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State Threats in Sub-Saharan Africa Through a Gender Lens

Michael Jones and Joana de Deus Pereira



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Contents

iv	Acknowledgements
1	Executive Summary
3	Introduction
6	Gendered State Threats in Sub-Saharan Africa
8	The Russia Problem
11	Russia and the 'Anti-Gender' Ecosystem
14	Russia Within Africa's Anti-Gender / Anti-Rights System
18	Gendered Vectors / Resonance of Russian Intervention in Africa
18	Russian Information Operations
28	Legislation, Lawfare and Repression
32	Paramilitary Violence
37	Implications for State Threat Analysis
42	Conclusion
43	About the Authors

Methodology

Research for this paper was conducted from July 2025 to January 2026 as part of a wider project on 'Gender-Responsive Approaches to Countering State Threats in sub-Saharan Africa'.¹ Much of the work draws on academic and grey literature in English, French and Pidgin, supplemented by key informant interviews with practitioners, journalists, civil society organisations and government officials. Given the sensitivity of the topic, all participants have been anonymised. The content also benefits from discursive analysis conducted using ExTrac's AI-enabled research platform. This enabled the structured interrogation of publicly available communication ecosystems involving state and non-state actors. The analysis covered the period between September 2024 and October 2025 and examined relevant Russian and Chinese public-facing sources across multiple digital environments to identify recurring themes, narratives and priority areas.

While this multimethod approach has helped to triangulate the findings, various constraints should be acknowledged. First, the concept of 'state threats' is incipient and inherently subjective, with much of the discourse 'poorly and loosely defined', leading to a saturation of content that lacks nuance, depth and/or consistency.² The authors draw on past RUSI analysis to frame the scope of their enquiry but accept that the boundaries remain porous. Second, the reliance on existing data risks recycling structural issues baked into the state threat evidence base more widely, including a reductive preoccupation with comparatively overt, accessible and/or measurable vectors such as mis- / disinformation. As a result, the assessment in this paper does not comprise the totality of gendered dynamics and implications but offers an initial corrective to longstanding research gaps.

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The paper was submitted on 3 May 2026 and approved for copy editing on 22 July 2026.

1. RUSI, 'Gender-Responsive Approaches to Countering State Threats in Sub-Saharan Africa', <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/projects/gender-responsive-approaches-countering-state-threats-sub-saharan-africa>>, accessed 18 September 2025.
2. Matthew R Redhead, 'Old Wine, New Bottles? The Challenge of State Threats', SOC ACE Research Paper No. 32, January 2025, p. 9.

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Executive Summary

State threat analysis – as an incipient, highly contested field – displays several shortcomings, not least chronic gender-blindness. This is a serious omission, as the weaponisation of gender and identity offers external actors cheap, scalable and easily deniable ways to sow confusion, project influence and attack the epistemic foundations of social solidarity.³

Consequently, this paper applies a gender lens to state threats across sub-Saharan Africa, interrogating several (explicitly) ‘gendered’ / intersectional interventions by external actors – including information operations, lawfare and paramilitary violence – to better understand their dynamics, efficacy and implications. Russia provides the most overt examples. Anti-gender politics have become integral to President Vladimir Putin’s domestic legitimacy, branding and foreign policy, conflating notions of *velikoderzhavnost* (‘great-poweriness’) with the preservation and promotion of patriarchy, pro-natalism and heteronormativity. Amid diffuse systems of anti-rights advocacy, the Kremlin can exploit ‘traditional values’ as a vehicle for ‘norm antipreneurship’,⁴ blurring the boundaries between conventional state threats and softer cultural outreach to contest Western authority.

Social discourse offers a particularly convenient avenue for subversion. By connecting geopolitical struggles to everyday issues, Russian information operations effectively embed global politics within debates over family, sexuality, morality and culture to amplify demagoguery and polarisation. This is not just rhetorical but legislative and logistical, supporting longstanding international networks in their efforts to fund, structure and market regressive measures across Africa. In each case, resonance is shaped by existing social ecologies and local elites themselves. However, Russia has emerged as a prominent model, broker and beneficiary of such processes. As a result, the constraints and contradictions of Russian coverage have also become increasingly evident, for instance in the Sahel, where gender-based violence is consolidating the dependence of regional clients on Moscow, while simultaneously undermining regime security and straining bilateral relations.

3. Kate Ferguson, ‘Democratic Defence: Identity, Resilience and the New Frontlines of European (In)Security’, Protection Approaches, May 2026.

4. Anna Kuteleva, ‘Gender-Blind and Anti-Feminist: Putin’s Russia as a “Norm Antipreneur”’, *Europe-Asia Studies* (Vol. 76, No. 2, 2024), pp. 149–72.

Although they are only one dimension of hybrid warfare, the gendered inflections and impact of Russian engagement can help to elucidate not just the mechanisms and methods but also the underlying logic of these interventions. This provides greater nuance, a better understanding of agency, functionality and efficacy, and – by extension – a more robust basis for any response.

Introduction

Malign state activities – both covert and overt – are considered a clear and immediate threat to Western interests and assets. However, there are significant geographic and thematic gaps in much of the corresponding analysis. The literature often focuses on the US, Europe and parts of Asia, but overlooks similar dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa, where the external subversion of democratic processes and societies intersects with contentious local issues – from the proliferation of private power brokers to the conflation of governance, graft and organised criminality. The result is a mounting threat to civil liberties and inclusive development across tracts of the continent, with concurrent crises sapping Western bandwidth and creating / accentuating openings for adversaries and competitors. Russia is already exploiting the permissive conditions of fragile or autocratic polities, Chinese investment has accelerated elite capture,⁵ and international laws / embargoes are routinely flouted by (non-)regional players plying arms and aid for influence.

At the same time, studies are limited in their scope and sensitivity, neglecting the gendered dynamics and impact of state threats across different contexts. Much of the scholarship prioritises soft power projection, private military and security companies (PMSCs) operations, foreign information, manipulation and interference, or gendered, intersectional and/or identity-based insecurity within domestic settings. These fields are well developed in themselves but rarely intersect. While grey literature supplies more empirical data – with investigative reports mapping the nexus between anti-rights advocacy, subversion and geopolitical competition – a significant proportion of this content appears anecdotal or Western-centric (in scope and assumption).

Given the ubiquity of gender (and gender identity) in shaping, and becoming shaped by, societal values, power structures and systems of organisation, the superficiality or siloing of this coverage seems counter-intuitive. Overlapping disciplines – from preventing / countering violent extremism to peacebuilding – have long shown how the weaponisation of identity and social anxieties can stoke disruption, scaling emotive

5. Niva Yau, 'A Global South with Chinese Characteristics', Atlantic Council, June 2024, <www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/a-global-south-with-chinese-characteristics/>, accessed 5 February 2026.

issues into collective grievances that reframe tensions in existential terms. This is more than religious conviction or conservative ideology; it features the ‘*strategic* deployment of identity-based narratives and institutional engagement to reshape policy outcomes, redefine civic space and challenge the legitimacy of human rights norms’.⁶ Whether contrived by domestic stakeholders or transnational networks, these processes often coincide with, and can be exploited by, hostile state actors (HSAs) to project influence, foment violence and/or embed themselves into the infrastructure of recipient countries.

Extending this analytical lens across neglected sites of geopolitical competition is therefore crucial, as it would not only help to plug a gap in existing datasets but would also offer greater insights into the mechanisms, methods, logic and agency that define state threats more broadly.

This paper provides a preliminary assessment of such dynamics in sub-Saharan Africa (with particular reference to the Conflict / Coup Belt in Figure 1), exploring a selection of vectors that explicitly incorporate ‘gendered’ and/or intersectional dimensions in order to better understand their resonance, value and implications. Read in tandem with an accompanying Insights Paper,⁷ the research contributes to a wider effort to improve analysis and response capabilities, answering three main questions:

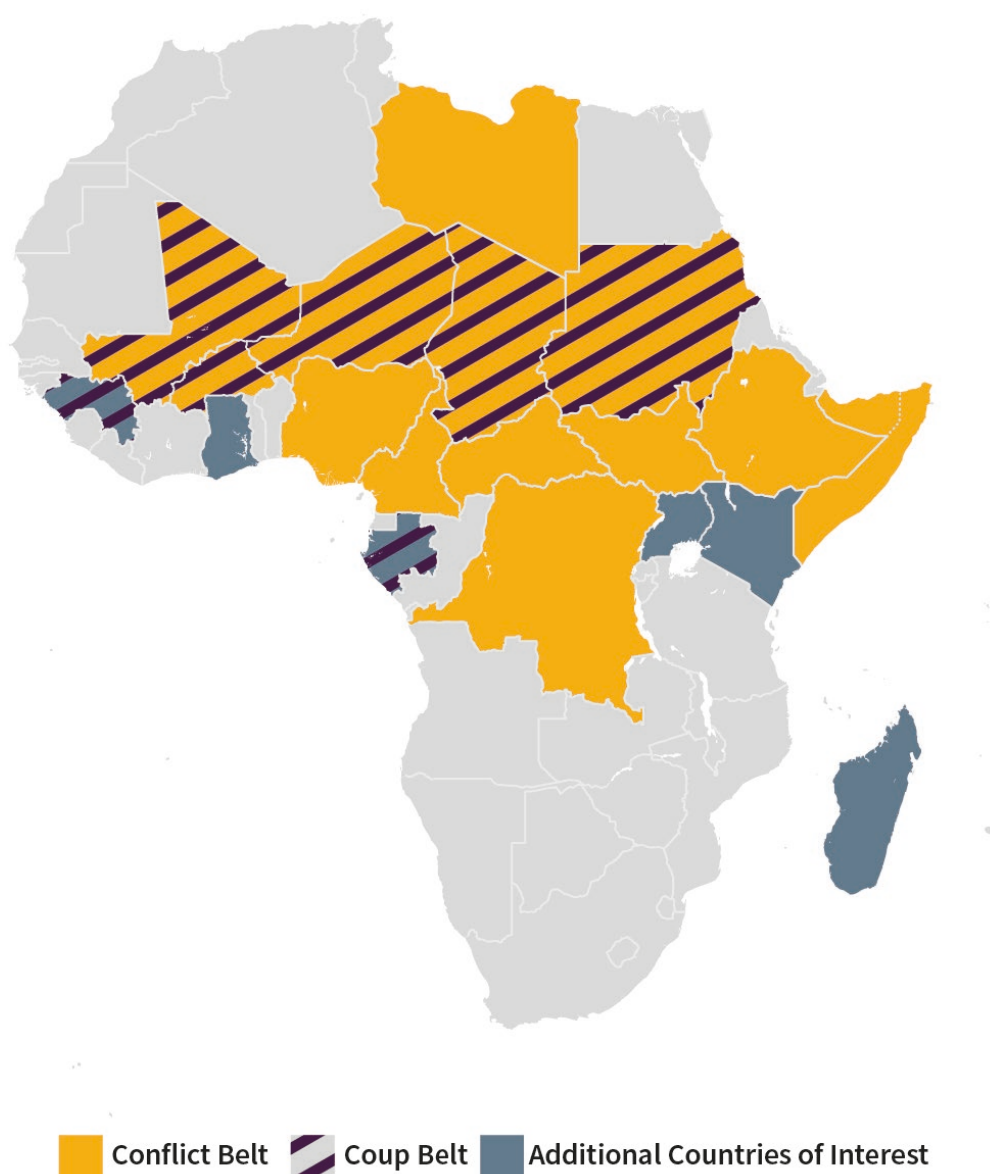
- How do HSAs in sub-Saharan Africa weaponise gender as a specific tactic in their offensive aims?
- How does gender condition the efficacy of state threat activities / vectors across sub-Saharan Africa?
- How are the impacts of state threat activities / vectors gendered?

As will be shown, the use of militant masculinities, anti-LGBTQIA+ rubrics,⁸ sexual violence and exclusionary social tropes is evident in various forms of hostile foreign engagement, from mis- / disinformation campaigns to paramilitary operations. Crucially, these interventions feed into broader efforts to distort, disrupt or co-opt states and societies, including the export of authoritarian norms, modalities and behaviours as a means of preserving wealth, strongman governance and/or ‘rule by law’. Although not the only feature of the hybrid toolbox, they are coordinated, cheap, scalable and easily deniable, offering opportunities to foment identity-based tensions along numerous axes, be they gendered, generational, ethnic or intersectional.

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6. Joana de Deus Pereira et al., ‘Tracking Money and Influence in the UK and Europe’, RUSI Insights Papers (March 2026), <www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/insights-papers/tracking-money-and-influence-uk-and-europe>, accessed 15 March 2026. Emphasis added.
 7. Jessica White and Michael Jones, ‘Gender-Responsive Approaches to Countering State Threats: A Policy Brief’, RUSI Insights Papers (June 2026), <www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/insights-papers/gender-responsive-approaches-countering-state-threats-policy-brief>, accessed 22 June 2026.
 8. Reflecting what Meredith Weiss and Michael Bosia call ‘political homophobia’, namely a ‘purposeful state strategy of scapegoating sexual and gender minorities for political purposes’. Referenced in Phillip M Ayoub and Kristina Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights: How Transnational Conservative Networks Target Sexual and Gender Minorities* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2024), p. 142.

Building on recent scholarship,⁹ the first chapter explains the value of a gender lens for understanding the mechanics, inflections and impact of state threats in sub-Saharan Africa. This is followed by an analysis of Russian interventions across the continent, contextualising these activities within Moscow's domestic politics and the wider anti-rights ecosystem. The second chapter centres on three specific vectors: information operations, legislation / lawfare and sexual violence. It references other modalities where possible and relevant. The third chapter concludes with a set of reflections on Russian interference and the broader role of gender in state threats.

Figure 1: Geographic Scope of the Research, Encompassing Africa's Conflict Belt, Coup Belt and Several Adjacent Countries



Source: The authors.

9. White and Jones, 'Gender-Responsive Approaches to Countering State Threats'.

Gendered State Threats in Sub-Saharan Africa

This chapter examines the salience of gender and intersectionality in assessing the mechanics, logic and impact of state threats in sub-Saharan Africa. It unpacks and contextualises Russian engagement as a case study for how identity can both be exploited by, and help to explain, the foreign policy of HSAs.

Africa's re-emergence as an arena for strategic competition¹⁰ is not confined to overt 'hostilities' or projections of 'sharp power' but reflects an ever more diffused and transactional donor market. Coinciding with an apparent 'deinstitutionalisation' of international relations,¹¹ the collapse of USAID, discomfort with Chinese debt-trap diplomacy and upheaval in much of the Sahel, this multipolarity is reconfiguring external engagement across the continent, blurring the boundaries between political outreach, financial linkages and harder security concerns. The usual fixtures of Western analysis (China and Russia) are increasingly accompanied by a raft of 'middle powers', from Turkey and India to Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel, Qatar and the UAE.¹² Abu Dhabi alone has spent an estimated \$47 billion on new projects in East Africa,¹³ stitching together a lattice of clients, concessions and companies, buying up farmland and rolling out infrastructure. Amid widespread frustrations over misgovernance and economic malaise, a new tranche of African autocrats now benefits from this fragmentation, eliciting 'no-questions-asked' support from outside powers, while 'assertive go-it-alone policies' by geopolitical rivals incentivise 'rule-breaking'.¹⁴

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10. Interviewees cast this dynamic as 'economic extraction', reducing Africa to a 'paragon' of 'free-for-all competition'. Author interviews with P03, P05 and P13, November and December 2025.
 11. Richard Gowan, 'The Twilight of International Peacemaking Institutions?', International Crisis Group, 24 July 2025, <www.crisisgroup.org/cmt/global/twilight-international-peacemaking-institutions>, accessed 10 February 2026.
 12. Author interview with P05, November 2025.
 13. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Mapping Gulf State Actors' Expanding Engagements', 8 July 2025, <www.africacenter.org/spotlight/gulf-state-actors-east-africa/>, accessed 25 August 2026.
 14. Theodore Murphy, 'Middle Powers, Big Impact: Africa's "Coups Belt," Russia, and the Waning Global Order', European Council on Foreign Relations, 6 September 2023, <www.ecfr.eu/article/middle-powers-big-impact-africas-coups-belt-russia-and-the-waning-global-order/>, accessed 6 February 2026.

Although diversified donor coverage may eventually empower local agency, redress Western apathy / paternalism and offer options for developmental and economic innovation,¹⁵ recent shifts also risk accentuating social polarisation, democratic backsliding and state precarity.¹⁶

These regressive dynamics often have gendered inflections and implications. Sahelian populism not only relies on the usual blend of patronage and coercion but exploits ‘militarised masculinities’ as a way of projecting legitimacy. Junta governments in Guinea, Niger, Burkina Faso and Mali lean on ‘big man’ imagery to help offset chronic insecurities, co-opting the vocabulary and pageantry of pan-Africanism – sovereignty, emancipation and revolution – to police social behaviour. Akin to what Rebecca Tapscott calls a ‘paradox of restraint’, the employment of macho-personality cults emphasises both a ‘capacity for capricious [violence] and ... the continued relevance of the rule of law’, consolidating perceptions that ‘manly, heroic, volatile and potentially overwhelming strength is necessary to produce orderly rule over a chaotic society’.¹⁷ This deliberately gendered performance pervades daily life, closing the gap between ‘elites and ordinary people’ and transmitting ‘national-level authoritarian power to the grass roots’.¹⁸ More rudimentary forms of chauvinism are likewise abetted (incidentally or intentionally) by foreign sponsors,¹⁹ enabling outfits such as the Rapid Support Forces to draw on disaffected young (nomadic) men excluded from Sudan’s social hierarchies. By framing conflict as a vehicle for prestige and progression, the group has tied recruitment to martial expressions of rural manhood, normalising sexual and identity-based abuse and generating greater instability.²⁰

Elsewhere, theology offers gendered mechanisms for external influence, with *dawaa* via itinerant preachers, madrassa networks and Saudi charities extending Gulf sway across the Horn, Sahel and West Africa since the 1970s.²¹ Of course, this is not a linear process: from Mogadishu to Maiduguri, Wahhabi discourse has been consumed, contested and reimagined, developing its own momentum and driving heterogeneous

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15. Ken Opalo, ‘What Explains the “Ambition Gap” Among Africa’s (Ruling) Elites?’, *An Africanist Perspective*, 27 January 2025, <www.africanistperspective.com/p/what-explains-the-ambition-gap-among/>, accessed 6 February 2026.
 16. Global Democracy Coalition, ‘When Aid Fades: Impacts and Pathways for the Global Democracy Ecosystem’, November 2025.
 17. Rebecca Tapscott, ‘Militarized Masculinity and the Paradox of Restraint: Mechanisms of Social Control Under Modern Authoritarianism’, *International Affairs* (Vol. 96, No. 6, 2020), p. 1584.
 18. *Ibid.*
 19. Liselotte Mas and Benjamin Roger, ‘The UAE Reorganizes its Arms Supply Network for Sudanese Paramilitaries’, *Le Monde*, 22 March 2026; Matt Spivey, ‘Sudan Takes UAE to World Court over “Complicity in Genocide”’, *BBC News*, 6 March 2025. Abu Dhabi has consistently denied any support for the RSF. See MEE Staff, ‘UAE Issues Rare Denial of “Imperial Ambitions” in Africa’, *Middle East Eye*, 17 August 2026, <www.middleeasteye.net/news/uae-denies-it-has-imperial-ambitions-africa>, accessed 20 August 2026.
 20. Reem Abbas, ‘The Men on the Roundabout’, CMI, 2023, <www.cmi.no/publications/8840-the-men-on-the-roundabout>, accessed 12 February 2026.
 21. Author interview with P08, November 2025; Hesham Alghannam, ‘Influence Abroad: Saudi Arabia Replaces Salafism in its Soft Power Outreach’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2024; Madawi Al-Rasheed (ed.), *Transnational Connections and the Arab Gulf* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

patterns of Islamisation across different contexts. In Burkina Faso and northern Nigeria, for instance, the egalitarian ethic of Salafism offered a language for social change, assuming a localised logic distinct from the intentions of outside powers.²² Nevertheless, the corollary was a proliferation of religious schools, clinics and media outlets, which – when coupled with deliberate efforts to ‘Africanise’ content production through native imams, administrators and businessmen²³ – fundamentally transformed domestic conceptions of morality, cultural norms and women’s rights throughout recipient states.

Even when international interventions are not overtly gendered, they can generate gendered outcomes. To take one example, Beijing’s strategic communications in Africa showcase the efficacy of Chinese governance (and implicitly encourage autocratic behaviours) but rarely reference social issues.²⁴ Instead, they prioritise ‘mutual benefit’, ‘non-interference’ and ‘win-win cooperation’.²⁵ The impact is nonetheless conditioned by demography. In general, women across the continent are more likely to hold negative perceptions of Chinese economic influence than men.²⁶ Driven in part by financial vulnerability and pressure on local livelihoods (especially those tied to informal markets), the statistical significance of this disparity reflects important differences in how external agency is interpreted and experienced.

Although gender may not always be a defining feature of foreign influence, understanding the scope and resonance of these activities, and the implications they raise for host societies, can therefore provide a nuanced account of the opportunities and constraints shaping international engagement, including state threats.

■ The Russia Problem

While these dynamics cut across different actors and activities, Russian interventions perhaps offer the most obvious and immediate examples of gender weaponisation in sub-Saharan contexts. By focusing on Russia as a case study, the subsequent analysis looks at how gender and identity are exploited by external powers, and how a gendered lens can, in turn, provide a more comprehensive understanding of Russian foreign policy.

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22. Michael Jones and Genevieve Kotarska, ‘Crime, Terror and Insecurity in Nigeria: A Bottom-Up Analysis of Local Perceptions’, *Whitehall Report*, 2-25 (June 2025), <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/whitehall-reports/crime-terror-and-insecurity-nigeria>>, accessed 28 January 2026.
 23. Author interview with P05, November 2025.
 24. Analysis of ExTrac data.
 25. Jukka Aukia et al., *Strings Attached: China’s Narrative Influence in Sub-Saharan Africa* (European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, 2025), p. 8. That said, there remains a significant emphasis on Confucian values in domestic discourse.
 26. Ann K Karreth and Johannes Karreth, ‘African Views of Chinese Engagement: The Political Economy of the Gender Gap’, *Politics & Gender* (Vol. 21, No. 2, 2025), pp. 246–74.

Despite the miscellany of state threats in Africa, Russia still captures the Western imagination, with several interviewees considering Moscow a close competitor to the US and China for access and influence.²⁷ Referencing both the rejection of UN General Assembly resolutions on Ukraine and successive Africa Summits (2019 and 2023), many noted the Kremlin's success at clinching military agreements, mining concessions and nuclear energy contracts while exporting 'more arms [to the continent] ... than the US, France and China combined' (until 2023).²⁸ Antipathy towards Europe has also enabled Russia to make 'significant inroads' across the Sahel and the Horn, mimicking patterns in Latin America, while Russian iconography is becoming a staple motif of protests in Nigeria, Niger, Ethiopia and Mali.²⁹

Others contest these interpretations, claiming that the Kremlin's 'lofty trade targets' are implausible,³⁰ its vaccine diplomacy has floundered³¹ and overall investment in Africa remains 'minimal'.³² As Samuel Ramani argues, the 'story ... has been characterised by unfulfilled promises ... consign[ing] Russia to the status of a "virtual great power"'.³³ Described as low-cost and of 'limited impact', Moscow's approach seems – at the very least – eclectic, inconsistent and highly contextual,³⁴ spanning electoral interference (fake monitoring missions and proxy candidates),³⁵ support for 'extraconstitutional' power grabs, and a variety of disinformation operations (more than 80 campaigns across 22 countries).³⁶

Much of the confusion over scope and efficacy stems from conflation. Despite a long genealogy,³⁷ Russian policymaking in Africa is often lumped together with the singular

27. Author interviews with multiple participants including P05, November 2025.

28. Author interviews with multiple participants. This debate is also captured in Samuel Ramani, *Russia in Africa: Resurgent Great Power or Bellicose Pretender?* (London: Hurst, 2024), p. 1.

29. Olayinka Ajala, 'Russian Flags Waved During Nigeria Protests: Why it's a Cause for Concern', *The Conversation*, 19 August 2024, <www.theconversation.com/russian-flags-waved-during-nigeria-protests-why-its-a-cause-for-concern-236611>, accessed 23 July 2025; Ronald Lwere Kato, 'Why are Protestors in Ethiopia and Mali Waving Russian Flags?', *AfricaNews*, 13 August 2024, <www.africanews.com/2021/05/31/why-are-protestors-in-ethiopia-and-mali-waving-russian-flags/>, accessed 23 July 2025; Aoife McCullough, 'Why Are People in West Africa Waving Russian Flags?', *Washington Post*, 28 October 2022.

30. Ramani, *Russia in Africa*.

31. Steven Gruz, Samuel Ramani and Cayley Clifford, 'Russia in Africa: Who is Courting Whom?', *South African Journal of International Affairs* (Vol. 29, No. 4, 2022), pp. 401–05; Matthew T Page, 'Nigeria's Ambivalence to Russia's COVID-19 Diplomacy', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 January 2022, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2022/01/nigerias-ambivalence-to-russias-covid-19-diplomacy>>, accessed 25 August 2026.

32. Emily Ferris and Christopher Hockey, 'Russia's Foreign Policymaking in Africa Since the Invasion of Ukraine', RUSI Newsbrief (4 August 2023), <www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/rusi-newsbrief/russias-foreign-policymaking-africa-invasion-ukraine>, accessed 27 January 2026.

33. Ramani, *Russia in Africa*, p. 2.

34. Author interview with P09, November 2025.

35. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Tracking Russian Interference to Derail Democracy in Africa', updated 8 May 2024, <www.africacenter.org/spotlight/russia-interference-undermine-democracy-africa/>, accessed 25 January 2026.

36. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 'Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa', 13 March 2024, <www.africacenter.org/spotlight/mapping-a-surge-of-disinformation-in-africa/>, accessed 14 January 2026.

37. Author interview with P01, November 2025.

experience of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Wagner Group.³⁸ Coalescing along similar lines to the Slavonic Corps in 2014, the enterprise was framed as a PMSC but relied on state contracts, logistics and funding from the outset.³⁹ It also benefited from concurrent efforts by Russia's military intelligence service (GRU/GU) and Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) – via Afrokom – to extend the Kremlin's influence further south, transposing mercenary networks from Syria to Sudan, Libya, Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR).⁴⁰ Fronting what Jack Watling, Oleskandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds dub 'regime survival packages',⁴¹ Wagner offered a supposedly deniable conduit for the pursuit of Moscow's strategic goals – displacing Western interests, controlling resources and reducing Russia's vulnerability to sanctions⁴² – while assuming an ad hoc, commercialised logic. 'Advanced scouting teams' of 'geologists, linguists, sociologists, pollsters, social media marketers and professional gunslingers' scoped new 'business opportunities', exchanging arms for cash, minerals and/or preferential terms for Prigozhin's firms.⁴³ Although coverage proved uneven (from near 'state capture' in the CAR to pilot ventures in Niger and setbacks in Madagascar and Mozambique),⁴⁴ a matrix of corporate structures gradually served to enmesh Wagner – and, by extension, Russia – into licit and illicit economies across the continent.⁴⁵

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and Prigozhin's mutiny in 2023, much of the group's infrastructure was either hived off by competitors or reconfigured as the GRU-run 'Expeditionary / Africa Corps'. The proliferation of other PMSCs – Redut and Convoy – diversified engagement, creating a 'military-business complex' in lieu of Wagner's near-monopoly, scaled up to the state level and supplying troops with support from the Russian Ministry of Defence. Yet, the expediency and profligacy defining this 'Kalashnikov diplomacy' has persisted, with elites in 'perennially unstable countries' renting Russian muscle as a convenient and (initially) cheap method of force projection⁴⁶ – arrangements already extending into littoral West Africa.

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38. For more on the Wagner Group, see Jack Watling, Oleskandr V Danylyuk and Nick Reynolds, 'The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine, 2022–24', RUSI, February 2024, <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/special-resources/threat-russias-unconventional-warfare-beyond-ukraine-2022-24>>, accessed 14 January 2026.
 39. *Ibid.*; Olivia Allison et al., 'Wagner's Business Model in Syria and Africa: Profit and Patronage', *RUSI Occasional Papers* (February 2025), <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/occasional-papers/wagners-business-model-syria-and-africa-profit-and-patronage>>, accessed 6 January 2026.
 40. Watling, Danylyuk and Reynolds, 'The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine'.
 41. An admixture of military assistance, financial incentives and diplomatic cover, accompanied by the services of 'political technologists'. See *ibid.*, p. 23.
 42. *Ibid.*
 43. Candace Rondeaux, *Putin's Sledgehammer: The Wagner Group and Russia's Collapse into Mercenary Chaos* (New York, NY: Hachette, 2025), p. 241.
 44. Julia Stanyard, Thierry Vircoulon and Julian Rademeyer, 'The Grey Zone: Russia's Military, Mercenary and Criminal Engagement in Africa', Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI-TOC), February 2023.
 45. Encompassing a raft of direct services and satellite industries, Wagner's portfolio spanned logging, mining, catering, close protection, military training, customs and tax collection, real estate, breweries / distilleries, production companies and media outlets. Allison et al., 'Wagner's Business Model in Syria and Africa'.
 46. GI-TOC, 'After the Fall: Russian Influence on Africa's Illicit Economies Post-Wagner', February 2025, p. 36.

Consequently, academic attention is often fixed on the Kremlin's transactional dynamics and material motivations. However, this risks overlooking other variables that may also condition Russian agency, from soft power ambitions and 'normative resistance to Western unilateralism', to interests in 'international government'.⁴⁷ Although the primary drivers of the new 'Entente Roscolonial' appear to be economic and geopolitical,⁴⁸ the mechanics and implications are far more diverse, as is the local appeal of Russian largesse and partnership.

Russia and the 'Anti-Gender' Ecosystem

Gender can be a useful prism for expounding this analysis, both because of the salient role of anti-gender politics in furnishing (if not defining) Moscow's strategy, and because it illuminates that strategy's shortcomings and the impacts and externalities for recipient societies.

Russian stakeholders often conflate foreign policy, national branding and domestic conservatism given the explicit patterns of 're-masculinisation' – for example, an emphasis on virility, authority and self-reliance – baked into Vladimir Putin's personality cult.⁴⁹ By manufacturing a 'militarised mythology' that prioritises family, *velikoderzhavnost* ('great-poweriness') and the 'hyper-visualisation of patriotic masculinity', the Kremlin has deliberately tied regime legitimacy to heteronormative, highly patriarchal ideas.⁵⁰ This not only normalises (and relies on) gender inequality, homophobia and social fragmentation within Russia (and other post-Soviet spaces), but also translates into what Anna Kuteleva calls 'norm antipreneurship' at the international level, with Moscow resisting Western notions of human and LGBTQIA+ rights, and (liberal) feminism.⁵¹

Under the idiom of 'traditional values' (in reality, a pseudo-traditional reinvention), Russia has exploited this moral agenda as an 'instrument of manipulation' to suppress local criticism while mobilising foreign support.⁵² By casting Europe as an arena for 'sexual and gender permissiveness and perversion' – 'Gayropa' – Moscow effectively bifurcates between the West and 'the Rest', strengthening ties with like-minded, conservative-oriented states and social groups. Crucially, it can also frame itself as *the* defender of anti-gender, pro-family convention (as defined by Russia), fusing anti-

47. Ramani, *Russia in Africa*, p. 5.

48. Watling, Danylyuk and Reynolds, 'The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine'.

49. Kuteleva, 'Gender-Blind and Anti-Feminist'.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 153; Petr Kratochvil and Míla O'Sullivan, 'A War Like No Other: Russia's Invasion of Ukraine as a War on Gender Order', *European Security* (Vol. 32, No. 3, 2023), p. 356.

51. Kuteleva, 'Gender-Blind and Anti-Feminist', p. 149; author interview with P02, November 2025.

52. *Ibid.*

Western, post-modern and pro-Russian sentiments together.⁵³ This is not just discursive – erasing the ‘very term gender from the diplomatic vocabulary’ – but practical: ‘ridiculing’ female leaders, blocking intersectional measures at the UN and justifying the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁵⁴ The corollary is a blurring of conceptual boundaries between soft power projection, cultural outreach and harder state threat methodologies. Social norms are deliberately weaponised, with over 20 references to ‘traditional values’ in Russia’s 2021 Federal National Security Strategy,⁵⁵ and similar prominence in the 2023 Foreign Policy Concept.

These dynamics derive, in part, from the polycracy of Russian governance. Within a ‘patronal’ system defined by cronyism as much as bureaucratic hierarchy,⁵⁶ competing stakeholders create space for multiple narratives. As Marlene Laruelle notes, Russia’s moral conservatism has been crafted and contested by various ‘groups of ideological entrepreneurs who have room to act, to determine their preferences and cultivate their own networks ... work[ing] in permanent negotiation and tension with [rival] groups and the presidential [regime] itself’.⁵⁷ As a result, the focus and framing have always been diverse, with different actors prioritising discrete ‘aspects of the “natural gender order”’ in service of the same ‘defensive nativism’.⁵⁸ While Putin generally references abstract terms like ‘Satanism’ or ‘degradation and degeneracy’,⁵⁹ lower-level functionaries tend to be more specific, with spokespeople in the Foreign Ministry ‘vigorously’ addressing any deviation from traditional ‘gender norms’ and identities.⁶⁰ Taken together, such themes nevertheless show a ‘compact picture of the Russian fight for a normal (illiberal) world’,⁶¹ one which has shifted in recent years from ‘breed[ing] passivity’ to ‘mobilis[ing] popular support for the war’ in Ukraine.⁶²

At the same time, this content also stems from ‘culture wars’ in the West, initially fronted by the Vatican and, later, the US evangelical right.⁶³ While both Putin and the

53. Graeme Reid, ‘Russia, Homophobia and the Battle for “Traditional Values”’, Human Rights Watch, 17 May 2023, <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/05/17/russia-homophobia-and-battle-traditional-values>>, accessed 14 January 2026.

54. Kuteleva, ‘Gender-Blind and Anti-Feminist’, p. 158; Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*.

55. Emil Edenborg, ‘Anti-Gender Politics as Discourse Coalitions: Russia’s Domestic and International Promotion of “Traditional Values”’, *Problems of Post-Communism* (Vol. 70, No. 2, 2023), pp. 175–84.

56. Henry Hale, ‘Russian Patronal Politics Beyond Putin’, *Daedalus* (Vol. 146, No. 2, 2017), pp. 30–40.

57. Mariene Laruelle, ‘Putin’s Regime and the Ideological Market: A Difficult Balancing Game’, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 16 March 2017, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2017/03/putins-regime-and-the-ideological-market-a-difficult-balancing-game>>, accessed 17 September 2025. Rather than a ‘carefully designed plan’, these ‘developments are better described as the outcome of loosely coordinated initiatives and policies, all of which ... responded to the Kremlin’s idea to make conservatism the ideological foundation of the Russian state’. See Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*, p. 145.

58. Kuteleva, ‘Gender-Blind and Anti-Feminist’, p. 161.

59. Kratochvil and O’Sullivan, ‘A War Like No Other’, p. 352.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 353.

61. *Ibid.*

62. *The Economist*, ‘The Putin Show: How the War in Ukraine Appears to Russians’, 17 May 2022.

63. Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*.

Moscow Patriarchate package these values within a ‘civilisational struggle’ that defines the *Russky Mir* (Russian World), external influences have reshaped the ‘self-understanding’ of Russian Orthodoxy and, by extension, the ‘traditionalism’ characterising ‘Russian domestic and foreign politics’ since the 1990s.⁶⁴ The Kremlin’s various agencies, acolytes and affiliates therefore fit within a wider constellation of social movements, politicians, activists, media outlets, governments and civic organisations, where ‘gender’ – as a proxy for ‘demographic decline, moral corruption ... the onslaught of multiculturalism, and in some contexts ... a colonial imposition by liberal elites’⁶⁵ – has become the ‘symbolic glue unifying different rightist traditions’.⁶⁶ This increasingly heterodox coalition spans different geographies,⁶⁷ based in part on shared illiberalism, convenience and cash,⁶⁸ with much of the strategy, language, methods and capital flowing from the north to the Global South.⁶⁹ Although the Russian state, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and assorted oligarchs (including Konstantin Malofeev, a nationalist businessman and media mogul)⁷⁰ are powerful stakeholders, US / Canadian / European-based pro-family think tanks, lobbyists, foundations and PR companies rank among the leading financiers and conveners.⁷¹ The outcome has been a proliferation / professionalisation of ‘moral conservatism’,⁷² as outfits like the International Organisation of the Family / World Congress of Families (WCF), CitizenGO and Agenda Europe reportedly fulfil specific ‘nodal’ functions within

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64. Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, *The Moralists International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2022), p. 3.
 65. Elżbieta Korolczuk, Agnieszka Graff and Johanna Kantola, ‘Gender Danger: Mapping a Decade of Research on Anti-Gender Politics’, *Journal of Gender Studies* (Vol. 34, No. 5, 2025), p. 621.
 66. Eszter Kováts and Maari Pöim (eds), *Gender as Symbolic Glue: The Position and Role of Conservative and Far Right Parties in the Anti-Gender Mobilizations in Europe* (Foundation for European Progressive Studies, 2015).
 67. These groupings – dubbed ‘Baptist-Burqa networks’ – often seem contradictory, with US Christian right entities collaborating with conservative Islamist organisations in ‘global governance arenas’. See Clifford Bob, *The Global Right Wing and the Clash of World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
 68. Lydia Namubiru and Soita Khatondi Wepukhulu, ‘Exclusive: US Christian Right Pours more than \$50m into Africa’, *Open Democracy*, 29 October 2020, <www.opendemocracy.net/en/africa-us-christian-right-50m/>, accessed 10 February 2026.
 69. Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy, ‘The Coloniality of Anti-Gender Politics’, OHCHR Submission: Report on Colonialism and SOGI, UN Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), May 2023, <<https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/cfi-subm/2308/subm-colonialism-sexual-orientation-un-ios-unrisd-input-1.pdf>>, accessed 25 August 2026.
 70. Holger Roonemaa, Martin Laine and Michael Weiss, ‘Exclusive: Russia Backs Europe’s Far Right’, *New Lines Magazine*, 24 March 2022, <www.newlinesmag.com/reportage/exclusive-russia-backs-europes-far-right/>, accessed 6 August 2026.
 71. Author interview with P05, November 2025; European Parliamentary Forum for Sexual and Reproductive Rights (EPF), ‘The Next Wave: How Religious Extremism is Regaining Power’, July 2026, <www.epfweb.org/node/1147>, accessed 28 July 2026.
 72. Haley McEwen and Lata Narayanaswamy, ‘The International Anti-Gender Movement: Understanding the Rise of Anti-Gender Discourses in the Context of Development, Human Rights and Social Protection’, UNRISD Working Paper No. 2023-06, May 2023 <<https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/278575>>, accessed 25 August 2026.

a broader ‘anti-gender movement’.⁷³ The specific configuration of campaigns and networks may vary, but they often feature a ‘common pattern of mobilization [alongside] a shared discourse [and] repertoires of action’,⁷⁴ spawning everything from demonstrations, legislation and interventions in education (book bans, pedagogy and knowledge production) to ‘moral panics’ over the ‘supposed threat of “gender ideology” to national sovereignty, children’s safety, and the sanctity of marriage’.⁷⁵

Russia Within Africa’s Anti-Gender / Anti-Rights System

In sub-Saharan Africa, this advocacy has translated into a densely packed, highly coordinated donor market. Investigative reporting suggests that US Christian groups distributed around \$280 million in ‘dark money’ contributions between 2007 and 2020, with \$54 million allocated to preventing / curtailing sexual and reproductive rights, comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) and LGBTQIA+ inclusion.⁷⁶ The Global Philanthropy Project argues that it may be more, with 11 US organisations allegedly disbursing \$1 billion.⁷⁷ Many of these US entities, along with others from Europe, exploit conferences, legal advocacy and lobbying to enmesh themselves within African judicial, theological and political structures, sponsoring events that appear organic but rely on foreign funding and ideological frameworks (alongside toolkits, training sessions, de-signing campaigns, legislative templates and ‘moral narratives’ adapted to specific contexts).⁷⁸ Others have conjured up ‘copy-and-paste coalitions’ to drive national reforms.⁷⁹ Crucially, their pro-family discourse is also inherently malleable, prescribing ‘heteronormative and patriarchal arrangements and power relations’ for a

73. Among several ‘nodal organisations’ identified by Ayoub and Stoeckl, the WCF ‘acts as a convenor’, while CitizenGO ‘communicates and creates a shared agenda across different linguistic and cultural contexts’. See Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*, p. 98. The role of Agenda Europe is outlined in Neil Datta, ‘Restoring the Natural Order’, European Parliamentary Forum on Population and Development, April 2018.

74. McEwen and Narayanaswamy, ‘The International Anti-Gender Movement’, p. 4.

75. Korolczuk, Graff and Kantola, ‘Gender Danger’, p. 622.

76. Claire Provost and Nandini Nair Archer, ‘Revealed: \$280m “Dark Money” Spent by US Christian Right Groups Globally’, *Open Democracy*, 27 October 2020, <www.opendemocracy.net/en/trump-us-christian-spending-global-revealed/>, accessed 11 February 2026.

77. Global Philanthropy Project, ‘Meet the Moment: A Call for Progressive Philanthropic Response to the Anti-Gender Movement’, 2020, p. 3, <www.globalphilanthropyproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Meet-the-Moment-2020-English.pdf>, accessed 11 February 2026.

78. Interviewees placed these evangelical networks on a similar footing to state actors in Africa due to their scale, coordination, financing and depth of political penetration. They effectively function as ‘sovereign actors’ in their own right. Author interview with P05, November 2025.

79. Haley McEwen and Ann E Towns, ‘An Anti-Gender Rhizome: Unearthing Transnational Anti-Genderism in Africa’, *Journal of Gender Studies* (Vol. 34, No. 5, 2025), p. 649.

raft of social ills.⁸⁰ Across Kenya, Cameroon, South Africa and Zambia, these inputs often (somewhat ironically) assume nationalist inflections, casting the nuclear family as the ‘only antidote for protecting the sovereignty of African [states]’.⁸¹ By doing so, domestic actors effectively ignore the ‘European origins of colonial laws that ... criminalise [LGBTQIA+] behaviour and expression’,⁸² while imitating (and occasionally cohering with) the methodology of transnational Salafi networks.⁸³

Although it is important to disaggregate state, corporate and civic agency, particularly in relation to the US, such activities have increasingly converged under recent Republican administrations. After initiating the Geneva Consensus Declaration (GCD) in his first term, President Donald Trump is ‘back at the forefront of manufacturing alternative anti-gender norms ... as evidenced by the US Mission to the UN hosting a round-table discussion on the GCD at the margins of the 2025 [Commission on Population and Development]’.⁸⁴ This conforms with recommendations from the Heritage Foundation’s ‘Mandate for Leadership 2025: The Conservative Promise’ (Project 2025), which called for ‘all foreign policy engagements’ proposed or expanded under Presidents Joe Biden or Barack Obama to ‘be aligned with the [GCD]’.⁸⁵ Former officials similarly promote related schemes such as Protego, a high-impact, low-cost programme to operationalise anti-abortion measures across multiple countries, including Uganda, Burkina Faso and Guatemala.⁸⁶ With diplomatic outreach evident in Zambia, Chad, South Sudan and Mali,⁸⁷ local campaigners are already expressing concern that Trump’s re-election provides ‘all the anti-rights groups new energy, new power’.⁸⁸

Against this backdrop, pro-Kremlin interventions operate within a conducive, if congested, ecosystem. Several Russian organisations are tied to the core WCF coalition – WCF Russia, the Russian Demographic Society, the Sanctity of Motherhood Foundation, the Patriarchal Commission on Family Matters and Protection of Motherhood and Childhood, and the pro-life Orthodox association Zhizn – which in turn provides access to possible sub-Saharan partners.⁸⁹ For instance, WCF events not only receive delegations from Kenya, Cameroon, Malawi, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia, but also host influential entities like the Foundation for African Cultural Heritage in Nigeria, which is itself an umbrella NGO for other initiatives.⁹⁰ Conferences

80. Haley McEwen, *The U.S. Christian Right and Pro-Family Politics in 21st Century Africa* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), p. 25.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

82. Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*, p. 179.

83. Author interview with P05, November 2025.

84. EPF, ‘The Next Wave’.

85. Ipas, ‘PROTEGO: Operationalizing the Geneva Consensus Declaration’, 2024, <www.ipas.org/resource/protego-operationalizing-the-geneva-consensus-declaration/>, accessed 3 March 2026.

86. *Ibid.*; EPF, ‘The Next Wave’.

87. Ipas, ‘PROTEGO’.

88. *The Economist*, ‘Meet Africa’s Ascendant Right’, 22 May 2025.

89. Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*, p. 114.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

in Nairobi, Abuja, Lagos, Lilongwe, Cape Town, Kampala and Accra, alongside those arranged by other ‘network-weaving institutions’,⁹¹ consequently offer venues for interaction among a range of different actors.

Additionally, Russia has developed relationships through numerous multilateral bodies (for example, the Friends of the Family Group, launched in 2014) and ecumenical outreach. The ROC opened more than 200 African parishes between December 2021 and July 2023 alone,⁹² with proselytisation accompanied by a suite of investments, education services and infrastructure projects.⁹³ Although its reach remains limited, the Church – and Holy Synod – appears to be an increasingly important relay for reiterating (or, in some cases, defining) conservative and anti-Western sentiments across the continent, a status confirmed by the creation of the Patriarchal Exarchate of Africa in 2021. Nested in a crowded – but coordinated⁹⁴ – web of influencers (PMSCs, news outlets, NGOs, ‘Russian Houses’, local cut-outs, mil-bloggers and content creators from the ‘Russosphere’),⁹⁵ the ROC’s approach reflects a concerted shift in Russian agency from ‘learning’ to ‘doing the culture wars’.⁹⁶ This may be a logical outcome of well-established trends, but the ramp-up is also a product of necessity following Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁹⁷ As Kristina Stoeckl argues, ‘[Moscow] needs an opportunity to gain new allies’.⁹⁸ This has led to various crowdfunding campaigns for the translation of Orthodox literature into regional dialects, recruiting students into ROC seminaries, and supporting embassies, companies and pro-Russian entities (such as the African Initiative Association) in the export of ‘traditional values’.⁹⁹ Reports cite ‘particular influence’ in Ethiopia (with satellite efforts across Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda and Madagascar), where “mutual understanding” and “shared values” are emphasised regularly at high-level meetings between the ROC and ... Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo

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91. Hélène Barthélemy, ‘How the World Congress of Families Serves Russian Orthodox Political Interests’, Southern Poverty Law Center, 16 May 2018, <www.splcenter.org/resources/hatewatch/how-world-congress-families-serves-russian-orthodox-political-interests/>, accessed 16 February 2026.
 92. Charles A Ray, ‘Russia’s Influence in Africa: The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 15 October 2024, <www.fpri.org/article/2024/10/africa-russian-orthodox-church/>, accessed 9 March 2026. In 2025, Patriarch Kirill suggested further expansion, referencing 270 clergy and 332 parishes spread across 36 African countries. ExTrac data analysis.
 93. The Russian Orthodox Church has ‘built schools in [the] CAR, Kenya, and Tanzania, runs orphanages and hospitals, drills wells, and provides food and clothes to vulnerable communities’. See African Digital Democracy Observatory (ADDO), ‘Spiritual Spear’, *Medium*, 28 February 2025, <<https://disinfo.africa/spiritual-spear-9d0b91b750ca>>, accessed 10 March 2026.
 94. Author interviews with P02 and P10, November and December 2025.
 95. Grigor Atanesian, ‘Russia in Africa: How Disinformation Operations Target the Continent’, *BBC News*, 1 February 2023.
 96. Stoeckl and Uzlaner, *The Moralism International*, p. 11.
 97. Will Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm: Countering Russian Hybrid Warfare in Africa’, European Council on Foreign Relations, 22 October 2025, <www.ecfr.eu/publication/the-bear-and-the-bot-farm-countering-russian-hybrid-warfare-in-africa/>, accessed 10 March 2026.
 98. Quoted in Nicholas Bariyo and Gabriele Steinhauser, ‘Russia and U.S. Religious Conservatives See Common Foe in Africa: Gay Rights’, *Wall Street Journal*, 22 September 2024.
 99. Author interview with P01, November 2025; ADDO, ‘Spiritual Spear’.

Church'.¹⁰⁰ That said, the Church's activism – like that of the Kremlin more broadly – should not be understood as a push for mass conversions, so much as the cultivation of elite networks to reinforce state policy and gain formal recognition.¹⁰¹ As one expert noted, the strategy remains somewhat improvised and superficial. Although a handful of baptisms receive significant publicity in Moscow and help to bolster Russian narrative-building,¹⁰² the ROC's limited institutional capacity and resources (covered in part by the State Atomic Energy Corporation or 'Rosatom') mean that even this relatively small uptake is stretching the clergy's ability to satisfy local expectations.¹⁰³

Accordingly, Russia's use of social discourse, anti-gender legislation and pro-family norms needs to be understood on several, overlapping levels: as a refraction of domestic politics, a mechanism for regime security, a proxy for agenda-setting and geostrategic influence, and a symptom (and propellant) of wider 'moral conservative' advocacy. As a result, the weaponisation of gender and identity – as explored below – forms one (significant) part of a far more complex logic that blends soft power, cultural diplomacy and conventional vectors of state threats together and raises important implications for those trying to counter Russian disruption in Africa.

100. Brown, 'The Bear and the Bot Farm'. Similar points were made in author interview with P11, December 2025.

101. Author interviews with P01, P02 and P11, November and December 2025.

102. Author interview with P02, November 2025.

103. Author interview with P11, December 2025.

Gendered Vectors / Resonance of Russian Intervention in Africa

Far from being an incidental element of Russia's foreign policy, anti-gender politics and the instrumentalisation of gender offer strategic vectors for influence across sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁰⁴ The mechanics of Russian operations may often appear transactional. However, the conflation of identity, sovereignty, morality and social grievances with anti-Westernism can afford the Kremlin's brokers the leverage to pull together 'value-based coalitions' in pursuit of wider geopolitical, geo-economic and ideological aims.¹⁰⁵ Interrogating the gendered inflections and implications of these interventions can subsequently help to explain their logic, functionality, resonance and impact, offering a level of nuance previously missed in both explorations of Russia–Africa engagement and understandings of state threat issues more broadly.

The following assessment examines three vectors exploited by Russia in sub-Saharan Africa that occupy much of the existing literature: information operations, legislation / lawfare and paramilitary violence. Other issues, including complicity in illicit markets, are referenced where possible but require further attention. Although each activity is presented discretely, they overlap in practice and should be situated within Russia's larger playbook in order to appreciate how different techniques are applied in combination and sequence.

Russian Information Operations

As a cheap, inherently scalable method of influence, information operations are perhaps the most obvious and pervasive state threat vector in sub-Saharan Africa.

104. Author interview with P02, November 2025.

105. Author interview with P01, October 2025.

While a litany of ‘cyber troops’ manipulate public discourse,¹⁰⁶ Russia appears to have a particularly sophisticated set-up, conducting interventions across multiple domains that range from small villages and religious enclaves to institutional cooperation.¹⁰⁷ Although coverage may diverge depending on existing linkages, colonial histories and social dynamics, these activities involve cohesive, well-organised circuits of stakeholders levying different tones, frames and approaches.¹⁰⁸ Reflecting on the breadth and heterogeneity of such networks, Maxime Audinet, a Russia specialist, provides a useful typology but stresses the coordination and – at times – fluidity between different categories:¹⁰⁹

- **Official institutions:** Russian ministries, federal agencies (for example, Rossotrudnichestvo) and cultural centres (Russian Houses),¹¹⁰ diplomatic services, intelligence units, the ROC, the Russkiy Mir Foundation and state-sponsored (or -owned) media enterprises.¹¹¹
- **Informal, ‘ad hoc-cratic’ or pseudo-state bodies:** the Wagner Group and successor organisations like the Africa Corps,¹¹² philanthropic and academic entities, civic groups and surrogate NGOs (for instance, AFRIC and African Initiative [AfI]).
- **Foreign third parties:** a lattice of troll farms, disposable bot factories and local brokers – from political figures and journalists to activists and social influencers – driven by a variety of financial, ideological, personal and/or opportunistic motivations.

Building on past informational activities, this programming has metastasised considerably since 2022, ‘extending into Anglophone and Lusophone spheres’, spanning ‘thousands of online channels, TV deals and bot accounts’, and leveraging local languages (including Swahili, Hausa, Amharic and Arabic).¹¹³ Although such content is not confined to Russian input – disinformation campaigns, which quadrupled between 2022 and 2024, have also reportedly been traced back to China, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, among others – the Africa Center for Strategic Studies has attributed up to

106. Emanuela C Del Re, ‘Russian Disinformation in Africa and the Sahel in the Post-Truth Era’, *Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali* (Vol. 89, No. 3/4, 2022), pp. 554–55.

107. Author interview with P02, November 2025.

108. Author interview with P13, December 2025.

109. Maxime Audinet, « En quête de « désoccidentalisation »: la stratégie d’influence de la Russie en Afrique subsaharienne » [‘In Search of “De-Westernisation”: Russia’s Influence Strategy in Sub-Saharan Africa’], *Les Etudes du CERI* (No. 277–78, 2025).

110. ‘At least eight Russia Houses have opened across the continent since 2024, mainly in Francophone West Africa, offering grants and programming that often doubles as low-level propaganda for domestic consumption’. See Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’.

111. Isaac Antwi-Boasiako, ‘The Quest for Influence: Examining Russia’s Public Diplomacy Mechanisms in Africa’, *South African Journal of International Affairs* (Vol. 29, No. 4, 2022), pp. 463–82.

112. Antonio Giustozzi, ‘What Next for Wagner’s Information Operations?’, *RUSI Commentary*, 23 September 2024, <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-next-wagners-information-operations>>, accessed 15 January 2026.

113. Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’; Davey Alba and Sheera Frenkel, ‘Russia Tests New Disinformation Tactics in Africa to Expand Influence’, *New York Times*, 30 October 2019.

40% of it to Moscow, with much of the focus being on the Sahel.¹¹⁴ Scholars tend to delineate between public and covert operations, but these can often function as mutually reinforcing tracks, ‘enabling [the Kremlin] to flood Africa’s digital space with narratives that advance its interest – or those of government and elite groups willing to pay’.¹¹⁵

These efforts employ an array of mechanisms and methodologies, with state-funded conglomerates – RT, Sputnik and TASS – opening new offices, training local staff, and pursuing syndication to lower costs, expand their consumer base and improve the authenticity of Russian outputs.¹¹⁶ Research cites discreet partnerships and cooperation agreements with dozens of regional entities,¹¹⁷ stretching from ‘established news agencies’ to the “sensationalist yellow press”, content aggregators and websites developing an “alternative” and counter-hegemonic editorial stance’.¹¹⁸ Elsewhere, Wagner has rented outlets wholesale, sustaining the CAR’s Lengo Songo radio station (through Prigozhin’s mining subsidiary, Lobaye Invest), propping up Ndjoni Sango¹¹⁹ and sponsoring a constellation of media personalities, ‘digital entrepreneurs’, shell companies and bot farms to ‘push Russia-related [messaging] into African feeds and harass or discredit critics’.¹²⁰ Often this involves the coordinated infiltration of domestic platforms like Nigeria’s Nairaland, exploiting lax moderation to amplify favourable narratives, distort facts and promote violence, as became evident after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.¹²¹ At the same time, Internet Research Agency (IRA) operations have been identified in Ghana, South Africa, the CAR and Libya, with Facebook accounts proliferating across Madagascar, Mozambique, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and Sudan.¹²² Reflecting on these developments, a fact-checking group in Mali conceded, ‘Russian fake news is produced on an industrial scale.... The prowess ... is undeniable’.¹²³ Crucially, much of this discourse has been

114. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘Mapping a Surge of Disinformation in Africa’.

115. Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’.

116. *Ibid.*; Antonio Giustozzi, Joana de Deus Pereira and David Lewis, ‘Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?’, *Whitehall Report*, 4-24 (January 2025), <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/whitehall-reports/did-wagner-succeed-eyes-its-african-and-middle-eastern-clients>>, accessed 16 January 2026.

117. Reports suggest more than 30 contracts with local TV stations alone. See *The Economist*, ‘China and Russia are Deploying Powerful New Weapons: Ideas’, 15 May 2025.

118. Audinet, « En quête de « désoccidentalisation » » [‘In Search of “De-Westernisation”’].

119. Morgane Le Cam, ‘How the Russian Propaganda Machine Works in Africa’, *Le Monde*, 31 July 2023.

120. Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’. Other examples include Afrique Média TV, Radio Révolution Panafricaine and the websites Mali Actu, Maliweb and Malijet. See Giustozzi, de Deus Pereira and Lewis, ‘Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?’.

121. ADDO, ‘Foreign Propaganda Thrives on Nigerian Forum Nairaland’, *Medium*, 9 July 2025, <<https://disinfo.africa/foreign-propaganda-thrives-on-nigerian-forum-nairaland-045236a20397>>, accessed 22 January 2026.

122. Eren Ersozoglu, ‘Troll-on-Troll: Russian-French Cyber Information War in Africa’, Grey Dynamics, 15 April 2021, <www.greydynamics.com/troll-on-troll-russian-french-cyber-information-war-in-africa/>, accessed 22 January 2026.

123. Quoted in Elian Peltier, Adam Satariano and Lynsey Chutel, ‘How Putin Became a Hero on African TV’, *New York Times*, 13 April 2023.

‘Africanised’, using local agents hired through AFRIC to ‘multiply’ messaging.¹²⁴ As one expert explained: ‘You can’t convince ... audiences ... just by speaking their language. You need to speak [in] their tone.’¹²⁵

Other approaches to information operations are discernible in the work of the Africa Corps-run AfI, which cuts across Mali and Burkina Faso via a string of bureaux and local franchises.¹²⁶ Framing itself as a ‘news agency’ with a focus on ‘neo-colonial legacies’, AfI’s campaigns routinely recycle old Soviet conspiracies about Western ‘pharmaceutical corporations [and] health-focused philanthropic efforts’.¹²⁷ Crucially, however, they now combine social outreach and the use of technology (video games and apps) with various ‘soft’ power programmes, including journalism schools,¹²⁸ ‘press tours’ and cultural events (sport tournaments, first aid workshops and graffiti festivals).¹²⁹ By embedding in neighbourhoods and collaborating with African influencers, AfI can seemingly germinate and spread ideas organically, building trust and cultivating community buy-in as part of a more convincing process for content laundering.¹³⁰

Expedient Narratives?

The script and style of Russian interventions appear transient, contextual and ad hoc, reaching for ‘whatever ideology, whatever technology and whatever emotions may be useful’.¹³¹ That said, many of the underlying themes slot within a coherent meta-narrative based on ‘conflicting / competing values’, anti-colonialism and ‘memory diplomacy’.¹³² European hypocrisy / rapacity is often set against Soviet legacies,¹³³ while anti-imperialism, de-Westernisation, ‘messianic multipolarity’ and modernisation offer

124. Michael Weiss and Pierre Vaux, ‘The Company You Keep: Yevgeny Prigozhin’s Influence Operations in Africa’, Free Russia Foundation, 2020.

125. Gretel Kahn, ‘A Kremlin Mouthpiece at the Heart of Africa: How Afrique Média Helps Putin Court Audiences in Their Own Language’, Reuters Institute, 19 September 2023, <<https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/news/kremlin-mouthpiece-heart-africa-how-afrique-media-helps-putin-court-audiences-their-own>>, accessed 3 December 2025.

126. A ‘new Russian-Burkinabe association, bearing the same name and a logo similar to that of African Initiative’ was launched in Ouagadougou. See Morgane Le Cam and Thomas Eydoux, ‘African Initiative, the New Bridgehead for Russian Propaganda in Africa’, *Le Monde*, 9 March 2024.

127. *Ibid.*

128. VIGINUM, ‘African Initiative: From Public Diplomacy to Covert Influence Operations’, June 2025.

129. Chiagozie Nowonwu et al., ‘War “Tour”, Football and Graffiti: How Russia is Trying to Influence Africa’, *BBC News*, 10 September 2024.

130. Ignacio Fuente Cobo, ‘The Russian Obsession: Disinformation and Propaganda in the Sahel’, IEEE Analysis Paper No. 42/2025, Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, 4 June 2025, <www.defensa.gob.es/documents/2073105/2595202/la_obsesion_rusa_2025_dieeea42_eng.pdf>, accessed 7 January 2026.

131. Anne Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc. The Dictators Who Run the World* (London: Penguin Books, 2024), p. 97.

132. Jose Caballero, ‘How Russia is Fighting for Allies Among the Brics Countries Using “Memory Diplomacy”’, *The Conversation*, 25 August 2023, <www.theconversation.com/how-russia-is-fighting-for-allies-among-the-brics-countries-using-memory-diplomacy-212130>, accessed 8 January 2026. Similar descriptions of ‘memory politics’ and ‘value alliances’ were given by multiple interviewees.

133. Author interview with P12, December 2025.

boundless tropes that Russian messaging can mimic, co-opt or complement.¹³⁴ Much of this material is gender-coded – at least subliminally – to bridge (or assimilate) different identities, grievances and priorities (both global and domestic) and elicit immediate emotional engagement.¹³⁵ By deliberately conflating progressive social policies – LGBTQIA+ rights, same-sex marriage, feminism and human rights regimes – with cultural colonialism,¹³⁶ the Kremlin has framed its own promotion of family ethics and religious conservatism at the international level as a defence of African sovereignty.¹³⁷ Buoyed by an assortment of ‘anti-gender’ stakeholders who present heteropatriarchal norms as a means of preserving and promoting African national interests, Moscow can therefore blend its advocacy for ‘traditional values’ with an anti-imperial subtext, providing expedient methods for tapping into local agitation. Although the prominence of these ideas varies – narratives in Senegal tend to stress the benefits of pre-colonial heritage, while non-interference and social solidarity are emphasised in the Sahel¹³⁸ – academics suggest that this ploy has become ‘one of the most productive chapters of the Kremlin’s ... playbook’.¹³⁹ Similar themes have been adopted and/or internalised by regional ideologues, including Kemi Seba – a self-described proponent of ‘Pan Africanity’¹⁴⁰ – who portrays the conflict in Ukraine as a civilisational struggle.¹⁴¹

At the same time, gender offers a useful medium for legitimising the authoritarian aesthetic and behaviour of client regimes. The murals, iconography and lionisation of Burkina Faso’s Ibrahim Traoré are a prime example, with Russian networks and ‘political technologists’ (embedded in Ouagadougou’s National Intelligence Agency) helping to sell strongman governance as an expression of social justice and pan-African

134. Olena Snigyr, ‘Ideological Agenda of Russian Information Influence in Africa’, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 8 November 2024, <www.fpri.org/article/2024/11/ideological-agenda-of-russian-information-influence-in-africa/>, accessed 8 January 2026.

135. Author interview with P12, December 2025.

136. In Burkina Faso, reports describe increasing dissatisfaction with French influence based, in part, on the export of progressive policies. See Justin Yarga, “Russia’s African Lab”: How Putin Won Over Burkina Faso After French Adieu’, *Al Jazeera*, 15 March 2024.

137. Ana Carbajosa, “The Russians Use a Narrative in Africa that Claims the West is Decadent and Perverts Our Children to Turn Them Gay”, *El País*, 28 March 2024.

138. Analysis of ExTrac data.

139. Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*, p. 145.

140. Whereas traditional ‘pan-Africanism’ encourages shared solidarity across African peoples, ‘pan-Africanity’ advocates a return to pre-colonial heritage. See Christophe Premat, « Panafricanisme: pourquoi le discours de l’activiste Kemi Seba mobilise » [‘Pan-Africanism: Why Activist Kemi Seba’s Rhetoric Mobilises People’], *The Conversation*, 21 September 2024, <www.theconversation.com/panafricanisme-pourquoi-le-discours-de-lactiviste-kemi-seba-mobilise-238540>, accessed 28 November 2025.

141. As Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams write, ‘Seba [...] regards the war in Ukraine as “a confrontation between those who want to Westernize humanity [and] those who want to protect the identity of the various peoples of the world.”’ See Rita Abrahamsen and Michael Williams, ‘The Emergence of a Global Radical Right’, *Current History* (Vol. 125, No. 867, 2026), p. 7. Also see Jędrzej Czerep and Sara Nowacka, *Fertile Ground: How Africa and the Arab World Found Common Language with Russia on Ukraine* (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2023).

emancipation.¹⁴² Amid repression and rampant insecurity (including a 132% spike in civilian fatalities between 2022 and 2024),¹⁴³ Traoré has nevertheless acquired cult-like status abroad,¹⁴⁴ driven in part by ‘algorithmic populism’ – an amalgam of ‘emotional, visual, anti-Western and hyper-sharable’ content.¹⁴⁵ The focus on ‘virility, coercion and sovereignty’¹⁴⁶ is more ‘about vibe and vision [than] fact or policy’, pushed by a digital propaganda system that curates and amplifies latent forms of machismo, nationalism and youth power.¹⁴⁷ Alongside other beneficiaries of the Sahelian ‘Coups Belt’, Traoré has effectively become a symbol of anti-neocolonialism, a proverbial ‘one-man show’ enmeshed in revolutionary garb (imitating the style and prose of prominent Burkinabès such as Thomas Sankara). Across the border in Mali, Colonel Assimi Goïta leverages a similar method of mythmaking, mixing memory, allegory and heroic archetypes like the *dozo* in order to venerate his presidency and present himself as an ‘exceptional man in exceptional times’.¹⁴⁸ As Morten Bøås and Viljar Haavik argue, the ‘ideational power wielded by the junta ... should not be underestimated’, with heritage, poetry, customary norms and fabricated folklore offering ‘the foundations for a strong power base’.¹⁴⁹ Despite ‘sluggish growth, high inflation and extreme poverty’,¹⁵⁰ this discourse has resonated, with the Goïta regime – and Russian operatives – spreading narratives that satisfy the shared ‘social imaginaries’ of many Malians.

Gender-sensitive analysis of electoral interference and disinformation across different geographies also emphasises the preponderance of ‘false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives ... aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere’.¹⁵¹ By belittling, objectifying or intimidating victims, sully their reputation and/or undermining their credibility, malicious actors can roll back equality, spread

142. Author interview with P07, November 2025; Benjamin Roger, « Burkina Faso: Ibrahim Traoré, superstar de la désinformation » [‘Burkina Faso: Ibrahim Traoré, Superstar of Disinformation’], *Le Monde*, 30 June 2025.

143. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, ‘A Growing Divergence of Security Narratives in Burkina Faso’, 26 August 2025, <www.africacenter.org/spotlight/security-narratives-burkina-faso/>, accessed 15 November 2025.

144. Author interview with P08, November 2025.

145. Sheriff Bojang Jnr, ‘Ibrahim Traoré: Inside the Digital Cult Glorifying Burkina Faso’s Military Leader’, *Africa Report*, 7 May 2025, <www.theafricareport.com/383198/ibrahim-traore-inside-the-digital-cult-glorifying-burkina-fasos-military-leader/>, accessed 15 November 2025.

146. Ornella Moderan, ‘Virility Politics in the Sahel’, Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 12 February 2026, <www.ispionline.it/en/publication/virility-politics-in-the-sahel-230031>, accessed 25 March 2026.

147. Sheriff Bojang Jnr, ‘Ibrahim Traoré’.

148. Morten Bøås and Viljar Haavik, ‘Winning Hearts and Power: How Mali’s Military Regime Gained Popular Support’, *The Conversation*, 28 April 2025, <www.theconversation.com/winning-hearts-and-power-how-malis-military-regime-gained-popular-support-254518>, accessed 24 March 2026.

149. Morten Bøås and Viljar Haavik, ‘Failed International Interventions and the Making of New Social Contracts in Mali’, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* (Vol. 20, No. 1, 2026), pp. 63.

150. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

151. Centre for Information Resilience, ‘Holding Our Digital Ground: A Playbook to Mitigate Gendered Disinformation During Elections and Beyond’, October 2024, p. 7.

confusion and ‘hasten democratic backsliding’.¹⁵² Such coercion appears effective, with interviewees suggesting that gendered abuse generates greater traction, visibility and engagement.¹⁵³ However, its scope and exponents are somewhat contested. While numerous reports capture the sexualised insults and doxxing experienced by female activists, journalists and politicians across Africa (as elsewhere),¹⁵⁴ it is not clear what proportion of attacks derive from Russian interventions specifically.¹⁵⁵ A small selection of studies track efforts to disrupt, distort and/or demobilise feminist advocacy, documenting how IRA accounts amplify chauvinistic tropes, hijack hashtags, recirculate ‘fake news’ and sow confusion while the GRU attempts to discredit particular individuals.¹⁵⁶ In contrast, RUSI’s analysis did not identify comparable evidence of direct involvement within the sources and period examined for this research, although the search was not designed to establish covert activity or attribution beyond observable Russian messaging. Given the permeable boundaries between state-affiliated networks and the wider ‘manosphere’, Russian inputs – however ephemeral – probably feed into a toxic environment conducive to misogynistic behaviour, encouraging more localised abuse on- and offline. Crucially, these dynamics can also instigate cycles of risk and repression: narratives help to legitimise harassment of women and sexual minorities, which in turn drives self-censorship, reduces counter-speech and ensures that the ‘moral panic’ incited by (Russian-backed) elites sounds like consensus. As a result, policymakers in sub-Saharan Africa may either feel compelled to reward this conduct or become subsumed within it.

■ Messaging Impact?

Foreign information, manipulation and interference does appear to resonate – on aggregate – across Sahelian populations, where past surveys have registered a 68% (or higher) favourability towards Russia among young participants.¹⁵⁷ While individual channels may have limited reach (Sputnik Africa, for example, has only accrued around 50,000 subscribers on Telegram), the content that they ‘produce and package’ has the propensity to ‘ricochet around ... local TV partners and ... informal networks’.¹⁵⁸ Previous

152. *Ibid.*

153. Author interviews with P12 and P13, December 2025.

154. US Department of State Global Engagement Center, ‘Gendered Disinformation: Tactics, Themes, and Trends by State- and Non-State Actors’, July 2022, <<https://2021-2025.state.gov/gendered-disinformation-tactics-themes-and-trends-by-foreign-malign-actors/>>, accessed 6 January 2026; Media Defence, ‘Violence Against Women Journalists – Sub-Saharan Africa’, <www.mediadefence.org/resource-hub/violence-against-journalists-sub-saharan-africa/>, accessed 10 August 2026. Similar claims were made in author interview with P12, December 2025.

155. Samantha Bradshaw and Amélie Henle, ‘The Gender Dimensions of Foreign Influence Operations’, *International Journal of Communication* (Vol. 15, 2021), pp. 4596–618.

156. *Ibid.*

157. Fuente Cobo, ‘The Russian Obsession’, p. 45.

158. Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’. Similar findings are presented in Institute for Strategic Dialogue, ‘Pro-Kremlin Influencers Target Audiences in the Alliance of Sahel States’, 27 August 2025, <<https://www.isdglobal.org/digital-dispatch/investigation-pro-kremlin-influencers-targeting-audiences-in-the-alliance-of-sahel-states-aes/>>, accessed 18 November 2025.

research across Angola, Ethiopia, South Africa and Zambia implies a similar trend, with more than 70% of respondents considering Russian disinformation about the war in Ukraine to be ‘probably or definitely true’ – a marked difference from material proffered by China-backed media.¹⁵⁹ This may be circumstantial, with pro-Kremlin narratives benefitting from the expulsion of Western outlets,¹⁶⁰ but the varied popularity of foreign messages might also allude to the specific appeal of Russian outreach or regular use of local partners. Although scholars such as Antonio Giustozzi, Joana de Deus Pereira and David Lewis recognise Wagner’s self-interest in inflating the value of its programming, they likewise conclude: ‘[D]ata on social media viewers and polls ... all ... suggest that public opinion [has moved] in the [desired] direction, whether because of campaign effectiveness or other factors.’¹⁶¹ As expounded below, ‘anti-gender’ discourse – whether directly promoted by Russia or through a panoply of stakeholders in the wider ‘moral conservative movement’ – has also fed into legislative and policy changes across countries such as Uganda, Ghana and Burkina Faso, straining relations with Western donors, opening entry points for the ROC and signalling at least some degree of cultural affiliation and social clout.

However, this international agency should not be overblown. The influence of foreign content seems heavily contingent on prevailing domestic attitudes,¹⁶² with interpretation shaped by social ecology, economic ties and local politics. Dani Madrid-Morales, Herman Wasserman and Saifuddin Ahmed, for instance, show that the consumption of Russian (and Chinese) media has little quantifiable effect on the uptake of a particular narrative.¹⁶³ Despite significant investment, the audience and impact of external messaging remain low, with efficacy coinciding with (rather than confecting) anti-US and anti-Western sentiments.¹⁶⁴

Similarly, the ‘beatification’ of ‘Saint Traoré’ and the wider popularisation of paternalistic governance¹⁶⁵ converge with the iconography and hyper-masculine logic of Putinism, but are also driven regionally. While memes, AI footage and pan-African

159. Dani Madrid-Morales, Herman Wasserman and Saifuddin Ahmed, ‘Chinese and Russian Disinformation Flourishes in Some African Countries – Anti-US Sentiment Helps It Take Hold’, *The Conversation*, 4 September 2024, <www.theconversation.com/chinese-and-russian-disinformation-flourishes-in-some-african-countries-anti-us-sentiment-helps-it-take-hold-238101>, accessed 18 November 2025.

160. ADDO, ‘Russian-Backed Propaganda Networks Bolster Traoré’s Image’, *Medium*, 26 August 2025, <<https://disinfo.africa/russian-backed-propaganda-networks-bolster-traor%C3%A9s-image-5c141869bf21>>, accessed 19 November 2025.

161. Giustozzi, de Deus Pereira and Lewis, ‘Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?’, p. 35.

162. Del Re, ‘Russian Disinformation in Africa and the Sahel in the Post-Truth Era’.

163. Dani Madrid-Morales, Herman Wasserman and Saifuddin Ahmed, ‘The Geopolitics of Disinformation: Worldviews, Media Consumption and the Adoption of Global Strategic Disinformation Narratives’, *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* (Vol. 36, No. 3, 2024).

164. *Ibid.*

165. Aanu Adeoye, ‘“The Cult of Saint Traoré”: How a Russia-Backed Junta Leader Became an Icon’, *Financial Times*, 22 May 2025.

slogans may be amplified and recycled by Russian outlets,¹⁶⁶ they generally appear to be organic expressions of local frustration.¹⁶⁷ The prolific output of ‘videomen’ – usually young suburbanites – during Mali’s coup/transition is a useful vignette. Despite boosting the appeal of pro-Kremlin / anti-French movements like Yèrèwolo and developing (transactional) ties to Wagner, many stirred up anti-colonial feelings on their own initiative.¹⁶⁸ They remain autonomous crisis actors,¹⁶⁹ defined by a specific history and societal experience, whereby Russian sympathy becomes almost incidental – a convenient rubric for defying Western expectations. At the same time, the rebranding of authoritarianism as efficiency – as proposed by the Mali Kura (‘New Mali’) model in Bamako – draws from Kigali as much as from Moscow,¹⁷⁰ while the strongman aesthetic cuts across Sudan and the Sahel, offering a cheap, almost acontextual avatar for disaffection.¹⁷¹ Crucially, many of these narratives have become ‘visible in everyday, informal spaces’, with displays of public solidarity (via street-level imagery) illustrating how themes, ideas and grievances previously confined to Francophone Africa are now permeating different contexts (including Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya).¹⁷² The Kremlin – and its affiliates – can exploit these sensibilities but do not necessarily implant them or steer the decentralised media markets that sustain them.¹⁷³

Anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-CSE narratives have similarly found traction in societies where local elites routinely leverage ‘moral panic’ – politicising homophobia, scapegoating minorities and mobilising hysteria – to consolidate power.¹⁷⁴ But this alignment does not always supersede other barriers or interests. In Nigeria, anti-gender language fits within a long-running pro-family discourse, with Pentecostal / Islamic spokesmen describing homosexuality as ‘un-African’ or a ‘Western imposition’.¹⁷⁵ Similar arguments framed the 2014 Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act and later backlash over the Samoa Agreement, with media outlets contriving (or repeating) claims of ‘LGBTQ clauses’

166. Some suggest ‘that these accounts are either directly piloted by the Kremlin or ... controlled by [paid] influencers’. See *The Economist*, ‘Burkina Faso’s Strongman Has Gone Viral’, 25 September 2025. Others describe the role of Burkinabé networks – usually manned by regime supporters such as the ‘Waiyan’ – as driving these operations, with ‘their Russian backers ... opportunistically amplifying disinformation’. Roger, « Burkina Faso ».

167. Author interviews with P12 and P13, December 2025.

168. Signe Marie Cold-Ravnkilde and Almamy Sylla, ‘The Rise of Mali’s “Videomen” as Cybercombatants in Global Crisis Ecologies’, *International Affairs* (Vol. 100, No. 4, 2024), pp. 1405–29; Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’.

169. Bah Traoré, « L’émergence des « vidéomans » au Mali : entre expression populaire et outil de désinformation » [‘The Emergence of “Video Artists” in Mali: Between Popular Expression and a Tool for Disinformation’], Wathi, 28 March 2025, <www.wathi.org/laboratoire/tribune/lemergence-des-videomans-au-mali-entre-expression-populaire-et-outil-de-desinformation/>, accessed 24 November 2025.

170. Czerep and Nowacka, *Fertile Ground*.

171. Kwangu Liwewe Agyei and Alec D’Angelo, ‘Africa’s AI Strongmen’, *New Lines Magazine*, 26 August 2025, <www.newlinesmag.com/reportage/africas-ai-strongmen/>, accessed 24 November 2025.

172. Author interview with P13, December 2025.

173. Author interview with P09, November 2025.

174. Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*.

175. Ayo Osisanwo and Matthew Alugbin, ‘Pentecostal Voices and Discourse Perspectives to LGBTQ+ Narratives in Nigeria’, *African Identities* (Vol. 23, No. 4, 2025), pp. 1099–115.

hidden in European aid deals.¹⁷⁶ Given that an overwhelming majority of Nigerians oppose same-sex rights,¹⁷⁷ the conflation of sovereignty and morality offers an expedient means of demagoguery. Complementary content supplied by ultra-conservative networks – including (and occasionally sponsored by) Russia – should therefore find a receptive audience, spanning the pulpit, press and political sphere. However, this convergence has not delivered mass support for the Kremlin's geostrategic priorities. Links between Pentecostal mega-churches and congregations in Ukraine have instead led Nigerian preachers to rebut other forms of Russian propaganda.

In short, gender plays a significant role in the disposition and resonance of Russian FIMI, albeit tempered by the limitations and logic of information operations more broadly. Recognising the shelf life of specific arguments, Moscow has attempted to 'blend ideology and pragmatism depending on the recipient's openness to [its] message'¹⁷⁸ – an approach characterised in part by experimentation, iteration and market saturation. As a result, its narratives appear fleeting and mercurial, latching onto whatever works in a given moment / space. Identity and anti-gender politics can offer an expedient, low-cost vehicle for galvanising attention if they coalesce with existing social preferences. This enables interventions to parcel pro-family language, anti-colonialism and Soviet nostalgia together as a means of exploiting public grievances and feeding the perception of Russian agency / norm 'antipreneurship' at the global level. Where these elements are less applicable, the emphasis shifts to other rubrics, such as backing the pan-African messaging of prominent influencers¹⁷⁹ or various forms of (neo)traditional African spiritualism.¹⁸⁰ The sheer quantity of Russian (and associated) outputs – a so-called 'firehose of falsehood'¹⁸¹ – leaves the content itself expendable. At the same time, the intentional blurring of sovereignty, autonomy and vaguely defined 'traditional values' offers flexibility. Themes can be cycled, implied or insinuated, enabling different vectors to operate concurrently and maximise local

176. Global Disinformation Team, 'Nigeria-EU Deal Sparks False Claims over LGBT Rights', *BBC News*, 11 July 2024.

177. Abideen David Amodu, 'Sex Panics: Queer (Counter)Publics, Networking, and Sociality in Nigeria', *Journal of Homosexuality* (Vol. 72, No. 3, 2025), pp. 478–500. In Nigeria, only 9% of participants would welcome a homosexual neighbour. Afrobarometer, 'Nigerians Show High Tolerance for Diversity but Low Trust in Fellow Citizens, Afrobarometer Study Shows', news release, 11 March 2021, <www.afrobarometer.org/articles/nigerians-show-high-tolerance-diversity-low-trust-fellow-citizens-afrobarometer-study-shows/>, accessed 23 November 2025.

178. Andrei P Tsygankov and Alvin Muhwezi, 'Engaging the Global South with Ideology and Pragmatism: Russia's Re-Emergence in Sub-Saharan Africa', *Global Studies Quarterly* (Vol. 5, No. 2, 2025), p. 9.

179. Antonio Giustozzi and David Lewis, 'Did Wagner Group Prove an Effective Tool for Russian Foreign Policy?', Academic Policy Paper Series No. 4, Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, December 2024.

180. This revival of 'pre-colonial heritage', African cosmology and sovereignty politics rejects Islam and Christianity as ineffective imports, reflecting the dexterity of Russian coverage that is able to support both ROC proselytisation and those rejecting clerical authority. Author interview with P05, November 2025.

181. Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, 'The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model', RAND, 11 July 2016, <<https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>>, accessed 18 November 2025.

interest, empower a vocal minority or sow apathy among an ‘uncertain majority’.¹⁸² The difficulty is converting these outcomes into diplomatic capital. The Kremlin has undoubtedly helped to subvert the credibility of European / US stakeholders, but its impact may be tied to ‘the weakness and/or unpopularity of ... Western governments ... rather than the specific strength of Wagner or [Moscow]’.¹⁸³

Similar patterns are evident in the ‘support packages’ supplied to sympathetic regimes. Official and informal Russian discourses clearly use gendered inflections to bolster the appeal of Sahelian strongmen, building on domestic efforts to combine populism, nationalism and militant masculinity in a convincing pitch. This has, in turn, laid the groundwork for closer economic and strategic collaboration, including the deployment of PMSCs. However, the efficacy of these networks – as a mechanism for Russian foreign policy – may also have diminishing returns. First, they operate within West Africa’s sprawling info-industry, with content manufactured by myriad outlets and independent brokers. Regional stakeholders draw on a script that partly derives from Wagner but has now become enmeshed in an increasingly diffuse ecosystem. Additionally, junta governance often appears inchoate, contradictory and transactional. Traoré, Goïta and Guinea’s president, General Mamady Doumbouya, are all looking for the ‘best deal’ to preserve control.¹⁸⁴ Given their need to appease (or at least be seen to satisfy) public demands for stability,¹⁸⁵ Moscow’s value is not just discursive, but practical. Any ideological or ideational propositions come second to its role as a security partner.¹⁸⁶ Influence is therefore contingent on battlefield successes – and susceptible to reversals¹⁸⁷ (as previously exemplified in Mozambique). Similarly, the mismanaged transition from Wagner to the Africa Corps, persistent tensions with the Malian army, the failure to ‘blunt insurgent advances’, and redeployment of ‘Bear Brigade’ forces from Burkina Faso to Ukraine may have all dented perceptions of Russia as a ‘fix’ for local problems.¹⁸⁸

Legislation, Lawfare and Repression

Russia’s promotion of traditional values and anti-gender politics is both rhetorical and legislative, shaping laws that constrain LGBTQIA+ rights, encourage violence and temper domestic criticism. As noted above, an eclectic, highly coordinated ‘moral

182. This ‘tyranny of the minority’ dynamic is explored in Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2018).

183. Giustozzi, de Deus Pereira and Lewis, ‘Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?’, p. 36.

184. *The Economist*, ‘Meet the Victors in Africa’s Coup Belt’, 2 July 2024.

185. 70% of participants in Mali identified ‘combating insecurity’ as their highest priority. See Bøås and Haavik, ‘Winning Hearts and Power’.

186. Issaev, Shishkina and Liokumovich, ‘Perceptions of Russia’s “Return” to Africa’.

187. The Sentry, ‘Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group’s Blueprint for State Capture in the Central African Republic’, June 2023, p.18.

188. Benoit Faucon and Nicholas Bariyo, ‘Russia’s Ambitious Plans in Africa are Unraveling’, *Wall Street Journal*, 29 September 2025.

conservative' ecosystem is already evident across sub-Saharan Africa. The WCF's presence in the region coincided with a 'rise [in] harsh penalties for LGBT Africans' in Kenya, Uganda and Nigeria,¹⁸⁹ while a string of international outfits have supplied briefings, digital toolkits, training, legal support and petitions to local pro-family campaigns since the early 2000s. Russia is not only a proponent within (and beneficiary of) this network, but also provides a model for delivery.¹⁹⁰ After passing an initial ban on 'gay propaganda' in 2013, Putin has implemented a suite of discriminatory measures to institutionalise 'traditional values' across the public sphere. These include incentivising population growth and decriminalising domestic battery, imposing blanket restrictions on same-sex advocacy, proscribing 'sex change procedures' and branding progressive civil society organisations (CSOs) 'foreign agents'.¹⁹¹ Set against a backdrop of political protests following the unpopular extension of presidential term limits in 2012, and the later invasion of Ukraine, the reforms align with familiar forms of 'moral panic' evident in other illiberal polities, offering a vocabulary, strategy and administrative template for structuring similar processes elsewhere.

Nested in rolling disinformation and marketing efforts by Russian and evangelical conduits, anti-homosexuality legislation in Africa leans into analogous notions of state sovereignty, framing repression as a means of 'securing national value systems from western influence'.¹⁹² That said, anti-gender activism at the local level is also contingent on endogenous variables, as Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Act 2014 – the so-called 'Kill the Gays Bill' – makes clear. While much of the momentum for the act was driven internationally, with funding¹⁹³ and propaganda provided by various US groups,¹⁹⁴ these prohibitions were already tropes among pastors and politicians trying to enhance their profile within the National Resistance Movement and the 'fragmented landscape of Ugandan Christianity'.¹⁹⁵ Prominent MPs championing the law were reportedly affiliated with American Evangelical networks,¹⁹⁶ and benefitted from US policies such

189. McEwen, *The U.S. Christian Right and Pro-Family Politics in 21st Century Africa*, p. 129.

190. Religious advocates have explicitly encouraged African states to adopt 'foreign agent' laws based on the Russian template. See Justice for Prosperity, 'Global Anti-LGBTIQ+ Networks in Africa', November 2025, <www.justiceforprosperity.org/global-anti-lgbtqi-networks-in-africa/>, accessed 4 February 2026.

191. Ayoub and Stoeckl, *The Global Fight Against LGBTI Rights*.

192. McEwen, *The U.S. Christian Right and Pro-Family Politics in 21st Century Africa*, p. 147.

193. Chelsea Cohen and Ottilia Anna Maunganidze, 'Anti-Gay Laws: Africa's Human Rights Regression', Institute for Security Studies, 27 September 2023, <www.issafrica.org/iss-today/anti-gay-laws-africas-human-rights-regression>, accessed 5 February 2026.

194. Neil Datta, 'Anti-Gender in Africa: Role of Western Organizations', *Blog der Hirschfeld-Eddy-Stiftung*, 11 December 2024, <<https://blog.lsvd.de/anti-gender-in-africa-role-of-western-organizations/>>, accessed 24 November 2025. Much of the imagery employed against Harvey Milk and the US gay rights movement in the 1970s was recycled in Uganda, reflecting the continuity of America's culture wars via African parliamentary processes. Author interviews with P03 and P05, November 2025.

195. Rahul Rao, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcoloniality* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 4.

196. Namubiru and Wepukhulu, 'Exclusive: US Christian Right Pours more than \$50m into Africa'.

as the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.¹⁹⁷ But they likewise drew on long-running patterns of discrimination enumerated in the Ugandan Penal Code – a legacy of British imperialism – alongside President Yoweri Museveni's efforts to distract from domestic misgovernance, using 'homophobic nationalism' to shore up state legitimacy.¹⁹⁸

A more draconian version, passed in 2024, was grounded in a similar ecology, with foreign support supplemented by alleged advocacy from the Russian ambassador.¹⁹⁹ The full breadth of these interventions may be contested,²⁰⁰ but the optics are indicative of external influence, with dozens of Ugandan parliamentarians voting remotely from Moscow after attending a conference on 'Russia-Africa in a Multipolar World'.²⁰¹ As elsewhere (including in Russia itself), this legislative process was syncretic and cumulative, combining transnational, regional and provincial input,²⁰² which in turn became a 'catalyst for ... rollouts across the rest of the continent'.²⁰³ Following subsequent international criticism and cuts in Western funding, other members of the moral conservative movement took up much of the slack. Saudi Arabia's Islamic Development Bank offered Uganda a \$295-million loan the following year.²⁰⁴

'Copycat' bills have since cropped up in Kenya, Ghana and Burkina Faso, accompanied by wider crackdowns on abortion access and on the rights of women and sexual minorities, with many states receiving resources from the same set of international organisations. Crucially, each case features a mix of local and global activism. While some attribute Ghana's 2021 Human Sexual Rights and Family Values Bill, for instance, to a CSE backlash (incited by transnational groups) and to the 2019 WCF congress in

197. Under the George W Bush administration, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief conditioned US support on privileging 'family values' and anti-abortion positions. This enabled ultra-conservative stakeholders to sit on National AIDS Councils, occupy seats on Global Fund coordinating committees and shape the conversation on HIV prevention / treatment. These legacies provided the legitimacy to later drive the anti-LGBTQIA+ movement. Author interview with P03, November 2025.

198. Ellie Gore, *Between HIV Prevention and LGBTI Rights: The Political Economy of Queer Activism in Ghana* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2024); S M Rodriguez, 'Homophobic Nationalism: The Development of Sodomy Legislation in Uganda', *Comparative Sociology* (Vol. 16, No. 3, 2017), pp. 393–421.

199. Bariyo and Steinhauser, 'Russia and U.S. Religious Conservatives See Common Foe in Africa'. The ambassador reportedly pressed Uganda's speaker of parliament to fast-track the bill, although the Russian embassy denies the claims.

200. Kristof Titeca, 'Did Russia Play a Role in Uganda's Anti-Homosexuality Legislation?', *Democracy in Africa*, 2023, <www.democracyinafrica.org/did-russia-play-a-role-in-ugandas-anti-homosexuality-legislation/>, accessed 21 November 2025.

201. Colin Stewart, 'In Africa, Moscow Battles Against LGBTQ Rights, Side by Side with U.S. Religious Conservatives', *Erasing 76 Crimes*, 25 September 2024, <www.76crimes.com/2024/09/25/in-africa-moscow-battles-lgbtq-rights-side-by-side-with-u-s-religious-conservatives/>, accessed 21 November 2025.

202. Author interview with P03, November 2025.

203. See Justice for Prosperity, 'Strategic Subversion: The Geneva Consensus Declaration as a Pull for Geopolitical Leverage in Africa', July 2025, <www.justiceforprosperity.org/geneva-consensus-geopolitical-leverage-africa/>, accessed 7 February 2026.

204. *Ibid.*

Accra,²⁰⁵ others argue that the ‘summit felt distinctly African’.²⁰⁶ Further analysis similarly maintains: ‘US evangelicals are not the sole or even primary actor fuelling homophobic moral panic in ... Ghana and African clerics and other religious organisations have their own agency in colluding with parts of the US and global Christian Right.’²⁰⁷ In reality, the process may have been expedited by external frameworks and funding, but it built on a well-established discourse (particularly in Anglophone Africa) used by populists to galvanise electoral support and mask chronic economic problems.²⁰⁸ As Gore observes, ‘articulations of homophobia have become increasingly encoded within the practices of postcolonial state building across a number of African settings’;²⁰⁹ Ghanaian elites – alongside those in Kenya, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Nigeria and Uganda – have exploited social policing to (ostensibly) ‘defend’ ‘traditional values’ since the 1990s.²¹⁰ The concurrent surge of evangelicalism / Pentecostalism amid recession and state parsimony has also infused a ‘moral renewal theology’ into everyday politics, providing a pretext for alliance-building between preachers, politicians and media bosses. As a result, anti-gay legislation is really the culmination of long-running trends, reflecting a feedback loop between press outrage, social mobilisation and policymaking. Much of the content – from punitive ‘rule-by-law’ logics to sanitised language about ‘rehabilitation’ – was sourced abroad, but implementation depended on an imagined ‘consensus’ that was manufactured locally. By adapting and amplifying international talking points through religious rallies and national news outlets,²¹¹ lawmakers could cite ‘overwhelming citizen buy-in’ as a proof of mandate, enabling them to shepherd the reforms through parliament.

The recent focus on ‘sovereignty, local traditions [and] values’ in Burkina Faso,²¹² Mali and Niger is perhaps more likely to be shaped by Russian influences,²¹³ as

205. The conference allegedly helped to cement the Ghanaian coalition responsible for pushing through the legislation.

206. Rita Nketiah, “‘God has a New Africa’: Undercover in a US-Led Anti-LGBT ‘Hate Movement’”, *Open Democracy*, 11 December 2019, <www.opendemocracy.net/en/god-has-a-new-africa-undercover-in-a-us-led-anti-lgbt-hate-movement/>, accessed 20 November 2025.

207. Gore, *Between HIV Prevention and LGBTI Rights*, p. 42.

208. Author interview with P09, November 2025.

209. Ellie Gore, ‘Moral Panics and “Anti-Gender” Politics: What Can (Queer) Political Economy Tell Us about Global Struggles over Gender and Sexuality?’, *SPERI Blog*, University of Sheffield, 14 November 2024, <<https://speri-blog.sites.sheffield.ac.uk/blog/2024/moral-panics-and-anti-gender-politics>>, accessed 21 November 2025.

210. Adrian Jjuuko et al. (eds), *Queer Lawfare in Africa: Legal Strategies in Contexts of LGBTIQ+ Criminalisation and Politicisation* (Pretoria: Pretoria University Law Press, 2022).

211. Juliana Martínez, Ángela Duarte and María Juliana Rojas, ‘Manufacturing Moral Panic: Weaponizing Children to Undermine Gender Justice and Human Rights’, Global Philanthropy Project, March 2021.

212. The Transitional Legislative Assembly amended the penal code to criminalise same-sex relations and outlaw the ‘promotion’ of gay rights in September 2025, mimicking measures in Uganda, Ghana and Russia. It also used similar language, including references to safeguarding ‘Burkinabè family values’ and resisting ‘foreign decadence’. See Alex Müller, ‘Burkina Faso Criminalizes Same-Sex Conduct’, Human Rights Watch, 3 September 2025, <www.hrw.org/news/2025/09/03/burkina-faso-criminalizes-same-sex-conduct>, accessed 7 February 2026.

213. Author interview with P03, November 2025.

homosexuality was never explicitly criminalised under French colonialism. However, anti-gender politics and ‘moral entrepreneurship’ may also be the product of regional transmission / diffusion. Given the propensity for liberalism, democratic advocacy and progressive social norms to overlap, authoritarians can discredit CSOs defending same-sex rights (and, by extension, human rights) as ‘foreign agents’ while justifying wider restrictions on NGO activity, registration and financing as safeguarding national integrity.²¹⁴ Proscription and censure effectively become an ‘all-purpose political currency’ for stifling dissent – one now showcased by various regimes across the continent.²¹⁵ Nor is this dynamic always top-down: in Ghana, a comparatively vibrant democracy, faith-based outfits and local councils have successfully painted pro-LGBTQIA+ organisations as elitist or alien. Donors can inadvertently compound these trends; as Gore explains, international funding streams, HIV prevention and the ‘NGO-isation’ of queer politics have not only exacerbated class divisions but also undermined the perceived authenticity of LGBTQIA+ campaigns.²¹⁶

Against this backdrop, Russia’s support for (and direct investment in) anti-LGBTQIA+ and ‘pro-family’ legislation – much like the information operations outlined above – is disruptive but contingent on local circumstances. Clearly, it can drive a wedge between African states and Western partners, polarise social expression, distort democratic processes and export methods for co-opting or quashing civic activism. Operating within a wider coalition of US / European populists, evangelicals and ultra-conservatives, these interventions – whether discursive or financial – are a cheap, expedient and low-risk means of cultivating influence. However, the extent to which dynamics in the cultural domain facilitate other priorities and interests remains unclear. For instance, Russia’s growing ties to Uganda are characterised by security cooperation, commercial investment and political support, in contrast to other states that remain critical despite their shared social policies / preferences (such as Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya). At the same time, Trump’s renewed commitment to the GCD is licensing the adoption of regressive measures, challenging any assumed correlation between ‘anti-gender’ politics and pro-Russian sentiment, while local models are also gaining traction. The impact of reactive or repressive lawmaking on minority communities and democratic norms may be similar, but the implications for any response will differ markedly depending on whose agency drives this legislation forward.

Paramilitary Violence

As noted, paramilitary deployments have long been Russia’s most visible method for exercising hard (and soft) power on the continent. Although their modalities have

214. Author interview with P08, November 2025.

215. Jjuuko et al. (eds), *Queer Lawfare in Africa*, p. 16.

216. Gore, *Between HIV Prevention and LGBTI Rights*, p. 17.

shifted over time, from improvised engagements to a more structured arrangement under the Africa Corps, the operative logic (along with the personnel, tactics and ‘insignia’) remains much the same.²¹⁷ At first glance, this longevity is surprising. Despite symbolic victories in northern Mali (including the recapture of Kidal in 2023), Wagner and its successors have failed to stop Jama’at Nusrat Al-Islam’s (JNIM) insurgency from expanding, disrupting fuel supplies or blockading Bamako, while insecurity is mounting in neighbouring Burkina Faso. Analysis by ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data) suggests that conflict-related fatalities across the Alliance of Sahel States (AES)²¹⁸ reached a record high between January and June 2024, having increased by 190% compared with the first half of 2021.²¹⁹ The loss of a Su-24M bomber near Gao was a particular nadir,²²⁰ later eclipsed by the assassination of Mali’s minister of defence. Crucially, however, the goal of these PMSC interventions may not be stabilising a restive hinterland so much as bolstering regime security (in return for cash or concessions)²²¹ and increasing dependency on Moscow.²²² As Emanuela Claudia Del Re argues, ‘Russia is more interested in prolonging conflicts rather than solving them’.²²³

This could explain its propensity for mass violence and civilian targeting. Multiple reports document extortion, extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances and indiscriminate drone strikes, with Russian soldiers beating detainees, stealing cattle and burning villages.²²⁴ Collective punishment appears routine.²²⁵ Working alongside Malian troops, Wagner personnel allegedly participated in the execution of 500 Peul residents from a single village²²⁶ – one of many ‘cleansing operations’ launched against minority groups (including Gbaya and Fulani communities in the CAR and Fula, Arab and Tamasheq / Tuareg populations in Mali).²²⁷ These incidents not only subscribe to

217. Approximately 70–80% of Africa Corps recruits are former Wagner fighters. See Timbuktu Institute, ‘Russian Repositioning in the Sahel: From Wagner to Africa Corps’, July 2025, p. 5.

218. The Alliance of Sahel States comprises Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso.

219. Julia Stanyard, ‘Mercenaries and Illicit Markets: Russia’s Africa Corps and the Business of Conflict’, GI-TOC, February 2025, p. 20.

220. Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’.

221. GI-TOC, ‘After the Fall’. A similar point was made in author interview with P07, November 2025.

222. Russia may be ‘more trickster than guardian’ when projecting military force. See Brown, ‘The Bear and the Bot Farm’.

223. Del Re, ‘Russian Disinformation in Africa and the Sahel in the Post-Truth Era’, p. 537.

224. GI-TOC, ‘After the Fall’.

225. John Lechner, *Death is Our Business: Russian Mercenaries and the New Era of Private Warfare* (London: Bloomsbury, 2025).

226. Jason Burke, ‘Russian Mercenaries Behind Slaughter of 500 in Mali Village, UN Report Finds’, *The Guardian*, 20 May 2023, <www.theguardian.com/world/2023/may/20/russian-mercenaries-behind-slaughter-in-mali-village-un-report-finds>, accessed 23 July 2025.

227. Mohamed Issouf Ag Mohamed and Mariana Bracks Fonseca, ‘Wagner’s War on Civilians’, *Africa is a Country*, 5 March 2024, <<https://africasacountry.com/2024/03/wagners-war-on-civilians>>, accessed 21 November 2025.

an explicitly racialised logic, as acknowledged by PMSC members themselves,²²⁸ but are often gendered, with Fulani men selected for abuse on the assumption that they were affiliated with JNIM or, in the CAR, the Union for Peace, 3R or Anti-Balaka outfits.²²⁹ Elsewhere, UN assessors describe the Malian Armed Forces (Forces Armées Maliennes or FAMA), *dozo* militiamen and their ‘foreign partners’ using sexual violence in a planned and ‘systematic’ manner to achieve their security objectives. In Moura alone, at least 58 women and girls were sexually assaulted by Russian and Malian forces.²³⁰ Other reports refer to ‘rape centres’ across rural areas like Bouar in northwest CAR, where female farmers were repeatedly attacked by ‘white men’, indicating a pattern of coercion, intimidation and public humiliation.²³¹ Although it is difficult to determine whether individual episodes were ‘gender motivated’ or a symptom of wider atrocities, several accounts note a clear overlap between ethnocised and sexual violence, and a concerted uptick in fatality and incident rates across Mali in the 12 months following Prigozhin’s death.²³²

Such behaviour departs from official Kremlin messaging but speaks to a permissive social milieu where ‘gendered, sexual and racist narratives shared in Wagner / AC affiliated milblogger channels [have been] used to ... sexualise and degrade African women, turning them into objects of fetish, disgust and desire’.²³³ Even if sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) does not always amount to a deliberate method of population control, these incidents fit within basic ‘tenets of Soviet anti-partisan warfare’, and possibly tie back to both the demography of Wagner / Africa Corps recruitment²³⁴ and the pervading culture of Russian security institutions.²³⁵ Importantly, they also serve a broader influencing agenda. As Watling, Danylyuk and Reynolds note, ‘the conduct of massacres and other violations of international law will prevent Western

228. Tracking Wagner’s invite-only Telegram channel, ‘White Uncles in Africa 18+’, analysts found 322 videos and 647 photographs ‘containing scenes of mutilation [and] torture’, often accompanied by racist tropes. See Matteo Maillard, ‘Wagner’s Red Room: How Russian Mercenaries Flaunt Their Crimes on Telegram’, *Africa Report*, 25 June 2025, <www.theafricareport.com/386622/wagners-red-room-how-russian-mercenaries-flaunt-their-crimes-on-telegram/>, accessed 26 November 2025.

229. Célia Cuordifede, ‘Malian Refugee Women Recount Repeated Rapes by Russian Mercenaries’, *Le Monde*, 1 September 2025; Human Rights Watch, ‘Mali: Army, Wagner Group Disappear, Execute Fulani Civilians’, 22 July 2025, <www.hrw.org/news/2025/07/22/mali-army-wagner-group-disappear-execute-fulani-civilians>, accessed 25 November 2025; Lechner, *Death is Our Business*.

230. Ryan Bauer et al., *Russian Mercenary and Paramilitary Groups in Africa* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2025), p. 13.

231. Philip Obaji Jr, “‘They Turn Our Farms into Rape Centres’: Russian Mercenaries Accused of Abuse in Central African Republic”, *The Guardian*, 23 July 2024.

232. ACLED tabulates an 81% increase in violence involving Russian mercenaries, and a 65% surge in reported fatalities during this period. See GI-TOC, ‘After the Fall’, p. 21.

233. Centre for Information Resilience, ‘From Harm to Hate: How Russian Forces in Africa Target Women’, March 2026, p. 19.

234. Many Africa Corps / Wagner troops are drawn from prison populations or Russia’s immiserated peripheries, where rates of domestic and sexual violence appear disproportionately high. See Julia Ioffe, *Motherland: A Feminist History of Modern Russia, from Revolution to Autocracy* (New York, NY: William Collins, 2026).

235. Multiple experts described similar atrocities in Ukraine, alluding to tolerated or encouraged behaviours that cut across different Russian security actors.

[donors] from maintaining links with a partner military', thereby leaving local clients ever more reliant on Moscow's assistance.²³⁶ In this regard, studies have identified a surge in abuses by state forces under Russian tutelage: 'Wagner ... set an example for FAMA to follow. ... "Before [Wagner's] arrival, the [FAMA] used to visit our camp ... [b]ut they never brutalised us" Working with Wagner, the FAMA became more violent.'²³⁷

Analogous trends are evident in the CAR, where 'Wagner's task [was] to instil resolution and ruthlessness in the FACA [the Central African Armed Forces], forcing them to [target] communities suspected of sympathising with the rebels'.²³⁸ Officers similarly cited the 'widespread commission of rape against men, women and children as young as [ten] ... confirm[ing] that it is a common practice ... encouraged by Wagner commanders and fighters'.²³⁹ The result is perennial insecurity, as SGBV and identity-based violence feed cycles of grievance and recrimination that resonate in highly conservative societies, while 'beneficiary' regimes are unable to attract alternative sponsors.

In Bamako, political blowback was previously tempered by elite indifference (or complicity), with authorities prioritising coup-proofing and the preservation of 'useful Mali' (cities, roads and mines concentrated in the south and west) over nationwide stability.²⁴⁰ However, these dynamics may now be changing. Observers maintain that Goïta's 'inability to restore security ... has created an atmosphere of distrust in the highest levels of the military', with FAMA generals expressing frustration over the selective intervention of Russian contractors.²⁴¹ Uncoordinated, 'brutal' raids stoked 'fear within the [army] hierarchy',²⁴² deterring 'informers from collaborating' and undermining the efficacy of counterinsurgency operations. Local resentment has also fed into the recruitment strategies of JNIM and Islamic State-Sahel, which frame Wagner / Africa Corps as the new face of a Christian invasion. Meanwhile, expanding PMSC activity has left Russia on 'multiple sides of [the same] ethnic boundaries' (for instance, fighting Tuareg groups in northern Mali but trying to cooperate with Tuareg networks in Libya and Niger).²⁴³

Of course, such challenges should not be overstated. Despite their concerns, Malian officials have concluded a suite of cooperation agreements on oil and mining with

236. Watling, Danylyuk and Reynolds, 'The Threat from Russia's Unconventional Warfare Beyond Ukraine', p. 24.

237. Giustozzi, de Deus Pereira and Lewis, 'Did Wagner Succeed in the Eyes of its African and Middle Eastern Clients?', p. 22.

238. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

239. The Sentry, 'Architects of Terror: The Wagner Group's Blueprint for State Capture in the Central African Republic', June 2023, p. 18, <<https://thesentry.org/reports/architects-of-terror/>>, accessed 26 August 2026.

240. Antonio Giustozzi, 'A Mixed Picture: How Mali Views the Wagner Group', *RUSI Commentary*, 27 March 2024, <<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/mixed-picture-how-mali-views-wagner-group>>, accessed 6 February 2026.

241. Author interview with P07, November 2025; *Al Jazeera*, 'Mali's Military Arrests Generals, Suspected French Agent in Overthrow Plot', 15 August 2025.

242. The Sentry, 'Mercenary Meltdown: The Wagner Group's Failure in Mali', August 2025, pp. 10, 16, <<https://thesentry.org/reports/mercenary-meltdown-wagner-failure-mali/>>, accessed 28 August 2026.

243. Stanyard, 'Mercenaries and Illicit Markets', p. 21.

Russia, have confirmed bilateral plans to construct a solar power plant and have displayed interest in developing a civil nuclear partnership with Rosatom.²⁴⁴ Popular sentiments are likewise mixed, with polls showing broad satisfaction among urban constituencies driven in part by Russian strategic communications and the exploitation of majoritarian politics.²⁴⁵

Moscow's approach nevertheless remains a careful balancing act, as persistent 'economic, political and military crises' could eventually compel Goïta to find a new 'scapegoat', with the 'largely unproductive experiment with Russian security assistance' offering an attractive target for blame.²⁴⁶ Conceding the value of local buy-in to help offset these issues, Prigozhin was already trying to soften Wagner's profile across sub-Saharan Africa before his death. The inclusion of a woman and two children in Bangui's 'mercenary monument' suggests a deliberate attempt to pair masculine violence with domestic compassion, recasting Russian PMSCs as heroic protectors. At the same time, Wagner has sponsored beauty pageants to promote idealised forms of femininity and a curated image of 'traditional' gender roles in keeping with the mores of host communities.²⁴⁷ More recently, cultural agents, the Afi and Russkiy Mir offices have scaled up recreational activities, including language, art and music classes, alongside the rollout of Russian Houses, with at least the notional aim of broadening Wagner / Africa Corps' public appeal.²⁴⁸ Although much of this programming is superficial – as Del Re acknowledges, there is little Russian appetite for cultural sensitivity or relationship-building unless these efforts are 'functional' (for example, bolstering the recruitment of 'Black Russians')²⁴⁹ – it may also reflect a recognition that transactional politics is insufficient for maintaining influence, especially given the contradictions between regime security and dependency.²⁵⁰

244. International Crisis Group, 'Le tournant souverainiste au Mali: ajuster la trajectoire' ['A Course Correction for Mali's Sovereign Turn'], Africa Report No. 315, December 2024.

245. Russian PMSCs and FAMA's social base – the Bambara – appear to share an interest in maintaining regime security and preserving Mali's cultural hierarchy. For a broader breakdown of public perceptions, see Aubrey Ghambi, Alfred Torsu and Carolyn Logan, 'AD1139: Popular Perceptions of Russia Lag, Even as Its Influence Grows Across Africa', AFR Barometer, Dispatch No. 1039, 27 February 2026, <<https://www.afrobarometer.org/publication/ad1139-popular-perceptions-of-russia-lag-even-as-its-influence-grows-across-africa/>>, accessed 25 August 2026.

246. Andrew McGregor, 'Russian Military Presence in Mali Contributes to State Collapse', *Jamestown*, 30 July 2025, <www.jamestown.org/russian-military-presence-in-mali-contributes-to-state-collapse/>, accessed 7 February 2026.

247. Author interview with P02, November 2025.

248. *Ibid.*

249. Del Re, 'Russian Disinformation in Africa and the Sahel in the Post-Truth Era'.

250. Filip Bryjka and Jędrzej Czerep, *Africa Corps – A New Iteration of Russia's Old Military Presence in Africa* (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2024).

Implications for State Threat Analysis

Based on the vectors described above, several implications should therefore be considered regarding Russian activity in Africa and the gendered dynamics of state threats more broadly.

First, a gendered lens provides insights into the functionality and efficacy of such interventions, alongside their contingencies and constraints. The weaponisation of gender / social dynamics is a salient feature of Kremlin / PMSC information operations that appears both ideational and practical. Anti-gender politics is integral to Putin's domestic legitimacy, national branding and foreign policy, conflating notions of Russian *velikoderzhavnost* with the parsing, preservation and veneration of patriarchy, pro-natalism and heteronormativity. While particularly acute in Ukraine, this preoccupation has coloured Moscow's rhetoric for decades as the regime has attempted to appease its base (by scapegoating minorities), project diplomatic heft and push back against Western liberalism.²⁵¹ These sentiments offer an expedient vehicle for norm antipreneurship, enabling Russia to 'mislead, deceive and destabilise democratic societies' by stoking tensions in a 'strategic and coordinated manner'.²⁵² Importantly, they also blur the boundaries between conventional state threats, cultural outreach and soft power, with Russian decision-makers integrating development, diplomacy and military action under the same 'holistic' security umbrella.²⁵³

To be sure, the exploitation of gender / identity cannot be understood in isolation. Russian information operations may be comparatively adept, but their resonance derives from and depends on pre-existing social conditions. Russia accordingly benefits from the proselytism of a transnational 'moral conservative' movement operating across (Anglophone) Africa. Even if direct Kremlin funding / leadership

251. Sergey Katsuba, 'Putin's Russia: First Arrests Under New Anti-LGBT Laws Mark New Era of Repression', *The Conversation*, 8 April 2024, <www.theconversation.com/putins-russia-first-arrests-under-new-anti-lgbt-laws-mark-new-era-of-repression-226864>, accessed 23 July 2025.

252. Del Re, 'Russian Disinformation in Africa and the Sahel in the Post-Truth Era', p. 547.

253. Allard Duursma and Niklas Masuhr, 'Russia's Return to Africa in a Historical and Global Context: Anti-Imperialism, Patronage, and Opportunism', *South African Journal of International Affairs* (Vol. 29, No. 4, 2022), p. 415.

remains disputed – WCF sponsors such as Malofeev apparently enjoy limited clout,²⁵⁴ and political technologists only partner with pastors / mega-churches episodically – Moscow continues to leverage these polycentric networks in pursuit of geopolitical and material interests.²⁵⁵ At the same time, Russian stakeholders interact with and rely on the strategies, methods and capabilities of other states.²⁵⁶ China is paramount in this context.²⁵⁷ In partnership with sub-Saharan media companies, major outlets – China Radio International, CGTN and StarTimes – often package Chinese, African and, increasingly, Russian channels (or content) together.²⁵⁸ While more a ‘game of shared improv’ than formal coordination,²⁵⁹ close cooperation between Xinhua and Interfax reflects the scope of this ‘international echo chamber’, with a cluster of nodes – teleSUR (Venezuela), Press TV (Iran), RT and CGTN – giving the ‘impression of veracity’ as narratives, images, stories and slogans are ‘reproduced and circulated by different sources’.²⁶⁰ Their tone and temperament may vary,²⁶¹ but the convergence is clear,²⁶² illustrating a multilateral system of influence and intimidation marked by shared interests (if not ideology).²⁶³

Crucially, gender offers both a message and medium in this context. By parcelling homosexuality and feminism within an anti-colonial frame, Russia can exploit the amorphous language of ‘traditional values’ to form new coalitions among those marginalised by Western conventions. Anti-gender and anti-rights content are conflated with cultural authenticity, integrating elements of pan-Africanism – strength, sovereignty and self-reliance – that play into a wider pattern of ‘virility politics’ popularised among Sahelian strongmen. Under Traoré, Goïta and Doumbouya, social conservatism, paternalism and authoritarianism have become conjoined, ‘fus[ing] into a single narrative of protection that leaves little room for pluralism’.²⁶⁴ In encouraging and/or co-opting these sentiments, the Kremlin’s networks can effectively re-engineer pro-Russian sympathies as an ‘identity marker’ for local patriotism. Alternatively, the approach may be more subtle, defending the right of every society to

254. Author interview with P14, December 2025.

255. Jędrzej Czerep, ‘Illusion of Attractiveness: Russia’s Pursuit of a Success Story in Africa’, in Robert Kupiecki and Agnieszka Legucka (eds), *Disinformation and the Resilience of Democratic Societies* (Warsaw: Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, 2023).

256. Author interview with P09, November 2025.

257. *Ibid.*

258. Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc.*; Digital Forensic Research Lab, ‘In Sub-Saharan Africa, China Embraces Russian Messaging Against Ukraine’, 12 June 2024, <www.dfrlab.org/2024/06/12/china-russia-sub-saharan-africa/>, accessed 25 August 2026.

259. *The Economist*, ‘How Russia is Trying to Win Over the Global South’, 22 September 2022. There is little evidence of direct operational coordination. Author interviews with P01 and P02, October and November 2025.

260. Anne Applebaum, ‘The New Propaganda War’, *The Atlantic*, 6 May 2024. Similar points were made in author interview with P02, November 2025.

261. Author interview with P01, October 2025.

262. Author interview with P02, November 2025.

263. Applebaum, *Autocracy Inc.*

264. Moderan, ‘Virility Politics in the Sahel’.

protect its 'own values' and thereby (implicitly) legitimatising gender oppression wherever it exists.

Elsewhere, women are fronting such processes directly, with First Ladies emerging as proxies for, and influencers within, international religious movements, exercising clout and moral authority (as 'Mothers of the Nation') outside the usual accountability mechanisms.²⁶⁵ By sponsoring prayer breakfasts, 'virgin parades' and cultural exchanges, they provide vectors for foreign advocacy, bolstering evangelical networks with funds, logistics and political cover, as is the case in Uganda.²⁶⁶ This is not a universal phenomenon, but First Ladies and prominent female politicians can offer salient (if understudied) brokerage amid the eclectic landscape of African puritanism, in which Russia is an indirect beneficiary. Other women are hired, duped or enticed into fronting mis- / disinformation campaigns, as exposed by recent scandals surrounding the trafficking of African civilians into Russian defence industries. 'Alabuga Start' – a scheme to recruit cheap labour for Tatarstan's drone factories – is a prime example, with local influencers, women's groups and youth organisations amplifying promises of housing, vocational training (in hospitality or logistics) and decent salaries.²⁶⁷ Similar methods were used to conscript men into the Russian military (reportedly over 1,700 from 36 African countries), leveraging support from fixers, foreign employment agencies and high-profile intermediaries.²⁶⁸ The precarity of these dynamics is clear from the mounting backlash: several social media personalities have already distanced themselves from the controversy, claiming they were deceived by 'third parties',²⁶⁹ while evidence of coercion and racial abuse undercuts claims of anti-imperial solidarity. Nigeria, Kenya, Ghana and South Africa are all publicly expressing concern, with the latter launching a series of formal investigations. Should domestic pressure continue, regional elites may find it increasingly difficult to maintain their 'non-aligned' stance on Ukraine – to the detriment of Russian diplomacy. Putin's belated 'stop-list' alludes to this risk,²⁷⁰ but the experience also exemplifies the breadth, penetration and impact of the Kremlin's

265. Author interview with P03, November 2025.

266. Interviewees referenced the role of Janet Museveni in helping local networks drive Uganda's proscriptions on homosexuality forward, suggesting her role eclipsed that of her husband, who appeared 'surprised and confused' when the legislative text was first tabled. Author interviews with P03 and P05, November 2025.

267. Thierry Vircoulon and Horacio Givone, « La politique russe de recrutement de combattants et d'ouvrières en Afrique subsaharienne » ['Russia's Policy of Recruiting Fighters and Female Workers in Sub-Saharan Africa'], L'institut français des relations internationales, December 2025, <<https://www.ifri.org/fr/notes/la-politique-russe-de-recrutement-de-combattants-et-douvrieres-en-afrique-subsaharienne>>, accessed 25 August 2026.

268. Pauline Bax, 'Recruits Duped into Joining Russian War Effort Spark African Outcry', International Crisis Group, 27 February 2026, <www.crisisgroup.org/anb/africa/africa-russia-ukraine/recruits-duped-joining-russian-war-effort-spark-african-outcry>, accessed 15 March 2026.

269. Khanyisile Ngcobo, 'South African Influencer Apologises over Viral Russian Job Videos', *BBC News*, 27 August 2025.

270. Ben Farmer, 'Putin Bans Recruitment of Foreign Soldiers to Placate African Allies', *The Telegraph*, 25 February 2026.

influence operations, and the ready supply of local narratives, incentives and interests that they can tap into.

In turn, any effort to allay the regression of civil and human rights, women's rights and broader democratic liberties across sub-Saharan Africa must confront the social ecology that defines how foreign messages are consumed and interpreted, rather than just countering the content of specific narratives. Cultural diplomacy and mis- / disinformation fit within a wider milieu, shaped by local power relations, identities, norms and expectations, which often leaves Russia peripheral to the role of African agency: an accelerant rather than prime mover. In this context, frustrations with (and perceptions of) Western neglect, ineffectiveness and/or rapacity pre-date Russian infiltration and hamper the return of European access / influence.²⁷¹ A rollback of liberal values may really be the outcome of (and a surrogate for) these broader issues, albeit one now exacerbated by reactionary currents emanating from the US.

Further research is also needed to understand the extent to which concurrent lines of effort coalesce and reinforce one another. Clearly, Russian engagement in Africa cannot be reduced to profligacy alone; it incorporates Soviet nostalgia, sanctions evasion and a raft of soft power ambitions. Gender offers a useful framework for interrogating these dynamics but raises questions over how far cultural affinity translates into political currency. For instance, the Kremlin has faced criticism from Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya, despite their shared social policies and preferences. Given the US's rollout of the PHFFA (the Promoting Human Flourishing in Foreign Assistance policy) in early 2026, any assumed synonymy between anti-gender politics, anti-rights advocacy, conservative rubrics and pro-Russian affiliations may actually be weakening. Elsewhere, the adoption of regressive norms appears mimetic or performative, with AES 'theatre states' imposing anti-LGBTQIA+ measures despite lacking any ability to enforce legislation beyond the capital.²⁷² Chronic levels of identity- and gender-based violence are less a symptom of government policy than of institutional dilapidation. Consistency is similarly weak: for example, Nigerien authorities may have hollowed out the Ministry of Population, Promotion of Women and Protection of Children and pushed back against CSE, but they also exploit ideas of gender equality to draw contrasts with extremist outfits like JNIM.²⁷³ Against this backdrop, ties between Sahelian regimes and Russia may be more material than ideological, raising questions over their sustainability after years of lacklustre military outcomes.

Evidently, interrogating the gendered mechanics and the impact of state threats in this region provides an additional layer of nuance in what continues to be a nascent, highly politicised field. Although gender is rarely a standalone aspect of HSA activities, social

271. Author interview with P05 and P13, November and December 2025.

272. Author interview with P07, November 2025.

273. Author interview with P08, November 2025.

values offer convenient entry points for subversion without having to ‘invent’ division. By connecting geopolitical struggles to everyday social values, moral frameworks and personal identities, foreign information operations can effectively embed international politics within debates over family, sexuality and morality, achieving a level of emotional depth and durability that economic or technical messaging rarely matches. The Kremlin has proved particularly adept at leveraging these dynamics across different environments, exploiting the propensity of domestic elites to use moral panics as a strategy for seizing / preserving power. Operating within a broader ecosystem of political advocacy, and across contexts where social morality and exclusivity are often baked into the ‘practices of post-colonial state building’,²⁷⁴ Russia’s operational dexterity and ‘norm entrepreneurship’ appear to be effective in exerting influence.

At the same time, gendered analysis reveals the limits of foreign agency. Heteronormativity has been imbricated within debates over sovereignty, identity and nationalism, but it does not necessarily translate into pro-Russian sympathy. While the violence and discrimination precipitated by anti-gender politics are very real, they are not synonymous with, nor always caused by, external intrigue. In cases where they are connected (for example, via atrocities committed by PMSCs), the resulting blowback risks undermining the transactional relationships built on state (or regime) security. By questioning how gender, identity and social relations are exploited by external actors and how these interventions are perceived and experienced, and by gauging the implications for local power structures and wider systems of societal interactional, research can therefore better understand the resonance of hostile state activity and its limitations, and identify ways to mitigate, manage and/or counter its influence.

274. Gore, ‘Moral Panics and “Anti-Gender” Politics’.

Conclusion

In contemporary practice, transnational repression and information campaigns seem to be the most prominent domains where gender has been explicitly leveraged, particularly by Russia. Conversely, gendered aspects of other hostile activities, such as espionage, state-sponsored terrorism and sabotage, or the role of China, Iran and other players, are far less apparent in the available evidence, if not totally absent. This is partly due to a lack of gender sensitivity and responsiveness in the analysis, documentation and research of state threats across the board, leaving any assessments nascent at best.

Further investment by HSAs in what remains a fast-evolving field will probably change this picture, particularly as their activities are inherently dynamic, raising the possibility of unexpected dimensions emerging over time. Explicitly gendered threats are unlikely to be employed by a state purely for their own sake but will depend on its ideological commitments, priorities and assessment of impact on the intended audience. State threats do not necessarily require significant power or strategy to do damage, especially if combined with underlying factors or societal vulnerabilities, such as those driven by gender and other identity-based inequalities. Individual threat vectors do not have to be overly effective but may still be enough to tip the balance. Damage can also be cumulative, making it very hard to detect or contextualise. Thus, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

From what little data is available, social discourse, gender identity, exclusionary rubrics and sexual violence all appear to offer vectors for coercion, control and/or co-optation. Although not the only feature of the hybrid toolbox, they are coordinated, cheap, scalable and easily deniable, providing opportunities to foment identity-based tensions along numerous axes, be they gendered, generational, ethnic or intersectional. In focusing on the successes, and setbacks, experienced by Russia, this paper shows how using intersectional gender analysis allows another layer of evidence to be collected and knowledge to be built up around HSAs and their impacts in sub-Saharan Africa, supplying greater nuance and a better understanding of agency, functionality and efficacy, and – by extension – a more robust basis for any response.

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