

Russian Twitter Influence in South Africa: The Kremlin's in the System.

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Disclosure: The CABC, Daily Maverick and City Press are currently involved in legal proceedings initiated by Sphithiphithi Evaluator (@_AfricanSoil), Thabo Makwakwa (@ThaboMakwakwa), Modibe Modiba (@mmodiba10) and Izwe Lethu (@LandNoli) who seek to review and set aside two reports: Online RET Network Analysis; and The Dirty Dozen & the Amplification of Incendiary Content during the Outbreak of Unrest in South Africa in July 2021. These proceedings are opposed and the CABC, Daily Maverick and City Press seek to have them set aside with costs.

Introduction

As researchers throughout Africa seek to understand the social media landscape better, many have focused on Russian interference on social media platforms. The Institute for Security Studies reported ahead of the 2024 elections that due to the weak checks and balances of new democracies on the continent, Russia considers Africa to be an attractive target¹. The Africa Center for Strategic Studies also published in 2024 that there are 189 documented disinformation campaigns across Africa, nearly four times higher than in 2022 and which the authors feel may be understated due to the opacity of disinformation campaigns². According to that report, there were 25 disinformation campaigns in Southern Africa, six of which involved Kremlin-linked actors³.

The Jamestown Foundation conducted a study which found that the involvement by Russia that has been detected so far in South Africa inflamed tensions between ethnic groups⁴. According to the study, this strategy is focused on two primary objectives:

1. To increase tensions between white and black populations using either Apartheid-era atrocities to shape discourse, or the radical idea of land expropriation without compensation, which gained popularity online post-2018; and,
2. To increase tensions between black South Africans and migrants from poorer, neighbouring countries⁵.

A study by the Centre for Information Resilience and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue also found that pro-Kremlin accounts were driving messages to South Africans that Ukraine is a neo-Nazi state⁶.

While previous studies have mapped out the extent and content of Russian influence campaigns in South Africa and neighbouring countries, the purpose of this research is to review the South African political discourse that takes place on X.com (formerly Twitter) to understand the vectors through which pro-Russian actors are interacting with these South African online communities.

¹ <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/online-influence-and-disinformation-preparing-for-south-africa-s-polls>

² <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ https://jamestown.org/program/the-hybrid-role-of-russian-mercenaries-pmcs-and-irregulars-in-moscows-scramble-for-africa/#_edn81

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pro-Kremlin Propaganda about Neo-Nazis in Ukraine Targets South Africans Online (Smith, Doctor et Mongardini; 2024)

Research Methodology

A network mapping analysis was conducted by Murmur, a South African-owned company, that has tracked online X.com communities in South Africa and globally for close to a decade. Based on this longitudinal analysis, they have been able to identify a Russian sphere of influence in South African X.com conversations based on the number of interactions held between accounts in key communities discussing South African politics. These communities are defined by patterns of interactions, where a community is formed if there are more connections within it than between it and another account or group of accounts. Being part of a community does not mean that an account agrees with that community. However, if, for example, less than 50% of their interactions occur within that community, they would be pulled towards another community where their contributions are engaged with to a greater extent.

A Russian community was observed within the overall conversation network that was only loosely connected to South Africa's main political conversations. Accounts with densely packed interactions within this community's core did not engage directly with other South African communities. Instead, there appeared to be specific accounts acting as 'conduits' or 'bridges' between the Russian community and the rest of the South African communities. A bridge is established between two accounts when one account is the source and the other account is the target of messaging. To understand the strength of a bridge account between two communities, those accounts that were identified as bridges were removed from the dataset to observe how the structure and interactions would shift. If the bridge is not strong, the position of the community should remain stable and in a position similar to the space it would hold if the bridge was held in place. If the bridge is strong, once removed, communities would be expected to drift apart as the mechanism that is being highly interacted with, would no longer be in place.

Below, the accounts that were labelled bridges are explored in more detail to show how they connect the observed Russian community in South Africa's broader political conversations. To further understand the vectors of Russian information into South African X.com communities, some of the accounts with the highest number of interactions from the Russian community are also analysed.

The period of analysis for this report is between 01 November 2023 and 30 April 2024.

Information Bridges

This part of the report displays the South African online X.com communities that are being tracked along with the formation labelled the "Russian community". During the reporting period, there were roughly 3,724 accounts that were considered to be a part of that community. In Figure 1 below, these accounts are clustered

together in red. Much of the interactions between members of the Russian community appear to remain far from South Africa's main discourse. However, what is very apparent from the image is the prominence of three nodes. These are @insightfactor, @mmodiba10, and @IOL.

The bio of the Insight Factor account reads *“Investigative Journalism | Unfiltered and Uncensored News | Probing the deepest layers of reality”*. It positions itself as an advertising account that presents news stories, including positive posts about Russia such as the state of its economy growing faster than European rivals⁷. The page has 110,000 followers. The name on the account @mmodiba10 reads “Modibe Vladimir Modiba” and displays a picture of the Insight Factor logo as he is a co-founder of the Insight Factor and a former columnist for Independent Media. Modiba was fined R100,000 in 2022 for defamation as he spread false claims about media house Daily Maverick being racist and claimed that it paid students to write negative stories about Independent Media (IOL) and the EFF⁸.

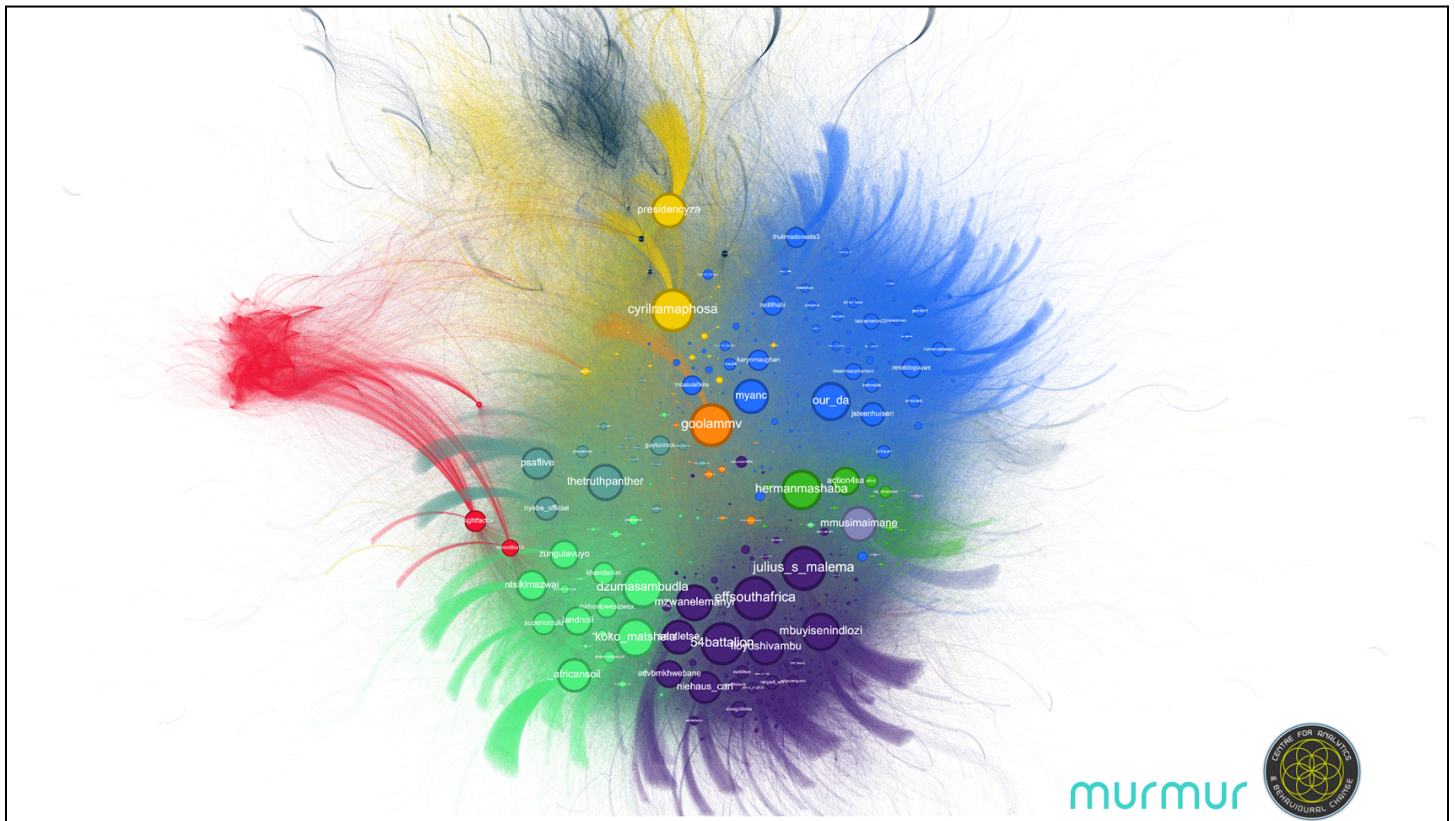


Figure 1: The South African communities that Russian Embassy accounts within the red community primarily interact with

In Figure 2 below, the account @mmodiba10 tags an account called “The Russian Embassy in South Africa” as he is pictured with Russian Governor Mikhail Degtyarev. With the freedom of association enshrined in the Constitution, Modiba is of course allowed to freely associate with whosoever he chooses. However, what this

⁷ <https://x.com/insightfactor/status/1780514459011666430>

⁸ <https://groundup.org.za/article/daily-maverick-wins-damages-case/>

post serves to show is that it is not only within the online communities that Modiba is seen interacting with pro-Russian influence. He also does so in real life, which establishes a firm connection between this journalist and Russia.



Figure 2: Post by Modibe Modiba’s verified X.com account in March 2024 where the journalist is seen shaking hands with a Russian Governor

The lines that lead toward and away from the nodes in Figure 1 are called “interactions” and they capture every time people from different communities mention someone in a post by “@’ing” them or reposting their content. The lines from the Russian community lead mostly to the three accounts mentioned above with @insightfactor and @mmodiba10 interacting predominantly between the Russian community and the MK party community, formerly known as the RET (Radical Economic Transformation) community. The MK Party, which is short for “uMkhonto weSizwe Party” is a political formation that appears to have mobilised the support of the RET community to amplify their popularity online in a short period of time⁹. Meanwhile, @IOL’s interactions lead them into the community that has been labelled “Xenophobic” based on the content that is driven by the accounts in this grouping which is the primary online home of the #PutSouthAfricansFirst / Operation Dudula movement. Content from the prominent accounts in this community is unpacked later in this report, where insight is provided to establish a largely one-directional flow of information i.e. from the Russian community into the observed South African communities.

⁹https://cabc.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/From-RET-to-MK-Party_The-mobilisation-of-existing-communities-to-drive-political-messaging_final.docx-2.pdf

As explained in the methodology, the strength of the accounts labelled bridges was tested by removing them from the dataset. Therefore, the X.com handles @insightfactor, @mmodiba10 and @IOL were removed to test how, and if, the shape and position of the Russian community would change. The results of this test are shown in Figure 3 below where it can immediately be noted that the position of the Russian community drifts further away from the South African political discourse. This establishes that the three accounts mentioned are strong connectors between the general South African communities and the Russian community.

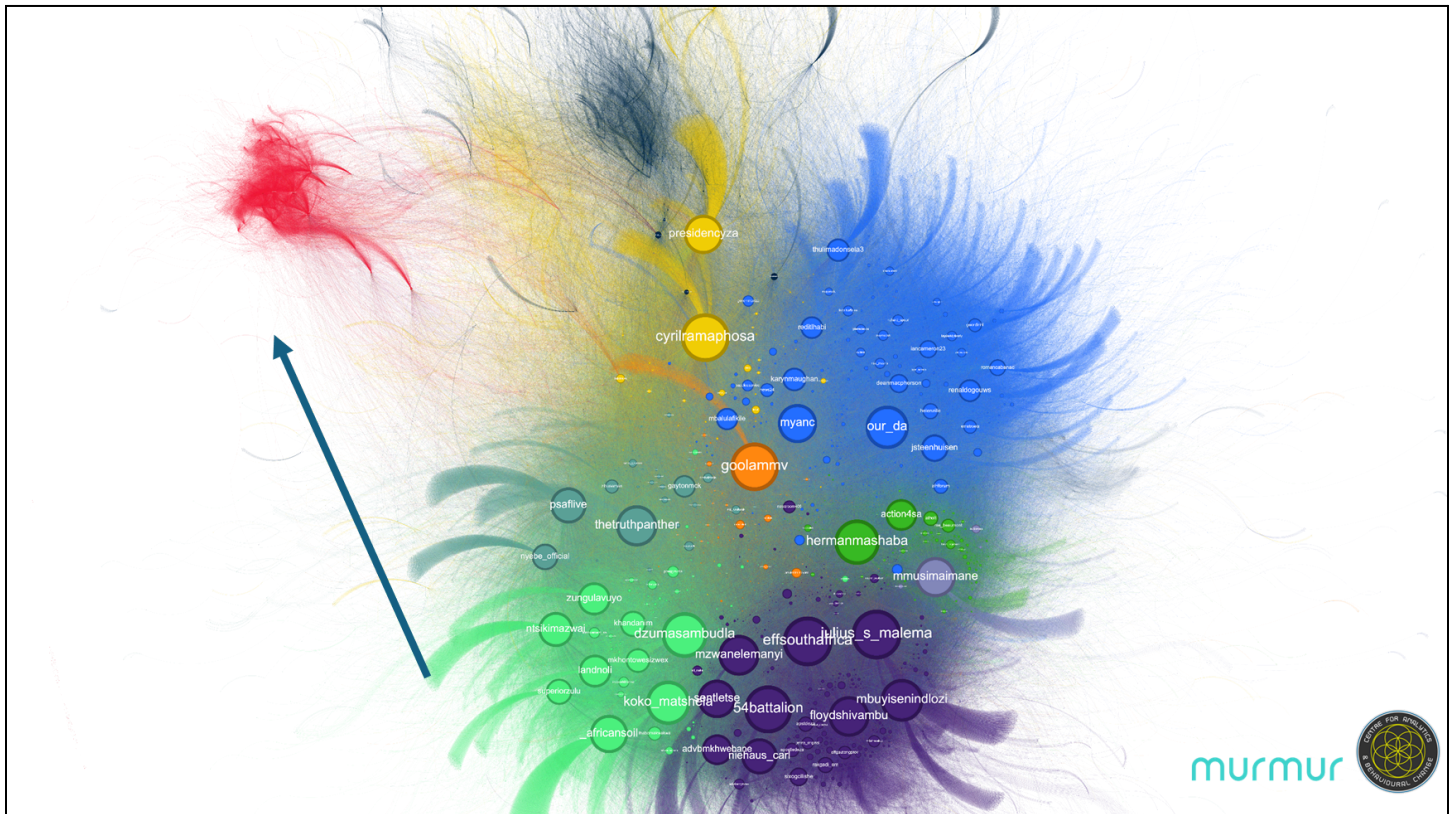


Figure 3: Network map with “bridge accounts” removed.

Top Accounts Based on Interactions

The ten accounts that are frequently interacted with and thus pulled into the Russian community based on the volume of mentions, reposts or replies from that community are:

@insightfactor
@mmodiba10
@embassyofrussia
@mahasharampedi
@thevaibhavag

@gunderground_tv

These interactions appear to come predominantly from accounts within the Russian community outwards into the South African communities. To understand the nature of their interactions during the assessment period, the handles of these accounts were added to a social media listening tool, called Brandwatch, for deeper insight. The details of @thevaibhavag did not load therefore the content from the remaining nine accounts is provided below.

Notably, accounts like @jacksonhinklle and @gunderground_tv take part in global ideological debates - Hinkle is a controversial 'MAGA' influencer in the USA, for example - perhaps demonstrating how these accounts are trying to connect local actors to global movements. Figure 4, which contains a topic wheel of the most frequently used words by these authors during the reporting period, seems to support this.

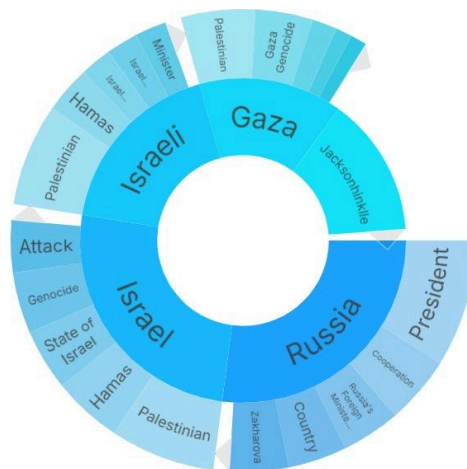


Figure 4: Topic wheel of accounts with most interactions in the dataset during the reporting period.

The topic “Russia” on the inner ring of the topic wheel contains 70 mentions, 69 of which are created and shared by three accounts; @jacksonhinklle, @embassyofrussia, and @mfa_russia.

Jackson Hinkle, who has been referred to as an “anti-American; pro-American”, is an American far-right commentator who has shown strong support for China and Russia¹⁰. During the reporting period, 114 accounts that were located in South Africa (based on the location they added to their profile) and who were also found in

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ui-RHPlcaa0>

one of the tracked, political communities interacted with @jacksonhinkle. The official account of the Russian Embassy in South Africa in particular interacts frequently with this account by mentioning them along with other Russian-aligned accounts. The New York Times reported that he has used manipulated images and misleading content and that in the six months between their article and 07 October 2024 (the day that Hamas launched an attack on Israel, to which the government reacted with extreme force, leading to the Israel-Gaza war) Hinkle was able to grow his support on X.com from 417,000 to 2.15 million followers¹¹. An example of a post by Hinkle's account on X.com is shown in Figure 5 below. It is noteworthy that the source from which he has shared this post is another X.com account with the handle @Sprinterfactory, which states in its bio "*Alternative media-news, geopolitics, war, reports*" along with a link to a PayPal link for interested parties to make donations. @Sprinterfactory and variations of this username such as @SprinterTeam, @SprinterTeam and @Sprinter99880 (see below) have been observed amplifying pro-Russian narratives across Africa, including in conversations relating to the recent pro-Palestine marches in Cape Town, South Africa; the Niger Coup; Russia-Africa Summit; and BRICS Summit, amongst other topics.



Figure 5: Sample post from @jacksonhinkle X.com account within "Russia" on the topic wheel

Following the link to a PayPal account for @Sprinterfactory, the account contains a profile picture of a major-general from the Syrian army believed to be dead, Issam Zahreddine. Zahreddine is accused of killing American journalist and foreign correspondent to the Sunday Times, Marie Colvin¹². Human Rights Watch has also reported on Zahreddine's activities during what they called the "arbitrary detainment of Syrians", stating

¹¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/11/business/media/jackson-hinkle-israel-gaza-misinformation.html>

¹² <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/10/19/558770513/anti-isis-syrian-general-accused-of-killing-u-s-journalist-is-reported-to-have-d>

that Zahreddine ordered most of the beatings in Douma, a city in Syria¹³. An image of the PayPal account is shown in Figure 6 below.

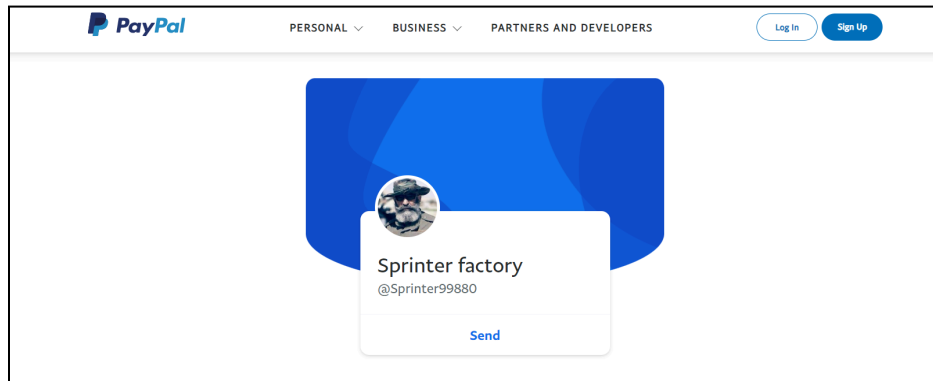


Figure 6: PayPal account that leads from an account that @jacksonhinkle reposted, which contains the image of Syrian army general, Issam Zahreddine.

The handle in Figure 6, @Sprinter99880, appears to have been the old X.com handle of the @Sprinterfactory as a link from a post reported to have been created by @Sprinter99880 on 06 March 2024 leads to the post shown in Figure 7 below¹⁴.



Figure 7: Claims by the Syrian-Russian affiliated account that drives a positive narrative about Russia's support to Africa

Fact-checking site polygraph.info has labelled the content in Figure 7 as misleading because three of the countries listed are run by military juntas that are supported by Russia (i.e. in Burkina Faso, Mali and the Central African Republic) and because they claim that Russia never supplied grain as the post states to

¹³ https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/reports/syria1211webwcover_0.pdf

¹⁴ <https://www.polygraph.info/a/russia-s-free-grain-falls-short-of-significantly-fighting-hunger-in-africa-/7519933.html>

countries like Sudan who face severe food shortages¹⁵. Given the pro-Russian stance of the account, it could be hypothesised that this type of content might have been created to counter the reality that Russia's decision to back out of the Black Sea Grain Initiative actually led to a deepening of the hunger crisis in Africa¹⁶, a place where Russia is trying to forge greater allegiances.

An example of this type of post is shown in Figure 8 below. @EmbassyofRussia posted a picture of Vladimir Putin (as it frequently does) on 13 March 2024 along with the caption “*If US troops appear in Ukraine, Russia will treat them as interventionists, and the US understands this.*” This was posted on the day that President Putin addressed the media trying to create fear about Polish troops entering Ukraine and threatening action with nuclear war¹⁷.



Figure 8: Post by the Russian Embassy in South Africa's X.com account that tags @jacksonhinkle and @IOL

Just below the image, the people tagged in the photo can be seen. In this instance, it is “Jackson Hinkle and 7 others” who have been tagged. The other 7 accounts are: @DD_Geopolitics; @RealScottRitter; @DougAMacgregor; @mfa_russia; @georgegalloway; @IOL and @mod-russia¹⁸.

It is noteworthy that they would choose to tag only one of the major news media houses (@IOL) in the post if their intention was to alert South African media houses to the news story. Another point that raises questions is the tagging of Jackson Hinkle by this South African-affiliated account to a story that doesn't involve South

¹⁵ <https://www.polygraph.info/a/russia-s-free-grain-falls-short-of-significantly-fighting-hunger-in-africa-7519933.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.anh-academy.org/community/blogs/the-black-sea-grain-deal-a-wake-up-call-for-africa-to-improve-intra-africa-trade>

¹⁷ <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2024/03/13/exp-putin-warning-vo-031303aseg1-cnni-world.cnn>

¹⁸ https://x.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1767832758095642639/media_tags

Africa at all - the direct question being, why would an official government account in South Africa try to draw the attention of an American right-wing commentator to Russia's response on an international matter to which South Africa is not involved? Questions like these make it difficult to establish the intention behind the Russian Embassy account on X.com, however it is noteworthy that it tags users that speak to two opposite ends of South Africa's political extremes: RET/MKP-aligned users (Insight Factor and Modibe usually fall into this community in such analyses) and far-right, MAGA influencers such as Hinkle who are popular with local right-wing, Donald Trump-MAGA sympathisers, mostly found within conservative White communities. The "Horseshoe Theory" is often used to describe this commonality between extreme left and right-wing proponents on the political spectrum¹⁹. Voters who find themselves in this horseshoe-shaped continuum, where ideologies like nationalism and populism thrive, are considered vulnerable to political mobilisation towards radical extremes²⁰.

A pro-Russian twist

In February 2024, @EmbassyofRussia posted #MadeInRussia, boasting about the modern technology that they are using in healthcare facilities (see Figure 9) in Mariupol, a former city in Ukraine that Russia seized in May 2022. London-based risk analyst @AlexKokcharov responded to the post reminding viewers that two months before Russia took control, they had bombed a maternity hospital in the same city, killing four people and injuring 17.



Figure 9: @EmbassyofRussia tweeted about Russia's achievements in creating a state of the art hospital in Mariupol.

¹⁹ <https://ecpr.eu/Events/Event/PanelDetails/3246>

²⁰ Ibid.

This is reminiscent of the misleading post shared by @Sprinterfactory in Figure 7 above and may be a trend worth tracking i.e. two years after extensive damage has been done, pro-Russian accounts appear to be driving narratives that portray Russia in a positive light in areas where there has been major fallout from the decisions taken during earlier days of the war.

In Figure 10, @jacksonhinklle is again tagged in the photo and this time, instead of @IOL, another self-proclaimed news source is tagged - @MorningShot²¹, in what appears to be another example of Russia talking to the two extremes of South Africa's politics; in this case, pro-Trump-MAGA libertarians popular with right-wing and conservative White South Africans. According to the bio of their account, Morning Shot positions itself as an *"alternative media analysis platform based in South Africa."* The account doesn't have a large following on X.com (7,800 at the time of this report) but their profile directs users to a YouTube page where they have over 61,000 subscribers²². Just as The Insight Factor has a face in journalist Modibe Modiba, @RomanCabanac appears to be the face of Morning Shot. Cabanac was formerly the 2nd candidate of the Capitalist Party of South Africa (ZACP), which appeared on the ballot in 2019 but didn't win any seats in parliament and only won 0.09% of the total votes²³. During the reporting period, @MorningShot1 created 46 mentions, most of which were about the incompetence of the ruling party, the African National Congress (ANC). This account raises questions about the industry classifications on X.com. @MorningShot1 steers clear of calling itself an alternative news site, however, they are listed as a Media and News Company in South Africa in its bio based on the demographic information it supplied to X.com (See Figure 10 below).



Figure 10: Account that drives partisan political opinions listed as a Media and News Company in X.com bio.

²¹ https://x.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1757701289935262181/media_tags

²² <https://www.youtube.com/@MorningShot>

²³ <https://results.elections.org.za/dashboards/npe/app/dashboard.html>

In a post shared on 04 December 2023, the account tweeted *“Cyril says that South Africans love to run their country down its [sic] a national sport. We agree. He also says that we should be more like the Chinese. We agree again. In China they hold a public rally and execute corrupt Officials. We should do that”*²⁴.

Conclusion

From the data points that have been reviewed so far, it is clear that pro-Russian accounts are interacting frequently with accounts in South Africa, specifically on the extreme ends of South Africa’s political spectrum, namely the far-left and far-right, either by reposting their content or tagging them in photos. This strategy is reminiscent of what political scientists refer to as “Horseshoe Theory”; the idea that the traditional political spectrum is bent back on itself into a horseshoe shape as political actors work to connect ideological groups sympathetic to fundamentalist, authoritarian worldviews on both ends of the Left-Right spectrum. This has a polarising, fragmenting effect on societies and weakens their buy-in to the democratic project, making them more open to less accountable, authoritarian regimes.

This report creates room for further analysis into the nature of the relationship between the accounts that are frequently interacting and the authenticity thereof. It also provides some information about Russian propaganda that appears to more immediately counter the country’s negative image based on the action it has taken against Ukraine, and more generally lays the groundwork for support of its more illiberal worldview within South Africa.

²⁴ <https://x.com/MorningShot1/status/1731584795329577377>