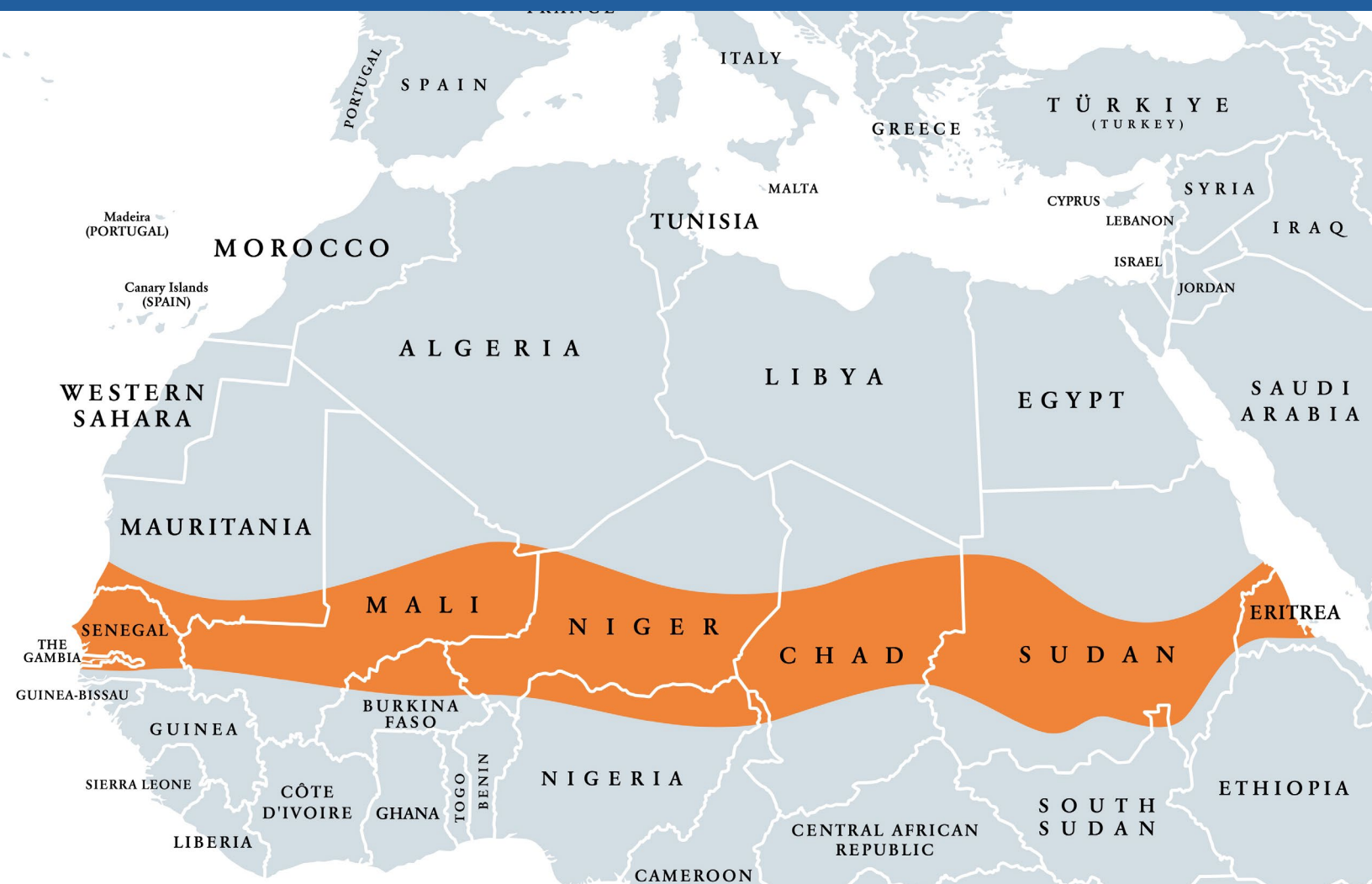# Strategic Authoritarian Narratives in the Sahel

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Introduction

In recent years, countries in the Sahel region of Africa have faced widespread insecurity and instability. Stretching across the northern tier of sub-Saharan Africa, Sahel countries like Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso have all experienced a series of military coups and rising levels of right-wing extremism. Poverty, environmental degradation, and competition for scarce resources like uranium, have further exacerbated this situation, creating a volatile mix of factors that have fueled social unrest and enabled the expansion of terrorist groups operating in these countries (Yabi, 2023).

Since the 1990s, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) has been pivotal in managing political instability and coups within its member states, including Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. However, the July 2023 coup in Niger marked a significant turning point for regional politics. In response to the coup, ECOWAS issued an ultimatum to coup leaders, threatening military intervention if Nigerien President Bazoum was not returned to power. The military juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger responded to this threat by forming the Alliance of Sahel States (AES), pledging to jointly counter any ECOWAS military intervention.

The ongoing political instability in these Sahel states, as well as their strategic geographical location and resource wealth, have also opened the door for foreign interference. Russia has been particularly active in Sahel countries, often through proxy actors such as its private military firm, the Wagner Group, which has provided security services and training to local forces (Hassan and Heibert, 2021). Additionally, the Wagner Group has been engaged in extensive information operations in the region (US State Department, 2022), which have continued under Russia's military intelligence, the GRU, following the attempted coup and death of Yevgeny Prigozhin in 2023 (Inwood & Tacchi, 2023).

Using ECOWAS's threat of military intervention in Niger during the 2023 coup as a case study, this paper explores how strategic authoritarian narratives are shaping conversations about democracy and regional security in the Sahel. We define strategic authoritarian narratives as the strategic and purposeful use of narrative, messaging, and information[1] by authoritarian states to advance an illiberal agenda and undermine democratic principles and institutions. As a collection of persuasive stories, strategic authoritarian narratives provide a framework for analyzing information operations, where disinformation, concealing crucial facts, and the delegitimization of adversarial narratives are tactics used strategically to promote authoritarian agendas.

The study of strategic authoritarian narratives around ECOWAS and the 2023 coup in Niger presents an opportunity to analyze the broad narratives shaping disinformation and propaganda about political insurgency and coups. What are the key strategic authoritarian narratives generating engagement and traction online? Are there asymmetries across French and English language narratives? And how does the current discourse on social media about ECOWAS reflect, build on, or advance narratives from known Russian influence operations targeting the region?

To answer these questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of 1,700 Facebook posts discussing ECOWAS and its threats of military intervention in the Sahel region. Based on strategic narratives theory, we categorized the posts into three broad narrative types (excluding news items): issue, identity, and system narratives. Broadly, issue narratives focused on the emerging dynamics between ECOWAS and the AES, the detrimental impact of Western-imposed sanctions and the French presence on regional economic and political stability, and the increasingly positive association between Russia and countries in the region aimed at fostering stability. Identity narratives focused on a pan-African identity that is free from Western influence and instead cooperating with Russian partners who have shared values and goals. System narratives focused on a changing world order where Western hegemony is in decline, while Russia's popularity grows in the region.

[1] Drawing on the strategic narrative frameworks (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin & Roselle, 2014; Miskimmon & O'Loughlin, 2017), strategic authoritative narratives are a collective of persuasive stories that provide a framework for analyzing information operations, where disinformation, concealing crucial facts, and the delegitimization of adversarial narratives are tactics used to strategically promote authoritarian agendas.

The predominance of issue narratives, accounting for 31% of the posts, suggests two potential strategic objectives. First, the emphasis on immediate, topical concerns in the Sahel indicates that narrative politics may be employed to exploit current, pressing issues. This tactic could aim to mobilize public opinion and resources by leveraging the urgency of ongoing crises. Second, the use of issue narratives may serve as a conduit for regional power balancing through the extension of issue narratives to encompass system and identity narratives as well. Indeed, many system and identity narratives were also embedded into online discussions about contemporary issues. These strategies underscore the multifaceted role of narrative politics in the Sahel, where immediate concerns are interwoven with long-term geopolitical maneuvers.

Overall, this paper provides important insights into how strategic authoritarian narratives are being employed to undermine democratic governance and regional security in the Sahel. By unpacking the key narratives, language dynamics, and connections to known Russian influence operations, we also offer policymakers and civil society actors a deeper understanding of the information environment shaping political discourse in the region. Crucially, our analysis highlights the need for more robust monitoring and programming to challenge the spread of not only disinformation, but anti-democratic messaging via strategic storytelling. As the Sahel faces complex security threats and political instability, recognizing and responding to these strategic authoritarian narratives will be essential for supporting resilient institutions, protecting human rights, and fostering sustainable peace and development in the region.

ECOWAS AS A FLASHPOINT FOR AUTHORITARIAN INFLUENCE

ECOWAS's threat of military intervention in Niger presents a compelling case study for examining strategic authoritarian narratives in the Sahel Region. Historically, ECOWAS has demonstrated its commitment to maintaining regional stability and order by issuing declarations of military intervention in many African nations including Liberia (1990), Sierra Leone (1997), Guinea-Bissau (1999), Côte d'Ivoire (2003), Liberia (2003), Mali (2013), and The Gambia (2017). These actions reflect ECOWAS's role as a stabilizing force in West Africa (Mathur, 2024). However, the 2023 coup in Niger marked a significant turning point when Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formed the AES and pledged to counter any ECOWAS military intervention. The formation of this coalition and ECOWAS's decision to not act on the threat of intervention raises critical questions about ECOWAS's future role and its ability to resolve disputes within the region.

In addition to expressing dissatisfaction with ECOWAS, the formation of the AES also created a space for the military juntas to challenge Western powers operating in the region. Since the coup in Niger, both France and the United States were ordered by the Nigerien junta to end their military presence in the country after, from the junta's perspective, they failed to reduce insecurity or improve economic wellbeing for Nigeriens (Asadu, 2023; Ford 2024). This withdrawal was not only criticized for weakening the immediate security apparatus of Niger, but also symbolized a shift in regional power dynamics and a retreat of Western influence in the region. It has also created opportunities for authoritarian powers to expand their geopolitical interests in the region.

The coup in Niger and the subsequent rise of the AES reflect a broader trend of increasing authoritarianism and militarization in the Sahel. This divergence from Western-aligned policies and an embrace of alternative power structures also underscores the complexities ECOWAS faces in asserting regional influence. As ECOWAS must navigate the delicate balance between addressing security concerns while promoting democratic governance, its credibility and effectiveness are being tested. Additionally, the humanitarian impact of the instability, marked by violence, displacement, and economic hardship, exacerbates the challenges faced by civilian populations, with the international community's response, including aid and development assistance, playing a crucial role in shaping the region's future stability (UNHCR, 2023).

FOREIGN INFLUENCE OPERATIONS
IN THE SAHEL

Over the past ten years, influence operations targeting the Sahel Region have seen a significant increase (Knight & Le Roux, 2024). In 2024, the African Center for Strategic Studies found evidence of more than 80 Russian disinformation campaigns targeting 22 countries across Africa, with more than half of these campaigns directly linked to the Wagner group (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). In particular, 19 of these operations targeted Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, all of which have since experienced violent coups (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024). Other actors, including domestic political actors and military juntas have also run information operations in the region, often emulating narratives found in Russian disinformation campaigns as well as using other tools of control and censorship, such as crackdowns on independent media, to suppress the information ecosystem (African Center for Strategic Studies, 2024).

Research and investigations into the Kremlin's propaganda system regularly reveal how narratives targeting the Sahel often amplify pro-Russian messaging and foster support for Wagner Group services throughout the region. This involves disseminating narratives that highlight Wagner Group successes, while simultaneously framing the West as a source of violence and instability in the region (US State Department, 2022; Hassan, 2022). For example, in September 2021 when Mali was considering employing Wagner Group forces to bolster its military capacity, Facebook pages began promoting the Wagner Group as a viable alternative to the current French military interventions, sharing memes with Wagner Group personnel depicted as "battle tested soldiers replacing French soldiers" (Knight & Le Roux, 2024).

In addition to highlighting pro-Russian and pro-Wagner narratives, the Kremlin's playbook also weaponizes generational memory to spread disinformation. By tapping into enduring anti-colonial, anti-Western, and pan-Africanist sentiments, these strategic authoritarian narratives leverage cultural history to resonate with local audiences. For instance, Russian influence operations have been documented blaming France and the West for fueling the Islamic insurgency, collaborating with local pan-Africanist influencers to advocate for the removal of French and Western presence across the Sahel (US State Department, 2022). Ultimately, these narratives not only serve to destabilize the region but also align with Russia's geopolitical objectives, positioning it as a more appealing alternative to Western institutions.

DATA & METHODS

Data Collection

To gather data on the strategic authoritarian narratives surrounding ECOWAS military interventions in Niger, we employed NewsWhip, a social media monitoring tool. NewsWhip enabled us to track content and engagement metrics across Facebook based on specific keywords and hashtags, capturing a wide range of narratives and messaging prevalent on social media from June 2023 to March 2024.

Working in consultation with Code For Africa's investigative teams who have been actively monitoring disinformation and foreign interference in the Sahel, we developed a set of keywords and hashtags to guide our data collection, carefully selected to capture various dimensions of the discourse. Here, we developed four buckets of hashtags (see Appendix 1 for a complete list of hashtags and keywords in both French and English):

1. Anti-ECOWAS sentiment
    (e.g., #ECOWAS, #antiECOWAScoalition, #DownwithECOWAS, #NeocolonialECOWAS),
2. Anti-Western and anti-French rhetoric
    (e.g., #DownwithFrance, #RejectWest, #NeocolonialFrance, #WesternImperialism),
3. Pro-Russian sentiment
    (e.g., #LongliveRussia, #RussiaFriendship, #SupportRussia, #RussianSecurityCooperation), and;
4. Discussions on democratic governance
    (e.g., #SupportforImprisonedLeader, #CallsforElections, #DenigrationofElectedLeaders).

These keywords and hashtags allowed us to pull data relevant to several issue areas, including the ECOWAS intervention, sanctions, regional security, the withdrawal of French troops, and the formation of the AES. Overall, we collected over 13,000 posts matching our keywords and hashtags from Facebook. We then subjected these posts to a rigorous cleaning process, which included translating French posts into English to ensure consistency and comprehensibility for qualitative coding, and removing duplicate posts. We then randomly sampled 1,700 posts from the cleaned dataset to create a representative sample for detailed qualitative coding and analysis.

Qualitative Coding

To guide the coding process, we developed a comprehensive codebook that included definitions and examples for each keyword and narrative type. We designed the codebook (found in Appendix 3) to ensure consistency and accuracy in coding, capturing the nuances of the social media discourse. A team of trained coders used the codebook to analyze the sampled Facebook posts based on the keyword categories we sampled for (anti-ECOWAS narratives, anti-Western narratives, pro-Russian narratives, and narratives about democratic governance), and identified the sentiment of each post (positive, negative, neutral). We then analyzed the coded data to identify patterns and trends in Facebook messaging across key areas, including identifying the most common narratives and their evolution over the data collection period, as well as assessing which types of posts and narratives garnered the most engagement.

While our methodology provides a robust framework for analyzing social media discourse, it is not without limitations. The volume and nature of data collected can vary significantly across platforms, potentially biasing results, and our narrow analysis of Facebook data presents only one viewpoint. Additionally, while we translated French posts, other languages prevalent in the Sahel region may not have been adequately represented. Furthermore, NewsWhip's social media listening is a proprietary platform and the quality and quantity of local language, non-news content was limited. Finally, the random sampling process, although intended to create a representative sample, may still miss some nuances of the broader discourse.

Table 1.
Qualitative Content Analysis Results

Code	Number of Posts (% of Total Posts)	Number of English Posts (% of Total Posts)	Number of French Posts (% of Total Posts)	Number of Interactions (% of Total Interactions)
Identity	**97 (4%)**	**13 (13%)**	**79 (81%)**	**254,350 (6%)**
Identity-Regional	67 (69%)	8 (12%)	54 (81%)	231,855 (91%)
Identity-Russia	17 (18%)	1 (6%)	16 (94%)	18,217 (5%)
Identity-West	13 (13%)	4 (31%)	9 (69%)	4251 (2%)
Issue	**704 (31%)**	**150 (21%)**	**532 (76%)**	**1,384,237 (31%)**
AES - Positive	38 (5%)	0 (0%)	38 (100%)	44,145 (3%)
AES - Negative	6 (1%)	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	25,171 (2%)
Cooperation -Positive	69 (10%)	12 (17%)	54 (78%)	113,618 (8%)
Cooperation - Negative	35 (5%)	19 (54%)	14 (40%)	93,642 (7%)
Democracy - Positive	80 (11%)	33 (41%)	47 (59%)	78,230 (6%)
Democracy - Negative	32 (5%)	8 (25%)	24 (75%)	130,310 (9%)
Ecowas - Positive	36 (5%)	18 (50%)	14 (39%)	80,339 (6%)
Ecowas - Negative	101 (14%)	13 (17%)	79 (78%)	231,850 (17%)
France - Positive	4 (1%)	0 (0%)	4 (100%)	496 (0%)
France - Negative	72 (10%)	9 (13%)	62 (86%)	219,474 (16%)
Russia - Positive	146 (21%)	11 (8%)	135 (92%)	196,185 (14%)
Russia - Negative	7 (1%)	4 (57%)	3 (43%)	6,239 (0%)
Sanctions - Positive	4 (1%)	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	17,707 (1%)
Sanctions - Negative	33 (5%)	5 (15%)	21 (64%)	87,599 (6%)
US - Positive	14 (2%)	4 (29%)	10 (71%)	23,816 (2%)
US - Negative	26 (4%)	5 (19%)	21 (81%)	35,346 (3%)
System	**90 (4%)**	**19 (21%)**	**71 (79%)**	**119,134 (4%)**
Power Transitions	73 (81%)	17 (23%)	56 (77%)	107,821 (89%)
Weak-IO	17 (19%)	2 (12%)	15 (88%)	11,313 (11%)

Note: 1077 posts were coded as news and 301 posts were coded as NA. These posts are not included in the table above. Only French and English languages were examined so numbers do not always add up to the total number of posts.

Issue Narratives

Issue narratives address the topical and contextual challenges within specific settings. In our dataset, issue narratives are broadly concerned with: (1) the emerging dynamics between ECOWAS and the AES; (2) the detrimental impact of French presence on regional economic and political stability; and (3) the increasingly positive association between Russia and countries in the region aimed at fostering stability. Notably, the most significant topical shift was the growing positive association between Russia and the Sahel countries, which represents the largest category of issue narratives (21%). Overall, issue narratives constituted a substantial portion of the strategic narratives disseminated via Facebook, accounting for 31% of the coded data.

The first bucket of issue narratives examined discuss the emerging dynamics between ECOWAS and the AES, accounting for 25% of the coded data. ECOWAS was predominantly portrayed negatively, often likened to terrorists and terrorism. In contrast, the AES was overwhelmingly positively represented. For instance, a Facebook post referring to the first Council of Ministers of the AES, where ECOWAS's measures were equated with terrorist maneuvers, garnered more than 1,000 interactions on Facebook. Other posts described ECOWAS as an organization "under the control of foreign powers'' that is failing to "effectively resolve the problems." These narratives frequently intertwined with identity narratives, depicting ECOWAS as "manipulated by the West" and an organization operating "in the pay of the imperialists," leading to questions about its credibility in ensuring regional stability.

There was also variation in the portrayal of ECOWAS based on language: 50% of the positive narratives regarding ECOWAS were in English, while 78% of the negative narratives were in French. ECOWAS-negative narratives were most prominent during its threat to intervene militarily following the Niger coup and during the establishment of the AES later in the year. In contrast, whenever the AES was mentioned, it was portrayed as an "architecture of collective defense and mutual assistance," enabling a pan-Africanist democracy and providing a pathway separate from "local lackeys of imperialism."

Anti-ECOWAS narratives also spiked at different times during our analysis (see Figure 1). Expectedly, Anti-ECOWAS narratives were most prominent following the military coup in Niger and ECOWAS's threat of military intervention. These narratives also spiked again in February 2024 during the Extraordinary Summit of ECOWAS Heads of State where the decision of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger withdrawing from ECOWAS was going to be discussed. During this summit, pro-AES content also increased on Facebook.
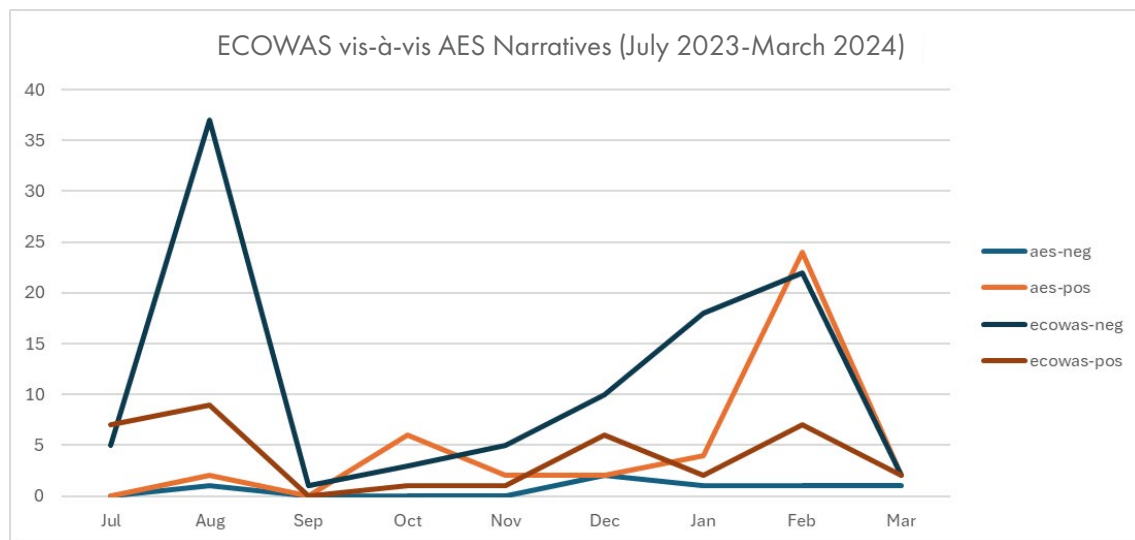

ECOWAS vis-à-vis AES Narratives (July 2023-March 2024)

Figure 1: General Tchiani on France

Figure 2: Demonstration in front of French Embassy

The second bucket of issue narratives discussed the roles of France and the United States in regional political and economic security, which constituted 39% of the coded data. Anti-French narratives were particularly prominent, far exceeding anti-US sentiments. These narratives mainly focused on the issues surrounding French military presence in the region, and the failure of France to curb insecurity in the region. For example, discussions highlighted how many public demonstrations demanded the withdrawal of French troops and accused France of providing "support for terrorism in Niger." President Macron was often depicted as a "warlord," manipulating ECOWAS to destabilize the region. Moreover, anti-French narratives also appeared alongside pro-Russian content, as evidenced by protestors displaying placards with slogans such as "long live Russia" in front of the French embassy, which received substantial engagement. Overall, anti-French narratives were especially prominent at the outset of the ECOWAS threat, later diminishing in prominence until the withdrawal of French troops occurred in December 2023 (Figure 2).

French and US Relations with Africa (July 2023 - March 2024)
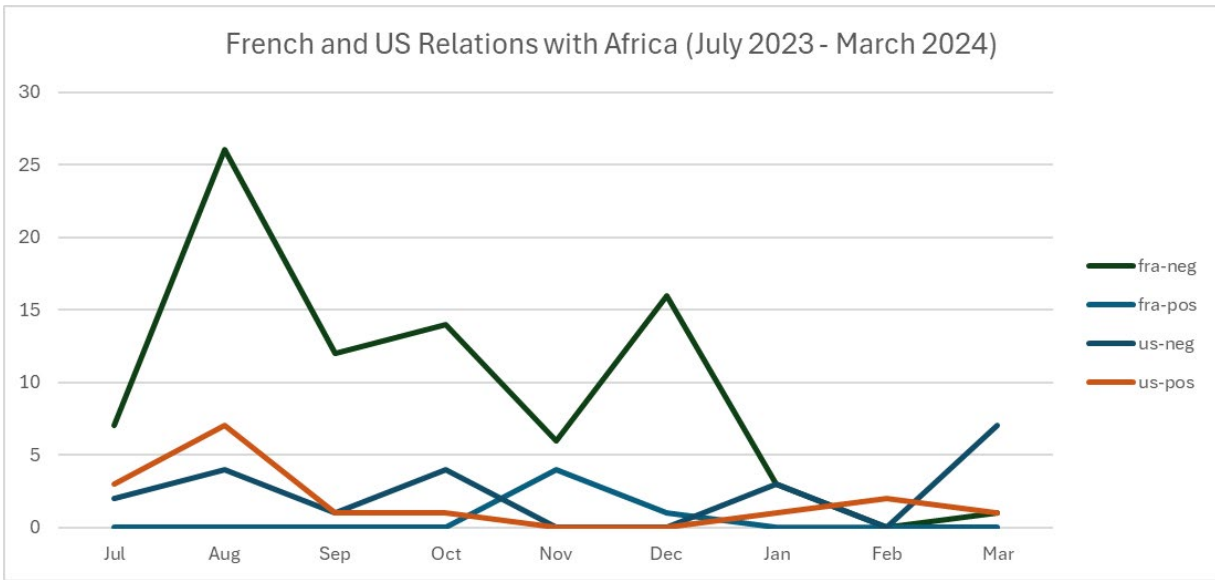
Third, strategic issue narratives focusing on improving relations with Russia constituted 22% of the posts. These narratives portrayed Russia as a steadfast ally offering extensive support amid international sanctions and perceived hypocrisy from the global community. Posts praised Russia's provision of grain aid, technological assistance, and efforts to engage ECOWAS in dialogue. They emphasized the "common historical and friendship between Russia and African countries," presenting Russia as "essential for Africa's development and sovereignty." Recent diplomatic engagements, including Burkina Faso's Prime Minister Kyélèm de Tambèla's meeting with Synergy University and President Traoré's address at the Russia-Africa Summit, highlight this strategic focus. These interactions underscore Russia's role as a steadfast ally, with Traoré emphasizing combating terrorism and fostering unity among African states, and Kyélèm de Tambèla addressing educational and cultural synergies. The total number of Russia-positive posts was 146, with 92% (135 Facebook posts) of them primarily in French. Additionally, Russia-positive narratives were more consistently portrayed throughout the six months of data collection compared to other issue narratives. Furthermore, adjectives such as "fraternal" were frequently used to describe the collaboration between Russia and Burkina Faso, highlighting their partnership as a means to "defeat the predators." Russia was also depicted as an ambitious partner in the development of Africa's energy sector. This narrative development suggests a strategic effort to bolster Russia's image as a benevolent and essential partner for African nations, countering negative portrayals of Western interventions.

Russia Relations with Africa (July 2023 - March 2024)
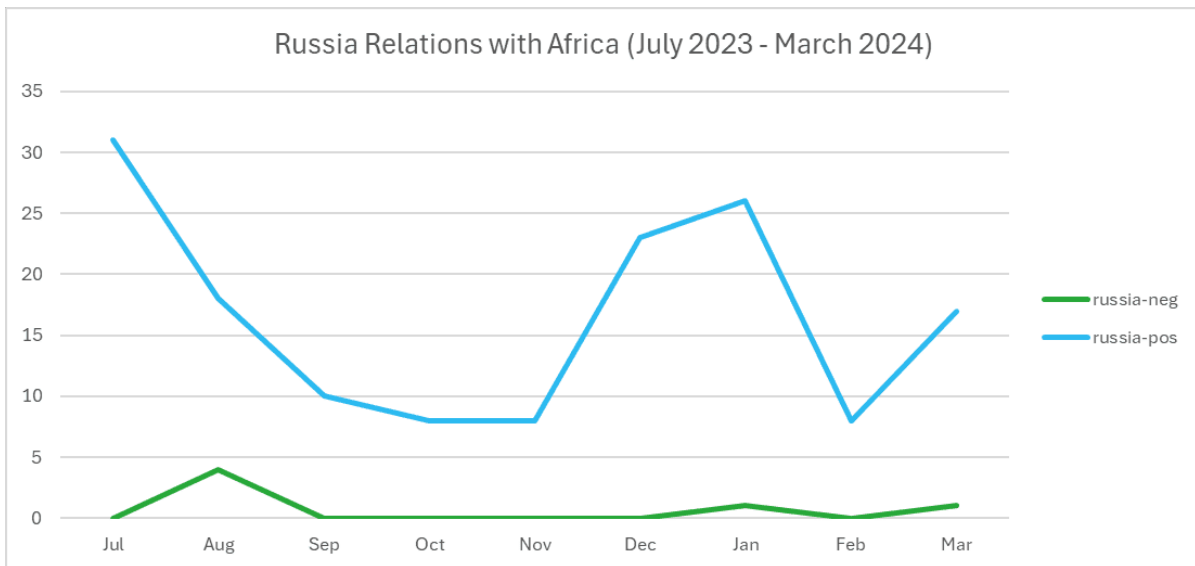
RTB ✔
December 29, 2023 · 🌐

🔴 Coopération Burkina-Russie : des universitaires russes chez le Premier ministre.

Le Premier ministre, Dr Apollinaire Joachimson Kyélèm de Tambèla, a reçu en audience une délégation des responsables de l'Université Synergy de Moscou, ce mercredi 27 décembre 2023 à Ouagadougou.

Conduite par le président de la corporation de Synergy, Vadim Lobov, la délégation a présenté au Chef du Gouvernement l'Université Synergy, ses activités, son champ d'actions et ses perspectives.

Pour le président de la corporation Synergy, Vadim Lobov, Synergy est une université basée à Moscou qui adopte un modèle de formation à temps plein, couvrant un spectre éducatif allant de la maternelle à l'enseignement supérieur.

« En plus de son engagement dans l'éducation, l'établissement intègre une école de business et une académie, faisant d'elle une institution complète. Actuellement, elle compte plus de 200 000 étudiants, dont près de 10 % sont des étudiants étrangers », a-t-il affirmé.

« L'université abrite une impressionnante variété de plus de 300 facultés, couvrant ainsi un large éventail de disciplines académiques. L'université, ancrée dans une vision globale, repose sur trois piliers majeurs de collaboration : l'éducation, l'entrepreneuriat et le patriotisme », a-t-il souligné.

Pour le Premier Ministre, Dr Apollinaire Joachimson Kyélèm de Tambèla, les présentations sont magnifiques, mais des interrogations émergent.

« Le défi de la langue d'enseignement se pose, car au Burkina Faso, la langue russe est peu répandue. Comment cela sera-t-il résolu, et ne surgira-t-il pas un problème linguistique ? Le deuxième obstacle concerne les déplacements. Auparavant, l'Aeroflot assurait cette liaison, mais à présent, aucune compagnie ne relie directement le Burkina Faso à la Russie », a-t-il relevé.

Et le Premier ministre, Dr Apollinaire Joachimson Kyélèm de Tambèla, d'ajouter : « Nous sommes favorables à toute forme de coopération avec la Russie. Les opportunités de collaboration sont nombreuses, mais il est important de résoudre rapidement les problèmes de déplacement. On a beaucoup de choses à faire ensemble, l'essentiel, c'est de commencer ».

En réponse, Vadim Lobov a fait savoir que les préoccupations soulevées par le Premier ministre "sont très objectives et on peut le comprendre".

"Notre pays a déjà une expérience dans le domaine de la collaboration et notre souhait est de pouvoir activer cette coopération » a mentionné Vadim Lobov.

DCRP/Primature

See Translation

Figure 3:
PM discusses Russia's academic soft power

Translation: Burkina-Russia cooperation: Russian academics at the Prime Minister's office.
Prime Minister, Dr. Apollinaire Joachimson Kyélèm de Tambèla, received in audience a delegation of officials from Synergy University in Moscow, on Wednesday, December 27, 2023 in Ouagadougou.

Led by the President of the Synergy Corporation, Vadim Lobov, the delegation presented to the Head of Government Synergy University, its activities, its field of action and its perspectives.
For Synergy Corporation President, Vadim Lobov, Synergy is a Moscow-based university that adopts a full-time education model, covering an educational spectrum from kindergarten to higher education.

"In addition to its commitment to education, the institution integrates a business school and an academy, making it a comprehensive institution." "It currently has more than 200,000 students, almost 10% of whom are foreign students," he said.

"The University is home to an impressive array of over 300 faculties, covering a wide range of academic disciplines." The university, anchored in a comprehensive vision, rests on three major pillars of collaboration: education, entrepreneurship and patriotism," he stressed.
For the Prime Minister, Dr. Apollinaire Joachimson Kyélèm of Tambèla, the presentations are magnificent, but questions emerge.
"The challenge of the language of education arises, because in Burkina Faso, the Russian language is not widespread." How will this be resolved, and will there not be a language problem? The second obstacle involves traveling. Previously, Aeroflot provided this link, but now, no company links Burkina Faso directly to Russia," he noted.

Figure 4: Traoré seeks stronger, anti-imperialist Russia-Africa relations

Translation: 2nd Summit "Russia-Africa": The Head of State for Profitable Relations with African People (Saint Petersburg, July 28, 2023 GMT+3). The Transitional President, Head of State, Captain Ibrahim TRAORE, in his speech at the opening of the 2nd Russia-Africa Summit this Friday late morning, wished for the establishment of better relations with Russia's the federation that can meet the needs of the populations. In front of his African peers gathered around the President of the federation of Russia Vladimir PUTIN, the Head of State defended the commitment and determination of the Burkinabe people in the face of terrorist hydro. "The people of Burkinabe have decided to fight against the terrorist hydro to revive its development. "In this struggle, valiant populations have pledged to take up arms in the face of terrorism," said the Transitional President, who has not failed to eradicate all those "imperialists" who call the Volunteers for Defense of the Homeland militias.

To this end, he insisted for more solidarity and unity among African heads of state in the face of imperialist and neocolonial speeches. "We African heads of state need to stop behaving like puppets that dance every time the imperialists pull the strings," he argued.

In St. Petersburg, Captain Ibrahim TRAORE welcomed the meeting of the summit that discusses the problematic strategic partnership with Russia for Africa's development and population welfare. Also, he wished that "this summit will be an opportunity to build very good relations in view of a better future for our people." While welcoming Russia's gesture of solidarity towards our country, Captain Ibrahim TRAORE invited his African peers, in view of the continent's richness and enormous agricultural potential, to work to ensure food self-sufficiency for populations.

Identity Narratives

Identity narratives concern the actors' sense of self, values and traditions. In our dataset, identity narratives focused on three key aspects: anti-Western narratives about the US and France, pro-Russian narratives about Russia and its relations with African nations, and narratives about pan-Africanism and a need for African solutions to African problems.

Identity narratives made up a relatively small proportion of the strategic narratives, representing only 4% of the coded data. The largest category of identity narratives were about regional identity and pan-Africanism, with 69% of all identity narratives discussing Africa and regional identity. The majority of pan-African posts were in French (81%). Although there were a relatively small number of identity-narratives, they generated some engagement (254K interactions), the majority of which was generated from posts discussing pan-Africanism (231K interactions). The prominence of pan-Africanism aligns with broader trends of African nationalism and anti-colonial sentiment that have ebbed and flowed over the decades.

Figure 5: Coverage of Coordination of CSOs in Burkina Faso in solidarity with the Nigerien people

Translation: Niger: Burkina Faso CSO Coordination in solidarity with the Nigerian people

The Coordination of Civil Society Organizations (OSC) of Burkina Faso has shown its support for Transitional President Captain Ibrahim Traoré and his government on the day after his return from St. Petersburg, Russia.

The coordination also says it is supporting their "pan-African brothers" from Niger who have decided to take their destiny into their own hands.

The coordination, which claims to support any saviour coups for the peoples, condemned "the murderous measures of ECOWAS, UEMOA and any imperialist complicity against Niger" and "vigorously rejected any project of aggression against the country".

In short, the coordination called on the sacred union of the Nigerian people and the Nigerian youths to rally behind the new authorities until the total liberation of their country.
This was during a press conference, this Tuesday, August 1, 2023 in Ouagadougou

Although pan-Africanism is a legitimate movement dedicated to cultivating unity among people of African descent and establishing independence for African nations, investigations have found that Russian influence operations have co-opted some pan-African activists to promote Russian interests, including delegitimizing French and Western activities in the region while promoting Russia (US State Department, 2022).

In our dataset, pan-African narratives reflected similar narratives from known Russian disinformation sources. For example, they emphasized solidarity and cooperation among Sahel states and condemned any acts of violence or military intervention. They also emphasized elements of unity and independence including calls to renew "the spirit of collaboration, innovation and determination, to build a prosperous and sustainable Africa for all." However, these narratives appeared to come mainly from local news sources (including those that are state-controlled and have faced significant crackdown from the military juntas). These sources often posted identity and pan-Africanist narratives that overlapped with anti-Western and anti-France themes, including calls for "Europe to step aside and stop pushing people in Africa," as well as pro-Russian themes including the shared role of "Russia and Africa in the fight against Nazism."

Pan-African and regional identity narratives were prominent during three key events: (1) the Niger coup in August 2023; (2) when ECOWAS imposed additional sanctions on Niger; and (3) the two month period after the formal withdrawal from ECOWAS. Pro-Russian identity narratives were highest in the month before the Niger coup in August 2023 and then remained relatively low. Finally, like many narratives, anti-Western sentiment increased during the military coup in August 2023 but then steadily quickly declined and remained relatively low, even during the French withdrawal of troops from Niger.
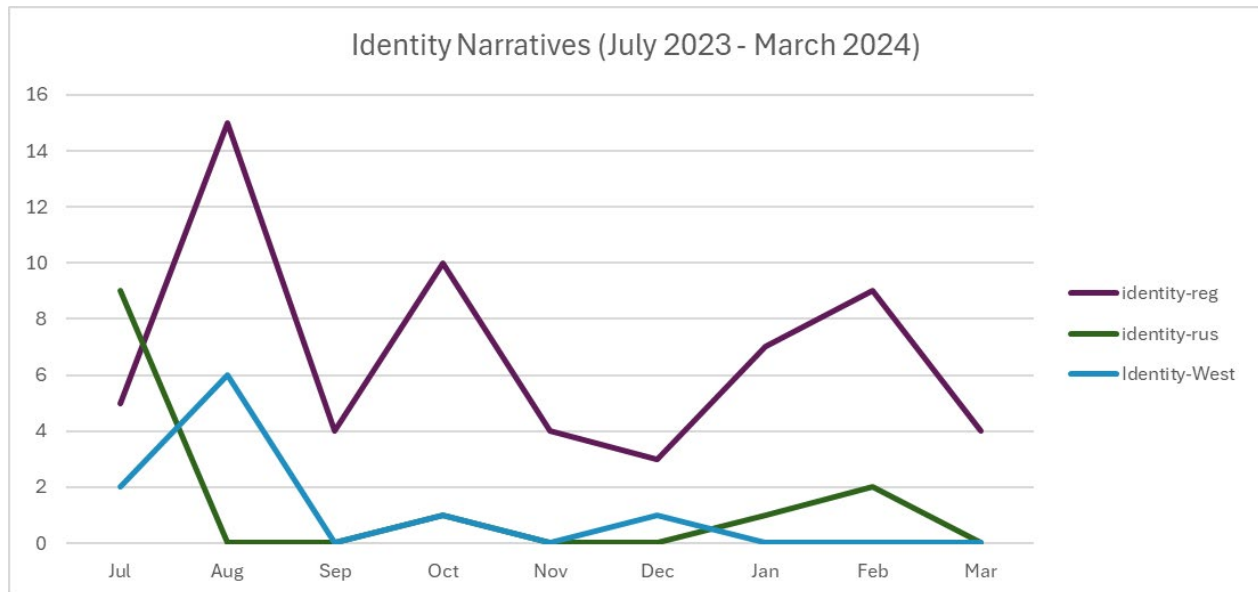
System Narratives

System narratives relate to the larger world order and the structure and characteristics of international relations. In our dataset, system narratives focused on two key aspects: (1) posts discussing how power is transitioning away from Western hegemony and towards Sahel states or Russia and (2) posts discussing the decline of international institutions like ECOWAS or the United Nations (UN).

In our dataset, system narratives made up the smallest proportion of the overall strategic narratives, representing only 4% of the coded data. Posts discussing power transitions and the decline of Western hegemony were the largest category of coded posts, representing 81% of all system narratives. The majority of system narratives were in French (77%). System narratives also used more emojis on average than other kinds of posts in our dataset (with an average of 2 emojis per post). Interestingly, however, system narratives generated the least amount of engagement (only 4% of total interactions in our dataset), and, across the entire dataset, there was an overall negative relationship between the use of emojis and interactions on Facebook.

System narratives discussed changing power dynamics in the region, emphasizing the weakening of the West and strengthening of Africa, often through partnerships with Russia. For example, many system narratives overlapped with the withdrawal of French troops from Niger, highlighting how relationships with France "were changing" and that the military partnership with France is "an old story." Many of these posts also drew on identity narratives about France "not being a serious partner in the fight against terrorism." At the same time, system narratives also emphasized Russia's increasing presence in the region, highlighting how it was "reopening diplomatic channels" or how "military cooperation with the russian federation allows for the strengthening of the capacities of military personnel with better supplies of arms and ammunitions." Overall, the emphasis on the declining relevance of Western institutions suggests an attempt to delegitimize these bodies while simultaneously championing alternative forms of regional governance, potentially ones more amenable to Russian influence.
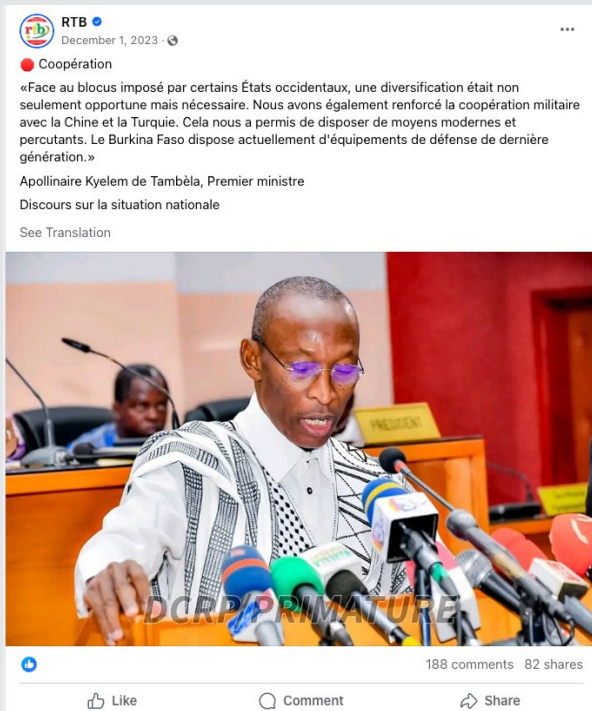
Figure 7: Coverage of Apollinaire Kyelem de Tambèla, Prime Minister Speech on the national situation

Translation: Cooperation

"In the face of the blockade imposed by some Western states, diversification was not only timely but necessary." We have also strengthened military cooperation with China and Turkey. This has allowed us to have modern and impactful means. Burkina Faso now has state-of-the-art defensive equipment. »

Apollinaire Kyelem of Tambela, Prime Minister Speech on the national situation

Figure 6: Abandonment of West

Russian state-backed media and diplomatic channels also discussed similar pro-Russian system narratives. Here, posts discussed the role of Russia "strengthening diplomatic presence" and highlighted Russia's role in working with local African governments, including exchanges between leaders and delegates. Some of these outlets also posted conspiratorial stories about the role of Western institutions in global governance, including claims that "NATO enticed hundreds of Ukrainian mercenaries to Fight Russia".

When it came to the distribution of posts overtime, power transition narratives were prominent immediately during and following the coup in Niger, as well as during December 2023 when the French withdrew their military troops from the region. Overall system narratives, although a small category of posts, align with the identity narratives that emphasize African nationalism and a desire for greater self-determination. Together, these narratives suggest a growing sentiment that the traditional Western-dominated international order is waning, and that new power centers are emerging, particularly through partnerships with Russia.

System Narratives (July 2023 - March 2024)
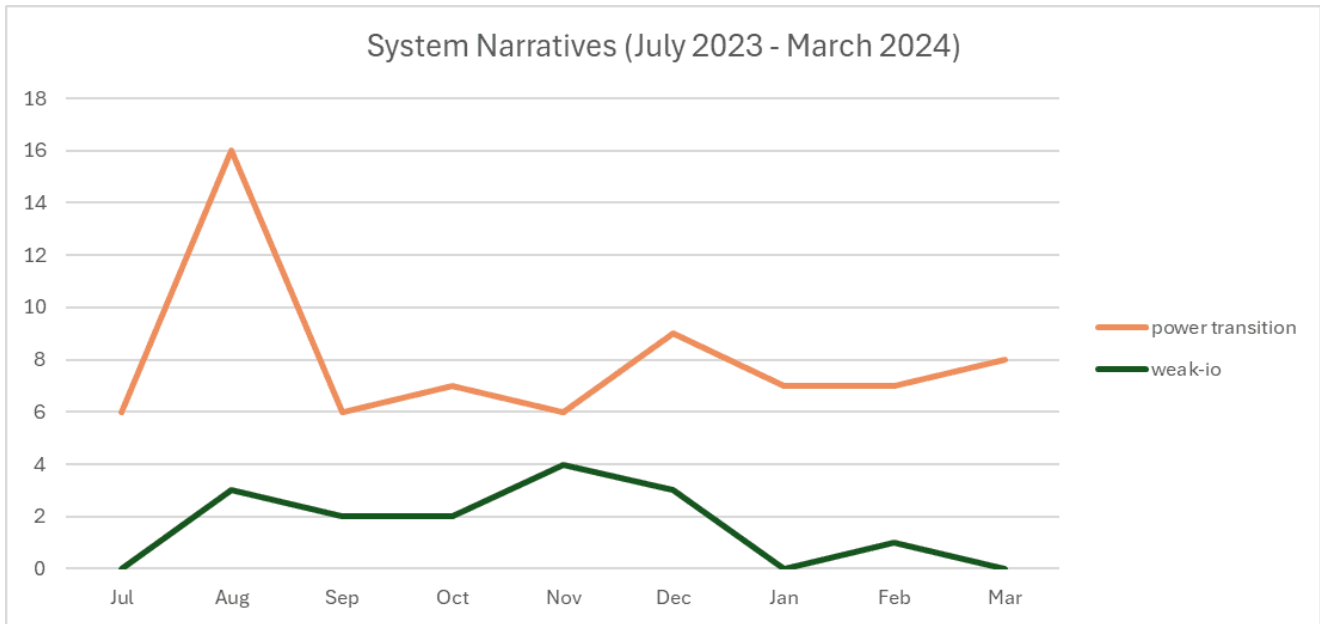
CONCLUSION

The Sahel region is at a critical juncture, grappling with political instability and the rise of authoritarian narratives that seek to undermine democratic governance. This paper has explored the strategic role of authoritarian narratives in shaping public discourse around the July 2023 coup in Niger, particularly around ECOWAS's response and the emerging Alliance of Sahel States. By analyzing 1,700 Facebook posts, we uncovered how issue, identity, and system narratives intertwine to reflect and amplify the challenges faced by the region.

Our analysis of social media discourse found that issue, identity, and system narratives often work in concert to portray ECOWAS as a tool of Western neo-colonialism, champion pan-African solidarity against foreign interference, and justify the military seizures of power as necessary to protect national sovereignty and regional stability. Pro-Russian narratives that framed Russia as an alternative and capable ally to Sahel states were also prominently featured in social media discussions about the Sahel. These narratives attempt to position Russia as a supportive partner in the fight against perceived neo-colonialism in order to appeal to those who might seek alternatives to Western alliances.

As the Sahel continues to confront insecurity throughout the region, it is imperative for policymakers and civil society to recognize and counteract strategic authoritarian narratives. Traditional development strategies that involve strengthening institutional resilience, promoting human rights, and fostering sustainable development should also be accompanied by robust strategies to mitigate the impact of authoritarian narratives and the erosion of democratic principles. In the long term, addressing the narratives that shape public perceptions will be essential for safeguarding the future of democracy and stability in the Sahel.

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Appendix 1: Keywords and Hashtags (English & French)		
CATEGORY	**ENGLISH**	**FRENCH**
Ecowas related sentiments	#ECOWAS #antiECOWAS coalition #antiECOWAS alliance #Alliance of Sahel States #DownwithECOWAS #DownwithFrance #Reject West #Down with political liberalism #Neocolonial France #neocolonial ECOWAS #double standard #ECOWAS plotting subversion #Western imperialism #declining EU #Sahel Security Alliance #anti sanction #MINUSMA leave #Down with ECOWAS, long live AES #anti sanction #Pan Africanism is United States of Africa	#CEDEAO #Coalition anti-CEDEAO #Alliance anti-CEDEAO #Alliance des États du Sahel #AES #BaslaCEDEAO #AbaslaCEDEAO #BaslaFrance #AbaslaCEDEAO #abasloccident #rejeterl'Ouest #abaslibéralismepolitique #Francenéocoloniale #CEDEAOnéocoloniale #doublestandard #La CEDEAO prépare une subversion #Impérialisme occidental #UEendéclin #Alliance pour la sécurité au Sahel #antisanction #MINUSMApartez #abaslaCEDEAO, l'AES en vie en amour #antisanction #Le panafricanisme, c'est les Etats-Unis d'Afrique
Russian military presence	#Long live Russia #anticolonial champion Russia #Russia Friendship #Support Russia #Russian defence agreement #Russian military aid #Russian support #Russian military training #Russian security cooperation with Niger #Russian security cooperation with Mali #Russian security cooperation with Burkina Faso #Russia-Africa Defense Agreements #Burkina-Russie Friendship	#Vive la Russie #La Russie championne de l'anticolonialisme #Amitié Russie #Soutenir la Russie #Accord de défense avec la Russie #Aidemilitairerusse #SoutienàlaRussie #Formation militaire russe #Coopération russe en matière de sécurité avec le Niger #Coopération russe en matière de sécurité avec le Mali #Coopération sécuritaire russe avec le Burkina Faso #Accords de défense entre la Russie et l'Afrique #Amitié Burkina-Russie

Appendix 1: Keywords and Hashtags (English & French)

Democracy	#Democracy #Support for imprisoned leader #Calls for elections #Denigration of elected leaders and support for military junta and coups #Rule by force #Against the electoral process	#Démocratie #Soutien au dirigeant emprisonné #Appels aux élections #Dénigrement des dirigeants élus et soutien à la junte militaire et aux coups d'État #Règle par la force #Contre le processus électora

Appendix 2: Timeline of Significant Events

MONTH	EVENT
July 2023	Niger coup d'état
July 2023	ECOWAS threatens military intervention and imposes sanctions on Niger's military junta
August 2023	Protests erupt in Niger against ECOWAS sanctions
August 2023	Mali and Burkina Faso express support for Niger, promising military aid against ECOWAS
September 2023	Formation of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES) by Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso
	ECOWAS meets to discuss further actions and potential interventions in Niger
October 2023	ECOWAS imposes additional sanctions, impacting trade and financial transactions in Niger
November 2023	Increased anti-French sentiment and protests across the region
December 2023	Full withdrawal of French troops from Niger
	Prime Ministers of Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso rally to a shared future through the AES
January 2024	Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso declare withdrawal from ECOWAS

Issue Narratives: Issue specific narratives are typically associated with a narrower policy issue or topic.

- ECOWAS - how are ECOWAS policies presented?
    - ECOWAS-POS is seen as a positive entity supporting the region with its threat of military intervention and ultimatum.
    - ECOWAS-NEG is seen as a negative entity supporting the American agenda and through its threat of military interventions is trying to affect regional stability.
- Dialogue/Cooperation -
    - COOP - POS discusses the state of relationship among countries trying to positively cooperate with Sahel states through dialogues or other forms of cooperation. (diplomacy and dialogue).
    - COOP-NEG discusses the state of relationship among countries unwilling to cooperate with Sahel states through any forms except for military interventions.
- Democracy
    - DEM-PRO discusses topics about democracy (elections, protests, speech, etc.) or democracy itself as a form of governance in a positive frame.
    - DEM-NEG discusses topics about democracy (elections, protests, speech, etc.) or democracy itself as a form of governance in a negative frame.
- Alliance of Sahel States (AES) - how are AES policies/actions presented?
    - AES-POS is seen as a positive entity supporting regional stability
    - AES-NEG is seen as a negative entity causing regional divergence.
- Russia - how is Russia presented? How is cooperation perceived?
    - RUSSIA-POS - Russian relations with Sahel countries are seen as 'high-quality'
    - RUSSIA-NEG - Russian relations with Sahel countries are seen as causing regional instability.
- US - How is the US presented? How is the relationship with the US perceived?
    - US - POS - US relations with Sahel countries are seen as beneficial
    - US - NEG - US relations with Sahel countries are seen as causing regional instability.
- French - How is the relationship with France/French army presented/perceived?
    - FRA-POS - French Army/France's relations with Sahel countries are seen as beneficial.
    - FRA-NEG - French Army's relations with Sahel countries are seen as contributing to regional instability/ rise in jihadism.
- Sanctions - is there a reference to sanctions - how is it presented/perceived?
    - SANC - POS - Sanctions are seen as a solution to the crisis in the region.
    - SANC - NEG - Sanctions are seen as causing deterioration in the relationship and economy of the region.

System Narratives: System narratives relate to the 'larger world order' and the structure and characteristics of international relations/system.

- POWER TRANSITION:
    - Power transition posts discuss how power is moving away from Western hegemony (countries like France and the US) and towards Sahel States or Russia.
- WEAKENING IO:
    - Weakening IO posts discuss or emphasize the decline of international institutes like ECOWAS or the UN.

Identity Narratives: Identity narratives concern the actors' sense of self, values, and traditions - for example, historical relationships, identity connections.

- IDENTITY - RUS:
    - Identities ties posts discuss how Russia is favorable to understanding the identities, culture and histories of the region.
- IDENTITY - WEST:
    - Identity ties posts discuss how Western powers are unfavorable to the basic identities, culture and histories of the region.
- IDENTITY - REG:
    - Regional identity posts discuss how the region of Sahel states shares culture, history and identity and the objective of cooperation should be to promote pan-Africanism.

News: News are basically news with no reference to narratives (i.e. this event happened or is taking place, for example, a communique was developed).

N/A: Specifically for issues that are about Sahel states but mostly internal issues that have no relevance with the ECOWAS/Coup topic. You can also use the NA category to code data that is not codable (for example, a long video).