

[How Russia Meddles Abroad for Profit: Cash, Trolls and a Cult Leader](#)

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November 10, 2019

ANTANANARIVO, Madagascar — The Russians were hard to miss. They appeared suddenly last year in Madagascar’s traffic-snarled capital, carrying backpacks stuffed with cash and campaign swag decorated with the name of Madagascar’s president.

It was one of Russia’s most overt attempts at election interference to date. Working from their headquarters in a resort hotel, the Russians published their own newspaper in the local language and hired students to write fawning articles about the president to help him win another term. Skirting electoral laws, they bought airtime on television stations and blanketed the country with billboards.

They paid young people to attend rallies and journalists to cover them. They showed up with armed bodyguards at campaign offices to bribe challengers to drop out of the race to clear their candidate’s path.

At Madagascar’s election commission, officials were alarmed.

“We all recall what the Russians did in the United States during the election,” said Thierry Rakotonarivo, the commission’s vice president. “We were truly afraid.”

Of all the places for Russia to try to swing a presidential election, Madagascar is perhaps one of the least expected. The island nation off the coast of southeastern Africa is thousands of miles away from Moscow and has little obvious strategic value for the Kremlin or the global balance of power.

But two years after the Russians’ [aggressive interference](#) in the United States, here they were, determined to expand their clout and apply their special brand of election meddling to a distant political battleground.

The operation was approved by President Vladimir V. Putin and coordinated by some of the same figures who oversaw the disinformation around the 2016 American presidential election, according to dozens of interviews with officials in Madagascar, local operatives hired to take part in the Russian campaign and hundreds of pages of internal documents produced by the Russian operatives.

The meddling in Madagascar began just a few weeks after Mr. Putin sat down with the nation’s president, Hery Rajaonarimampianina, in Moscow last year. The meeting, which has never been reported, also included Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close confidant of Mr. Putin who [was indicted in the United States](#) for helping to orchestrate Russia’s effort to manipulate the 2016 American election, according to Mr. Rajaonarimampianina and another government minister present on the trip to Moscow.

Mr. Putin has repeatedly denied any official effort to tamper with foreign elections. But his sit-down with Madagascar’s president — Mr. Prigozhin by his side — points to his involvement in Russia’s electoral interference in even the smallest, most remote countries.

In some vital ways, the Madagascar operation mimicked the one in the United States. There was a disinformation campaign on social media and an attempt to bolster so-called spoiler candidates. The Russians even recruited an apocalyptic cult leader in a strategy to split the opposition vote and sink its chances.

“What surprised me is that it was the Russians who came over to my house without me contacting them,” said the cult leader, known as Pastor Mailhol. “They said, ‘If you ever need money, we are going to pay all the expenses.’”

But while Russia’s efforts in the United States fit Moscow’s campaign to upend Western democracy and rattle Mr. Putin’s geopolitical rivals, the undertaking in Madagascar often seemed to have a much simpler objective: profit.

Before the election, a Russian company that local officials and foreign diplomats say is controlled by Mr. Prigozhin acquired a major stake in a government-run company that mines chromium, a mineral valued for its use in stainless steel. The acquisition set off protests by workers complaining of unpaid wages, canceled benefits and foreign intrusion into a sector that had been a source of national pride for Madagascar.

It repeated a pattern in which Russia has swooped into African nations, hoping to reshape their politics for material gain. In the Central African Republic, a former Russian intelligence officer is the top security adviser to the country’s president, while companies linked to Mr. Prigozhin have spread across the nation, [snapping up diamonds in both legal and illegal ways](#), according to government officials, warlords in the diamond trade and registration documents showing Mr. Prigozhin’s growing military and commercial footprint.

Last year, [three Russian journalists were gunned down](#) while investigating his activities there.

“Prigozhin had tremendous success in 2016, and he is now the guy everyone is watching,” said Paul Stronski, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. “He’s got some boots on the ground, people peddling stuff in different countries in Africa. These are countries with authoritarian-style leaders who need a little extra help to win. And in return, he gets access to some of the goodies.”

But Russia’s forays abroad have been far from flawless. For all its efforts, the operation in Madagascar missed its mark at first, plagued by a startling incompetence and corruption that undercuts Russia’s image as a master political manipulator.

Campaign materials were riddled with grammatical mistakes. Ballpoint pens meant as election giveaways misspelled Mr. Rajaonarimampianina’s name. Some operatives appeared to undermine the campaign for their own personal gain, demanding fake receipts with double the actual price of publishing the newspaper so they could pocket the difference.

“They paid well, but they were messing around,” said the printing house owner, Lola Rasoamaharo.

One person working for the campaign described packets of gold and precious stones piled on the bed in the room of a Russian operative, another sign that the people entrusted with the mission were often more interested in profit than politics.

They also chose the wrong candidate. As it became clear that Mr. Rajaonarimampianina had little hope of winning, even with their help, the Russian operatives pivoted quickly, dumping the incumbent, whom they referred to as “the piano,” and shifting their support to the eventual winner, Andry Rajoelina.

“The piano is very weak,” Yaroslav Ignatovsky, a manager of the operation, wrote to a colleague in a text exchange obtained by the Dossier Center, a London-based research organization. “He’ll never make it. But we have to make it somehow.”

The maneuver worked. After the Russians pirouetted to help Mr. Rajoelina — their former opponent — win the election, Mr. Prigozhin’s company was able to negotiate with the new government to keep control of the chromium mining operation, despite the worker protests, and Mr. Prigozhin’s political operatives remain stationed in the capital to this day.

‘Everything Is Possible in Politics’

It all started with a secret meeting.

News reports described Mr. Rajaonarimampianina’s three-day trip to Moscow in March, 2018, as mundane: He attended an investment forum, met a foreign ministry official and received an honorary degree from a local university.

But at some point, his plans veered from the published itinerary.

Slipping away from the press pool, he made his way to the Kremlin. There, in the private office of the Russian president, he met for no more than 30 minutes with Mr. Putin and Mr. Prigozhin.

In an interview, Mr. Rajaonarimampianina explained that Mr. Prigozhin had set up the meeting, and even met him at the airport in Moscow. But he insisted that the presidential election, scheduled for that fall, was not discussed.

Others remembered things differently. Harison E. Randriarimanana, a former agriculture minister who accompanied the president to Moscow, said that after the meeting his boss proudly announced that Mr. Putin had agreed to assist with his re-election campaign.

“Putin said he wanted to help him,” Mr. Randriarimanana recalled the president saying. “He was going to help us with the election.”

Just weeks later, local residents were startled by the sudden appearance of Russian operatives in Antananarivo, Madagascar’s capital.

The operation happened alongside an aggressive push by the Kremlin to revive relations with a number of African countries. For Moscow, Africa had been an important ideological battlefield during the Cold War, and Mr. Putin, who makes no secret of his nostalgia for the Soviet Union, views the continent as an important front for combating the West’s global influence.

Last month, Mr. Putin played [host to more than 40 African heads of state](#), including Madagascar’s, at a summit meeting in the Black Sea resort town of Sochi to showcase

Russia's growing stature as a player in the region and present his country as a partner preferable to the West.

"We see how a number of Western governments have resorted to pressuring, bullying and blackmailing the governments of sovereign African countries," Mr. Putin said before the meeting. By contrast, he added, "Our African agenda has a positive, aspirational character."

In recent years, a parade of African leaders have paid visits to the Kremlin, seeking lucrative deals with Russia's giant state-run companies, including for weapons.

In dollar terms, Russia is no match for China or the United States, which have tens of billions of dollars worth of economic investment in the continent. But for some leaders in search of a political edge, Russia has developed a handy tool kit, which is where Mr. Prigozhin comes in.

After being indicted on charges of intervening in the 2016 American election, he has traveled the world, proffering his services. In Africa, he has found a highly receptive market. He and his operatives have been active in nearly a dozen African countries, including [Libya](#), [Sudan](#) and [Zimbabwe](#), analysts say.

In the interview, Mr. Rajaonarimampianina described his meeting with Mr. Putin as run-of-the-mill for someone of his stature. During his tenure, he had met with the leaders of China and India, and twice visited the White House.

But unlike those encounters, the meeting with Mr. Putin and Mr. Prigozhin was kept secret.

Mr. Rajaonarimampianina insisted that he took "not one penny from the Russians" for his campaign, though he did not rule out that the Kremlin worked to assist him without his knowledge. "Everything is possible in politics," he said.

He stumbled a bit when shown a letter with his signature written to a Russian political operative named Oleg Vasilyevich Zakhariyash. In the letter, written in French and stamped "PROJET CONFIDENTIEL," the president requests the Russian's help "to resist attempts by international institutions to interfere" in Madagascar's election. Western diplomats had, in fact, been concerned that the president was trying to delay the vote.

"I am convinced," the president's letter said, "that certain forces will attempt to call into doubt" the election.

Mr. Rajaonarimampianina confirmed that the signature on the letter was his and acknowledged meeting Mr. Zakhariyash in Madagascar, but he said he did not recall writing the letter.

Mr. Zakhariyash, who did not respond to repeated requests for comment, was later quoted by RIAFAN, a Russian news outlet connected to companies owned by Mr. Prigozhin, blaming the United States, Britain and France for interfering in the Madagascar elections.

Local residents hired by the Russian operation in Madagascar described Mr. Zakhariyash as "the boss." Likewise, one of the Russian unit's internal spreadsheets identified him as the "head of department." He is also one of two authors of a confidential report detailing plans

for the Madagascar campaign, including the creation of a “troll factory” to focus on social media, echoing the tactics Mr. Prigozhin is [accused of unleashing](#) on the United States.

The documents — along with text exchanges and emails between Russian operatives — were obtained and analyzed by the Dossier Center, a London-based investigative organization founded by Mr. Putin’s longtime nemesis, the former oil billionaire Mikhail B. Khodorkovsky. Through interviews with officials, candidates and local operatives in Madagascar, The New York Times independently confirmed much of the information in the documents, which the Dossier Center said were provided by moles working within Mr. Prigozhin’s organization.

The spreadsheets name more than 30 Russians working in the country ahead of the election, calling them media managers, lawyers, translators and a “counterpropaganda technologist.” People in Madagascar hired by the Russians to work on the campaign verified many of the operatives’ identities.

Many of them appear to be from St. Petersburg, where Mr. Prigozhin’s so-called troll factory is based. But not all. Several worked for the Russian-backed separatist government in eastern Ukraine. One attracted attention earlier this year when his wife posted a photo of her battered and bruised face on Facebook, accusing her husband of beating her.

Few appeared to have much expertise on Madagascar, or on Africa at all — and it showed, locals said. They often used a translation application on their phones to communicate and had little understanding of local politics.

“They’re always going around with money, they’re always going around with women,” said one Malagasy man who worked with the Russians and feared reprisals. “They just thought it was all very simple in Madagascar. They arrived and that’s it, let’s go. That’s why it all fell apart.”

‘A Powerful Country Came to My House’

Nearly two decades ago, André Christian Dieudonné Mailhol, the founder and pastor of the Church of the Apocalypse, said he received a message from God that he would be president of Madagascar one day.

He did not predict, however, that three Russians would turn up like Magi on his doorstep 18 years later with an offer to help fulfill that prophecy.

“They said that they came here to help me with the presidential election,” he said.

The three gathered in his brightly painted living room in 2018, peppering him with questions: “How old are you? Why do you want to run for the presidency?”

Pastor Mailhol explained God’s plan for him, and they offered him cash, promising to fully fund his campaign.

They never fully explained who they were, he said, beyond giving their first names — Andrei, Vladimir and Roman — and never said what they wanted in return. Pastor Mailhol didn’t ask.

“I just thought, a powerful country came to my house and suggested helping me. Why would I bother them with questions like, ‘Who are you? What are you here for?’” the pastor, 59, recalled. “No other foreign countries came to help me. They were the only ones, so I did not want to ask much. I was O.K. with that.”

The strategy of supporting so-called spoiler candidates is another echo of the 2016 plot to subvert the American election, in which Russian social media bots encouraged support for figures like Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate — as a way, officials say, to draw votes away from Hillary Clinton.

Pastor Mailhol said his Russian team wrote some of his speeches and paid for campaign posters and television advertising. On one internal spreadsheet, the “Pastor Group” is identified as Andrei Kramar, Vladimir Boyarishchev and Roman Pozdnyakov. Shown photos of the men from Facebook, Pastor Mailhol and his assistants confirmed they were the men who worked with his campaign.

They made for a curious team. A photo of Mr. Boyarishchev [posted to a Russian social media](#) site in 2012 shows him shirtless, flexing his biceps and wearing the blue beret of a United Nations peacekeeper. Other social media posts suggest he served in a United Nations mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Pastor Mailhol said he spoke excellent French, which many educated Malagasy know well.

The other two have equally colorful histories. In a Facebook post from a decade ago, Mr. Kramar describes himself as a member of Mr. Putin’s political party, United Russia, but later he popped up in eastern Ukraine as a functionary in a Kremlin-backed separatist enclave that has been fighting a war against Ukraine since 2014.

Ukrainian authorities say the third operative, Mr. Pozdnyakov, is also involved with the pro-Kremlin rebels. His wife, once a United Russia member of Parliament, is the head of the separatist government’s election commission.

Other presidential candidates in Madagascar gave similar accounts of Russians turning up out of the blue, some with bags of cash.

Onja Rasamimanana, who worked for a history professor-turned-candidate named Jean Omer Beriziky, said she coordinated with a Maksim, an Anastasia and a Margo, who was the interpreter. “And then a Grigori showed up,” she said.

“They were looking for fresh faces,” she said. “They didn’t explain anything. They didn’t mention anything regarding their motivations.”

She said that her candidate, Mr. Beriziky, later told her the Russians offered \$2 million in campaign funding, but ultimately provided less than half a million.

Two Russians also approached a pop megastar running for president, Rasolofondraosolo Zafimahaleo, also known as Dama. Over four meetings, Mr. Zafimahaleo said, the Russians tried to pressure him to support a delay in the election so that the incumbent had more time to campaign.

“They made big promises,” Mr. Zafimahaleo said. “If you do what we want you to do, we’ll help your campaign,” he said they told him. He refused, he said, suspecting that the Russians had come to exploit Madagascar’s natural resources.

Only three of the Russian operatives identified by local hires of the campaign responded to requests for comment. All acknowledged visiting Madagascar last year, but only one admitted working as a pollster on behalf of the president.

The others said they were simply tourists. Pyotr Korolyov, described as a sociologist on one spreadsheet, spent much of the summer of 2018 and fall hunched over a computer, deep in polling data at La Résidence Ankerana, a hotel the Russians used as their headquarters, until he was hospitalized with the measles, according to one person who worked with him.

In an email exchange, Mr. Korolyov confirmed that he had come down with the measles, but rejected playing a role in a Russian operation. He did defend the idea of one, though.

“Russia should influence elections around the world, the same way the United States influences elections,” he wrote. “Sooner or later Russia will return to global politics as a global player,” he added. “And the American establishment will just have to accept that.”

‘If You Accept This Deal You Will Have Money’

As the election approached, the Russians grew nervous and frustrated. In one text message, Mr. Ignatovsky, who helped oversee the operation, describes Madagascar as a “black hole.” One of his colleagues complains that “everything is ass-backward,” and that the “unhappy locals” were impeding the team’s work.

But the Russians were setting off alarms, too.

An op-ed in a local newspaper warned that after meddling in the United States, Russia had set its sights on Madagascar.

“Russia badly wants to make good use of its impressive experience in destabilization” by intervening in Madagascar, the article said. “Vodka will flow like water if they achieve their goal.”

Relations with the various candidates the Russians were backing began to sour. By September, they had dumped the incumbent, Mr. Rajaonarimampianina, deciding he was too unpopular to win, according to internal communications.

In the interview in Paris, Mr. Rajaonarimampianina said he was aware the Russians were supporting other candidates and became indignant when told of the Russians’ conclusion that he was a losing bet. “How could they know that I will lose the election?” he said.

In the first round, he received less than 9 percent of the vote, finishing a distant third.

The Russians shifted their support to Mr. Rajoelina, a young former mayor who had been Madagascar’s [transitional president after a coup in 2009](#).

In the campaign's final weeks, Pastor Mailhol said, the team of Russians made a request: Drop out of the race and support Mr. Rajoelina. He refused.

The Russians made the same proposal to the history professor running for president, saying, "If you accept this deal you will have money," according to Ms. Rasamimanana, the professor's campaign manager.

When the professor refused, she said, the Russians created a fake Facebook page that mimicked his official page and posted an announcement on it that he was supporting Mr. Rajoelina.

The members of the so-called Pastor Group — Mr. Kramar, Mr. Pozdnyakov and Mr. Boyarishchev — were arrested and deported last year after organizing a protest in front of the French Embassy. They left without fully paying what they owed their local operatives, said Niaina Rakotonjanahary, the pastor's campaign spokeswoman.

"It happened to all of us who worked there," she said. "We were so dumb."

As in the American election, it is not clear whether the Russians directly colluded with the eventual winner, Mr. Rajoelina, or simply operated a parallel campaign to support him. Before switching sides, the Russians had local hires write articles disparaging Mr. Rajoelina, according to one of the people who worked for them.

"They asked me to write bad things about Andry Rajoelina — that he sold our lands to the Chinese," said the person, speaking anonymously for fear of reprisals. "During the second round of the presidential election, though, they asked me to write good things about Andry Rajoelina."

Mr. Rajoelina declined to comment, but an official from his campaign said that his team was aware of Russian payments to other candidates.

In the end, the Russians retained their prize — control over the chromium operation. They now maintain a staff of 30 in the country, including engineers and geologists. The contract gives them a 70 percent stake in the venture, said Nirina Rakotomanantsoa, the managing director of the Malagasy company that owns the remaining share.

"The contract is already signed," he said. "I am thankful the Russians are here."

Not all the Russian operatives appeared satisfied. In a moment of doubt, Yevgeny Kopot, a Prigozhin functionary who appears to play a coordinating role for operations in different African countries, sent a text message to a colleague in Madagascar in January.

"Do you think that we're disgracing our country?" he asked, according to texts obtained by the Dossier Center. "Or devaluing her name?"

The colleague told him not to worry. "If you think about it," she replied, "the whole planet is disgraced. Not the planet, precisely, but humanity."

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