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Russian Operatives Offered Money to Multiple Madagascar Presidential Candidates – BBC

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Madagascar President Andry Rajoelina **Henitsoa Rafalia / EPA / TASS**

Russian political operatives disguised as "tourists" have offered money to at least six presidential candidates in Madagascar last year in exchange for Russia's support for the eventual winner, a BBC investigation reported on Monday.

Former leader Andry Rajoelina, 44, was declared the winner of a hard-fought presidential vote in December, rejecting his rival's accusations of fraud. Yevgeny Prigozhin, a secretive businessman known as Vladimir Putin's "chef," is reported to have spearheaded Russia's push to rekindle Cold War ties across African countries with untapped mineral wealth as the country seeks to revive its geopolitical might.

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At least six out of Madagascar's 35 presidential candidates were offered money by "dozens" of Russians in a "systematic and coordinated operation" spanning nearly a year, a BBC Africa correspondent reported. Several candidates interviewed by the news channel spoke openly about the Russian payment offers.

The outlet identified three of the Russians as the politically connected Andrei Kramar, businessman Roman Pozdnyakov and diamond trader Vladimir Boyarishev. Madagascar's police chief told the outlet that the three had been banned from the Indian Ocean island after being arrested at an unauthorized anti-colonial protest.

"There are eight or nine of you that we Russians have supported. Whichever one of you comes first, you will all support that candidate," ex-candidate Pastor Mailhol quoted one of the Russian men as saying.

Jean-Omer Beriziky, another candidate who said he was approached by the Russians, said he was asked if he was ready to "open Madagascar's diplomacy to other horizons" in exchange for almost $2 million.

Mailhol and Beriziky said the Russian operatives told them — but they refused — to stop their campaigns when Rajoelina emerged as the frontrunner. Rajoelina rejected allegations that he was supported by the Russian tourist operatives.

Madagascar is one of Africa's poorest nations, with about 80 percent of its 25 million people living on less than $2 per day.

Russia has backed several candidates in Madagascar, a former Mauritius foreign minister and expert on Indian Ocean territories told Bloomberg last fall. Bloomberg reported in November that Putin and Prigozhin share an interest in Madagascar, the world's largest producer of vanilla and a holder of major deposits of nickel, cobalt and uranium. A Kremlin envoy flew to the island in March 2018 for talks with then-president Hery Rajaonarimampianina.

Russian election consultants affiliated with Prigozhin were in the country amid a tight race for the presidency between two other former leaders, one of the people familiar with his activities told Bloomberg at the time.

Reuters contributed reporting to this article.

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