

Repression and suppression within the Rwandan diaspora

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The Rwandan diaspora in Europe is both a channel for state-linked narratives and a target of repression. How should EU policymakers respond to protect information integrity, civic space, and democratic resilience?

Summary

Rwanda's diaspora in Europe is deeply divided. Some members act as active promoters of the regime, lobbying institutions, shaping narratives, and silencing dissent. Others, particularly critics, face intimidation, harassment, and exclusion. This dynamic transforms diaspora politics into a tool of foreign information manipulation and repression within Europe. It has direct implications for EU policy, touching on foreign interference, disinformation, protection of civic space, and EU external engagement with the Great Lakes region, including the South Kivu conflict.

This brief outlines the historical and political context, and highlights the policy relevance in light of current EU debates on foreign interference, democracy resilience, and external action. It provides recommendations tailored to the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Commission's Democracy and Elections Unit, and the European Parliament's committees on foreign interference and democracy resilience.

Context

The genocide in 1994 resulted in the death of an estimated 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in just three months. While the international community did little to prevent the atrocities, the Rwandan Patriotic Army arguably ended the

genocide. This rebel movement transformed into a political party before taking control and restoring peace, security and economic growth. Paul Kagame has now led Rwanda for three decades, creating an international reputation for stability and overseen a rise in international investment. However, the peace and stability has come with a price, as Rwanda has become increasingly authoritarian, striking down harshly on dissident voices, forcing many to leave the country.

Key Messages

- Rwandan diaspora politics are highly polarised
- Pro-regime actors in the diaspora lobby, litigate, and influence
- Critics face intimidation, harassment, and isolation
- Accusations of supporting genocide are used to discredit critics in the diaspora
- Diaspora politics fuel disinformation in the EU
- European policy makers, NGOs and scholars risk being instrumentalised if unaware
- Strengthen monitoring of diaspora influence and engage diverse voices for balance
- Encourage collaboration with diaspora-led media and civic groups to build credible fact-checking and engagement



Rwandan migration to Europe has come in three waves. Pre-1994 migrants were mainly students and business people, 1994-2000 saw Hutu political elites leave, and post-2000 mainly for business, employment or government critics. Today, there are significant Rwandan communities in Belgium, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Germany.

The diversity of backgrounds amongst the Rwanda diaspora creates divisions that increasingly shape diaspora politics. Competing narratives, lobbying activities and allegations of intimidation connect domestic Rwandan politics to EU debates on FIMI, information suppression, and the protection of the civic space.

Main content

The Rwandan diaspora in Europe is sharply divided between pro-regime supporters and critics, with little neutral ground. This polarisation translates into two contrasting patterns of action and experience.

Pro-regime diaspora as channels of influence

Pro-regime groups are active across Europe and work in several interconnected ways. They promote a positive image of the regime in host countries by lobbying politicians, using international fora and sympathetic academics as legitimising voices, and cultivating ties with well-connected NGOs. This deliberate projection of a favourable image abroad helps mask the authoritarian nature of governance in Rwanda, making external audiences less likely to question the regime's authoritarian practices domestically and abroad.

Using the genocide narrative to influence positions on the South Kivu conflict

The ongoing conflict in South Kivu, marked by the M23 rebellion, Rwandan involvement, and heavy civilian toll, provides a critical backdrop for understanding how Rwanda deploys genocide memory to shape international narratives.

During the April 2025 genocide commemoration at UNESCO in Paris with the participation of Mairie de Paris and international human rights NGOs, the Rwandan ambassador framed Rwandans as victims in the South Kivu conflict and called on the international community to support Rwanda's position. Under the parole of 'never again', he argued that Rwanda was shouldering the international communities obligation to prevent genocide. This portrayal linked historic suffering to present-day claims, shifting the framing of responsibility for ongoing violence.

In parallel, the Rwandan diaspora in France successfully lobbied the Mairie de Paris to cancel a concert organised by famous artists in support of Congolese people in South Kivu. Their lobbying presented the event as problematic and succeeded in suppressing (for a time) a critical narrative.

In the same period, the Rwandan diaspora was mobilised during an event on "Peace in the Great Lake region" in Paris featuring the Rwandese ambassador and leading scholars from Europe and North America. The gathering was used to promote Rwanda's narrative on South Kivu and to sensitise attendees to the framing and vision that Kigali is willing to project.

Pro-regime diaspora identifies and pursues genocide suspects, relying on legal action in host countries, leveraging a narrative of “genocide guilt,” and partnering with Holocaust organisations to strengthen their position. This amounts to a form of strategic litigation, since being labelled or targeted as a ‘genocidaire’ is a powerful deterrent against speaking out against the regime. They also dedicate significant effort to targeting opposition within the diaspora. Methods include anonymous phone calls to employers warning that they have hired a “genocidaire,” turning up at meetings to intimidate participants, and spreading public accusations of corruption or genocide denial.

By combining outward lobbying with inward repression, pro-regime actors simultaneously bolster Kigali’s image abroad and weaken opposition within diaspora communities.

Critics as targets of suppression

Critical voices in the diaspora face systematic pressure on multiple fronts. In host countries, many report intimidation, harassment, and surveillance. Dissidents in exile are even known to have been killed in South Africa and Uganda ([Human Rights Watch 2023](#)). Employers may receive anonymous phone calls labelling them as genocidaires, while smear campaigns on social media target both individuals and their families. Exclusion from diaspora associations and community events creates further isolation.

Returning to Rwanda can also be made deliberately difficult. Obtaining documents or permissions is often obstructed, creating practical barriers that discourage critics from travelling back. Meanwhile families inside Rwanda face direct pressure. Relatives of critics report intimidation, close surveillance, and even visits being filmed and later shared on social media to demonstrate exposure. In rural areas, family visits may be video-recorded without consent, amplifying fear and vulnerability.

Such tactics ensure that opposition voices abroad are silenced not only through personal harassment but also through threats and intimidation directed at their loved ones still living in Rwanda.

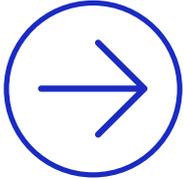
Portrait of Dieudonné, a Rwandan human rights activist in France

When meeting for the interview, Laurent arrived carrying his laptop, explaining that he always takes it with him in case his home is searched during his absence. A lawyer by training and president of a small human rights association in France, he was forced to flee Rwanda in 2014 after harassment linked to his participation in international human rights meetings. Granted asylum in France, he continues to speak out but faces constant threats and insults, which he believes originate from Kigali and its embassy.

His family in Rwanda is regularly intimidated, and he cannot return to visit them. One of his sons died in Belgium under suspicious circumstances, deepening his sense of insecurity. “It is impossible for me to communicate with my family in Rwanda. I cannot return, and they are regularly threatened,” he says. Among exiled opponents, he adds, there is a pervasive fear of poisoning, which reinforces a constant sense of vulnerability.

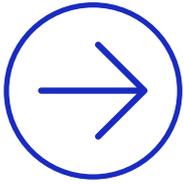
The climate of intimidation extends into the diaspora community itself. “There is constant mistrust within the Rwandan community. Intimidation is common. During funerals, people are afraid to attend or be seen with me,” Laurent confides. In daily life, he experiences online harassment, anonymous threats, and the impression of surveillance. Social isolation compounds the pressure, as community members avoid him at public or private events, fearing repercussions for being associated with him. Even within activist networks, mistrust is pervasive due to infiltration and pressure from regime-linked groups.

Kigali also uses the memory of the genocide to impose a single vision of history and to discredit or discriminate against critics. This framing marginalises and renders invisible the experiences of those who suffered from Rwanda Patriotic Front violence. The consequence is a narrowed historical narrative in which some victims remain excluded, further deepening mistrust and



Policy considerations – why it matters for the EU

- **Diaspora politics as a vector of foreign interference:** The Rwandan case illustrates how states can instrumentalise diaspora groups to conduct influence operations in Europe. This connects directly with EU debates on foreign information manipulation and interference (FIMI).
- **Fit with EU disinformation agenda:** The Digital Services Act, the Code of Practice on Disinformation, and the EU Rapid Alert System are designed to tackle disinformation. Rwanda-linked cases demonstrate that these tools must be applied beyond the main focus on Russia or China.
- **Protection of civic space and fundamental freedoms:** EU debates on resilience and democracy underline the importance of safeguarding civic space. Intimidation of diaspora critics on European soil is a direct challenge to the EU's ability to protect free expression and association.
- **Consistency in EU external action:** European Parliament and Council statements stress that cooperation with third countries must not undermine democratic principles. Rwanda's diaspora repression therefore raises credibility questions for EU partnerships in development aid, migration, and peacebuilding.
- **Risk of instrumentalisation:** Without awareness, EU institutions risk legitimising narratives promoted by pro-regime diaspora groups, and being drawn into information campaigns that distort debate.
- **Social cohesion within the EU:** Suppression and mistrust within diaspora communities fuel polarisation and weaken social trust, concerns that resonate with the EU's broader resilience and integration agenda.



Policy Recommendations

- **Strengthen EU monitoring and alert systems:** Extend the Rapid Alert System to include Rwanda-related disinformation, and improve intelligence-sharing on harassment of diaspora critics.
- **Integrate diaspora rights in EU–Rwanda dialogue:** Make protection of exiles a benchmark in political, migration, and development agreements. Review EU funding to avoid supporting actors involved in repression.
- **Support independent diaspora initiatives:** Provide funding and training to diaspora-led media and fact-checking groups to counter disinformation and diversify voices.
- **Safeguard civic space and rights:** Ensure counter-disinformation measures respect proportionality and human rights standards. Offer legal and security support to exiles facing harassment.
- **Promote inclusive engagement:** Establish platforms for open dialogue with diverse diaspora voices. Avoid reliance on regime-linked associations when consulting diaspora groups.

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About the ARM Project

Coordinated by the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), the ARM project delves into authoritarian strategies for information control beyond borders. While foreign disinformation receives ample scrutiny, other forms of foreign information manipulation and intervention (FIMI) remain overlooked.

Analysing Russia, China, Ethiopia, and Rwanda, ARM conceptualises and addresses different forms of FIMI. The project will explore the extent that major global players like China and Russia, alongside Ethiopia and Rwanda, engage in transnational information suppression, particularly targeting European diaspora communities.

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