

*The Malian armed forces are now in an offensive dynamic, we have significantly reduced the number of attacks that were targeting military bases, and we have been able to provide security in many locations. I want to thank you again, Mr. President, for your support, for the support of your government. Thanks to you, we have been able to make great progress in the fight against terrorism. The cooperation between our countries is not limited to defense and security issues. We also cooperate in the field of human resources, as well as in commerce and trade*¹⁸. A similar assertion was made by the interim president of Burkina Faso who indicated their fight against terrorism and the support of Russia in this fight. Based on the analysis presented, depending on where you stand, the role of Russia's presence in the security of Africa is viewed in different ways (either dominant, counter or alternative narratives) based on the context, and what the news article or narrative aim to deliver.

Conclusion

This study examined the complex relationship between the narratives about Russia in Western mainstream media (WMM) and how the youth in West Africa perceive Russia as a global role player. It is evident from the study that dominant narratives often depict Russia negatively, overshadowing alternative narratives that shed light on the complexities of geopolitical dynamics. Despite the dominant narratives describing Russia as advancing its imperial interests, the study identified counter-narratives to these overly dominant narratives. The counter-narratives emphasized the role of NATO's expansion to the east as a catalyst for the recent geopolitical crisis. Other narratives (alternative narratives) found in this study present Russia as a potential ally for Africa, fostering mutually beneficial cooperation.

Although the study revealed that Africa-Russia relations or cooperation have increased and become stronger amidst the current geopolitical crisis, it does not discount the fact that the prevailing dominant narratives in WMM contribute to shaping the perceptions of youth about Russia, leading to a somewhat negative portrayal of Russia across the region.

This underscores the importance of diversifying information sources as well as promoting critical media literacy and discourse among the youth. This is because exposure to a wider range of narratives or media sources leads to a critical evaluation of media content, thereby promoting media accountability and transparency devoid of sensationalism.

Therefore, this study emphasizes the need for continued dialogue and critical evaluation of diverse perspectives in media narratives. As the geopolitical landscape evolves rapidly, it is essential for the youth, who are the future leaders, to be equipped with the necessary tools to critically assess and evaluate media narratives in order to make informed decisions about global issues; the youth in West Africa are no exception. This calls for future research to further examine the impact of social

¹⁸ Mali thankful to Russia for helping strengthen its army — transitional president. Retrieved August 15, 2025, from <https://tass.com/politics/1653473?ysclid=mharnwfr3d367569463>

media and alternative media sources on shaping youth perceptions about Russia, including a comparative assessment of Anglophone and Francophone blocs. Additionally, future studies should focus on the potential for collaborative initiatives between Africa and Russia that transcend the dominant narratives projected in Western media discourse.

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