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**POPULISM**

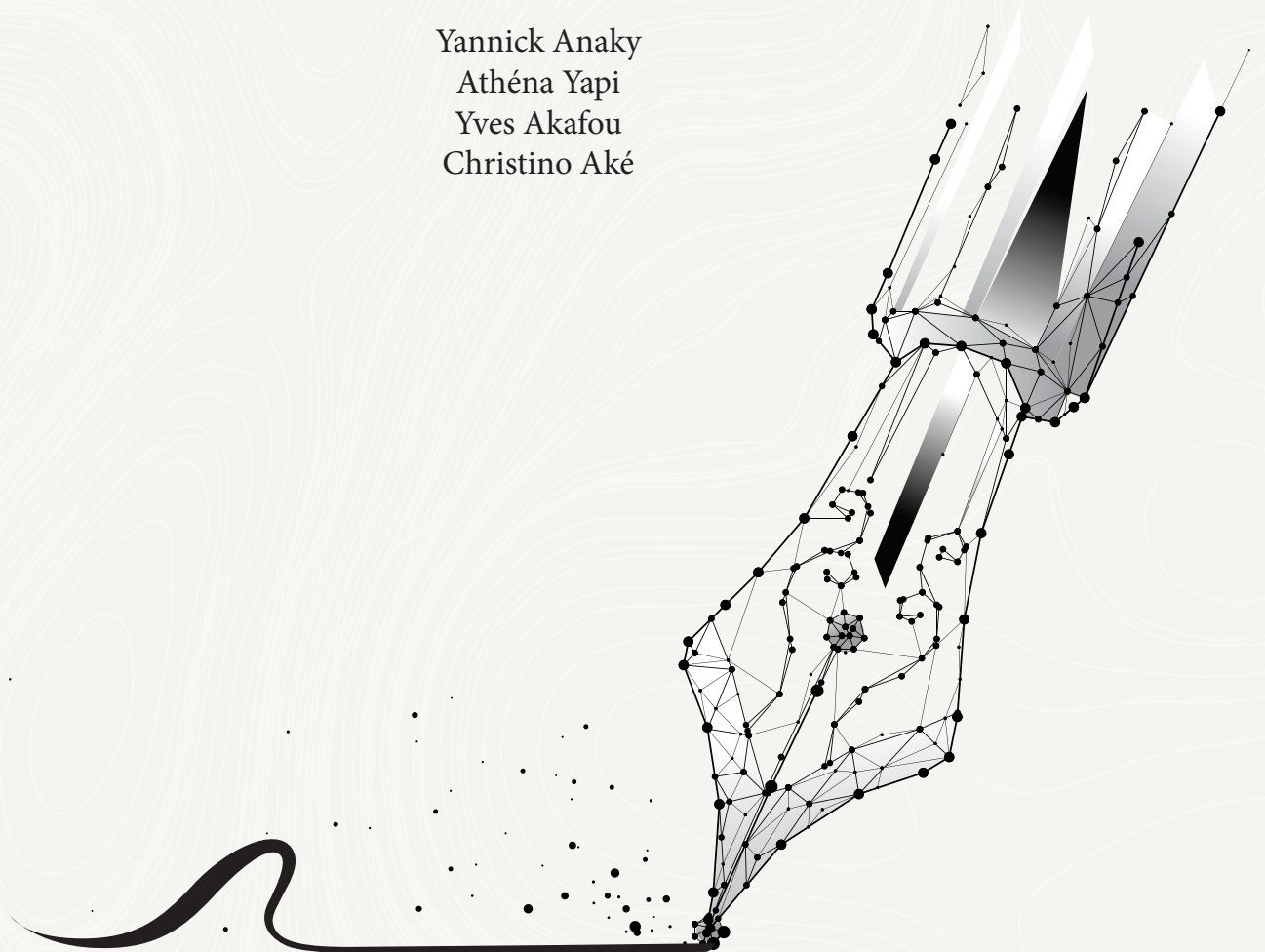
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**Mapping Digital Influence, Political Legitimacy, and Geopolitical Realignment in West Africa and the Sahel**

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# Executive Summary

**B**etween July and September 2025, researchers from the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) and the Observatoire Ivoirien des Droits de l'Homme (OIDH) monitored 30,558 online publications to understand how coordinated narratives are reshaping public opinion about governance, sovereignty, and democracy across West Africa and the Sahel as it relates to military juntas. The findings reveal a sophisticated, multi-platform information ecosystem that is actively undermining regional institutions, normalising military rule, and facilitating geopolitical realignment away from Western partnerships toward Russian influence.

## Key Findings

### The Rise in support for Military Populism

Military leaders in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso have deliberately positioned themselves as champions of popular sovereignty through the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). Analysis of 927 AES-related posts across platforms shows concerted efforts to portray the alliance as a fully legitimate confederation with international standing. The narrative is amplified through emotional content on TikTok (30% of posts) and reinforced by formal news articles (36%) to create the appearance of mass support.

### Systematic Delegitimisation of ECOWAS

With 2,255 posts identified, anti-ECOWAS content represents one of the largest thematic clusters in the dataset. The regional body is consistently framed as an “external actor” serving Western interests rather than African citizens. Messaging intensifies strategically around ECOWAS sanctions and diplomatic interventions, with posting volumes spiking to 70-90 posts per day during key political moments. The “double standards” narrative, contrasting ECOWAS's harsh response to military coups with silence on constitutional manipulation in countries like Togo is particularly used to undermine the institution's credibility.

### Exploitation of Anti-French Sentiment

While only 104 posts (0.34% of total) explicitly reference anti-French themes, these narratives permeate all other discourse clusters, functioning as connective tissue between anti-ECOWAS, pro-AES, and pro-Russia messaging. Three dominant frames emerge: denouncing Françafrique as ongoing neocolonial exploitation, attacking French media as instruments of narrative domination, and portraying France as actively destabilizing Sahelian security. AES states have suspended French media outlets (RFI, France 24) to protect what they term “informational sovereignty.”

### Russian Information Operations at Scale

Russian and Wagner/Africa Corps-related content (982 posts) shows clear signs of coordinated amplification, with volumes spiking around diplomatic visits and security announcements. Network analysis reveals Russian media outlets like Russia Today (RT) and Russian-language curator accounts function as central hubs that funnel narratives into West African information spaces, where they are repackaged as domestic news. Content dating back to 2020 is systematically resurfaced at strategic moments to capitalize on content from a long-term campaign. Russian diplomatic accounts leverage their official status to disseminate propaganda that has a veneer of credibility.

### **Critical Implications**

These narratives do not represent either episodic criticism or organic discontent. The data reveals sustained, often coordinated efforts to reshape how millions of West Africans and global citizens understand democracy, sovereignty, and regional cooperation. While these narratives exploit genuine grievances including colonial legacies, persistent insecurity, corruption, and perceived Western hypocrisy, they are strategically amplified to justify authoritarian rule and facilitate Russian geopolitical expansion.

The consequences are already visible: support for the AES, widespread acceptance of military rule as legitimate governance, erosion of democratic norms, and growing Russian military presence across the Sahel. Without credible responses that address both the disinformation and the underlying failures it exploits, the gap between regional institutions and citizens will continue to widen, creating space for further democratic backsliding and external manipulation across West Africa.

## **Introduction**

The prevalence of military rule across West African and Sahel states has risen significantly since 2020, following coups and attempted coups in many countries. This trend has accompanied and been bolstered by growing public sentiment accepting or in favour of military rule, driven by social media narratives promoting the juntas' purported successes and denigrating their perceived enemies.

In response to this evolving dynamic, the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD-West Africa) and the Observatoire Ivoirien des Droits de l'Homme (OIDH), supported technically by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and financially by Global Affairs Canada, have been monitoring the information space to understand and deconstruct the narratives, causes, and patterns shaping the resurging popularity of military rule in the Sahel region and beyond. CDD and OIDH have defined the ideology underpinning this popularity as "military populism," a legitimizing strategy in which military rulers claim to embody the popular will of the disillusioned citizens while positioning themselves against discredited political elites, foreign actors, and liberal-democratic institutions.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout July, August, and September 2025, researchers from both organisations systematically monitored social media, online news platforms, and targeted accounts to identify emerging patterns in the discourse surrounding coups, military transitions, and foreign influence. Using Boolean search queries, the research team identified and analysed 30,558 publications touching on the keywords, actors, and narratives promoting the ideology of "military populism" across web and social platforms.

These posts and reports can be analysed across five dominant narratives, each with its own information flows and influence on public views about legitimacy, sovereignty, and governance in the region:

- The Alliance of Sahel States (AES) Bloc and Military Populism narrative tracks the emergence of the AES as an alternative to ECOWAS, examining how military juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger have positioned themselves as champions of sovereignty against foreign interference.
- Anti-ECOWAS and Anti-Democracy narratives focus on delegitimising the regional body from which the military-led Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger withdrew after it refused to recognize their new governments. Posts denigrate ECOWAS as a puppet of Western interests rather than a genuine African institution, calling it out for double standards in enforcing democratic norms, and decry ECOWAS sanctions against Sahel states without addressing their grievances.
- Anti-French Sentiment and Postcolonial narratives leverage historical resentment against persistent French (post-)colonial influence and portray ECOWAS as a tool for France's continued economic and political control in West Africa. The CFA franc, French military deployments, and resource extraction feature prominently in these discussions.
- Russia's Influence in Spreading Disinformation analyses the role of Russian actors, including Africa Corps (formerly Wagner Group), in amplifying anti-ECOWAS and anti-Western messaging while positioning Russia as a security and development partner without colonial baggage.

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<sup>1</sup> CDD and OIDH defined and explored the concept of military populism in depth in an initial background paper that can be found here: <https://t.co/veW1uXgLOL>

## **Research Methodology**

This study employed a comprehensive digital monitoring and content analysis approach to examine information flows, narratives, and influence operations affecting West Africa and the Sahel between July 1 and September 30, 2025. The methodology combined systematic data collection, rigorous filtering, quantitative measurement, and qualitative interpretation.

The primary objectives of the methodology were to:

- Monitor the emergence and evolution of narratives supporting military rule, anti-ECOWAS sentiment, anti-French positioning, and pro-Russian discourse in the region.
- Measure the volume, reach, and engagement of relevant content across multiple digital platforms.
- Identify patterns of coordination, amplification, and narrative reinforcement in transnational online ecosystems.
- Examine the interplay between online narratives and real-world political or diplomatic events.

The geographic scope encompassed Francophone and Anglophone West Africa, with a focus on Sahelian countries (Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger), regional powers (Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire), and diasporic or international platforms that contributed to narrative dissemination. The temporal scope targeted a period of heightened political activity and diplomatic engagement, capturing content around coups, sanctions, official visits, and international media coverage.

Data were collected using a combination of automated and manual monitoring techniques across public digital platforms. The research team systematically tracked content on:

- Social media platforms: The team monitored X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, YouTube, TikTok, Reddit, and Telegram channels linked to influencers, journalists, and official institutions.
- Online news outlets and blogs: Both mainstream and alternative sites were included to capture diverse framing and amplification patterns.
- Messaging and reposting networks: Publicly accessible channels and groups on Telegram, Facebook, and similar platforms were monitored to track the circulation of high-engagement posts and narratives.

Researchers designed Boolean search queries in both English and French to capture a wide range of relevant content. Keywords were chosen to cover military, political, and geopolitical terminology, including references to coups, sanctions, ECOWAS, AES, sovereignty, Russia, Wagner Group / Africa Corps, French influence, and related concepts. Each query was refined iteratively to reduce irrelevant noise and improve coverage. A detailed breakdown of keywords and classification methodology appears in Annexe A. The monitoring process identified a total of 30,558 publications relevant to the research objectives, spanning social media posts, web articles, blog entries, and reposted content.

To ensure accuracy and relevance, all collected content underwent a rigorous filtering process, including:

- Relevance assessment: Each post or article was evaluated to determine if it addressed political transitions, military influence, or foreign engagement in West Africa. Content unrelated to governance or geopolitical narratives was removed.
- Deduplication: Identical or near-identical posts shared across multiple accounts or platforms were marked to prevent double-counting while preserving evidence of amplification.

- Language verification: Content in English, French, or regional languages with significant online engagement was retained. Posts in other languages were excluded unless widely disseminated in the region.
- Source verification: Web articles and news posts were validated to confirm publication dates, authorship, and origin, reducing the risk of including outdated or misattributed content.

After filtering, the research team applied a combination of quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques:

- Volume and trend analysis: Daily and weekly content volumes were measured to detect peaks corresponding to political events, coups, sanctions announcements, or diplomatic visits. Temporal patterns were analysed to determine reactive versus sustained discourse.
- Keyword frequency analysis: Recurrent terms and phrases were identified to assess semantic reinforcement and track narrative persistence. Frequency distributions highlighted which ideas, actors, or events dominated conversations.
- Platform distribution mapping: Contents were analysed by platform to determine where narratives originated, where they gained the most traction, and how they spread across social media, news sites, and video platforms.
- Geographic mapping: Metadata, such as location tags, language, and user profiles, was used to approximate the regional and international reach of narratives. This included tracing content from core Sahelian countries outward to neighbouring states, diasporic networks, and global amplification hubs.
- Network and repost analysis: The study examined reposting patterns, shared links, and cross-platform circulation to identify coordination and amplification. Particular attention was paid to accounts or media outlets that functioned as distribution hubs, including official diplomatic channels, influential journalists, and regional media aggregators.
- Qualitative content review: High-engagement posts and representative articles were examined to understand framing, rhetorical strategies, emotional appeal, and alignment with broader geopolitical narratives. This analysis provided insight into how online content influences public perception and interacts with offline events.

To assess strategic timing and coordination, the research mapped spikes in content against key events, including military coups, ECOWAS leadership changes, influential personalities' visits to Moscow, ECOWAS statements, and major security incidents. This approach allowed identification of reactive versus premeditated amplification, revealing coordinated campaigns designed to influence perceptions at moments of maximum political salience.

While this research was meticulously carried out, it was not devoid of certain limitations such as:

- Platform coverage: Only publicly accessible contents were analysed. Private or encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp were not included for access reasons. WhatsApp is the most widely used platform across the Sahel and likely sees significant relevant content sharing.
- Language constraints: Focus on English and French content means narratives prevalent in local languages were not captured. At the same time, the use of both languages let us explore narratives at a regional level.

Despite these limitations, the methodology provides a robust, multi-dimensional view of the online information environment and the dynamics shaping narratives around governance, sovereignty, and foreign influence in West Africa.

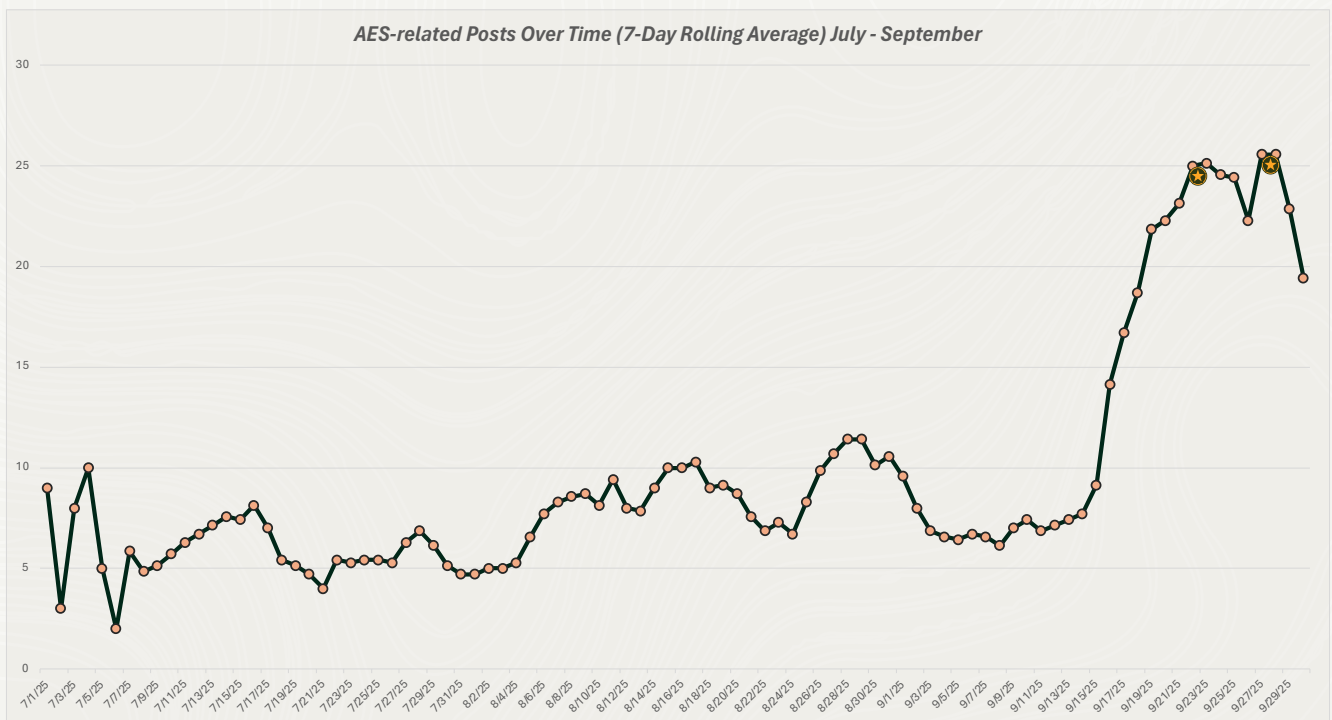
All contents analysed were obtained from open-sources, publicly accessible platforms. No personal data were collected beyond publicly visible identifiers, and all reporting complies with research ethics standards. Sensitive information was anonymized where appropriate, and sources are referenced in this report only when content had significant public relevance.

# The AES Bloc and Military Populism



### The AES Bloc and Military Populism

Across the July-September dataset, AES-related content stands out as one of the most sustained and coordinated narrative clusters. The 927 AES-tagged posts portray the Alliance of Sahel States not simply as a loose political alignment but as a fully constituted regional power structure, endowed with sovereignty, legitimacy, and international recognition. The discourse repeatedly frames the AES as a “confederation”, a “Sahelian entity”, or a “bloc speaking for the Sahel”, despite the fact that its institutional architecture remains nascent. The presentation of the bloc serves a deliberate strategy of accelerating the symbolic formation of the AES through online narratives that give it the appearance of a mature geopolitical organization. The AES presents itself as an independent and united front that rejects Western influence and ECOWAS control. Its leaders use messages about “sovereign transition” and “African unity” to justify military rule and promote populist ideas.



**Figure 1: AES-related Posts Over Time (7-Day Rolling Average) July-September**

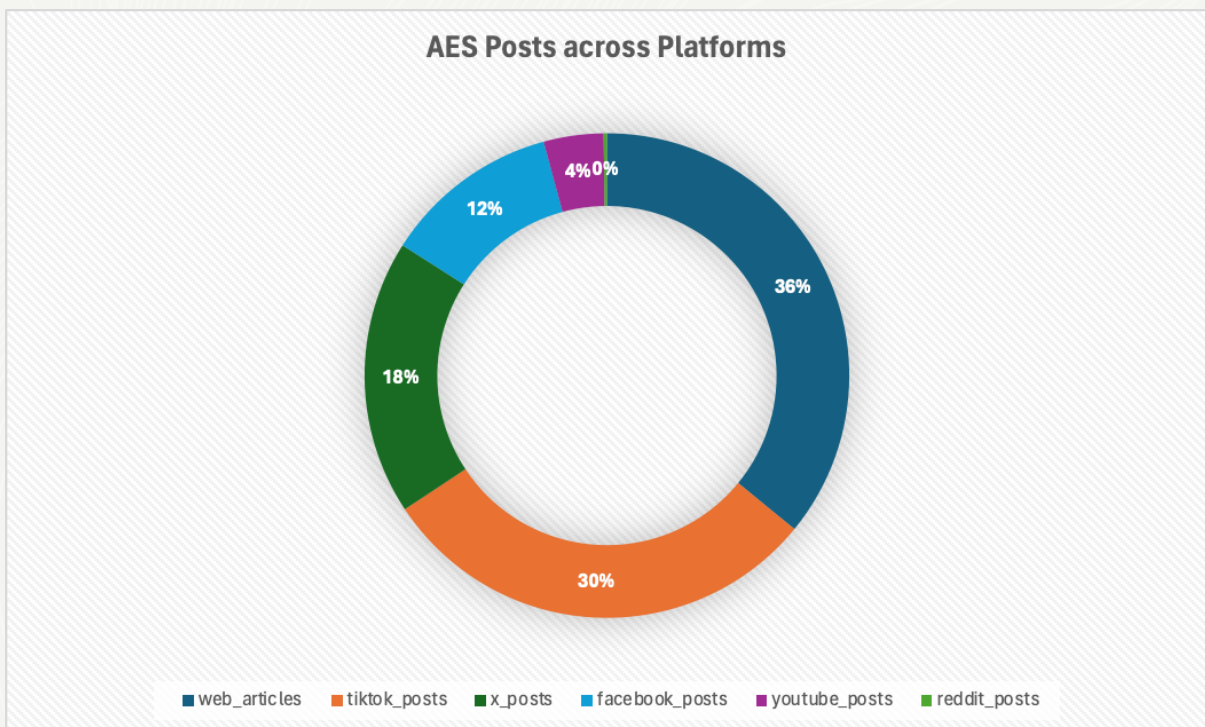
AES-related posting occurred throughout the period, as shown in Figure 1, with steady daily volumes ranging between 3 and 12 posts forming a consistent baseline of narrative presence. This continuity suggests an effort to maintain the visibility of the AES project beyond episodic news cycles. However, moments of heightened political significance coincide with clear surges in activity. From late August onward, posting became more dynamic, aligning with ministerial meetings and renewed diplomatic messaging linked to the alliance.

The most dramatic surge in posting occurred in mid- and late-September, following the AES's September 22 withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC). AES-tagged posts spiked sharply, twice reaching nearly an average of 50 posts per day. Posts featured AES leaders asserting “sovereign jurisdiction” and “Sahelian self-determination,” and affiliated commentary framing the bloc as a rising geopolitical actor that would soon have its own international criminal court. AES-aligned narratives intensify following major political announcements, coinciding closely with official messaging. While this temporal alignment may reflect organic public reaction to news events, the consistency and framing of these narratives indicate that they function to amplify and normalize state discourse during key political moments.

Month	Facebook Posts	Reddit Posts	TikTok Posts	Web Articles	X Posts	Grand Total
JUL	1,140,370	10	5,196,600	200,890	83,880	6,621,750
AUG	829,230	-	9,163,710	19,710	67,110	10,079,760
SEP	2,888,060	130	3,834,150	80,070	160,970	6,963,380
3-Month Total	4,857,660	140	18,194,460	300,670	312,960	24,978,890

**Figure 2: Monthly AES engagements by platform**

This visualization reveals how platform-specific audiences amplify AES messaging. TikTok dominates in raw interactions, exceeding 9 million engagements in August alone, reflecting the role of short-form, emotional storytelling in creating a sense of youth-driven revolutionary enthusiasm. This format achieves higher reach with fewer posts, whereas the Facebook and web articles only get more reach in September alongside the surge in institutional messaging around the ICC withdrawal and Sahel sovereignty. The cross-platform pattern suggests that AES discourse is not confined to a single demographic, but circulates across youth spaces (TikTok), political commentary hubs (Facebook), and formal news ecosystems (web articles) to increase its resonance and legitimacy.





#### Figure 4: Flow Mapping of AES Narratives

Figure 4 above presents a network visualisation of the AES/Sovereignty narrative ecosystem, constructed from the domain-tag relationships extracted from the July–September dataset. At the centre of the Gephi graph sits the “AES/Sovereignty” node, surrounded by more than 100 interconnected domains that repeatedly publish or amplify content framing the AES as a legitimate political entity, a “confederation”, or an emerging regional power structure. The star-shaped structure of the network reveals a highly centralised narrative core, with AES/Sovereignty acting as the primary hub through which a shared storyline circulates. A particularly important feature of the network is the proximity of major social media platforms, Facebook, X, TikTok, and YouTube, to the AES/Sovereignty node in the Gephi layout. ***The proximity of these social media platforms to the centre compared with most individual web domains indicates that they serve as higher-frequency amplifiers of AES-related content. Their centrality reflects two dynamics observed in the data:***

- volume, as these platforms collectively account for more than half of all AES-tagged posts in the dataset (Facebook 30%, TikTok 30%, X 18%, YouTube 12%), and
- connectivity, because posts from these platforms connect simultaneously to multiple tags (e.g., sovereignty, confederation, transition, AES bloc), thereby increasing their gravitational pull to the centre in the network layout.

Figure 4 shows visually that social platforms act as the primary distribution highways for AES legitimacy-building narratives, while the numerous smaller domains around the perimeter function more as originators or repeaters.

Taken together, the temporal patterns, platform distribution, and network structure illustrate how the AES is discursively constructed as a coherent and authoritative political bloc despite the fragility of its formal institutions. Through sustained cross-platform amplification and centralized narrative framing, the alliance acquires the appearance of consensus, permanence, and popular legitimacy. Having established how the AES is symbolically produced and normalized as a regional political project, the following sections examine the specific narrative themes, sovereignty, popular support, and opposition to ECOWAS and Western influence, through which military populism is articulated and sustained.

### 1. Claims to international recognition and institutionalisation

Across the 927 AES-tagged posts collected between July and September 2025, one of the clearest and most consistent narrative patterns is the strategic construction of the AES as a recognized and legitimate regional political entity. Although the alliance is still in its formative legal phase, the large proportion (31%) of posts with tags related to “AES” and “Sovereignty” show a deliberate effort to portray it as a fully constituted confederation with international standing.

This narrative presents the AES as a political entity with an established voice and the capacity and legitimacy to represent its people on the international stage. Repeated use of assertive institutional labels, such as ‘confederation’, ‘confederal space’, ‘Sahelian entity’ and ‘speaking on behalf of the bloc’ aims to present the alliance of these three military regimes as a legitimate regional organisation that must be recognized. These posts do not see the AES as a temporary response to a regional crisis, but a sustainable structure designed to last.

This is the logic behind a 30 June post applauding the “International Recognition of the AES,” which describes a representative speaking “on behalf of the Confederation of Sahel States” at the 4th International Conference on Financing for Development in Seville, in the presence of heads of state, the UN Secretary-General, and officials from multilateral financial institutions. Such an impressive event would only invite legitimate institutions, according to this framing, and so the AES must therefore be legitimate.

The bloc's institutionalization, at least in writing, is demonstrated by references to new regional institutions designed to embody the sovereignty of the alliance. The announcement of the establishment of an Investment and Development Bank on 23 May 2025, followed by the creation of a Sahelian Criminal and Human Rights Court (CPS-DH) on 30 May 2025, broadened the bloc's institutional landscape and endowed it with the semblance of a fully articulated political architecture. But this institutional promise comes at a politically charged moment. Although the AES Court was formally announced in May 2025, references to its establishment resurfaced prominently in online discourse during the July–September monitoring period, coinciding with the lead-up to, and eventual withdrawal of the three AES states from the Rome Statute of the ICC on 22 September 2025. In the publications analysed, this renewed attention rarely interrogates the implications of this sequencing. Instead, the Court is discursively mobilised as evidence of “regained sovereignty,” implicitly presented as a functional substitute for international judicial oversight.

From a more detached perspective, however, this narrative framing risks obscuring a different interpretation: that the reactivation of the Court narrative serves to normalise the exit from a binding international justice mechanism while replacing it with a not-yet-established regional institution whose effectiveness and independence remain untested.

## **2. Popular support for the revolutionary ideal**

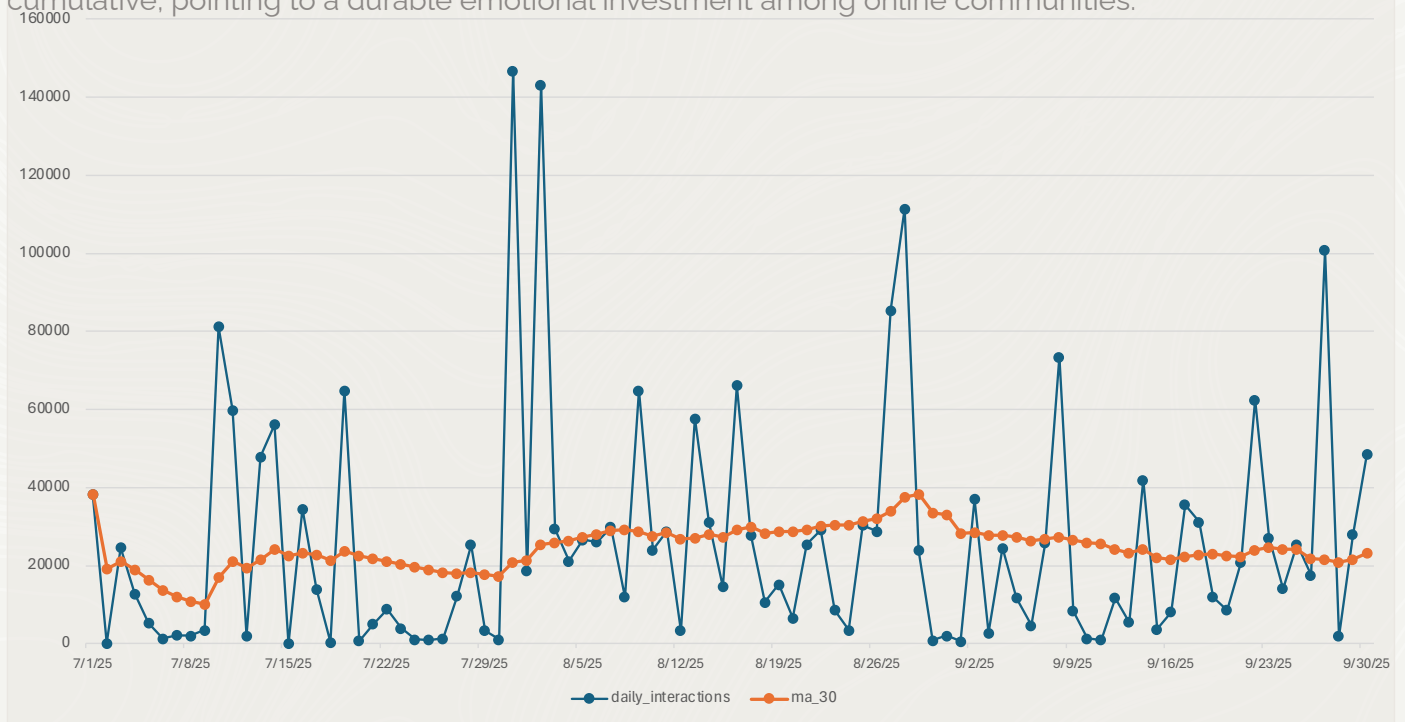
A second, equally important sub-narrative presents the AES as the result of popular movement or an expression of the popular will. This movement manifests itself both in civil solidarity and in support for the fight against terrorism through participation in, particularly via donations to, the Patriotic Support Fund (FSP). The alliance is presented not just as an inter-state administrative mechanism, but as the embodiment of a set of collective emotions. The discourse creates the idea of a united Sahelian people that consents to a collective, AES-driven struggle. The people's cohesion is manifested through concrete gestures, often modest but imbued with strong symbolic meaning. This diffuse mobilisation allows the AES to project itself beyond a military base to a public ideology rooted in regained dignity and shared resistance to domination. It also enables the AES to demonstrate that while it may not have the formal consent of the governed through elections, it has wide grassroots support that it can prove through an aggregation of gestures demonstrating cohesion, solidarity, and courage.

Engagement data reinforce this narrative logic. As shown earlier in Figure 2 (Monthly AES engagements by platform), AES-related content achieves its greatest resonance on platforms that privilege emotional storytelling and symbolic performance, particularly TikTok. This platform ecology creates favourable conditions for the circulation of gestures that can be framed as proof of popular endorsement rather than elite orchestration.

The data provide several illustrations of this dynamic. One of the most emblematic posts, with over 3,500

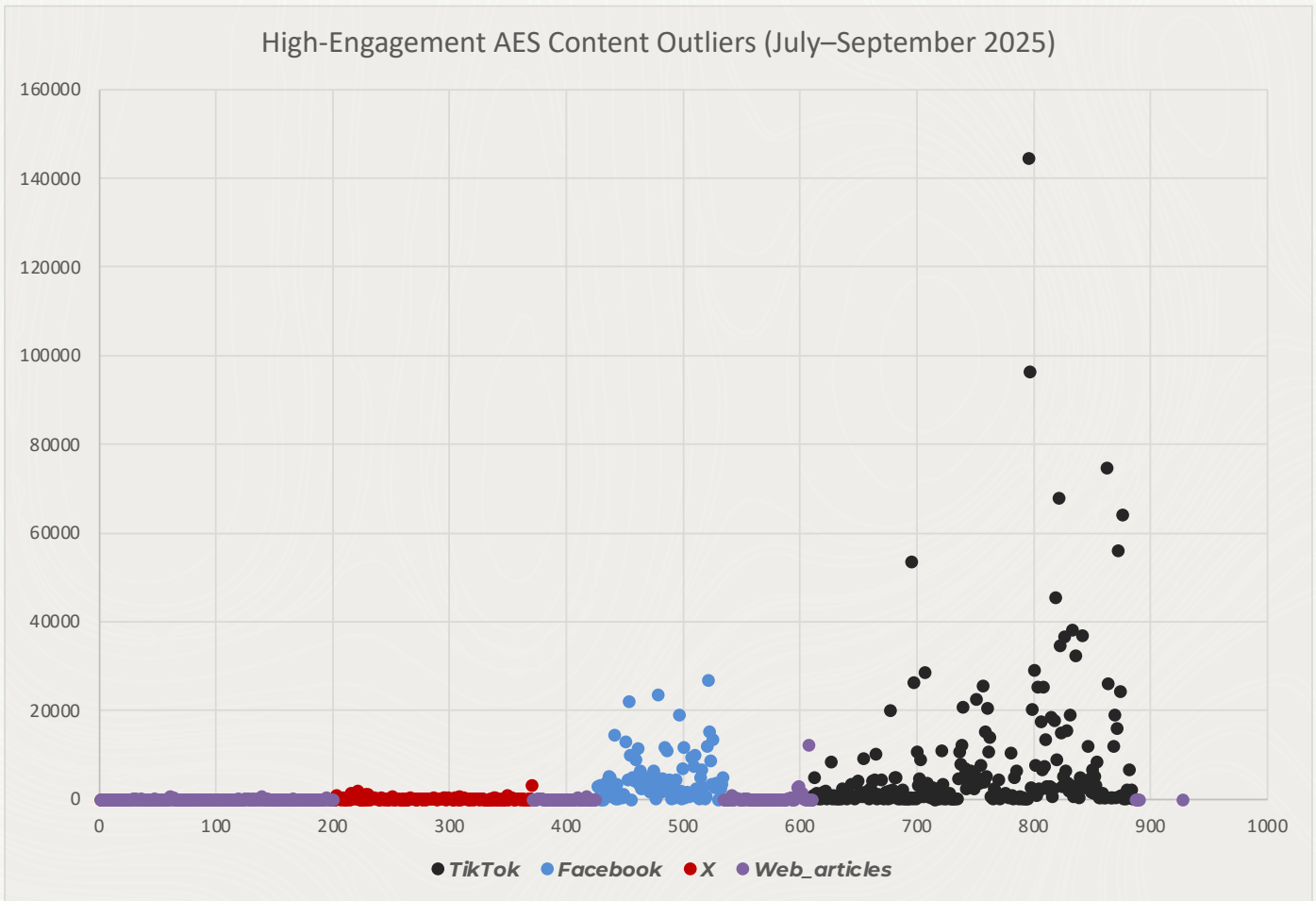
interactions and 160 shares, recounts the donation of two tonnes of cement by a young Malian “on behalf of the AES” to support a construction project in Burkina Faso. The gesture is elevated to the rank of a founding act and described as a “fraternal and historic gesture.” It is presented as proof that “the peoples of the Sahel share the same aspiration for restored dignity.” Through the narrative, this donation becomes an expression of collective commitment to the struggle for stability and development.

This affective logic is further reflected in interaction dynamics over time. As shown in Figure 5 (Daily AES interactions), engagement with AES-related content is highly responsive to symbolic and political moments. Peaks align with speeches by AES leaders, major security announcements, and highly visible demonstrations of unity. The most significant surges, exceeding 1.4 million interactions per day, occurred around the ICC withdrawal announcement on 22 September and during military demonstrations in Mali and Burkina Faso. The rising 30-day moving average suggests that AES popularity is not episodic but cumulative, pointing to a durable emotional investment among online communities.



**Figure 5: Average Daily AES interactions across all platforms (July–September)**

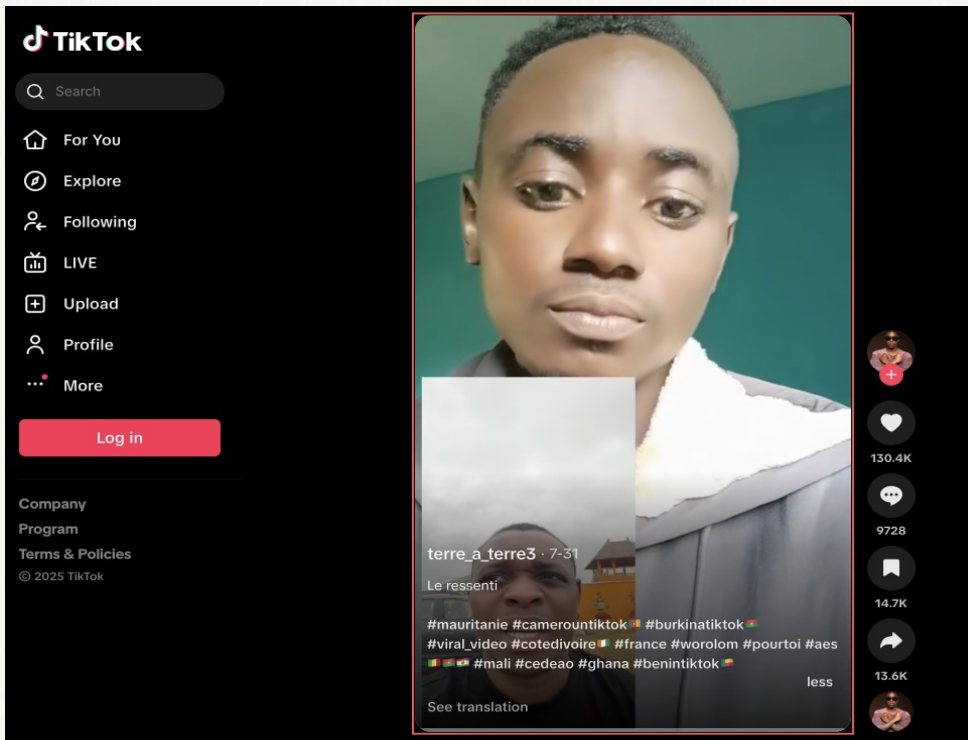
The interaction timeline shows that public engagement with AES-related content was highly volatile and reactive to key political and symbolic developments throughout the monitoring period. The most significant surges occurred in late July and early August, when daily interactions peaked at over 140,000, suggesting intense audience response to major speeches, military developments, or viral symbolic content circulating across platforms. Additional spikes are visible in late August and late September, aligning with moments of renewed political messaging, military demonstrations, and sovereignty-related announcements, including the AES states’ withdrawal from the International Criminal Court (ICC) on 22 September 2025. The 30-day moving average smooths this volatility and reveals a gradual consolidation of engagement at higher levels from early August onward, indicating that AES visibility online was sustained over time rather than being driven solely by isolated events.



**Figure 6: Scatter of AES posts vs. interaction volume**

While many AES-related posts generate moderate engagement, the scatterplot shows a cluster of outlier posts that reach virality regardless of their publication date or platform. These outliers, primarily TikTok videos and Facebook posts featuring symbolic gestures (donations, patriotic acts, military displays), drive disproportionate public sentiment formation. The pattern confirms that AES popularity hinges not on volume of messaging but on emotionally charged symbolic episodes, which act as accelerants for collective identity formation. These high-impact posts reinforce the portrayal of AES as a mass movement rather than an elite-driven political project.

Beyond circulation within AES member states, the dataset also reveals a broader pattern of cross-border narrative alignment in the broader West Africa region, in which grievances from outside the Sahel are linked to AES discourse. In these cases, the AES label functions less as a geographic reference and more as a shorthand for a shared political ideology, opposition to perceived neo-colonial control, rejection of political elites, and demands for popular sovereignty. This dynamic extends AES narratives beyond their original national contexts and into a wider regional and diasporic space.



A particularly revealing example of this cross-border mobilisation dynamic comes from one of the dataset's most viral [TikTok videos](#)<sup>2</sup>, which accumulated more than 130,000 likes, 9,700 comments, and 13,000 shares, making it one of the highest interaction outliers in the entire July–September period (see Figure 6: Outlier Scatter Plot). Although the video primarily addresses domestic tensions in Côte d'Ivoire, its hashtag cluster, #AES, #Mali, #BurkinaTiktok, #CamerounTiktok,

#Mauritanie, #CEDEAO, #Ghana, #France, shows how content creators deliberately anchor local grievances within a regional narrative space. In the video, a young Ivoirian activist delivers an impassioned denunciation of political elites, repeating that Ivoirian president “Ado is cursed” and insisting that “people must wake up” and that citizens “don't go out to break things, but to reclaim their liberty.” By attaching the #AES label, the content creator signals that Côte d'Ivoire's frustrations are part of the same broader struggle for dignity, sovereignty, and resistance that AES supporters promote across the Sahel. The hashtag does not imply that the content is about the AES bloc; rather, it reframes the Ivoirian context as another manifestation of the same revolutionary sentiment. This rhetorical move blurs national boundaries and contributes to what the data shows as a transnational affective community: a collective of online audiences who see their struggles reflected in one another.

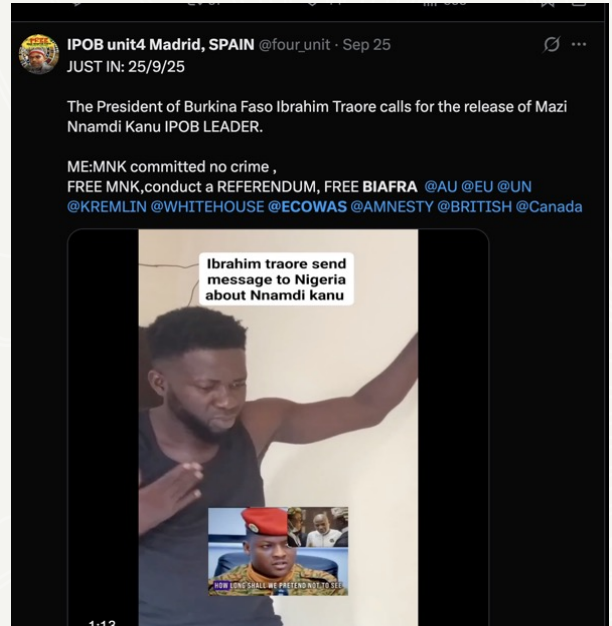
This helps explain the substantial interaction spikes observed on the AES timeline (Figure 5: Daily Interactions), where the most dramatic surges are driven not by official AES statements but by emotionally charged TikTok content from across Francophone West Africa. Similarly, platform distribution data (Figure 2: Monthly Interactions by Platform) confirms that TikTok acts as the primary amplifier of this “people versus elites” discourse. The hashtagging of the Ivoirian video with #AES exemplifies how the AES narrative has evolved beyond the confines of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, becoming a symbolic container for regional anger, civic frustration, and aspirations for sovereignty.

The effectiveness of these narratives cannot be denied. A survey conducted by Sagaci Research via the SagaPoll panel and published by Jeune Afrique, covering the period from 16 to 31 July 2025, indicates that 77% of respondents in six French-speaking countries view the AES favourably.

2 [https://www.tiktok.com/@terre\\_a\\_terre3/video/7533297314081803528](https://www.tiktok.com/@terre_a_terre3/video/7533297314081803528)

AES's popularity in Nigeria is demonstrated by the separatist Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)<sup>3</sup> using the AES hashtag and asserting association with the bloc to boost its own popularity. For example, in September IPOB shared artificial content showing Toure's support for a Biafran leader, as shown on the right.<sup>4</sup>

This demonstrated real-world popularity indicates that in the battle for public opinion, the AES bloc is winning over counter-narratives that emphasize it as undemocratic, illegitimate, and ineffective. The popularity of the AES bloc extends beyond its immediate borders and gives it a unique status in the West African public sphere, suggesting that the public views it as a viable regional alternative.



3 Biafra War Room. <https://x.com/USBiafraFirst/status/1948071846848426212?s=20>.

4 IPOB unit4 Madrid, SPAIN (2025). [https://x.com/four\\_unit/status/1971131096336384239?s=20](https://x.com/four_unit/status/1971131096336384239?s=20)

# Anti-ECOWAS Narratives



## Anti-ECOWAS Narratives

The resurgence of coups across West Africa and the Sahel since 2020 has exposed deep fractures in regional governance and weakened the authority of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Once hailed as a stabilising force and defender of democratic order, ECOWAS now finds itself at the centre of public discontent and online backlash. Digital conversations monitored between July and October 2025 reveal that ECOWAS-related discourse constitutes one of the most sustained critical narrative clusters in the dataset.

Across the monitoring period, more than 2,255 ECOWAS-related posts were identified across news websites, social media platforms, blogs, and messaging channels. Rather than isolated criticism tied to singular events, the data points to a persistent narrative ecosystem portraying ECOWAS as externally influenced, selectively democratic, and misaligned with the popular sovereignty in the region. We also found that the attacks intensified with strategic timing. Each time ECOWAS imposed sanctions or condemned military takeovers in Niger, Mali, or Burkina Faso, a fresh wave of criticism emerged. The messaging from anti-ECOWAS actors was consistent: ECOWAS doesn't serve African interests; it serves Western ones. These weren't spontaneous outbursts of frustration. The coordination, the timing, and the repeated talking points all pointed to something more deliberate than organic discontent.

The dominant framing casts ECOWAS not as a neutral regional body, but as an instrument of Western (particularly French) interests; it is repeatedly described as "the political arm of Paris." This framing collapses anti-ECOWAS, anti-French, and anti-democracy discourse into a single narrative stream and presents ECOWAS sanctions against military juntas as neo-colonial punishment rather than enforcement of agreed regional norms.

## Description of the Observed Trend

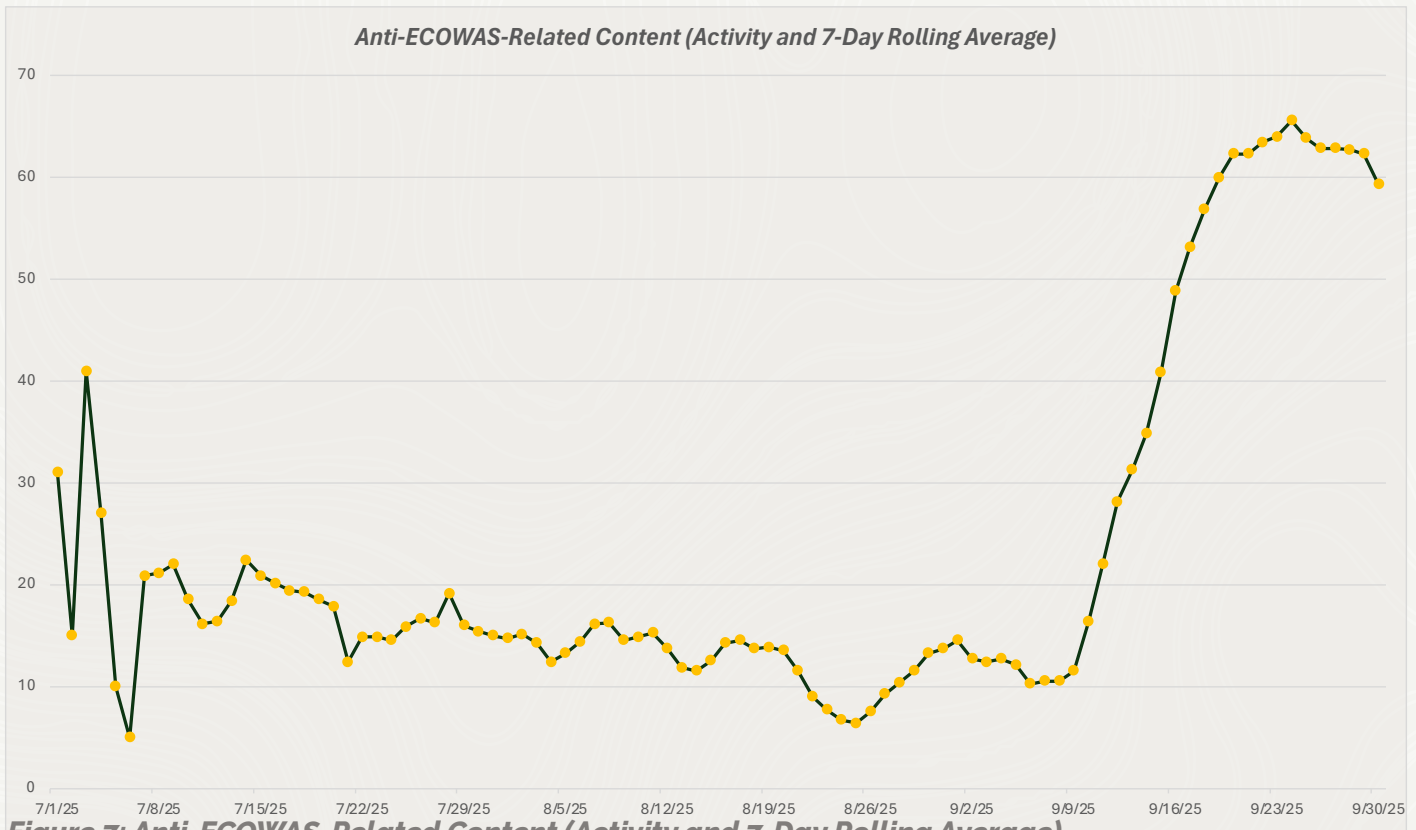
Digital discourse between July and September 2025 shows a sustained and increasingly coordinated effort to delegitimize ECOWAS as a regional institution and to undermine its role as a defender of democratic norms in West Africa. Rather than episodic criticism tied to isolated political events, the data reveals a persistent narrative ecosystem portraying ECOWAS as externally controlled, selectively democratic, and fundamentally hostile to African sovereignty.

Anti-ECOWAS discourse intensifies in direct response to ECOWAS actions, especially public condemnations of coups, sanctions announcements, and mediation efforts in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. This reactive pattern indicates that the online backlash is event-driven and strategically mobilised, rather than the product of background political dissatisfaction alone.

Figure 7 (ECOWAS-Related Content: Daily Activity and 7-Day Rolling Average) visualizes the temporal structure of this discourse. Throughout July and August, ECOWAS-related activity remains relatively moderate, with daily engagement fluctuating within a stable range. However, from early September onward, the rolling average shows a sharp and sustained upward trajectory, indicating a structural shift rather than isolated spikes.

The most pronounced increase aligns with renewed ECOWAS diplomatic activity, including public

condemnations of military authorities, sanctions-related discussions, and mediation efforts in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. During this period, daily activity rises sharply, with peak levels exceeding 60–70 posts per day. While such surges may partly reflect heightened public attention to political developments, the consistency of framing and repetition of core talking points suggest that ECOWAS actions function as focal points around which critical narratives intensify and coalesce.



**Figure 7: Anti-ECOWAS-Related Content (Activity and 7-Day Rolling Average)**

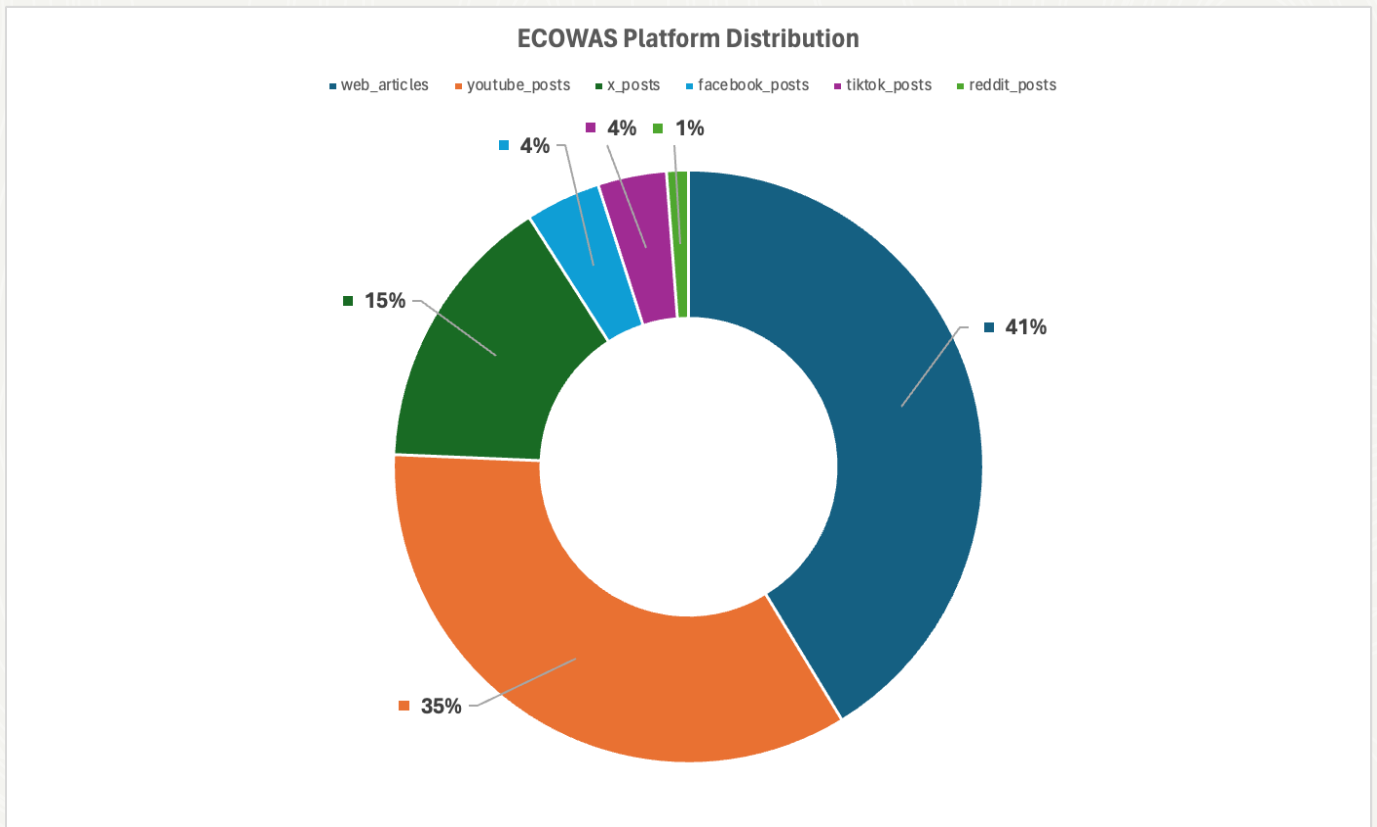
The 7-day rolling average indicates that engagement with ECOWAS-related content generally declined across most of the observation period before rising sharply toward the end. While this late surge signals a renewed spike in activity, the available data window is insufficient to determine whether this increase represents a sustained shift or a short-term escalation within the regional information environment.

**Volume and Reach**

Across the monitoring period, 2,255 ECOWAS-related posts were identified across news websites, social media platforms, blogs, and messaging channels. This represents one of the largest single thematic clusters with web articles pulling more information followed by YouTube, the lowest being reddit, underscoring the centrality of ECOWAS as a target of regional information manipulation.

The scale is significant not only in raw volume but also in platform diversity, allowing the narrative to circulate simultaneously through formal media, influencer ecosystems, and user-generated content.

**Figure 8: Anti-ECOWAS Narrative by Platform Distribution**



This chart shows how the anti-ECOWAS narrative is structurally distributed:

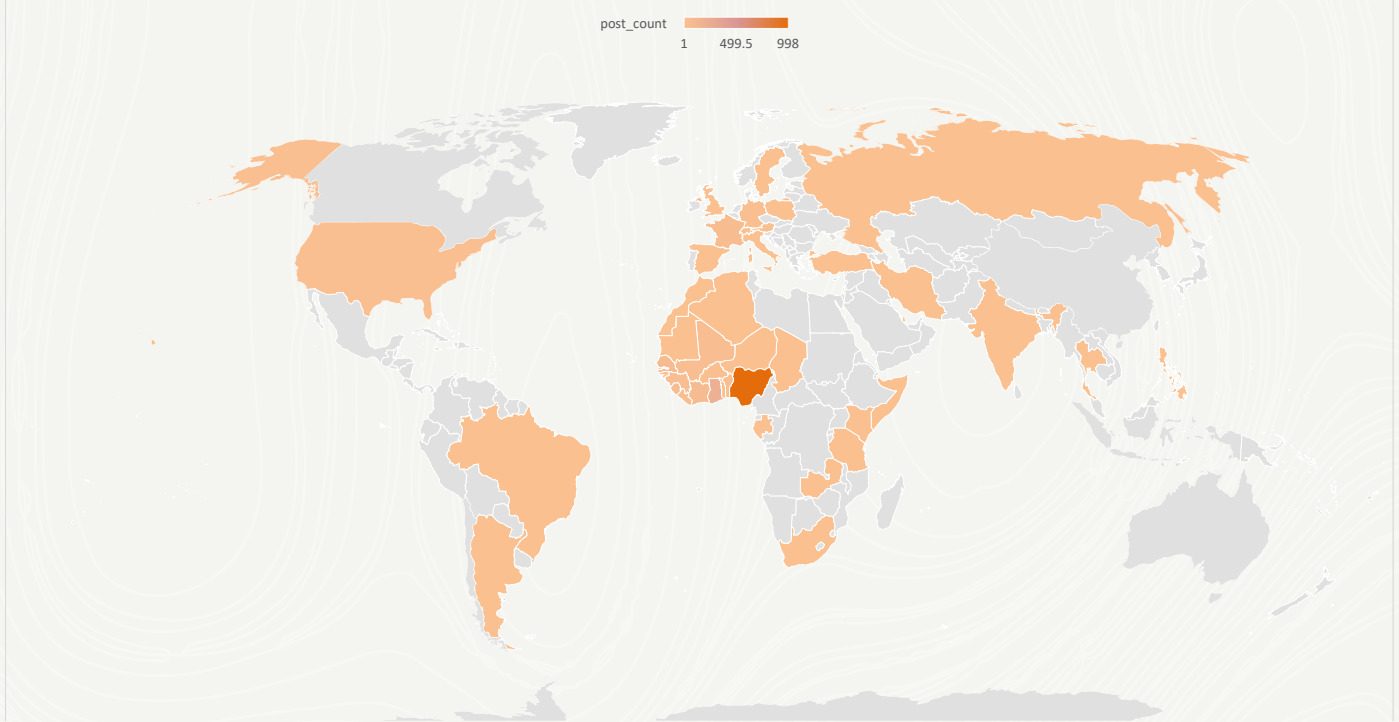
- **Web articles (41%)** form the backbone of the campaign, providing long-form legitimacy and a veneer of journalistic authority.
- **YouTube (35%)** plays a major amplification role, translating political critique into emotive video commentary and talk-show formats.
- **X (15%)** functions as a rapid-reaction layer, pushing slogans, accusations, and framing during key political moments.
- **Facebook, TikTok, and Reddit (collectively under 10%)** act as secondary redistribution channels, extending reach into community and diaspora networks.

This distribution mirrors patterns seen in coordinated influence campaigns: credibility is built through articles, emotional resonance through video, and velocity through social media.

### Geographic Concentration

While ECOWAS is a West African institution, the discourse attacking it is not geographically confined to its member states. Instead, the narrative circulates through a transnational media ecosystem, with content originating from, and being reposted across, multiple regions.

Chart Geographic Distribution of Anti-ECOWAS-Tagged Posts (July–September 2025) Title



The map shows a clear Sahelian epicentre, with the highest concentration of ECOWAS-critical content originating from Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali.

Besides Nigeria, these are countries where military juntas face sanctions or diplomatic isolation from ECOWAS, reinforcing the link between political pressure and narrative mobilisation.

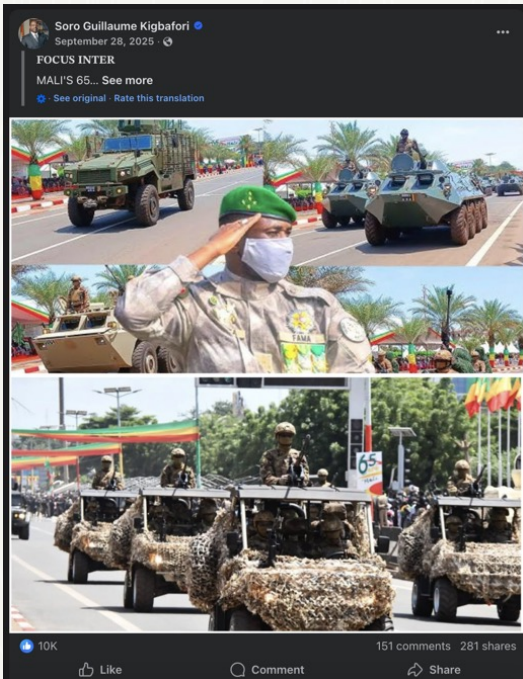
Outside of Africa, activity appears in France and Western Europe, often via diaspora-linked platforms and alternative media; Russia, aligning with broader geopolitical messaging that seeks to weaken regional democratic institutions; and North America, particularly through social media reposts and commentary. This geographic spread demonstrates that anti-ECOWAS narratives are not confined to domestic audiences, but are actively circulating within a global information space.

### **ECOWAS as an “External Actor”, Not a Regional Institution**

A recurring and high-intensity narrative frame across the dataset depicts ECOWAS not as a West African regional institution, but as an external enforcement mechanism acting on behalf of Western powers, particularly France. Within this framing, ECOWAS is portrayed less as a mediator or guarantor of regional norms and more as an instrument through which foreign geopolitical interests are imposed on African states, especially during moments of political crisis. This narrative strips the organisation of African political agency and reframes its interventions as externally motivated rather than collectively mandated.

This framing is most consistently articulated in African-origin, high-engagement long-form content circulating on Facebook pages and regional commentary platforms. Across these spaces, ECOWAS is explicitly linked to colonial and neo-colonial power structures and accused of selective enforcement of democratic norms. Sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and mediation efforts targeting Sahelian military authorities are reframed as manifestations of foreign influence, while similar governance crises elsewhere in the region are portrayed as receiving more restrained or inconsistent responses.

A particularly illustrative example of this narrative appears in the image below, showing a widely circulated



Facebook post published on 28 September 2025<sup>5</sup>, at the height of the ECOWAS/ICC-related engagement peak. The post, which generated more than 10,000 interactions, situates Mali's military transition within a broader sovereignist struggle and explicitly attributes the derailment of earlier political processes to French neo-colonial interference exercised through ECOWAS. In this framing, ECOWAS is not merely criticised for its policy choices, but is recast as a conduit through which external powers exert control over regional political outcomes. The organisation is depicted as lacking autonomous decision-making capacity and functioning instead as an intermediary for foreign interests under the guise of regional governance.

The timing of this content is analytically significant. Its publication coincides with a period of heightened attention to ECOWAS following the AES's withdrawal from the International Criminal Court, a moment when questions of sovereignty, external jurisdiction, and regional legitimacy were especially salient in online discourse. Rather than emerging in isolation, the post aligns with a broader surge in ECOWAS-critical narratives during this period, reinforcing the interpretation that major institutional developments act as focal points around which the "external actor" framing intensifies.

Notably, this narrative is not evenly distributed across platforms. It is most prevalent in spaces conducive to extended political argumentation, particularly Facebook and blog-style content, where historical references to *Françafrique*, neo-colonial dependency, and foreign interference can be developed at length. By contrast, mainstream video platforms show limited substantive engagement with this framing, with ECOWAS often appearing only as a hashtag or passing reference. This uneven distribution suggests that the portrayal of ECOWAS as an external or neo-colonial actor functions as a concentrated ideological frame, rather than as a diffuse mass sentiment.

Content originating outside the African continent, including diaspora-linked or international accounts, does contribute to the visibility of this discourse within global information spaces. However, such material largely operates as an amplification layer rather than as a primary source of narrative production. The core articulation and sustained circulation of the "ECOWAS as external actor" narrative remain anchored in African-facing platforms with demonstrable regional engagement.

Taken together, these patterns indicate that casting ECOWAS as a foreign-aligned institution is a strategic narrative choice within the broader ecosystem of military populism. By delegitimising regional governance structures and reframing institutional enforcement as external domination, this discourse reinterprets military takeovers as acts of sovereign self-assertion rather than unconstitutional seizures of power, thereby weakening the normative authority of regional democratic mechanisms.

<sup>5</sup> <https://web.facebook.com/100044635170193/posts/1332043071626853/>

### The “Double Standard” Narrative: Selective Enforcement as a Structural Critique

One of the most persistent narratives identified in the dataset is the accusation that ECOWAS applies democratic norms selectively, acting punitively against military juntas while exercising restraint, silence, or procedural leniency toward civilian-led governments accused of constitutional manipulation and human rights abuses. This narrative is sustained over time and across platforms, countries, and languages, indicating a deeply entrenched perception rather than isolated discontent.

Across Facebook, TikTok, X, and (largely francophone) news websites, users and commenters frame ECOWAS as forceful in sanctioning, suspending, or threatening Sahelian states but cautious or passive in cases involving long-standing civilian incumbents. The double standard narrative appears at both elite and popular levels:

- **Civil society statements and long-form articles** accuse ECOWAS of legitimising authoritarian continuity by limiting its interventions to calls for “dialogue” and “restraint,” even in the face of documented repression, internet shutdowns, arbitrary detentions, and constitutional engineering.
- **Social media posts, particularly on Facebook and TikTok**, translate this critique into simplified moral contrasts, praising countries like Togo for refusing to apply ECOWAS sanctions against AES states, or condemning ECOWAS for ignoring abuses by leaders perceived as aligned with France or Western partners.
- **Political actors and opposition figures**, for example in Guinea, openly criticise ECOWAS observation missions as performative, describing them as symbolic “visits” that validate predetermined outcomes rather than enforce democratic standards.

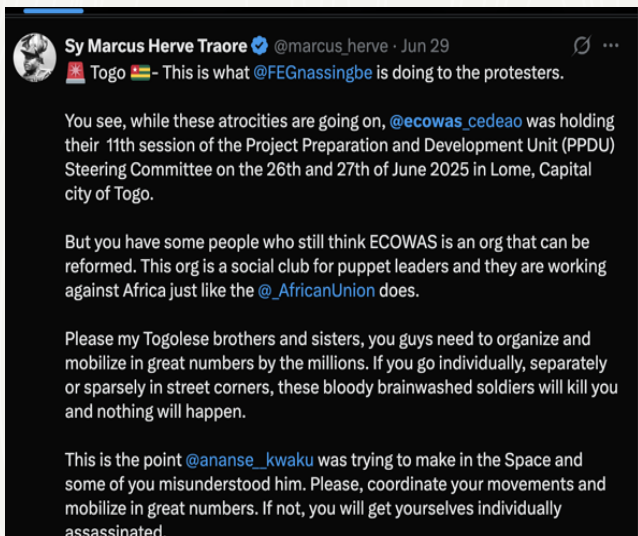


The double standard narrative functions as a delegitimisation mechanism: it reframes ECOWAS not as a neutral guardian of democratic order, but as a selective enforcer whose actions undermine its own protocols on democracy and good governance. The narrative challenges the credibility of ECOWAS's mandate to uphold member states' democracies by highlighting inconsistencies in its application. This provides ideological justification for alternative regional arrangements like the AES, since ECOWAS is normatively compromised rather than merely ineffective. This perception, repeatedly reinforced across digital spaces, contributes directly to declining public trust in regional governance and amplifies support for alternative

regional blocs.

The “double standard” critique was applied repeatedly during the period to multiple specific ECOWAS postures:

- In late June 2025, Togo made headlines when mass protests erupted in Lomé against constitutional reforms seen as extending President Faure Gnassingbé's tenure and concentrating power, and were

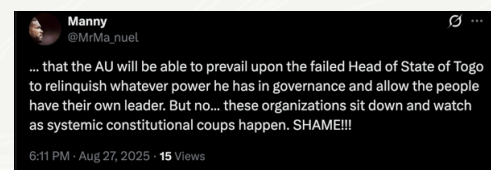
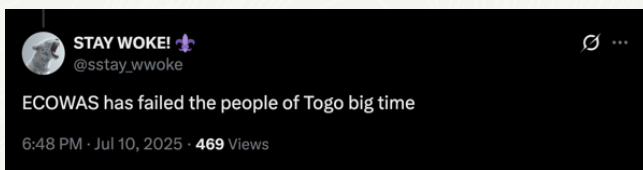


met with a violent security crackdown that left several protesters dead, a level of civil resistance that drew regional attention and scrutiny<sup>6</sup>. Passed by parliament in 2024 without a popular vote and over opposition boycotts, the reforms shifted Togo from a presidential to a parliamentary system<sup>7</sup>, creating a "President of the Council of Ministers" role that Gnassingbé could occupy indefinitely. The timing also violated ECOWAS's own Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, which bars major electoral law changes within six months of elections without broad consensus. The mass protests in June 2025 under hashtags like #FreeTogo and #FaureMustGo were met with brutal repression

by security services, which arrested dozens of activists, including children. This came in the context of long-term repression; internet shutdowns and protest bans have stifled dissent since 2018, and more than 100 activists are being detained without trial.

ECOWAS's response was to call for "restraint and dialogue" and offers of mediation, but no sanctions, observer missions, or enforcement mechanisms,<sup>8</sup> even though the ECOWAS Court of Justice has ruled against Togo over a dozen times since 2017 for torture and human rights abuses without any successful redress having been obtained for the victims.

In response to this apparent double standard, headlines such as "Situation in Togo : ECOWAS stays silent", "When ECOWAS walks on eggshells", and "ECOWAS in the hot seat<sup>9</sup>" recur across multiple outlets and reposts, signalling a consistent narrative arc: ECOWAS is portrayed as aware of democratic backsliding but unwilling to enforce its own rules when violations are carried out through legalistic or parliamentary mechanisms rather than overt military force.



ECOWAS's response to Togo contrasts starkly with its response in the Sahel, where it threatened and sanctioned military juntas for unconstitutional changes in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. Both situations

6 While this event occurred prior to the data collection period, the ensuing debates, controversies, and public discourse surrounding these protests and the constitutional reforms spilt into the study period, warranting its inclusion in this contextual analysis.

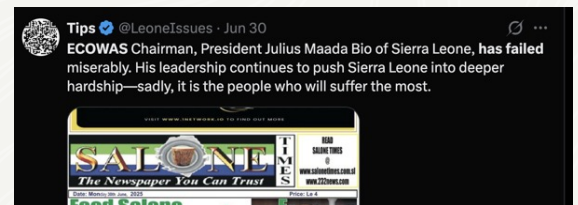
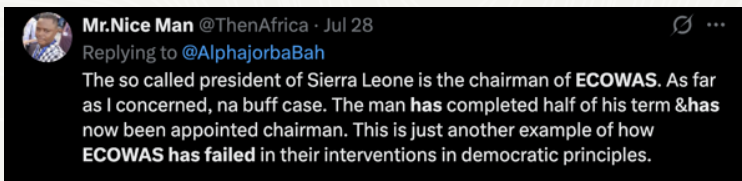
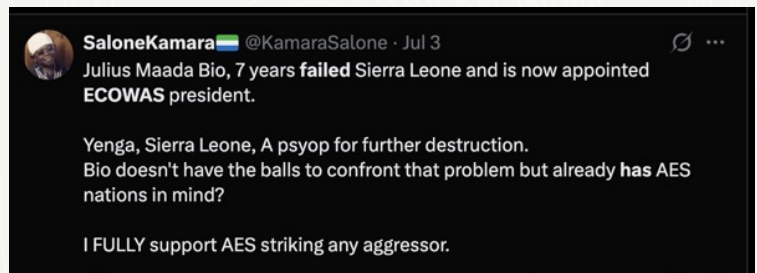
7 D. Spearman: Togo's Political Crisis: Understanding Constitutional Changes (2025). <https://www.africanelements.org/news/togos-political-crisis-understanding-constitutional-changes/>

8 Rédaction Africanews (2025): ECOWAS calls for restraint in violent protests in Togo. <https://www.africanews.com/2025/07/02/ecowas-calls-for-restraint-in-violent-protests-in-togo/>

9 'The term 'Hotseat' signifies enormous pressure being faced by ECOWAS

undermined democratic principles affirmed by regional protocols, but only one triggered real action.

- The rotating chairmanship of ECOWAS passed from Nigeria to Sierra Leone in June 2025,<sup>10</sup> kicking off a rhetorical response. President Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone inherited leadership of a regional bloc in its deepest crisis in decades: multiple coups have destabilised the region; Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have permanently exited the body; jihadist insurgencies rage across the Sahel; and accusations of irrelevance and Western bias dog the organisation. Bio's response has been to position himself as a champion of "constitutional order." However, posters through early July were quick to point out that Bio's own 2023 re-election victory was marred by widespread allegations of rigging, including ballot stuffing, voter intimidation, and statistical anomalies,<sup>11</sup> with the result rejected by opposition parties and civil society organisations.<sup>12</sup>
- A preliminary high-level ECOWAS election observation mission was deployed to Cote d'Ivoire in early July and called for peaceful elections. Posts framed ECOWAS as lenient toward civilian incumbents and decried the mission's failure to address the Ivorian president's decision to run for a fourth term in office and exclude his principal opposition.
- Similar to in Togo, the ECOWAS Court has ruled against Sierra Leone over a dozen times since 2017 for torture, arbitrary arrests, and human rights abuses under Bio's government,<sup>13</sup> without enforcement or consequences. Posts highlight the irony of a leader credibly accused of electoral fraud and systematic rights abuses now being tasked with upholding democracy across West Africa. They also point to an alleged poor economic track record at home and predict that Bio's management of the region will go similarly.



At the same time, posters denigrated the record of outgoing Nigerian President Bola Tinubu, claiming

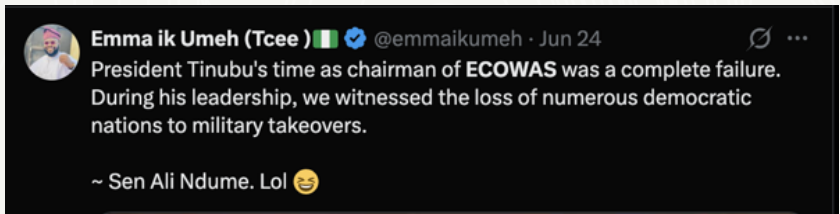
10 State House (2025). <https://statehouse.gov.sl/2025/06/24/sierra-leones-president-julius-maada-bio-assumes-ecowas-chairmanship-making-history-for-sierra-leone-2/>

11 S. Hayden. Sierra Leone elections: Julius Maada Bio re-elected with 56.17% of vote (2023). <https://www.irishtimes.com/world/africa/2023/06/27/sierra-leone-elections-julius-maada-bio-re-elected-with-5617-of-vote/>

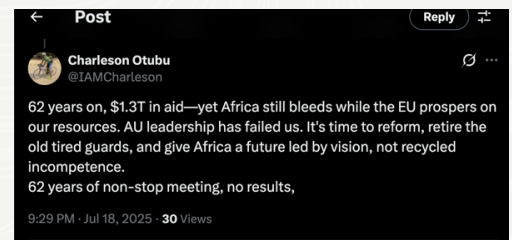
12 CNN (2025). <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/06/30/africa/sierra-leone-polls-controversy-intl/index.html>

13 B. Ayuk. ECOWAS Court Issues Important Judgment on Police Accountability in Sierra Leone (2024). <https://www.ihrda.org/2024/02/ecowas-court-issues-important-judgment-on-police-accountability-in-sierra-leone/>

he failed to maintain stability in the region,<sup>14</sup> and blaming him for the numerous coups and country departures from ECOWAS that happened under his watch.



- The Nigerian separatist group Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB)<sup>15</sup> regularly pushed narratives that delegitimised ECOWAS, along with the African Union and United Nations, and promoted the AES. The group sees these international bodies as preventing the legitimisation of Biafra, and the model presented by the AES as the model of how to subvert the institutional order.
- In Ghana, online discussion exploded in July at the news that a company owned by the Ghanaian president's brother<sup>16</sup> had won a \$130 million financing deal from the ECOWAS Bank for Investment and Development (EBID) for a project<sup>17</sup> mining 2 million ounces of gold reserves in the Volta region, despite that company's having lost a previous agreement to develop the mine as a result of non-compliance.<sup>18</sup> EBID signed the contract despite warnings that the deal was disputed and heading to arbitration. Online users framed the scandal as further evidence of their belief that ECOWAS serves elite interests and operates as a proxy for powerful politicians, rather than representing the interests of ordinary West Africans.



14 B. Miller (2025). ECOWAS Leadership Crisis: Legal and Political Implications of President Tinubu's Appointment.

<https://legalafrica.org/ecowas-leadership-crisis-legal-and-political-implications-of-president-tinubu-appointment/>

15 Biafra War Room. <https://x.com/USBiafraFirst/status/1948071846848426212?s=20>.

16 Africa Intelligence (2025). <https://www.africaintelligence.com/west-africa/2025/09/05/azumah-resources-and-ibrahim-mahama-s-battle-for-black-volta-gold-rumbles-on%2C110518182-art> The company Engineers & Planners (E&P) is owned by Ibrahim Mahama, brother of Ghana's President John Dramani Mahama.

17 John Dramani Mahama. B. Simons (2025). ECOWAS Bank jumps into big gold mine fight in Ghana. <https://www.myjoyonline.com/ecowas-bank-jumps-into-big-gold-mine-fight-in-ghana/>

18 K. Mensah (2025). <https://www.theafricareport.com/387860/ghana-inside-ibrahim-mahamas-ep-azumah-dispute-over-black-volta-gold-project/>

# **Anti-French Sentiment and Postcolonial Narratives**



### Anti-French Sentiment and Postcolonial Narratives

Analysis of the July–September 2025 dataset (30,558 total records) identifies 104 posts that contain explicit or coded anti-French sentiment. Although this represents just 0.3% of the total dataset, the anti-French narratives are strategically significant because they appear across all of the other thematic clusters (AES bloc support, anti-ECOWAS narratives, and pro-Russia narratives). This cross-thematic diffusion amplifies their resonance beyond their numerical volume.

Country-Level Distribution of Anti-French Narrative Content

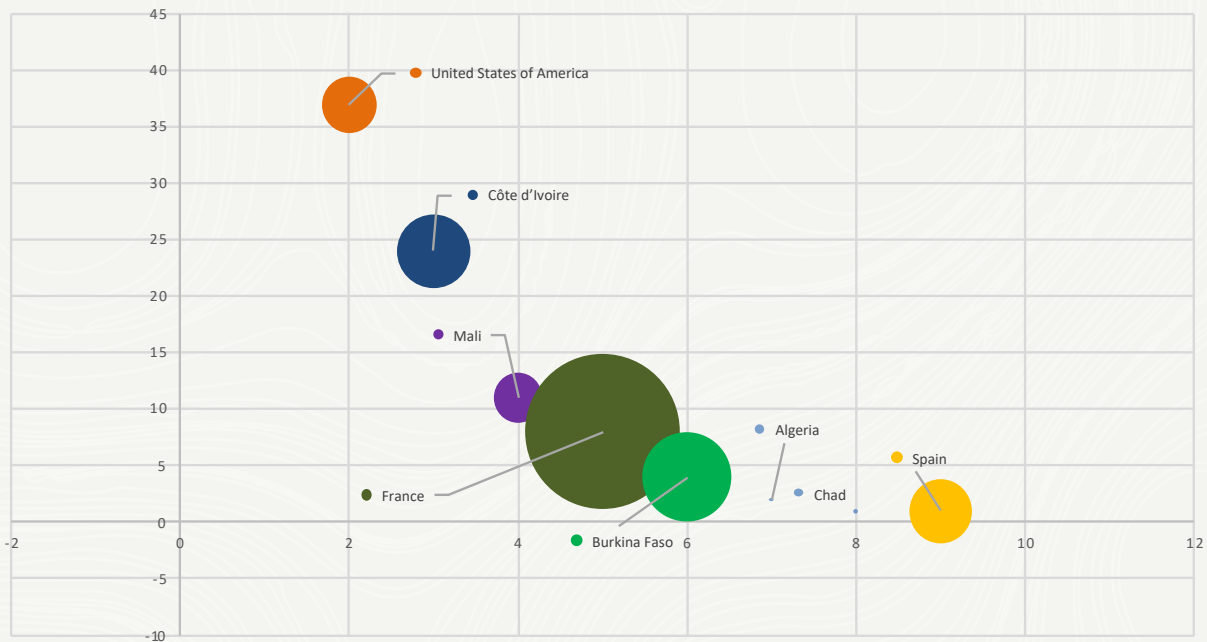


Figure 9: The data confirms the cross-country diffusion of anti-French narratives. The concentration of posts from the United States is misleading, however; the research tool (Newswhip) tags all international outlets such as Reuters, AP, Yahoo News, and France24's US-edition as "US" based on hosting or editorial location. These outlets primarily report on anti-French sentiment rather than originate it. When looking at genuine narrative sources, Côte d'Ivoire (24 posts) and Mali (11 posts) emerge as the leading producers of anti-French content, followed by Burkina Faso and Algeria. Cote d'Ivoire has a long history of anti-French sentiment; the other countries are led by military governments in the Sahel. The regional clustering demonstrates that anti-French discourse is not isolated to individual countries; instead, it circulates across borders and reinforces shared grievances around sovereignty, security, and postcolonial dependency.

Three dominant narratives emerge in the anti-French corpus: (1) the denunciation of a system of postcolonial domination assimilated to *Françafrique*, (2) mistrust of the French media, which are perceived as constructing a neocolonial narrative that fails to represent authentic African perspectives, and (3) France's destabilizing role in the region's security and geopolitics.

Across the dataset, these narrative pillars are underpinned by frequent use of keywords like "*Françafrique*" (a pejorative term for France's sphere of influence in Africa), "*néocolonial*," "*exploitation*," "*ingérence*" (*interference*) "*CFA*," "*France coloniale*," and "*tutelle*" (*administrative supervision*).

## 1. Françafrique and the political economy of dependence

Underlying the anti-French narrative is the idea that France is not only a former colonizer, but also a regime whose domination has continued over time, changing forms without ever abandoning its goal of exploiting Africa. Colonization, Françafrique, and contemporary policies are not seen as separate historical periods, but as different faces of the same system. This narrative presents the vulnerabilities of the Sahel – political crises, economic weaknesses, and institutional blockages – as the effects of a postcolonial order that France continues to architect.

Keywords related to neocolonialism and political and economic exploitation or dependency appear in 68% of the anti-French posts, forming the largest semantic cluster. Representative posts include statements such as:

- “Françafrique has remained a system of exploitation serving French rather than African interests.”
- “France continues to attack the monetary rights of Burkina Faso and the AES within ECOWAS.”

These narratives use economic grievances, notably CFA Franc control, energy exports (including uranium and oil), and natural resource concessions, to present France as a direct obstacle to sovereignty and development. Terms linked to economic exploitation appear 42 times across the 104 posts, making this the strongest framing device in the corpus.

The denunciation of Françafrique is coupled with criticism of the unbalanced economic model of the former French colonies, where France reaps the most benefit by exploiting the weakness of its African trading partners.

Posts claim, for example, that “Françafrique has remained a system of exploitation serving French rather than African interests,” and that the process of France granting African nations independence was a sham that did not allow for true economic independence, and therefore “has served to block the path to freedom for its former colonies”. Such narratives present an alternative history replete with deception and domination.

Other publications that overlap with the anti-ECOWAS narratives raise grievances against the monetary architecture embodied by the CFA franc, which is presented as proof of the reduced sovereignty of West African states.

Posts overlapping with the pro-AES narratives advance the story of AES leaders as the restorers of lost sovereignty, the principal defenders of national interests, and heroically capable of imposing the economic prosperity that France has prevented African nations from achieving. Publications claim that “oil revenues are skyrocketing under [Nigerien President] Tiani, tripling the figures from the French era” and that this growth is making it possible to “break with the patterns of dependence inherited from Françafrique.” While the “French era” brought stagnation and dispossession, they claim, the new AES era has allowed for a return to African control and new profits.

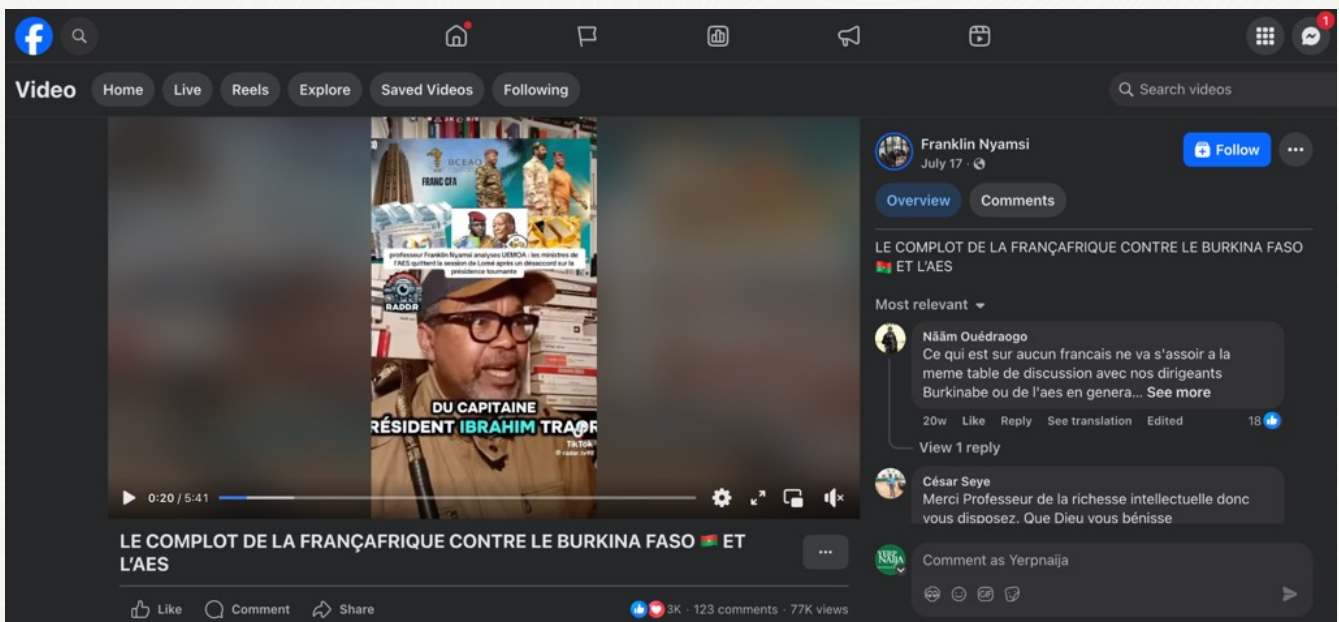
## 2. The French media as a symbolic infrastructure of domination

### Observed Trend

#### Observed Trend

*The data reveals a consistent trend in which criticism of French media is used as a proxy for contesting French geopolitical power, with French press outlets framed as agents of narrative domination whose reporting delegitimizes AES governments and reproduces postcolonial hierarchies.*

A significant share (more than a third) of “Anti-French” posts focus on the alleged bias of French media outlets, especially RFI, France 24, TV5Monde, and international wire services perceived as aligned with French narratives. These posts present media framing, Western journalism, or “biased reporting” as part of a broader architecture of domination. Such criticism of the French press is not peripheral, but rather sits at the ideological core of the anti-French narrative ecosystem.



A video posted in July (“[THE PLOT OF FRANÇAFRIQUE AGAINST BURKINA FASO AND THE AES](#)”) is one example of posters tying together a range of grievances (here, related to the Central Bank of West African States - BCEAO and the CFA franc) into a grand conspiracy orchestrated by France to undermine Burkina Faso and the wider AES bloc. The commentator accuses French media of a coverup of these facts and of engaging in information manipulation; these types of posts claim that France not only exploits the region materially but also distorts media narratives to delegitimize AES governments.

Another element of this theme is the claim that the French media have taken upon themselves the right to tell the truth about Africa, and to frame events there as successes or failures, to the detriment of Africans’ ability to tell their own story and evaluate their own events. This control of narrative production is presented as just as powerful as France’s military or monetary control. The French media are part of France’s infrastructure of power and their editorials, commentary, and reporting interpret the world and Africa in line with Paris’s (postcolonial) interests. This is summed up for example in the post entitled “THE PERFIDY OF THE FRENCH PRESS: A TOOL OF NEOCOLONIAL DOMINATION IN AFRICA.” This post argues that the French media are working to “discredit the sovereign choices of the Malian people.”

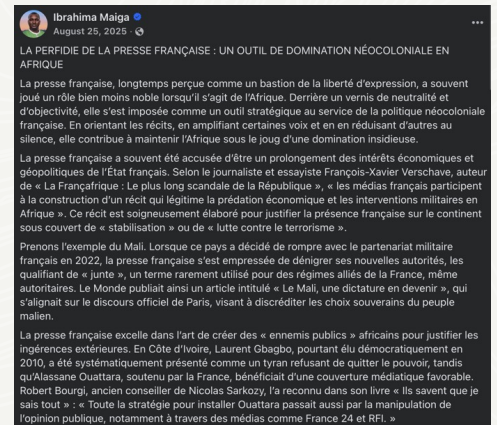
Another example from X in September accuses journalists from France 24 and RFI of intentionally “seeing

and ignoring" reality. The post states that "the false narrative of the mainstream media in Françafrique... was put in peril" by "the show of strength of the Malian armed forces."



It is not so much the factual accuracy of French reporting that is called into question within anti-French discourse as its framing and interpretive authority. Across the dataset, high-engagement posts explicitly criticize French and France-linked media outlets, particularly RFI and France 24, for their use of delegitimizing labels such as "junta," "coup," or "adventurism," and for prioritizing narratives that emphasize instability or irrationality over sovereignty claims or popular support.

For example, one widely shared post denounces "the perfidy of the French press " as "a propaganda tool against the African peoples," while another



accuses RFI of systematically portraying Sahelian authorities as "aventuriers" while ignoring public backing. In this framing, French media is depicted less as a neutral source of information than as a symbolic infrastructure of domination, capable of imposing interpretive hierarchies that place France on the side of rationality and modernity while casting Sahelian actors as irrational, illegitimate, or archaic. These accusations recur across platforms and function to delegitimize external criticism while reinforcing postcolonial narratives of epistemic control.

This power to shape public narratives justified the suspensions of major French media outlets in the three AES countries in recent years. In Mali, the authorities presented the shutdown of RFI and France 24 in March 2022 as a response to "disinformation" about military operations. In Burkina Faso, the ban on France 24 in March 2023 followed that station's decision to report on an interview with the head of AQIM, which the authorities felt legitimized a public enemy. In Niger, their suspension after the July 2023 coup was made without any public justification, but was likely done to allow the new regime to control the story of the coup. These suspensions were decried by human rights defence organizations as attacks on press freedom and the public's freedom to information, but in the pro-AES narrative, these decisions are not acts of censorship but gestures of informational sovereignty aimed at breaking with a monopoly over presenting the news deemed detrimental to the legitimacy of the transitions. Posts argue that France shapes global understanding of African politics by controlling how events are framed, labelled, and disseminated.

During the monitoring period, anti-France posts welcomed the further empowerment of the state to present its own story through the creation of an AES regional Web TV channel intended to "counter orchestrated disinformation campaigns" against the three states. An August 22-23 workshop in Bamako to prepare the initiative was followed in September 2025 by the launch of the online media outlet

Nouvelles Afrique, promoted by Burkinabe cyberactivist Ibrahima Maïga. Presented as a “100% African” media outlet intended to “restore the legitimacy of the African voice,” it is explicitly part of an information space designed to rival the content produced by the major international media. Although Nouvelles Afrique is not formally an organ of the AES, its editorial line, “Africa speaking for itself,” aligns closely with the sovereigntist narratives promoted by military regimes.

The common idea underpinning these examples is that the political battle is being fought not only in institutions or on the military front, but also over control of the narrative. By challenging the legitimacy of the French media while building their own storytelling tools, the AES states are attempting to exercise their sovereignty over the interpretation of events in the region.

### 3. France as a factor of security destabilization: reversing the narrative of protection

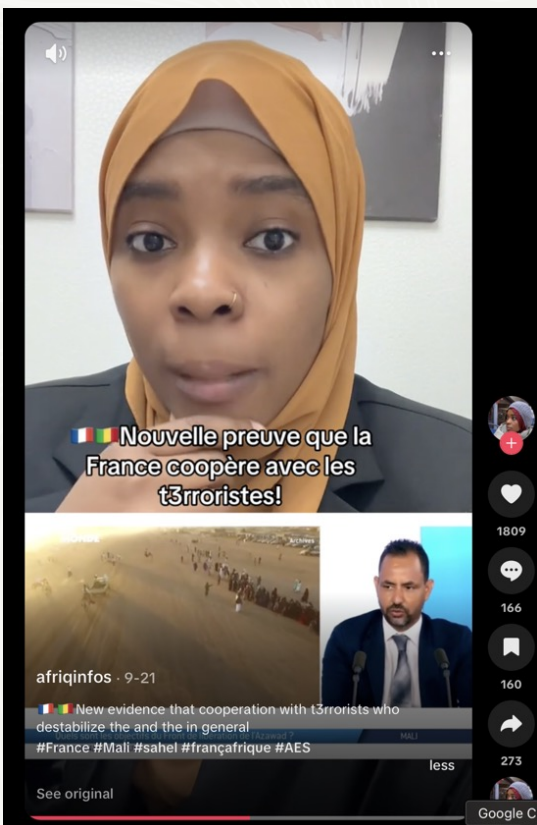
#### Observed Trend

*Within posts tagged Anti-French, the single most aggressive and sensationalist cluster concerns security destabilization. These posts, many from TikTok, Facebook videos, and commentary accounts, claim that France supports, manipulates, or protects terrorist groups in the Sahel.*

The final observed anti-France trend across the July-September dataset is the reframing of France not as a security partner, but as an active contributor to instability in the Sahel. While France officially presents its interventions (e.g. Serval, Barkhane, Takuba) as operations initiated at the request of African states to counter terrorism, the monitored discourse takes the opposite view. It depicts France as fuelling insecurity in order to maintain political leverage, justify military deployment, feed its defence contracts, and preserve postcolonial influence and position as an indispensable partner. France appears as a destabilizing actor, even a supporter of terrorism in the Sahel region.

One of the clearest illustrations of this narrative comes from a widely circulated TikTok video posted by the account “afriqinfos” (September 2025), which declares: “New proof that France cooperates with terrorists!” The video overlays commentary onto footage of armed groups and televised interviews, creating the impression of documentary evidence despite presenting no verifiable proof. This format is common across the dataset. The post’s multiple tags (#France, #Mali, #Sahel, #Françafrique, and #AES) situate the claim within a broader ideological frame that presents insecurity in the AES region as a deliberate product of French strategy. It also underscores a recurring theme, that France’s self-interest and duplicity through its collaboration with armed groups justifies the strengthening of AES national armies’ capacities and the rejection of French military partnerships, so as to break security dependence.

From this perspective, accusations of France’s duplicity and alleged role in perpetuating insecurity are mobilized to legitimize a security doctrine centred on autonomy



and national capacity strengthening. Widely circulated posts frame the presence of foreign forces as incompatible with sovereignty and depict the reinforcement of national armed forces as both a corrective and a necessity.

For example, a widely shared post marking the handover of the French Camp Geille in Dakar in July 2025 celebrates the transfer of control to "the national army,<sup>19</sup>" arguing that "a State that calls itself sovereign does not abide... a postcolonial military supervision." Similarly, official AES discourse amplified online presents security spending and the strengthening of the Forces de Défense et de Sécurité as essential "to ensure the existence of our States ,<sup>20</sup>" framing autonomy in military capacity as the only viable response to externally imposed insecurity. In this narrative, rejecting French military partnerships and reinforcing national armies become markers of regained sovereignty rather than mere policy choices.

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19 <https://web.facebook.com/100064931732315/posts/1140836821424032/>

20 <https://web.facebook.com/100064470740758/posts/1208524974639849/>



# **Russia/Wagner Influence and Information Operations**

## Russia/Wagner Influence and Information Operations

Since the death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in August 2023, and accelerating through July - August 2025, the information landscape surrounding Russian and Wagner Group (now Africa Corps) operations in Africa underwent a significant transformation. Early misinformation focused on tactical military movements, reports of Wagner aircraft landing in Niger,<sup>21</sup> and mercenary deployments<sup>22</sup> in Niger's eastern territories. However, the nature and sophistication of information disorder<sup>23</sup> in this domain have evolved substantially, moving beyond simple false reports to encompass coordinated, systematic narrative campaigns that blend official diplomacy, domestic media, and paid and organic influencers. The objective is twofold: (1) delegitimise Western (particularly French/ECOWAS) security and political engagement and (2) reframe Russia as a credible partner for security and sovereignty.

The evolution of these information operations reflects broader trends in how state and non-state actors leverage digital platforms to disseminate propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and divisive content. What distinguishes the Russian approach is its strategic coordination, historical revisionism, and skilful exploitation of legitimate regional grievances.

## Volume and Engagement Patterns

Based on the July–September 2025 monitoring period, the dataset captures 1,019 posts referencing [Russia/Wagner influence](#)<sup>24</sup> themes across platforms. Analysis of these posts reveals engagement patterns consistent with reactive but coordinated amplification rather than random diffusion. As shown in Figure X (Russia-Tagged Posts Over Time), overall posting volume displays a gradual upward trajectory punctuated by sharp spikes that align closely with identifiable geopolitical moments.

Three periods stand out. In late July, posting increases coincided with contested claims of new Russian deployments in Niger, suggesting rapid narrative uptake around unverified security developments. The most pronounced surge occurred in late August, corresponding with Malian President Assimi Goïta's visit to Moscow, a moment that triggered extensive resharing by Russian diplomatic accounts, affiliated media outlets, and sympathetic commentators. A further uptick in mid-September aligns with renewed messaging that explicitly links Russian engagement to AES sovereignty narratives and critiques of Western

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21 Iruke C. (August, 2023), FACT CHECK: Did a Russian Aircraft Carrying Wagner fighters land in Niamey, Niger?

<https://cddfactcheck.org/fact-check-did-a-russian-aircraft-carrying-wagner-fighters-land-in-niamey-niger/>

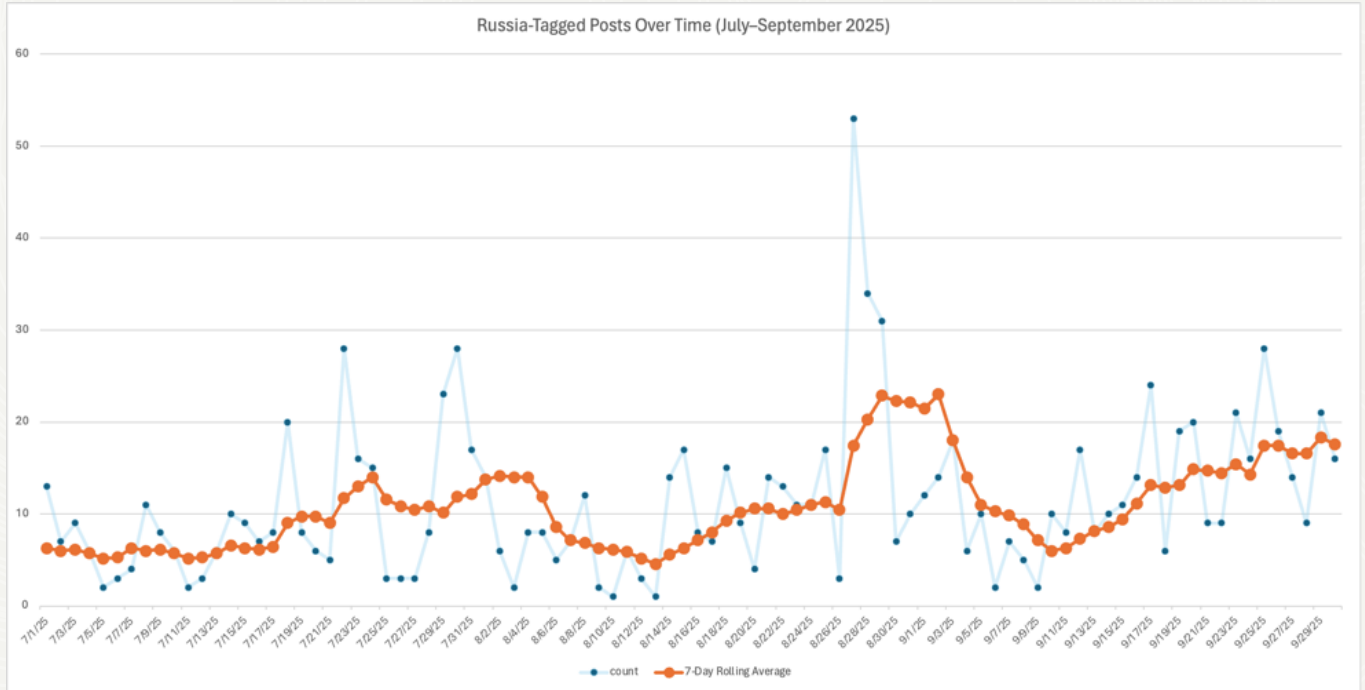
22 Ahmad A. (August, 2023) FACT CHECK: Did Wagner group confirm its armed/combat division's presence in Niger? <https://cddfactcheck.org/fact-check-did-wagner-group-confirms-its-armed-combat-divisions-presence-in-niger/>

23 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (March 2024), Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa <https://africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>

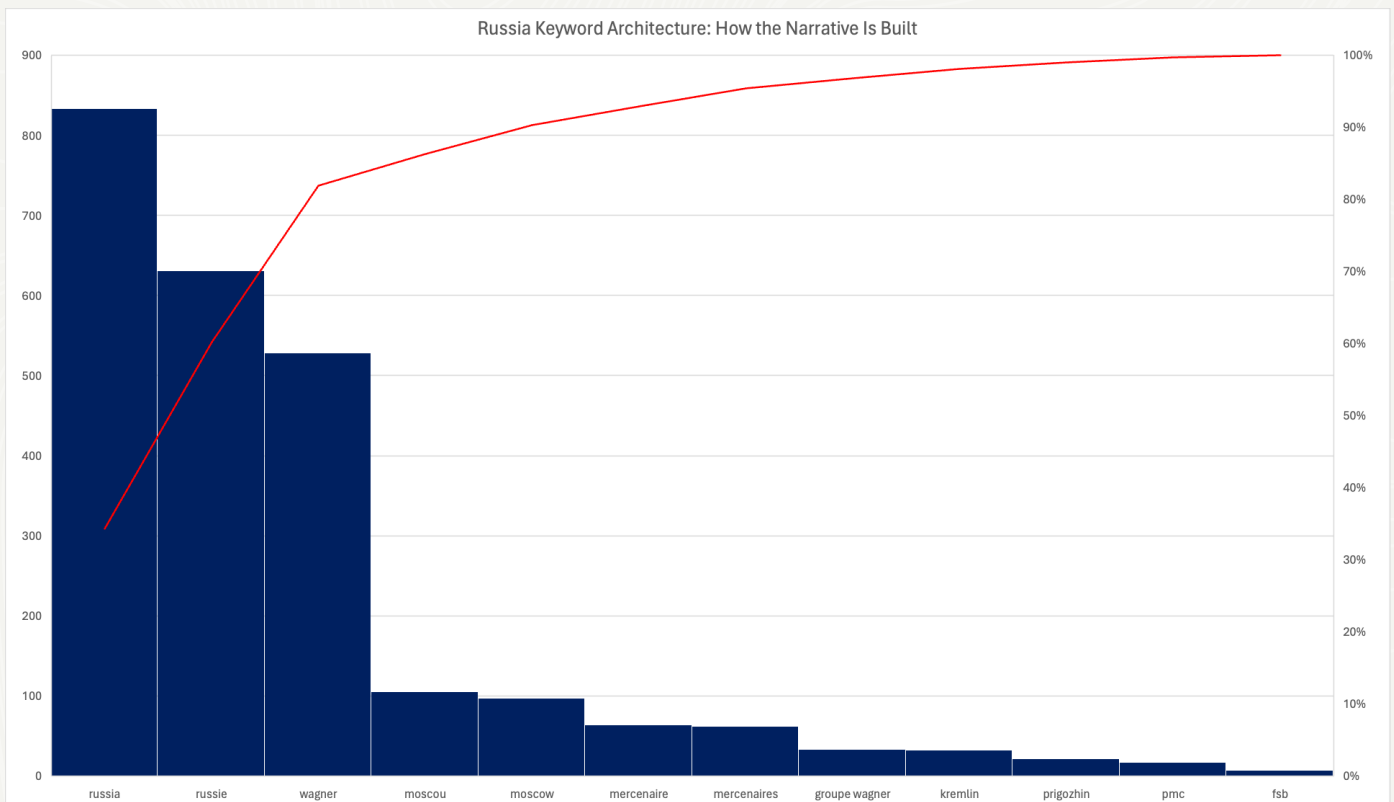
24 <https://disinfo.africa/wagner-in-africa-military-conflicts-economic-interests-and-disinformation-campaigns-ad04aff234cd>

security models.

These temporal patterns indicate that Russia/Wagner discourse is neither totally stable nor fully opportunistic/ event-based. Instead, it enjoys a constant minimum of content that intensifies during moments when Russia can be framed as a stabilising alternative to Western influence. The presence of a visible rolling average trend alongside volatile daily counts underscores that attention to Russian narratives is sustained over time, even as it also remains highly responsive to political triggers.



### Keyword Architecture and Semantic Reinforcement



The structure of this influence operation becomes clearer when examining the linguistic architecture of Russia/Wagner-related discourse. Figure X (Russia/Wagner Keyword Frequencies) demonstrates a highly concentrated distribution centred on a small set of anchoring terms. References to "russia" (834 occurrences), "russie" (632), and "wagner" (527) dominate the dataset, while lower-frequency terms such as "groupe Wagner," "FSB," "mercenaires," and "Prigozhin" constitute supporting frames.

This distribution is analytically significant. The heavy repetition of core identity markers ensures constant visibility of Russia and Wagner as recognisable actors, regardless of the immediate topic under discussion. Meanwhile, the supporting frames enable flexibility, allowing narratives to attach themselves to themes of security, sovereignty, mercenarism, or geopolitics as needed. The resulting curve resembles a classic coordinated messaging architecture: a tightly reinforced semantic core surrounded by dispersed secondary frames that allow the narrative to travel across diverse conversations without losing coherence. Rather than advancing novel arguments, this strategy relies on semantic saturation. Pro-Russian framing remains present even when content ostensibly focuses on AES politics, jihadist violence, ECOWAS decisions, or anti-French grievances, confirming that Russia functions less as a discrete topic than as an embedded interpretive lens.

### Platform Distribution and Propaganda Infrastructure

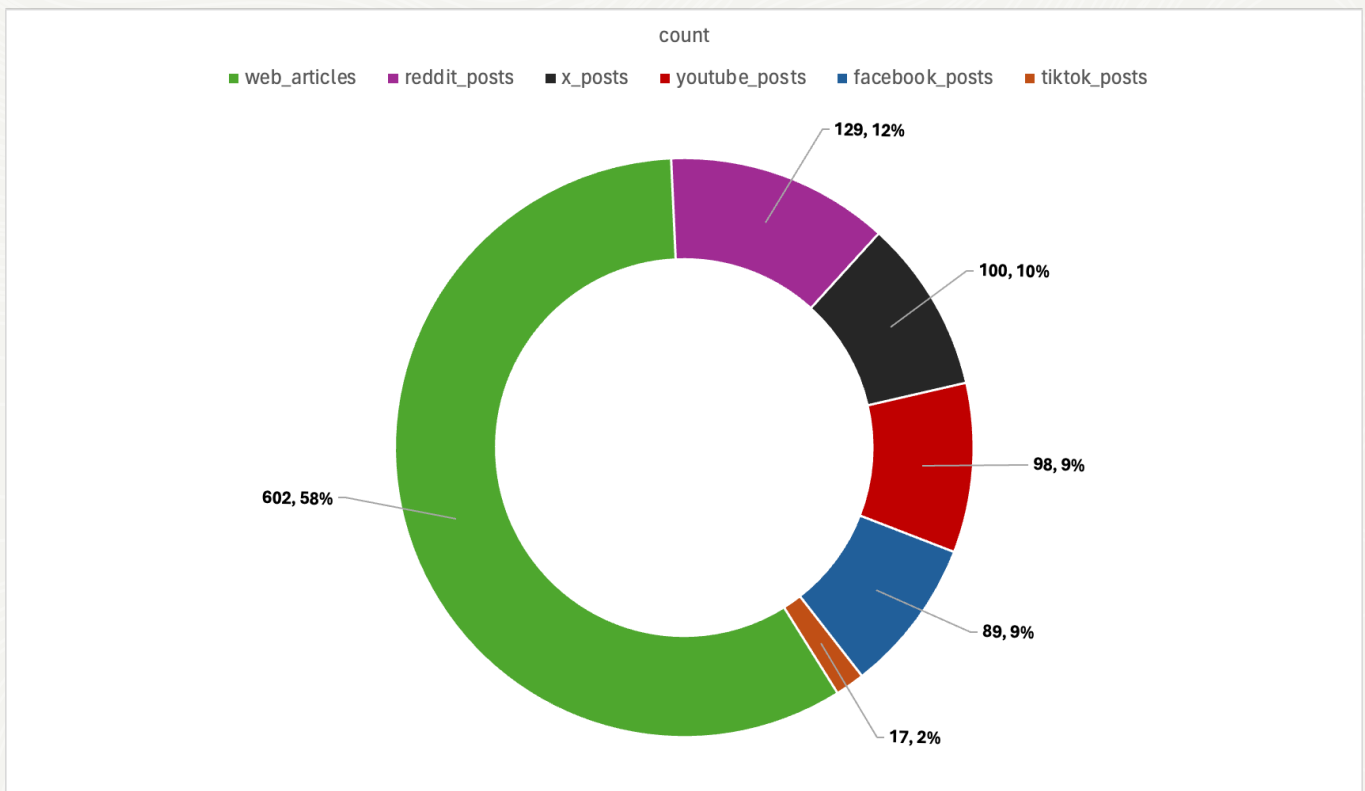
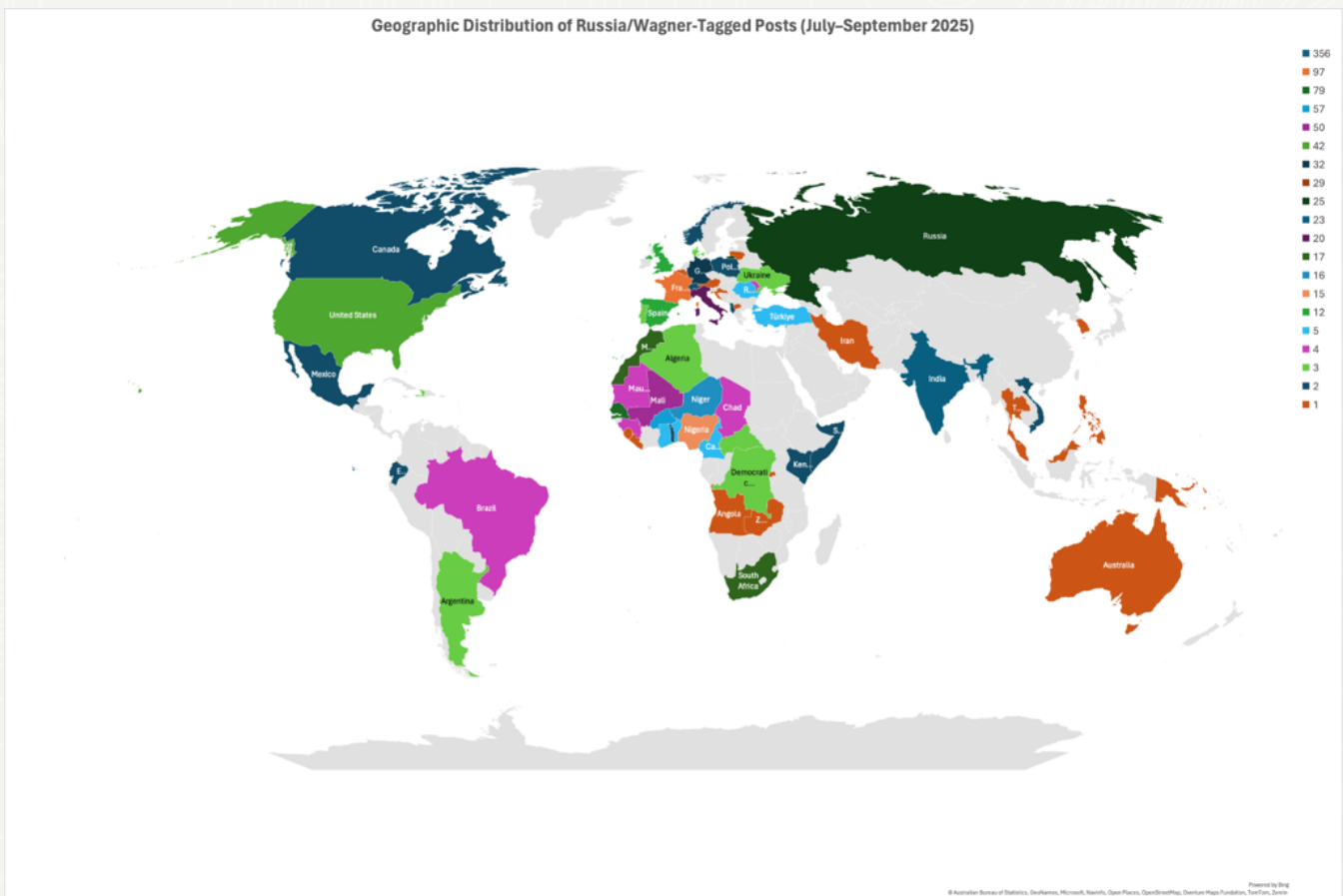


Figure 10, Russia/Wagner Content Distribution Across Platforms, shows that the discourse is not evenly distributed:

The platform distribution of Russia/Wagner content further reinforces this interpretation. As illustrated in Figure 10 (Russia/Wagner Content Distribution Across Platforms), the discourse is heavily skewed toward web-based outlets. Web articles account for 58 % of all Russia/Wagner-tagged posts, indicating a strong reliance on online news sites, blogs, and pseudo-journalistic platforms that frequently act as first-order amplifiers for diplomatic statements and curated narratives.

Secondary circulation occurs on Reddit (12 %) and X (10 %), where content is reframed into shorter, reactive formats suitable for rapid debate and political commentary. Facebook and YouTube, each representing roughly 9 % of posts, host longer-form persuasion content, including commentary videos and analytical threads. Notably, TikTok remains marginal at just 2 %, suggesting that Russian narratives have yet to achieve the same penetration in youth-oriented short-form spaces as AES or anti-French messaging

This top-heavy, news-driven distribution aligns closely with known Russian information tactics, which prioritise text-heavy propaganda infrastructure that is subsequently recirculated through social platforms rather than emerging organically from them. Even when local African outlets serve as the visible surface, the underlying architecture mirrors that of established Russian state-aligned media ecosystems.



**Figure 11 Geographic Distribution of Russia/Wagner-Tagged Posts (July–September 2025)**

The map above visualises the geographic footprint of Russia/Wagner-related discourse captured in the dataset. It provides strong empirical confirmation that Russian influence narratives are not limited to Sahelian domestic spaces but circulate across a transcontinental information ecosystem extending through Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas.

**1.Sahelian core: Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger (High Density)**

The map highlights Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the three AES states, as the densest cluster of Russia/Wagner discourse outside Russia itself. This mirrors:

- The strategic partnership messaging pushed by AES leadership
- High-profile diplomatic visits (e.g., Goïta in Moscow, Aug 2025)
- Local influencers actively re-sharing Russian narratives
- The integration of pro-Russia frames into sovereignty, security, and anti-French/ECOWAS content

This concentration visually reinforces the finding that Russia does not insert itself as a standalone topic, but rather piggybacks on existing grievance-based narratives in the Sahel.

## **2. Wider West and Central Africa: Nigeria, Chad, Cameroon, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire** **Countries adjacent to the core Sahel region show moderate engagement, reflecting:**

- Cross-border media consumption
- Diaspora and influencer amplification
- West African political debates increasingly shaped by narratives of sovereignty and anti-West distrust

This spread outward from the Sahel confirms that Russian disinformation is not confined to conflict theatres, it diffuses into the regional political conversation.

## **3. Non-African amplification hubs: United States, France, the UK, and Brazil**

The map shows significant content originating from:

- United States
- France
- United Kingdom
- Brazil

This does not imply Russia/Wagner operations are based there. Instead, it reveals:

- News aggregators, wire services, and diaspora commentators
- Western media reporting on Wagner in Africa
- Online political communities discussing foreign policy and geopolitics

Much like the anti-French dataset where "United States" appears heavily due to platform metadata, this map shows that Russia/Wagner narratives are globally circulated, even when their political meaning is anchored in the Sahel.

## **4. Russia as the global epicentre**

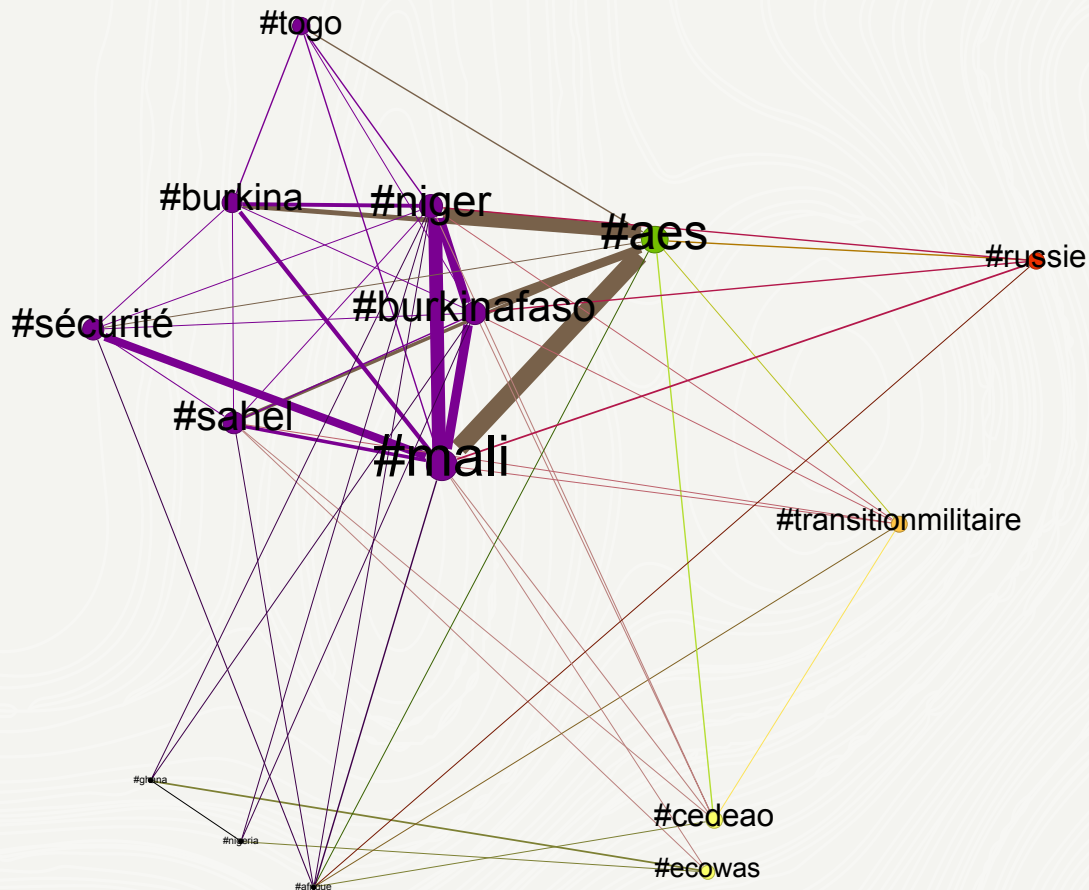
Unsurprisingly, Russia displays the highest volume, reflecting:

- Official diplomatic communication
- Kremlin-linked Telegram channels
- Russian-language content farms
- Wagner-affiliated media and proxy outlets

This confirms that much of the content originates upstream from Russian-controlled narratives, then disperses globally through news websites, influencers, and social media ecosystems.

## **Core Narrative Framework**

The Russian influence campaign operates on a dual narrative structure: delegitimising Western engagement while positioning Russia as Africa's authentic partner and defender. This layered messaging is not merely rhetorical; it is structurally reflected in how regional audiences discuss Russia online. Our hashtag network analysis (see Figure X) shows that Russia/Wagner-related hashtags are rarely central nodes in the conversation. Instead, they attach themselves to ongoing Sahel security themes and the sovereignty agenda promoted by the AES. Russia appears not as a stand-alone focus of discussion but as a "solution" woven into narratives focused on regional and local crises, particularly insecurity, anti-Western grievances, and the delegitimation of ECOWAS.



**Figure 12. Hashtag Network Mapping of the Russia/Wagner Narrative (July–Sept 2025).**

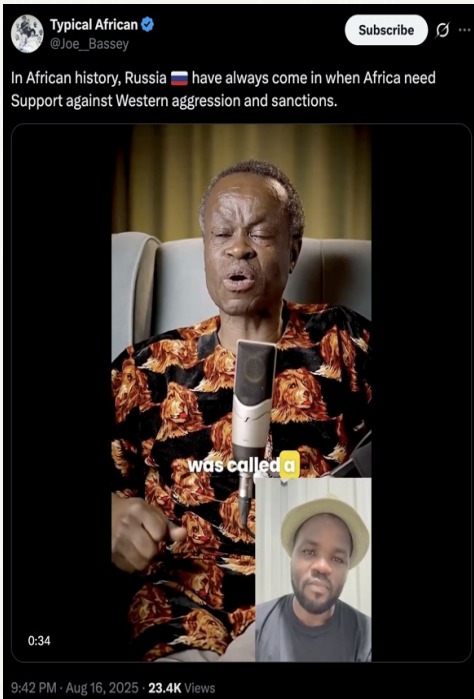
The visualisation shows how Russian influence narratives embed themselves within existing regional conversations. Pro-Russia hashtags (e.g., #russe, #russia, #wagner) rarely appear in isolation, instead attaching themselves to Sahel security crises (#mali, #niger, #sahel), sovereignty discourse (#aes, #sécurité), and anti-ECOWAS sentiment (#cedeo, #ecowas). The tight Sahel cluster demonstrates that online engagement with Russia is not stand-alone propaganda, but a parasitic narrative that reinforces local grievances to legitimise military juntas and weaken regional institutions.

**Anti-Western Messaging:** The campaigns capitalise on regional frustrations, persistent insecurity despite years of Western military intervention, perceived neocolonial<sup>25</sup> economic arrangements, and the historical burden of colonialism<sup>26,27</sup>. Russian-aligned accounts amplify narratives that Western powers have not

25 ADF (August 2024). Russia Pushes Anti-Colonial Narrative While Using Colonizer’s Playbook <https://adf-magazine.com/2025/08/russia-pushes-anti-colonial-narrative-while-using-colonizers-playbook/>

26 B.R. (September 2024) Young Russia Is Riding an Anti-Colonial Wave Across Africa. <https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2024/09/russia-is-riding-an-anti-colonial-wave-across-africa.html>

27 Historical Note: Russia’s claim of having “never colonised Africa” is central to its contemporary messaging. However, this absence reflects failed imperial ambitions rather than opposition to colonialism. Russian attempts to establish influence in Africa during the late 19th century, most notably in Tadjoura (present-day Djibouti) and Ethiopia, collapsed due to late entry, foreign resistance, and logistical constraints. Soviet-era support for African liberation movements later enabled Russia to reframe itself as an anti-colonial power, a narrative now widely deployed in pro-Russian information operations.



merely failed Africa but actively exploited and destabilized<sup>28</sup> it. This messaging resonates particularly strongly in Francophone Africa, where there is intense anti-French sentiment. Within this discourse, economic grievances are articulated through multiple frames, including aid dependency, sanctions, and international financial institutions. References to the CFA currency appear less frequently but remain symbolically potent, particularly in Francophone contexts, where they are invoked as a shorthand for perceived monetary and postcolonial dependence on France.

**Pro-Russian Positioning:** Simultaneously, coordinated content portrays Russia as the solution to Western-created problems. Russia's disinformation campaigns manipulate discontent by blaming France for challenges while presenting Russia as a 'saviour', with Russian agents, proxies, co-opted journalists,<sup>29</sup> and paid influencers weaving a compelling fantasy. The narrative presents Russian engagement as fundamentally different: respectful of sovereignty, effective in providing security, and unburdened by colonial guilt. Russian official

communication adheres to a black and white<sup>30</sup> approach, pitting Russia against the West and declaring that partnership with Russia will provide the benefits of modernisation and protection. Russian strategic communications carefully highlight respect for friendship,<sup>31</sup> sovereignty, and neutrality, contrasting sharply with Western approaches perceived as conditional and neo-colonial.

**Russia as a Sovereignty-Respecting Security Partner:** A central pillar of pro-Russian positioning within the Sahelian information space is the portrayal of Russia as a fundamentally different type of external partner, one that respects national sovereignty, avoids political conditionality, and delivers tangible security outcomes without the historical or normative constraints associated with Western engagement. This framing contrasts sharply with representations of France and other Western actors as intrusive, prescriptive, and ultimately destabilising. Rather than articulating cooperation in moral, institutional, or governance terms, Russian-aligned messaging emphasises discretion, mutual respect, and strategic trust, particularly

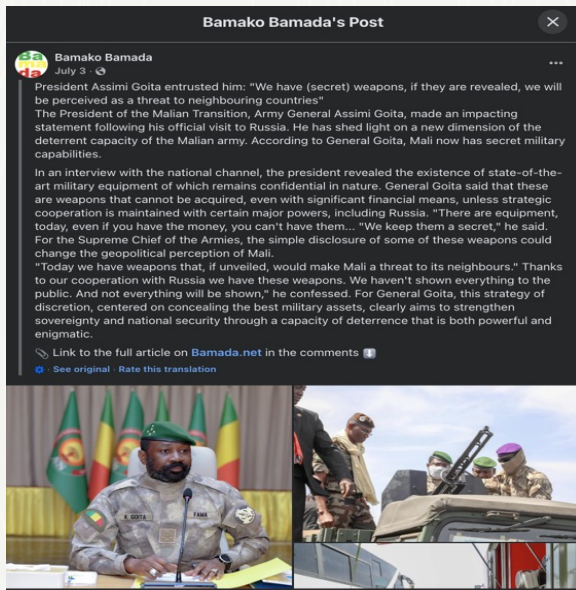
28 D. Whitman (July 2024). The West's Loss Of The Sahel: Not (Only) Russia's Doing  
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/07/the-wests-loss-of-the-sahel-not-only-russias-doing/>

29 S. McDonagh (November 2022). Journalist Reveals Wagner's Disinformation Tactics in Africa  
<https://www.newsweek.com/wagner-group-disinformation-africa-whistleblower-russia-1989677>

30 O. Snigyr (November 2024). Ideological Agenda of Russian Information Influence in Africa  
<https://www.fpri.org/article/2024/11/ideological-agenda-of-russian-information-influence-in-africa/>

31 C. Babcock (April 2024). Friends in Need: Russian Strategic Communications in Africa Before and After the Full-Scale Invasion of Ukraine  
<https://jpia.princeton.edu/news/friends-need-russian-strategic-communications-africa-and-after-full-scale-invasion-ukraine>

in the military domain.



This narrative is clearly illustrated by the coordinated circulation of content surrounding Malian President Assimi Goïta's official visit to Moscow. An article widely reposted across regional media outlets and social platforms presents the visit as evidence of "a sincere partnership founded on mutual respect and sovereignty." Within the same coverage, Goïta explicitly links Mali's enhanced deterrence capacity to its strategic cooperation with Russia, asserting that the country now possesses military capabilities that remain deliberately undisclosed in order to preserve national security. The implication is unambiguous: sovereignty is not merely political autonomy, but the capacity to acquire, control, and conceal advanced security capabilities outside Western oversight or influence

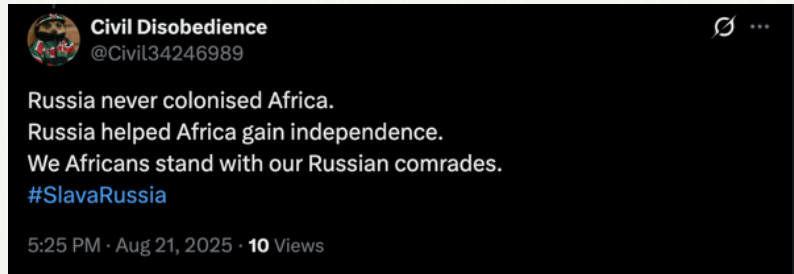
The replication of this framing across platforms underscores its strategic function. As detailed in Annex X (Russia/Wagner Posting-Time Coordination Table), the same article and associated quotations circulated across multiple Facebook pages, groups, and individual accounts in verbatim or near-verbatim form, frequently linking back to Bamada.net or closely related Malian news outlets. Importantly, these reposts often occurred within narrow time windows, with several publications appearing within minutes of one another across different pages and platforms.

This combination of content repetition and temporal clustering suggests a process of coordinated narrative amplification rather than isolated or spontaneous commentary. In effect, the rapid redistribution of identical messaging reinforces the framing of Russian partnership as aligned with sovereign military empowerment, while creating the appearance of broad and immediate consensus.

In parallel, Russian diplomatic messaging provides a complementary normative framework that legitimises this interpretation of events. A Telegram channel affiliated with the Russian Embassy in Mali and Niger relays remarks by Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova emphasising that Russo-Malian relations are grounded in "mutual respect, trust, and consideration of mutual interests." This example further reinforces the broader discursive environment in which trust, and sovereign decision-making are framed as defining features of the bilateral relationship.

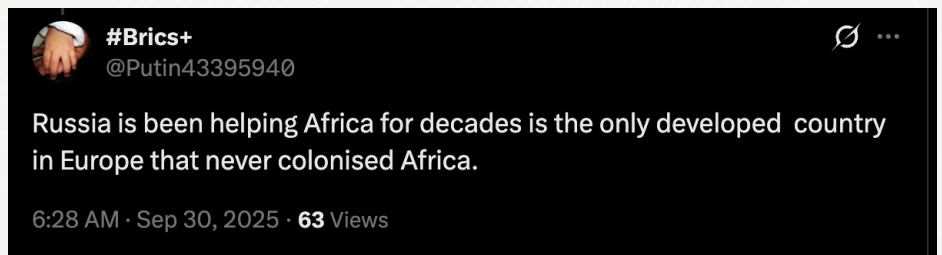
Taken together, the convergence of regional media reporting, social media amplification, and official diplomatic rhetoric demonstrates how narratives of respectful partnership and sovereign empowerment are systematically reinforced across the information ecosystem. Rather than presenting Russia as an external actor imposing itself on the region, this discourse normalises Russian involvement as a voluntary, dignified, and security-enhancing choice. In doing so, it directly appeals to Sahelian audiences shaped by long-standing grievances toward Western intervention and conditionality, while repositioning sovereignty as both the means and the outcome of closer alignment with Moscow.

Russia as the defender of African sovereignty: A recurring narrative within the dataset frames Russia as a historical and contemporary defender of African sovereignty against Western aggression and coercion. This discourse positions Western actors, particularly through sanctions and political pressure, as external forces undermining African self-determination, while portraying Russia as a consistent ally that intervenes when African states are most vulnerable. The emphasis is less on specific policies than on a moral contrast between punitive Western engagement and Russia's purportedly supportive posture.



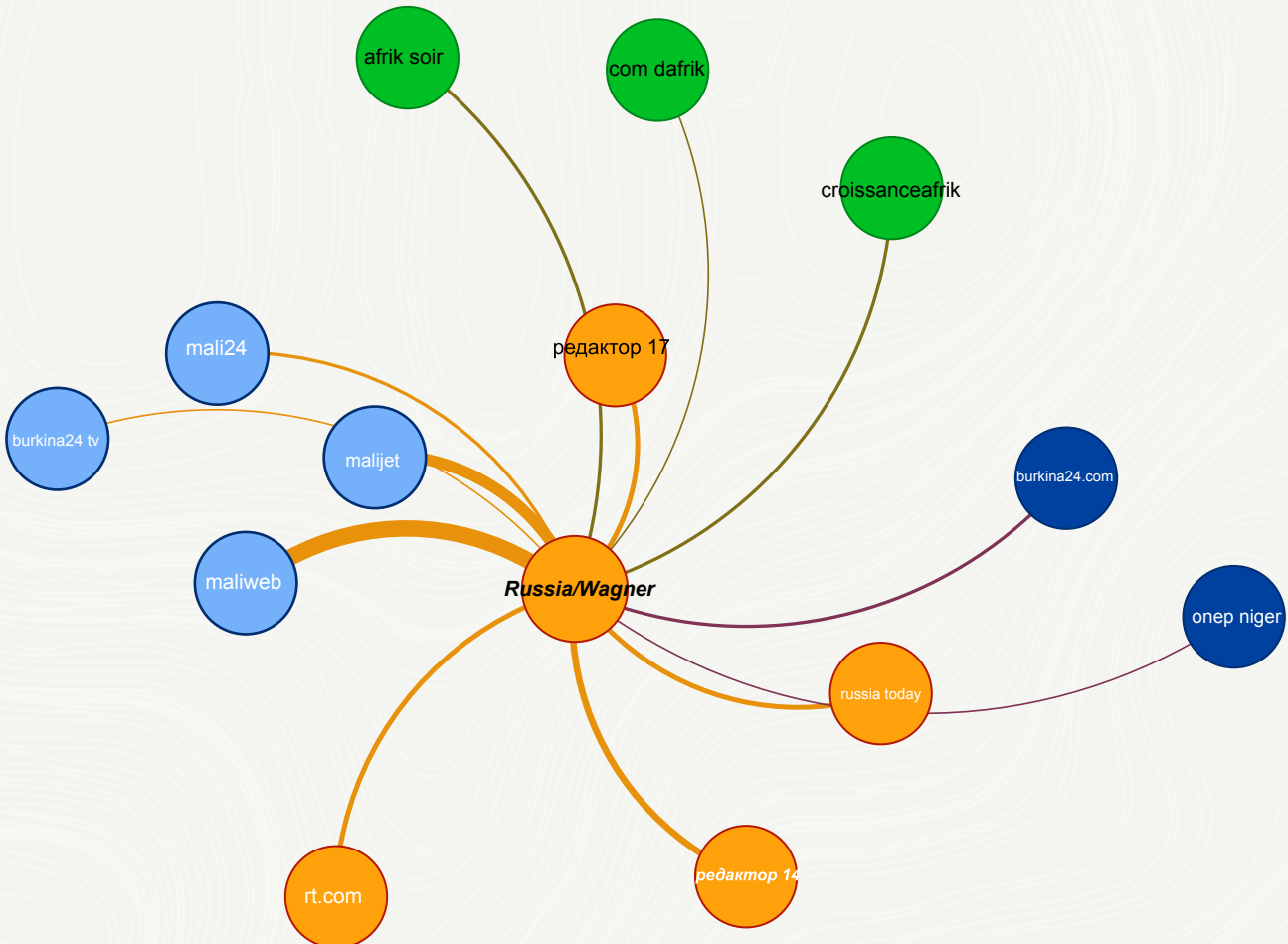
This framing is particularly evident in influencer-driven video content circulating on social platforms. One widely viewed post shared by the account "Typical African" asserts that "in African history, Russia has always come in when Africa needs support against Western aggression and sanctions." Delivered by an

older African speaker and framed as lived historical insight, the video presents Russian support as both enduring and principled. The authority of the message derives not from official attribution, but from its presentation as an authentic African perspective, reinforcing the idea that Russia's role as a protector of sovereignty is widely recognised and internally validated. Such content exemplifies how sovereignty narratives are normalised and popularised beyond formal diplomatic channels, embedding geopolitical alignment within culturally resonant and emotionally persuasive formats.



### Coordination and Temporal Patterns

The intensity and coordination evident in the Sahel's digital space reveal sophisticated planning rather than organic discourse. Network analysis of cross-platform data further confirms that this influence is not spontaneous; it is routed through some Russian-language curators and media outlets that act as narrative distributors into the Sahelian information space.



**Figure 13 illustrates a transnational amplification network in which Russian media outlets (RT, Russia Today), Russian-language curator accounts (notably редактор 17 and редактор 14), and Wagner-aligned narratives form a central hub that pushes content into West African media ecosystems. These Russian nodes exhibit direct, repeated connections to Francophone outlets (Afriksoir, Com D'Afrique, CroissanceA-frik), including high-traffic Sahel platforms (Maliweb, Burkina24, Onep Niger). This pattern demonstrates the deliberate funnelling of narratives from Russian sources into local information spaces, where they are repackaged as domestic news rather than foreign influence operations.**

Our analysis uncovered coordinated posts dating as far back as 2020<sup>32</sup> that established foundational narratives positioning Russia as Africa's benevolent friend. Significantly, this content has been systematically

32 Africa Center for Strategic Studies (February 18, 2020). Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman.

<https://africacenter.org/spotlight/russian-disinformation-campaigns-target-africa-interview-shelby-grossman/>

resurfaced and recirculated in recent periods, suggesting deliberate campaign architecture rather than spontaneous expression. This temporal pattern establishes narratives well in advance of their peak relevance, then reactivates them at strategically opportune moments, indicating campaign planning that coordinates information operations with geopolitical developments on the ground. The recycling of content also serves to create an illusion of sustained grassroots support while minimising the resources required to maintain constant content production.

This repackaging is visible in our network analysis (see Figure 13), where Russian hubs (e.g., RT, редактор 17,<sup>33</sup> редактор 14) feed narratives to Francophone media intermediaries, who then inject them into high-traffic Sahel pages such as Maliweb, Burkina24, and Bamada.net. Russian messages thus acquire a domestic identity.

### Weaponisation of Official Diplomatic Channels



A particularly noteworthy dimension of Russian information operations is the use of official diplomatic accounts for what effectively constitutes smear campaigns and propaganda dissemination. Accounts such as the Russian Embassy in South Africa on X<sup>34</sup> (formerly Twitter) and the Embassy of Russia in Nigeria on Facebook<sup>35</sup> serve dual functions: conducting recognised diplomatic communication while simultaneously amplifying politically charged narratives that advance Russian strategic interests. This approach offers several advantages. Official status lends credibility and legitimacy to messaging that might otherwise be dismissed as propaganda. Diplomatic accounts typically face less scrutiny and platform enforcement than anonymous or covert influence networks.

This strategic ambiguity represents a sophisticated evolution in influence operations, blurring the lines between traditional public diplomacy and coordinated information warfare.

33 Редактор (redaktor) in Russian translates to “editor” in English, referring to a person who prepares written content

34 X (April 2023). Russian Embassy in South Africa. <https://x.com/EmbassyofRussia/status/1651515576123027458>

35 Facebook (April 2020). Russian Embassy in Nigeria. <https://www.facebook.com/nigeria.mid.ru/posts/1437433463113076?>

## Implications

The scale, coordination, and sophistication of Russian information operations in Africa, particularly the Sahel region, represent a significant dimension of contemporary geopolitical competition. With 982 identified posts representing one of the highest engagement levels in our research, these campaigns demonstrate that information warfare has become as central to Russian strategy as military or economic engagement.

The effectiveness of these narratives stems not from fabrication alone but from their strategic exploitation of genuine grievances. Western failures, colonial legacies, and persistent insecurity are real; Russian campaigns amplify these realities while offering a carefully curated alternative that obscures Russia's own extractive practices, human rights record, and historical imperial ambitions.

Russian information operations have successfully shaped public sentiment across the Sahel, evidenced by the repeated appearance of Russian flags at political upheaval, from coups in Mali (2020-2021)<sup>36</sup>, Burkina Faso (2022)<sup>37</sup>, and Niger (2023)<sup>38</sup>, to anti-government protests in Nigeria (2024)<sup>39,40</sup>. These flags serve as visual proof that years of coordinated online narrative-building have translated into street-level political expression, with populations using them as a symbolic vocabulary to reject Western influence and signal openness to Russian partnerships.

The effectiveness of these narratives stems not from fabrication alone but from their strategic exploitation of genuine grievances. Western failures, colonial legacies, and persistent insecurity are real; Russian campaigns amplify these realities while offering a carefully curated alternative that obscures Russia's own

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36 R.L. Kato (August 2024) Why are protestors in Ethiopia and Mali waving Russian flags? <https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/31/why-are-protestors-in-ethiopia-and-mali-waving-russian-flags/>

37 Henry Wilkins (October 2022) Why Burkina Faso Protesters Waved Russian Flags in French Embassy Attack. <https://www.voanews.com/a/why-burkina-faso-protesters-waved-russian-flags-in-french-embassy-attack/6778372.html>

38 I. Elijah (August 2023) Russian flags trend in West Africa following military coups <https://www.pulse.ng/articles/news/local/russian-flags-trend-in-west-africa-following-military-coups-2024072615533040688>

39 C. Ewokor, W. Muia (August 2024). Nigerian protesters arrested for waving Russian flag <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgl22630pzeo>

40 O. Adetayo, H. Ibrahim (August 2024). Nigeria detains tailors who made Russian flags for anti-government protests. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/nigeria-detains-tailors-who-made-russian-flags-anti-government-protests-2024-08-06/>

extractive practices, human rights record, and historical imperial ambitions.<sup>4142</sup>

Understanding these operations, their volume, coordination, narrative structure, tactical evolution, and physical manifestations is essential for comprehending the contemporary information landscape in Africa and developing effective responses that address both the disinformation and the underlying issues that make it resonate. The Russian flags waving at coup sites are not merely symbolic; they are the visible endpoint of sophisticated influence campaigns that have successfully reshaped popular sentiment and enabled fundamental shifts in the region's geopolitical orientation.

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41 Russia has strengthened ties with Sahel countries through military cooperation and diplomacy. Key events include reopening its embassy in Burkina Faso, deploying troops there, and pledging military support to the Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), effectively replacing Western influence in the region.

42 Syed Md, As-Sazid. (2025). Formulation of the New Alliance of Sahel States: Geopolitical Implications and Impacts on Peacebuilding. 10.13140/RG.2.2.19001.43369.



**Conclusion**



This study documents a sophisticated information ecosystem in which coordinated narratives reshape how millions of West Africans understand democracy, sovereignty, and regional cooperation.

The research identifies five dominant narrative clusters, military populism, anti-ECOWAS messaging, anti-French sentiment, pro-Russian positioning, and pro-AES framing that do not circulate in isolation but function as an interconnected propaganda apparatus.

The architecture of this ecosystem is deliberate. Content flows through a stratified platform infrastructure where web articles establish credibility and historical context, TikTok and short-form video generate emotional resonance and drive viral engagement, and X enables rapid amplification during moments of political salience. Russian media outlets and curator accounts function as central hubs that funnel narratives into West African spaces, where they are repackaged as domestic news. This cross-platform coordination creates the appearance of consensus and inevitability, with the same messaging simultaneously reaching audiences through formal media, influencer ecosystems, and user-generated content.

The effectiveness of these campaigns rests on their capacity to exploit genuine grievances rather than fabricate them entirely. References to *Françafrique*, CFA franc dependency, constitutional manipulation, security failures, and colonial legacies are grounded in documented realities. Information operations amplify these authentic institutional failures and connect them to broader narratives of postcolonial struggle and lost sovereignty. Yet they simultaneously obscure Russia's own extractive practices and historical imperial ambitions while presenting military takeovers as expressions of popular will rather than unconstitutional seizures of power.

Temporal coordination reveals campaign architecture extending across years. Content dating back to 2020 is systematically resurfaced at moments of maximum political salience, coups, sanctions announcements, diplomatic visits. This pattern indicates that sustained information operations function as infrastructure for political change, operating continuously beneath episodic news cycles while activating at critical geopolitical junctures. The result is a durable emotional investment among online audiences who increasingly view their struggles through a shared interpretive lens.

Political mobilisation increasingly operates through affective alignment rather than institutional persuasion or policy deliberation. Symbolic gestures donations, military displays, flag-waving generate disproportionate engagement and shape collective political identity. The battle over meaning itself has become as consequential as disputes over policy. The suspension of French media outlets, reframed as "informational sovereignty," and the launch of alternative platforms positioned as "100% African" represent institutional manifestations of this narrative strategy: who is heard and whose framing prevails determines whose political project succeeds.

The consequences are already visible. Three countries have withdrawn from ECOWAS to form an alternative regional bloc. Military rule is increasingly accepted as legitimate governance. Democratic norms are eroding. Russian military presence is expanding across the Sahel. Citizens mobilised through emotional performance and symbolic identification may not fully consider the material costs of these shifts, impacts on trade, freedom of movement, and economic cooperation, or recognise how information operations have shaped their political consciousness.

Without credible responses that address both the disinformation and the underlying failures, it exploits corruption, insecurity, constitutional manipulation, and ignored court rulings; the gap between regional institutions and citizens will continue to widen, creating further space for external manipulation and anti-democratic narratives across West Africa.

