

GCKN RUNNING ESTIMATE

Russian Global Influence Efforts

In the Previous Running Estimate...

- Russian domestic support for the war decreased from 76% in August to 72% in September. Public discontent over Russian mobilization and the disorderly way it was carried out are likely contributors.
- Approximately 300,000 Russians have been mobilized, while at least as many have also fled Russia as a result of the mobilization order.
- Some ethnic minorities and rural populations across Russia claim that the mobilization is targeting their communities.

This Running Estimate...

- Multiple surveys indicate that Russian domestic support for the “special military operation,” in October and November, ranges from a high of 76% to a low of 25%; however, polling suggests that a majority of Russians support negotiations to end the war.
- The Kremlin has long prepared its political narrative within the media space, resulting in strong domestic support and moderate political support from Russia’s traditional partners in under-developed countries.
- Putin leverages his close partnership with the Russian Orthodox Church's Moscow Patriarchate as an influential conduit for his information fight.
- Reasonably broad Russian influence in the “Global South” did not bring a strong, equivalent level of opposition to the UN resolution condemning Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian Oblasts.
- China pushes Russian narratives about Ukraine both independently and in coordination with Moscow, as part of its global influence campaign.
- Turkish media is heavily influenced by the cooperation between Erdoğan and Putin.
- The Iranian regime supports Russia in its “special military operation,” but the Iranian people are conflicted on the matter.
- Russia has generated state-by-state support across Africa with longstanding, widespread information campaigns, but that support has not led to consistent, pro-Russia voting behaviors at the UN. However, there also is no unanimity across the continent against Russia.



DOMESTIC RUSSIAN PERCEPTIONS

The relatively steady levels of Russian domestic support for the war since September, despite increased public apprehension following battlefield setbacks and mobilization controversies,¹ reflect a persistent climate of wartime censorship and the public's growing psychological investment in the country's war outcomes². These are increasingly instrumentalized by aggressive state messaging³ that influences public conformism.⁴ November public surveys indicate Russian support for the war has remained steady at 72-74%, although two other surveys claim only 25% overall support and 50% proxy support for the war, respectively.⁵ Up to 67% desire negotiations to end the conflict.⁶

- According to the Levada Center's 10th Russia-Ukraine war survey, released on 12 December,^a Russian domestic support for the Kremlin's "special military operation" (SMO) slightly increased from 73% in October to 74% in November. Older respondents (55 and older) remain most supportive of the war (75%), while respondents aged 18-24 years remain the least supportive (62%). However, the

majority of Russians polled (57%) supported negotiations to end the war.⁷

- Polling by a group of independent Russian researchers measured overall support for the SMO even higher at 76% in November, up slightly from 75% in October. In contrast, the level of proxy support for the war (i.e., whether close friends, family, or co-workers support the war) was much lower at 50%, **an indicator that support is likely lower than self-report levels.** Further, 67% supported negotiations to end the war.⁸
- Leaked Russian Federal Protective Service (FSO) polling showed domestic support for the war had plunged from 57% in July to 25% in November, affected ostensibly by Russian losses in Ukraine and the burden of mobilization. However, only 55% were in favor of negotiations to end the war.⁹

a Levada Center conducted the survey on 24-30 November 2022 with a representative sample of all Russian urban and rural residents, comprising 1601 adults aged 18 years or older. Levada conducted the surveys as personal interviews in respondents' homes and published the survey results on 12 December 2022.

RUSSIAN STATE MEDIA: PRIMARY THEMES ABOUT THE WAR

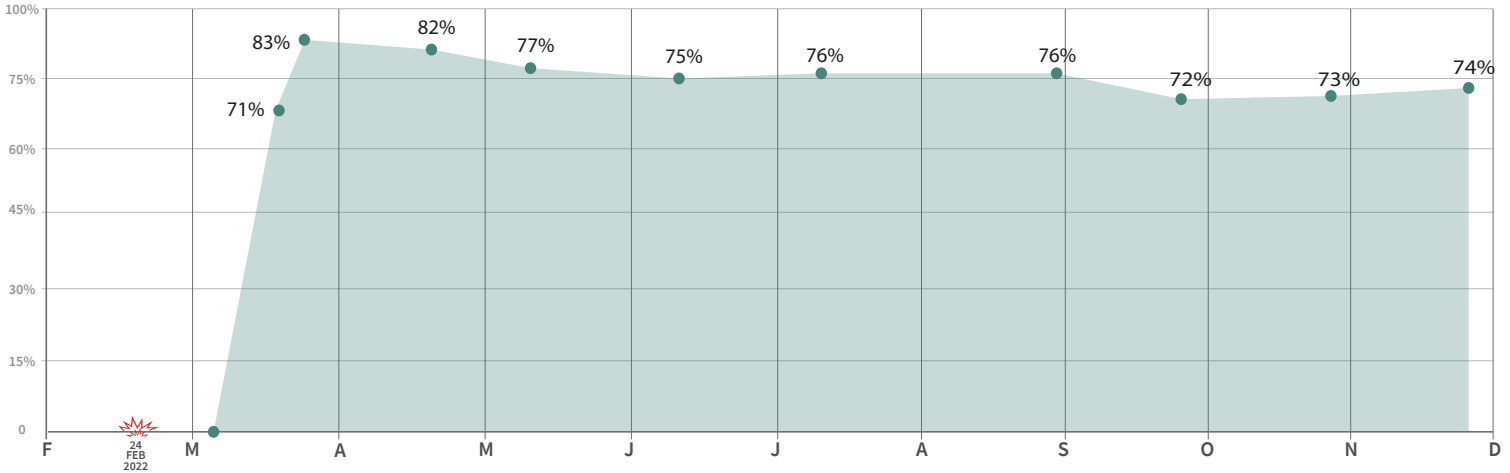
High levels of Russia domestic support (above 50%) for the war are likely driven by aggressive state framing of the conflict along several themes:

- The war pits Russian Slavic Orthodox civilization against the decadent West and the evil United States and NATO.
- The integrality of Ukraine to Eurasianism and its centrality to a world in which Russia enjoys natural supremacy.
- The portrayal of Ukraine as a pseudo-state unable to sustain sovereignty.
- The continual reference to the Great Patriotic War to stoke the near morbid hatred of Nazism among Russians,¹⁰ and supposed threats to Russian citizens in Ukraine.¹¹

Thus, the motif of the war as primarily defensive continues to resonate with Russians eager for the rebounding of their country's sociopolitical hegemony in the region.¹²



Domestic Russian Perceptions of the "Special Military Operation"



*It is important to note that Russian opinion polls are immediately instrumentalized by the Kremlin, repeated by the Russian media, and used to claim that the invasion is supported by the Russian public and conducted in its name.

Sources: Levada Center, 2022. "Conflict with Ukraine: October 2022." *The Levada Analytical Center*, 1 November 2022; Levada Center, 2022. "Conflict with Ukraine: November 2022." *The Levada Analytical Center*, 12 December 2022

POLLING SNAPSHOT

- *Levada Center polling, released as late as December, indicates support for the SMO remained relatively steady at 73% (October) and 74% (November).*¹³
- *Survey by an independent group of Russian researchers shows support for the SMO holding, slightly increasing from 75% in October to 76% in November.*¹⁴
- *Allegedly leaked Russian government polling shows support for the SMO at of 25% in November.*¹⁵
- *Multiple surveys from October and November indicate the majority of Russians (Levada: 57%; FSO: 55%; independent Russian researchers: 67%) want to start negotiations to end the war.*¹⁶

Support for Russia Around the Globe vs Support for Russia in the United Nations: Not a Direct Relationship

Many of Russia's partners will support Moscow only so far as it benefits them without losing Russia's business or their place internationally. Despite international polling indicating various levels of Russian support around the globe, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly to condemn the Kremlin's annexation of four Ukrainian oblasts; only four

nations voted with Russia against the resolution.

- An Open Society Foundations survey from July-August showed considerable support for Russia in a broad range of locations--with a concentration in the Global South--likely the result of an effective, longstanding Russian influence campaign there.^b

^b The polling was carried out between 22 July and 15 August of over 21,400 people across 22 countries for the Open Society Foundations by YouGov, Datapraxis, and two local providers in Moldova and Ukraine. The margin of error for the polling is about plus or minus 3%. SOURCE: Fault Lines: Global Perspectives on a World in Crisis-Open Society Foundations <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/1774bddf-31ff-4e79-88fd-813399017c45/fault-lines-global-perspectives-on-a-world-in-crisis-20220906.pdf>

- However, in October only four nations voted with Russia against UN Resolution 11/4^c, which condemned Moscow's annexation of the Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhia Oblasts as a violation of the territorial integrity of Ukraine.¹⁷ ***This is borne out by the disparity between global polling of individual countries and the results of the UN votes concerning Russia's action in Ukraine.***

Russia's one-to-one transactional partnerships are a dual-edged sword: Russia may increase trade and gain local access to resources, yet fail to fully transition this into a solid, broad consensus of support within the international community.

- According to Dr. Stephen Blank, Russian "geopolitical power is less about the projection of military prowess and more about access and control of resources and infrastructure."¹⁸
- Russia seems to be successful in building relationships with diverse partners that may be antagonistic to each other, largely because of its absence of preconditions as well as its transactional (rather than permanent) partnerships. ***In this way, Russia can be friendly with nearly any actor of consequence in a region, while presenting itself as a viable alternative to the United States and the West.***¹⁹

^c Aside from the five nations that voted against the resolution, 35 nations abstained and 10 did not vote. SOURCE: A/RES/ES-11/4 Territorial integrity of Ukraine: defending the principles of the Charter of the United Nations : resolution / adopted by the General Assembly, 12 OCT 2022 <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3990400?ln=en>

“ACTIVE MEASURES” AND “REFLEXIVE CONTROL”

Russian operational art includes a mixture of political, economic, and subversive activity that seeks to extend and maintain Moscow's sphere of influence without triggering an armed response. The former Soviet Union frequently employed what it called "active measures" in the information domain, including forgery, propaganda, and false stories or "fake news." Active measures in the information domain follow the "4D" approach: dismiss, distort, distract, and dismay. Russia is continuing and expanding its "active measures" beyond the traditional information environment and into the cyber domain via social media and proliferating fake news outlets. One way Russia does this is through "Reflexive Control". According to Timothy Thomas in his book "Kremlin Kontrol: Russia's Political-Military Reality," "Reflexive Control" is "a means of conveying to a partner or an opponent specially prepared information to incline him to voluntarily make the predetermined decision desired by the initiator of the action." Reflexive control involves a cyclical repetition of the message.²⁰

THE KREMLIN HAS LONG PREPARED ITS MESSAGE WITHIN THE DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SPACE

After ten months of vicious fighting, the Kremlin maintains considerable domestic support and a moderate international support for its "special military operation" (SMO) in Ukraine. A key factor in gaining and maintaining this support has been the Kremlin's extensive preparation, careful evolution, and longstanding control of the information space for domestic and international audiences. For over twenty years, the Kremlin has created a media leviathan that cleverly and expertly inculcates its message among both Russian and foreign media consumers.²¹

- Exploiting its media arsenal has allowed the Kremlin to portray its current messaging about the invasion in a consistent, persistent, coordinated, and largely one-sided manner. Domestically, this pro-Kremlin perspective broadcasts in a nearly continual stream from morning talk shows

to call-in radio, magazines and newspapers, evening TV news programs and documentary films, and from influential think tanks to religious clerics and influential cultural figures. This "expert" commentary is disseminated across much of the internet, where it picks up traction by being easily shared on a multitude of digital sites and social media platforms. The result is an around-the-clock, highly professional and effective media saturation. ***Coupled with the Kremlin's suppression of independent media within the country, the average Russian media consumer is rarely, if ever, exposed to a perspective that deviates significantly from the approved Kremlin viewpoint.***

- The Kremlin has also developed a robust platform to spread its message to the international audience via *RT* (formerly *Russia Today*) and *Sputnik* media outlets, as well as the foreign language branches of the official *ITAR-TASS* and *Interfax* news organizations. While not nearly as extensive as the Kremlin’s domestic media operation, Russian international programming—especially among ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in the country’s “Near Abroad”—is effectively distributed among a wide array of local, regional, and national news sources in the target language (*RT* in 5 languages and *Sputnik* in 31 languages) to promote the Kremlin’s narrative.
- The pro-Kremlin narrative portrays the SMO as a struggle with the fanatical Nazi regime in Ukraine and emphasizes

Ukraine’s nefarious Western backers (e.g., Washington, London, Brussels, NATO) using Ukraine to dismember and destroy Russia. This portrayal justifies the Kremlin’s slow progress in the SMO to date, the need for additional manpower, and the imposition of repressive domestic measures (e.g., mobilization and media suppression). The sanctions imposed on Russia by the West also aid in cauterizing this point of view. As a result, the **Russian media can channel the anger and fear among the Russian people (and the larger international audience) away from the Kremlin leadership and aim it at Ukraine, NATO, and the United States.**²²

PUTIN’S CLOSE PARTNERSHIP WITH THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH’S MOSCOW PATRIARCHATE: AN EFFECTIVE CONDUIT FOR HIS INFORMATION FIGHT



Vladimir Putin and Moscow Patriarch Kirill on Unity Day, November 11, 2016. Source: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_Putin_and_Patriarch_Kirill_on_Unity_Day_2016-11-04_05.jpg.

For generations, the Russian Orthodox Church has played a significant role in Moscow’s ability to project influence domestically and internationally.²³ Russia is the largest Orthodox majority country, with 90 million members,²⁴ and the Moscow Patriarchate itself oversees the world’s largest community of Orthodox Christians: 150 million²⁵, half of the number of Orthodox Christians worldwide.²⁶

Since the end of the Cold War the Church’s growing, official linkage to the Kremlin has had significant consequences for Russia’s immediate sphere of influence, including Ukraine. Two developments, internal to Russia and involving the Orthodox Church, play a key role in this trend. First, the Kremlin has increasingly supported a type of “clericalization” of Russian politics, allowing the Church access to draft legislation prepared

for the Duma, suggesting that the Russian Orthodox Church has been developing into a de facto established (state) church. Second, as part of this trend, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has maintained a high level of collaboration with the Russian Orthodox Church, using the latter as an instrument to unify support for Russia and the Kremlin among the country’s diaspora.²⁷ The Kremlin spends considerable resources using the Russian Orthodox Church to promote Moscow’s concept of a global “Russian world” (*Russkiy Mir*)—one comprised not only by ethnic Russians, but also Russian speakers, their families, and others whose cultural, familial, or business connections to Russia make them Russia’s “compatriots.”²⁸ **Therefore, in the broadest terms, Russia adroitly uses the Orthodox Church to institutionalize and sustain a global Russian identity, and it attempts to socially, politically, economically, and even legally amalgamate Russians and compatriots—in Russia, across Europe, and abroad—by advancing the concept of a greater ethnocultural Russian state.**²⁹

Impact of the Ukraine Conflict Beyond the Battlefield

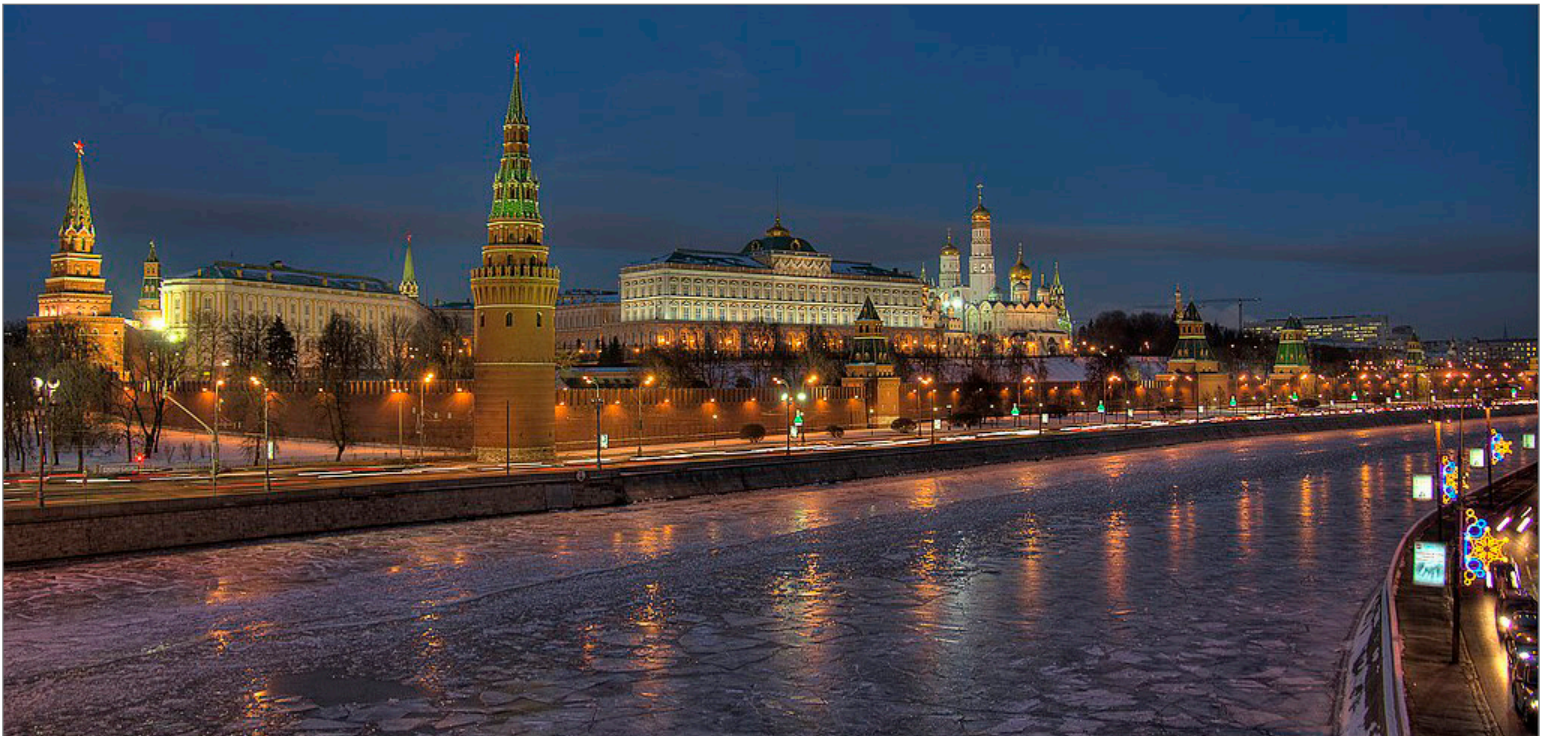
Ukraine—for multiple historical, cultural, and political reasons—has unquestionably been directly subject to Russia’s influence through the Orthodox Church. Ukraine is the second largest Orthodox majority country in the northern hemisphere, with approximately 65 percent of its population, or 27.8 million people, identifying as members of the Orthodox Church.³⁰ Until recently, the majority of the country’s Orthodox communities fell under the Moscow Patriarchate, the Kiev Patriarchate (which

split from the former in 1992), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.³¹ **Those Ukrainian Orthodox churches under the Moscow Patriarchate formed the largest Orthodox community in the country and were the most highly integrated with Moscow’s politically influenced Church leadership.**

- The role of the Orthodox Church in Ukraine’s current struggle against Russia really began in 2014, when Ukrainian Orthodox churches under the Moscow Patriarchate began overtly supporting Russia’s separatist actions in both Crimea and eastern Ukraine. Moscow was essentially intensifying the Church’s longstanding use as an instrument within a broader form of unconventional warfare against Kiev.³² This angered many Ukrainians, a large number of whom subsequently began transitioning from the Moscow Patriarchate to churches which fell under Ukraine’s own Kiev Patriarchate.³³
- Unlike the Moscow Patriarchate, however, the Kiev Patriarchate was not officially recognized by the greater Orthodox community. This changed in 2018, when Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in Istanbul, of the Constantinople Patriarchate—whose overarching position in the Orthodox Church community authorizes him to

recognize and endorse Orthodox churches—revoked a 17th century ruling placing Ukraine’s Orthodox Church under the Moscow patriarch. The Kiev Patriarchate then combined nearly all non-Moscow Patriarchate churches in Ukraine into a new “Orthodox Church of Ukraine,” which Bartholomew I subsequently recognized. **For most Ukrainians, this symbolized a final step in their country’s independence from Moscow.**^{34, 35}

- These developments led to a powerful setback of Russian influence in Ukraine through the Orthodox Church and had significant implications for the Orthodox Church internationally. Russia unilaterally severed full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate in Istanbul, prompting a substantive schism in the global Orthodox community. As a result, many other Orthodox Church entities around the globe have been compelled to align themselves with either the Moscow Patriarchate or the Constantinople Patriarchate—**a politically significant fault line for the Church that has only become more prominent since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.**³⁶



Moscow river at winter evening, 17 December 2012. Photo by Pavel Kazachkov
Source: Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moscow_Kremlin_\(8281675670\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Moscow_Kremlin_(8281675670).jpg).

CHINA PUSHES RUSSIAN NARRATIVES ABOUT UKRAINE INDEPENDENTLY AND IN COOPERATION WITH MOSCOW



China and Russia have been working to integrate their media ecosystems since 1992; cooperation with Russian media organizations helps China advance its goal of setting global narratives.³⁷ This process accelerated after 2013 as Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin worked to more broadly align their countries.³⁸

- In July 2017, China Radio International (CRI) and *RT* (formerly Russia Today) created a bilingual news application for iOS and Android. Reporting on the agreement included commitments to continue to expand cooperation. *RT*, Russia's flagship state media channel, also has a Chinese language service and China Global Television Network (CGTN) broadcasts in six languages including Russian.³⁹
- In November 2021, China and Russia held their annual Internet and Media Forum [中俄网络媒体论坛],^d part of a long-term effort to improve cultural ties but which has recently highlighted the development of bilingual apps and content-sharing between media networks.⁴⁰
- Other evidence predating the war showed increasing use of material from Russian programs in Chinese state television programs, including entire segments from Russia's *Star (Zvezda)* military TV shows, which appeared on CCTV-7 (military channel). This suggests a content-sharing agreement is in place, although it is unclear if it was formalized.⁴¹

Sino-Russian cooperation in a variety of spheres continued to intensify in the run-up to the war in Ukraine.⁴²

- In early February, just a few weeks before invasion began, China and Russia signed a joint agreement laying out similarities in outlook and shared values between both countries. Chinese officials subsequently expanded upon the statement, noting that China-Russia relations had “no limits” or “forbidden areas.”⁴³
- On 15 June, Xi held an official call with Putin in which he expressed that “China is willing to continue to support Russia on issues involving core interests and major concerns such as sovereignty and security, intensify strategic coordination between the two countries.”⁴⁴
- On 11 September, Li Zhanshu [栗战书], then the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) third most senior official, said regarding Russia's invasion that “China expresses understanding and offers to respond in a coordinated manner in various areas” when speaking with members of the

Russian duma.⁴⁵

Soon after the Russian invasion, it became clear that China was using its Information Operations (IO) apparatus to support Russian narratives about the war and suppress all others.⁴⁶

- Shortly after the war began, guidance for state media was accidentally leaked online by a verified account for Horizon News [世面], an affiliate of Beijing News [新京报]. The guidance bluntly said, “Do not post anything unfavorable to Russia or sympathetic to the West.”⁴⁷ Reporting by Reuters suggests that the rollout of state guidance to media was fully extended to social media platforms, including Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin (the Chinese version of TikTok).⁴⁸ A study by the independent research group “Tracking Exposed” found that TikTok removed all content posted by non-Russian channels on 7 March, which equated to roughly 95% of content on the platform. The report noted that this action followed China's restrictions of material related to the invasion on Weibo, WeChat, and Douyin and may have been motivated by Russia's new “fake news” law in coordination with China.⁴⁹
- An article in China's *PLA Daily* from September revealed the country's use of ‘cognitive domain operations’ by components of the state media apparatus in the lead up to and during the war in Ukraine. The article described how a Chinese publication on international military issues deliberately published articles building up perceptions of Russian military strength before the war broke out, with deep dives into Russian military modernization and how Russian military capabilities remained undiminished in the wake of COVID. The article also described “avoiding language traps” and setting the narrative through word choice including, for example, deliberately using the word “conflict” rather than “invasion” to direct the narrative. Other elements included the use of foreign (including American) critics of the war to further enhance Chinese and Russian narratives about the war.⁵⁰

China is carefully studying Ukrainian successes and Russian failures in IO. China likely sees validation of its efforts to improve its “Discourse Power” in Russia's apparent struggle to gain information dominance during the war.⁵¹

^d The forum has been held every year since 2015. China and Russia also formalized their cooperation in “international information security”, a broad umbrella term that in practice appears to include censorship and combating foreign influence and information operations.

- Chinese state-affiliated media outlets have highlighted Ukraine’s effective use of information operations, including the rumored “Ghost of Kyiv”—a Ukrainian fighter pilot operating against immense odds in the initial stages of the war—and the defenders of Snake Island (a strategically significant but tiny islet that held their position in the face of overwhelming Russian strength). They have also highlighted U.S. government efforts to limit Russia’s ‘narrative space’ through taking down accounts and other methods.⁵²
- Commentary in a publication affiliated with the Chinese aviation industry criticized Russia’s insufficient shaping of the information battlespace, noting that the “...Russian army [has] failed to achieve effective information control [信息控制] on the battlefield. It has failed to effectively destroy Ukraine’s facilities for basic communications and failed to effectively interfere with the Ukrainian Army’s wireless communications—particularly ground-to-air communications.”⁵³

CHINESE CONCEPTS OF INFORMATION OPERATIONS

Speeches by Chinese leaders and authoritative texts indicate that China regards itself as engaged in a competition for ‘narrative dominance’, part of a larger contest for information control, which can occur at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels across all domains and spectrums.^{e,54}

- All elements of the Chinese Armed Forces have responsibility for carrying out IO through the “Three Warfares” [三战], comprised of warfare using public opinion, psychological, and legal methods that are intended to ‘dismantle enemy forces’ [瓦解敌军].⁵⁵ The PLA plays a major role in establishing ‘information dominance’ [制信息权] through offensive and defensive information operations—particularly offensive psychological warfare.⁵⁶
- China’s 2017 *Science of Military Strategy*, a standard text for Chinese senior officer professional development by China’s National Defense University, states that the “main task” of public opinion struggle is to “unify the ideological will” of (your own country’s) military and civilians. Subsequent passages describe seizing the initiative as a priority to quickly defeat enemy narratives domestically, restricting dissemination of enemy information, and “shocking” the enemy. The 2020 edition bluntly states “Future wars are likely to originate from cyber, electronic, and psychological warfare.”
- Chinese sources describe ‘cognition’ as another domain for IO in which China is actively engaged. One recent article in *PLA Daily*, the military’s official newspaper, defined cognitive domain operations [认知域作战] as “refer[ing] to cognitive confrontation operations that use military, political, economic, public opinion, psychology, legal action, and other narrative means in order to achieve strategic purposes for national security, and which affect the cognition of the target to change its decision-making and behavior. It represents a new operational model and an advanced mode of warfare.”⁵⁷
- In June 2021, during a collective study session^f for the CCP Politburo Central Committee on how to improve China’s power through effective international communication,⁵⁸ Xi remarked that there was a need to improve the ability to “tell China’s story” and to exercise China’s ‘Discourse Power’ [话语权], sometimes translated as ‘right to speak’—in essence its ability to set global narratives.^g Discourse power requires a significant global footprint for IO, which China has built.⁵⁹

e Chinese definitions of information operations (IO), much like those given in U.S. joint publications, encompass a broad range of elements from influence online to electronic warfare. Here domains include media or what China calls the cognitive domain as well as the electromagnetic spectrum. SOURCE: Peter Wood, Foreign Military Studies Office

f Collective Study Sessions [集体学习]: CCP leaders hold regular meetings of topics of interest and invite leading scholars to speak and answer questions. These meetings appear to play a major role in agenda setting and policy formulation. Readouts from these meetings frequently (as they did in this particular case) become the basis for talking points for the state media apparatus. SOURCE: Peter Wood, Foreign Military Studies Office

g A related phrase that is sometimes used is “discourse system” 观念话语体系 SOURCE: Peter Wood, Foreign Military Studies Office

CHINA IS LEVERAGING THE UKRAINE CONFLICT TO GAIN GLOBAL INFLUENCE



China appears to be changing the emphasis in its strategy to influence the global audience; this includes leveraging the Ukraine conflict to explicitly illustrate U.S. aggression, subtly highlight Russian aggression, and to position itself as a power broker and partner of choice.⁶⁰ Prior to the invasion of Ukraine and throughout the conflict, China has been propagating Russia's anti-U.S. narrative.⁶¹ For example, as early as November 2021, China spread the narrative that the United States and Ukraine were provoking Russia. The day before the invasion, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying reportedly accused the United States of "bringing oil to fire" by sending weapons to Ukraine.⁶² While not explicitly endorsing or condemning Russia, China has tried to boost its own image and influence by being a purveyor of peace, continually touting the importance of a diplomatic resolution to the war.⁶³

- At the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, Xi tightened his hold over the party and secured his leadership over the country, while indicating that China is rethinking its strategies.⁶⁴ During his report to the National Congress, Xi made veiled references to the Ukraine conflict, describing some of China's challenges as being a "sluggish" global economy with "regional conflicts and disturbances," and speaking about speeding up the planning and development of new energy sources, which is relevant to Europe's energy issues resulting from the war.⁶⁵
- China is focusing heavily on presenting itself as an indispensable partner to Europe. Concurrently, China is por-

traying the United States as "taking advantage of the Russia-Ukraine conflict to weaken its two potential competitors, Russia and Europe, and to maintain its hegemony," saying that Europe can only pin hopes on China to "escape the predicament."⁶⁶ China also hopes to increase its influence by enticing Europe with its ability to provide needed infrastructure and increase its access to energy resources.⁶⁷ However, as one expert points out, Brussels wants China to move against Russia, while Beijing wants the European Union to distance itself from the United States, neither of which is likely to happen any time soon.⁶⁸ Hence, it came as no surprise on 1 April when representatives from the European Union and Chinese government met for a virtual summit and made no progress in finding common ground.⁶⁹

- It is unclear if China's influence efforts are effective. European views toward China are increasingly negative as a result of Xi's support of Russia's actions in Ukraine—83% of Europeans have hardened their views toward China, with 68% in France, 74% in Germany, and 54% in Italy, according to press reporting.^h Despite these perceptions of China's support for Russian actions, Europe is not likely to decouple from China because of China's strategic partnership with Russia. China is the EU's second biggest trading partner and Europe is now the most important destination for Chinese companies' foreign direct investment.⁷⁰

^h The author does not give a source for these percentages. SOURCE: Philippe Le Corre, "L'Europe, L'Ukraine et Taiwan," *Ouest-France*, 1 August 2022. <https://www.ouest-france.fr/reflexion/point-de-vue/l-europe-l-ukraine-et-taiwan-d76f710-10bf-11ed-ade8-6487a90890cf>

CHINA (XI) AS GLOBAL LEADER

Xi is expanding his global footprint and appears to be stepping into a self-designated role as global ambassador. Xi had not traveled abroad since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic until September 2022, when he traveled to Uzbekistan to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit. While there, he took the opportunity to grow support for his new Global Security Initiative (GSI), launched in April and intended to be an alternative to the Western-led security order.⁷¹ At the November 2022 G20 Summit, Xi emphasized the timeliness of the meeting due to the fragile state of the world and spoke about his vision of a unified world. He emphasized the need for all G20 members to take responsibility and "lead by example," and spoke about building global partnerships to enable economic recovery. He concluded by recapping the recent 20th National Congress in which the Communist Party had laid out its goals, tasks, and policies for the next five years. Xi publicly portrays China as "marching toward modernization," which "will bring more opportunities to the world, inject stronger momentum for international cooperation, and make a greater contribution to human progress."⁷²

CHINA USES DIPLOMATIC, INFORMATION, AND ECONOMIC ELEMENTS OF NATIONAL POWER TO INFLUENCE ASIAN NEIGHBORS AGAINST WESTERN ACTIONS RELATED TO UKRAINE

China has used its state-owned media network to reduce support in Asia for Western sanctions on Russia and military assistance to Ukraine. China issued an official statement the day after the Russian invasion supporting the sovereignty and security of all countries, as well as a diplomatic resolution in Ukraine. However, China has avoided using the word “war,” instead referring to the “Ukraine issue” and the Ukraine crisis. Many Chinese sympathize with Russia’s concerns over a Western-leaning Ukraine. Therefore, Chinese state media has popular support in using its influence to weaken Western resolve to support Ukrainian sovereignty and independence. Xi has sought to portray China as a neutral player in the conflict by urging Ukraine’s President Zelensky to meet with EU President Charles Michel to find a resolution to the conflict. However, experts have warned that China’s efforts are not entirely credible, as Beijing has strong economic ties to Russia and is unlikely to take a side that could hurt those interests. Furthermore, the Chinese propaganda campaign could have long-term consequences for China’s relations with its neighbors.⁷³

- China’s state-run news agency *Xinhua* has published numerous articles critical of the United States’ involvement in the conflict, accusing Washington of being “the principal instigator”.⁷⁴ A recent article in *Xinhua* condemned the United States and NATO for supporting Ukraine, claiming that it is nothing more than an attempt to contain Russia. The article also claimed that the Ukrainian people are not interested in receiving help from the United States nor NATO and that they would prefer to resolve the conflict through peaceful negotiations.⁷⁵ Further, Chinese media accused NATO of using the crisis in Ukraine to expand its influence in the region, calling it an “instigator of evil”.⁷⁶
- Chinese propaganda efforts have increased in recent months with outlets like the *Global Times* and *China Daily* publishing stories that portray Russia as a victim of Western aggression and Ukraine as a puppet of U.S. and NATO interests, and of China as a victim of Western slander regarding COVID policies.⁷⁷
- This narrative has been amplified by Chinese social media accounts using popular platforms like Weibo and WeChat, alongside official news. The Chinese government posted videos of Russian soldiers in Ukraine and claimed that the United States sought to undermine Russian sovereignty in the region.⁷⁸ Moreover, the Chinese official newspaper

People’s Daily accused the United States of interfering with Ukraine’s sovereignty.⁷⁹

The Chinese government uses its economic and diplomatic influence with developing countries in Asia to silence criticism of Russia’s actions in Ukraine. These countries, which are important economic partners of China, have been accused of caving to Chinese pressure and not speaking out against Russia’s actions in the region. As such, China is exercising its leverage in Asia to reduce U.S. and Western influence.⁸⁰

- Malaysia and Thailand, both of which are members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), have been reluctant to criticize Russia for its actions in Ukraine.⁸¹
- Laos and Vietnam both abstained from a March UN resolution condemning Russia’s invasion, while Myanmar voted for the resolution, as well as for an October UN Resolution condemning Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territory.⁸²
- Mongolia abstained from both UN resolutions, under considerable pressure from Beijing to remain neutral in the conflict, despite recent efforts by President Khurelsukh to communicate adherence to UN principles and charters.⁸³
- Cambodia recently voiced support for Ukraine,⁸⁴ despite initial criticism of President Hun Sen for his refusal to condemn Russia’s invasion⁸⁵ as well as Chhun Theravat of the Rural Development Ministry arguing that Russia’s actions were not an “invasion.”⁸⁶

TURKISH MEDIA IS DOMINATED BY COOPERATION BETWEEN ERDOĞAN AND PUTIN



Russia's campaign to gain Turkey's support for its "special military operation" is difficult to discern from the typical tone within mainstream Turkish media, which is controlled by the government and is generally pro-Russian and anti-Western already. This Pro-Russian sentiment is the direct result of the two countries' strategic and security partnership as well as the personal relationship between the two countries' authoritarian leaders. *Sputnik Turkey*, which is the most important pro-Russian news source in Turkey, and RSFM radio (formerly Voice of Russia), are known to be managed and financed by Russia. There are also pro-Russian digital accounts and bots on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media. This content, combined with an existing anti-Western sentiment in Turkey, produces a narrative which resonates with the Turkish public; i.e., that NATO and the United States are responsible for the crisis in Ukraine—a common message in Russia's influence campaigns. **Russia also tries to influence Turkey via Putin's direct efforts to get Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan re-elected; Erdoğan responds by siding with Putin and echoing many of his positions on the Ukraine war.**⁸⁷

- Over the last decade, more and more of the Turkish media landscape has come under government control. Turkey has the 149th least free press out of 180 assessed countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2022 Press Freedom Index.⁸⁸ As such, most Turkish mainstream and high-circulation newspapers echo the government's position on issues, making news that is anti-Western and pro-Russian. **The Turkish media's drift towards a pro-Russia tone makes it hard to identify Russia's influence campaign, institutions, and networks.**⁸⁹
- *Sputnik-Turkey* and *RSFM* (formerly *Voice of Russia*), are openly managed and financed by Russia and employ a less direct strategy in Turkey compared with other cases in the West: Instead of outright disinformation, they use accurate information but take it out of context and present it from Russia's perspective. Russian digital accounts and bots do the same.⁹⁰ The main message concerning Russia's "special military operation" is that the West is escalating the crisis by providing weapons to Ukraine, and NATO is conducting a proxy war with Russia via Ukraine.⁹¹ There are indications this is working: on 30 March, a survey by MetroPoll, a reputable Turkish polling company, revealed that 48% of Turks believed the U.S. and NATO were responsible for

the conflict. Only 33.7% said Russia was responsible, while 7.5% said Ukraine was responsible (The rest said "others" or "don't know").⁹²

- Over the last decade, Erdoğan has consolidated power as the head of state, military, and police, with expanded powers over the judiciary, intelligence, media, and other institutions. Influencing Turkey means influencing Erdoğan, who has become synonymous with the Turkish state.

Putin has a 20-year long working relationship with Erdoğan, and their personal relationship has benefited Putin in many ways. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Turkey has served as a lifeline for the Kremlin amidst sanctions; Turkey was instrumental in delaying Finland and Sweden's NATO memberships; and Ankara embraces investment by Russian oligarchs in Turkey.⁹³

- As such, Putin has an interest in ensuring that Erdoğan remains in power. To this end, Putin has been taking steps to influence the outcome of the June 2023 elections in favor of Erdoğan to include providing financial help and calling for Turkey to become a gas hub.⁹⁴
- In return, Erdoğan has publicly echoed some of Russia's positions related to the Ukraine war. The starkest example of this was on 7 September when he publicly criticized European sanctions on Russia and voiced support for Putin's decision to cut natural gas sales to Europe.⁹⁵

ⁱ "The purpose of the World Press Freedom Index is to compare the level of press freedom enjoyed by journalists and media in 180 countries and territories. This comparison is based on a definition of press freedom formulated by RSF and its panel experts when developing the new methodology to be used from 2022 onwards: "Press freedom is defined as the ability of journalists as individuals and collectives to select, produce, and disseminate news in the public interest independent of political, economic, legal, and social interference and in the absence of threats to their physical and mental safety." SOURCE: https://rsf.org/en/index-methodologie-2022?year=2022&data_type=general



IRANIANS ARE EQUIVOCAL ABOUT SUPPORT TO RUSSIAN “SPECIAL MILITARY OPERATION”



The Islamic Republic of Iran has sought to use the Russia-Ukraine conflict to cement closer ties to Moscow and advance its de facto diplomatic and military alliance with Russia. However, the strategic partnership between the ayatollahs and Moscow overlays deep-seeded unease within Iranian society about the relationship and support for the war in Ukraine. Iranians suffer from the follow-on effects of grain disruption because of the war. At the same time, Iranians analogize themselves to Ukrainians through the prism of their experiences during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. On the other hand, Russia continues to support Iran against the backdrop of sanctions arising from its nuclear program while Iran reciprocates with the provision of unmanned aerial vehicles to Russia to employ against Ukraine—an action that has led the West to now identify a stronger Russia-Iran partnership in the war. Moreover, the Russo-Iranian alliance extends beyond Ukraine. Iran and Russia cooperate closely in Syria, where Iran maintains a strong presence and fills any gap left by the possible evacuation of some Russian forces from that country.⁹⁶

- The Iranian public’s distrust of Russia stems from centuries of diplomatic and economic exploitation and overt interference in Iranian political affairs. Examples include

Russian Empire and Soviet attempts to seize parts of Iran and, more recently, multiple arms and nuclear technology deals that Russia has cancelled or paused to leverage Iran, the West, and Russia’s other partners in the region. This specifically includes Israel and Saudi Arabia, who are declared enemies of the Islamic Republic and the Iranian people.⁹⁷

- Iran traditionally imports grain from both Russia and Ukraine. After the outbreak of war in Ukraine, the Iranian government worked to ensure adequate wheat for bread, but it fell short in supplies of chicken feed, leading to a shortage of chicken and eggs. This in turn led many Iranians to leave cities to avoid hospitality expectations during the annual Nowruz (Persian New Year) celebrations.⁹⁸
- Iranians complained to their diplomats that the Islamic Republic’s abstention on the 12 March UN vote condemning Russia’s invasion was unprincipled. Specifically, Iranians explained that when Iraq invaded Iran, the world ignored Iraqi aggression and so it was shameful for the Islamic Republic to ignore Russian aggression against Ukraine based on their strategic relationship.⁹⁹

IN AFRICA, RUSSIA JUSTIFIES THE WAR IN UKRAINE WITH WIDESPREAD DISINFORMATION CAMPAIGN



Pro-Russian disinformation campaigns have emerged in Africa over the past two years with a corresponding rise in pro-Russian sentiment on a state-by-state basis. As of July 2022, Russia has been “the leading purveyor” of disinformation campaigns on the continent, with known operations in 16 African states including Angola, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic (CAR), Côte d’Ivoire, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Ghana, Libya, Madagascar, Mali, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa, Sudan, and Zimbabwe.¹⁰⁰

- On 2 March 2022, immediately prior to the UN vote to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, thousands of new accounts, fake accounts, and hackers flooded Twitter with 23 million tweets to give the appearance of widespread pro-Russian support. Hashtags that began trending on Twitter included #IStandWithPutin and #IStandWithRussia. In a second campaign, pro-Russian actors hacked the social media accounts of Nigerian journalists and other

real Nigerian social media users and posted pro-Kremlin propaganda supporting the war in Ukraine.¹⁰¹

- In November 2022, Russia announced that it will open a new broadcast station of RT in Johannesburg, South Africa, to lead its English-language African-focused press, underscoring its efforts to influence the African media space.¹⁰²
- The Russian information campaign may have created local effects, but its international impact was moderate if judged by the results of the 2 March and 12 October UN Resolutions calling for the immediate withdrawal of Russian forces from Ukraine and condemning the Russian annexation of Ukrainian territory, respectively. In the 12 March UN resolution demanding Russian withdrawal from Ukraine, Eritrea was the only African nation to vote against the resolution, while targets of Russian information campaigns in Africa, including Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Libya, Niger, and Nigeria voted for the resolution.¹⁰³ In

the 12 October UN resolution condemning the Russian annexation of four Ukrainian regions, targeted nations such as Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Libya, Madagascar, Niger, and Nigeria voted for the resolution, and no African nations voted against it.¹⁰⁴

The focus of online African reactions to the war in Ukraine has ebbed and flowed across sundry topics. There is little evidence to show a clear or pervasive anti-Russian narrative emanating from the continent. Instead, **social media narratives in Africa concerning the war in Ukraine, especially early in the conflict, have trended against Ukraine and the West, highlighting bigotry and historical exploitation.**¹⁰⁵

- Based on self-reported geolocation tagging on Twitter during the early weeks of the war, from late February through early March 2022, the most pervasive topic being discussed by African users was European and Ukrainian racism towards Africans.^j At the same time, other African Twitter narratives demonstrated a pro-Russian outlook by suggesting that unlike Western Europe, Russia had no similar history of colonial imperialism or slavery.¹⁰⁶

- Other prominent topics on African social media related to the war in Ukraine have been the impacts of Russia's grain blockade on African food security and anger about Western "selective outrage" and subsequent support for Ukraine while ignoring many of the long-simmering conflicts on the continent.¹⁰⁷
- These narratives may account for the lack of anti-Russian sentiment and also explain the ambivalence toward the major parties involved. **Unless Russia has a direct involvement in the country (e.g., energy, security, or trade), the likelihood of consistently strong positive or negative opinions on the continent about Russian actions is low.**¹⁰⁸

^j Note that the accuracy of using self-geolocated tweets is a questionable metric of analysis.

AFRICAN RESPONSE TO UN RESOLUTIONS: NO CLEAR SUPPORT

Russian influence efforts across Africa resulted in only limited support at the UN, but the continent was far from united against Russia. In October, 30 of 54 African countries voted in favor of the resolution rejecting Moscow's annexation of four Ukrainian regions with 19 countries abstaining. In April, only 10 of 54 African countries voted (9 opposed) to suspend Russia's membership of the UN's Human Rights Council, significantly less than the 28 countries that supported the UN's resolution in March demanding immediate Russian troop withdrawal from Ukraine. **The Kremlin's disinformation campaigns leveraged African sensibilities about non-alignment, security, and historical exploitation by the West to undermine Western messaging, weaken pan-African commitment, and present a façade of global (south) support for Russia.**

REGIONAL ASSESSMENT

CENTRAL AFRICA

ALIGNED OBJECTIVES

Moscow's anti-democratic agenda is aligned with the autocratic politics of the Central African Republic, Congo, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon with Russia's predatory economics exploiting local resources ensuring non-criticism of Moscow or support for Putin at critical moments.

EAST AFRICA

STRATEGIC ALLIANCE

Moscow invests in efforts to undermine democracy, foment social polarization, and uphold strongman rule, while seeking port/base access in Berbera (Somaliland), Massawa and Assab (Eritrea), and Port Sudan (Sudan) to gain a maritime chokehold of the Bab-el-Mandeb strait.

NORTH AFRICA

EXPLOITS VULNERABILITIES

Moscow exploits regional schisms to expand its regional presence and is the leading supplier of arms to Algeria, Morocco, and Egypt. Russia has invested in nuclear power, maintains educational exchanges, and is a source for regional wheat imports granting Moscow some leverage on the Ukraine issue.

SOUTHERN AFRICA

HISTORICAL ALLIANCE

Moscow's support for the region's decolonization undergirds the region's perception of the conflict as a proxy war between Russia and the U.S., and to adopt veiled neutrality. South Africa's failure to criticize Moscow signals a broader effort to minimize sanctions' effects on arms sales/trade.

WEST AFRICA

ANTI-FRENCH ANGST

The Kremlin has grafted disinformation onto the pervasive anti-French angst and trepidation over the spreading of terrorism from the Sahel to littoral West Africa to polarize the elite and society, undermine ECOWAS unity, and create allies out of beleaguered Sahelian states.

Table: African Voting Results for UN Resolutions on Russia-Ukraine War. Attribution, Dr. Benjamin Okonofua, infographic, GCKN, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.

	UN Resolution against Russia's Ukraine annexations (OCT)	UN Resolution to suspend Russia from Human Rights Council (APR)	UN Resolution for Russian withdrawal from Ukraine (MAR)
Algeria	A	●	A
Angola	●	A	A
Benin	●		●
Botswana	●	A	●
Burkina Faso			
Burundi	A	●	A
Cape Verde	●	A	●
Cameroon		A	
Central African Republic	A	●	A
Chad	●	●	●
Comoros	●	●	●
Congo	A	●	A
Côte d'Ivoire	●	●	●
DR of Congo	●	●	●
Djibouti			●
Egypt	●	A	●
Eq. Guinea			A
Eritrea	A	●	●
Ethiopia	A	●	
Gabon	●	●	●
Gambia	●	A	●
Ghana	●	A	●
Guinea	A		
Guinea-Bissau	●	A	
Kenya	●	A	●
Lesotho	A	A	●
Liberia	●	●	●
Libya	●	●	●
Madagascar	●	A	A
Malawi	●	●	●
Mali	A	●	A
Mauritania	●		●
Mauritius	●	●	●
Morocco	●		
Mozambique	A	A	A
Namibia	A	A	A
Niger	●	A	●
Nigeria	●	A	●
Rwanda	●		●
Sao Tome and Principe			●
Senegal	●		A
Seychelles	●	●	●
Sierra Leone	●	●	●
Somalia	●		●
South Africa	A	A	A
South Sudan	A	A	A
Sudan	A	A	A
Swaziland	A	A	
Tanzania	A	A	A
Togo	A	A	
Tunisia	●	A	●
Uganda	A	A	A
Zambia	●		●
Zimbabwe	A	●	A

● Voted YES

● Voted NO

A Abstained

(Blank cell) No Vote Recorded

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