

# The Strategic Culture of the European Union in the Sahel *EU-initiatives in Niger*

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## SUMMARY

The Sahel region continues to face several challenges, including poverty and lack of economic prospects, food insecurity, rapid demographic growth, inter-ethnic conflicts, jihadist terrorism and climate change. While it is important to note that these affect different parts of the region to different degrees, the challenges are interlinked and mutually reinforcing, further complicating the situation.<sup>1</sup> For instance, the demographic growth and food insecurity are exacerbated by climate change, fuelling tensions between different communities, which militant Islamist insurgents are exploiting for the purpose of radicalisation and recruitment. During the past three years the fragile states of the region have seen a string of military coups: the military overthrow of Chad's government in April 2021 and the coups in Mali (August 2020 and May 2021) and Burkina Faso (January and September 2022), as well as the military coups in Niger (July 2023) and Gabon (August 2023) all serve as a reminder that the Sahel region remains politically extremely unstable. Considering the factors mentioned above, the Sahel region has been a concern for Europe for more than a decade. Experience shows that instability in the Sahel can have spillover effects, potentially leading to increased terrorism, irregular migration, and the spread of illegal activities that all may impact European security. Identifying the challenges of the region through a comprehensive framework, which – a beside security-related issues – includes the ever so important questions of sustainable development, human rights, good governance, food security and green energy, the European Union has been active in the Sahel for over a decade.

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<sup>1</sup> ISO-MARKKU, T. – TAMMIKKO, T. (2020): *The EU's role and policies in the Sahel: The need for reassessment*. Ulkopoliittinen Instituutti/Utrikespolitiska Institutet, FIIA Briefing Paper 290, 2020.09.28. Available at: <https://www.fiia.fi/julkaisu/the-eus-role-and-policies-in-the-sahel?read#viite3> (accessed on 17 October 2023).

## INTRODUCTION AND CURRENT STATE OF AFFAIRS IN THE SAHEL

More than other sub-Saharan nations, the Sahel countries are ranked among the most vulnerable in the world, especially in terms of terrorism, violent conflict, climate change, and state instability. Food scarcity, population increase, and internal displacement have created a severe humanitarian situation, while efforts to confront challenges to peace and security have been hampered by weak state structures and a lack of legitimacy in the government. According to the so-called Normandy Index, which measures threats to peace and democracy worldwide based on the EU Global Strategy, the Sahel countries are “some of the most vulnerable to threats in the world, particularly in terms of terrorism, violent conflict, climate change, and state fragility”.<sup>2</sup> The region has seen an increase in intercommunal disputes over territory and resources since 2011 as well a surge of acts of terrorist violence. According to the Global Terrorism Index 2023, the Sahel region is considered the “new epicentre of terrorism”, as it accounted for 43 percent of terrorism-related deaths in 2022, up from 1 percent in 2007.<sup>3</sup> Due to the increase in violence linked to jihadist, international actors – including the EU – have initiated counter-terrorism operations in the region conjunction with local actors.

Considering its Africa policies, the Sahel (which, in the view of the EU, essentially comprises five states: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad), is an area of top priority. The Sahel does not share a border with the EU, but the Union has long emphasised that the security of Europe is intrinsically tied to the region’s trajectory. The migration crisis of 2015 and the rise of militant Islamist terrorism in the Sahel have only served to strengthen this belief. To address these multiple and interrelated difficulties, the European Union’s strategy for the Sahel has been centred on both security and development since 2011.

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<sup>2</sup> PICHON, E. – BETANT-RASMUSSEN, M. (2021): *New EU strategic priorities for the Sahel – Addressing regional challenges through better governance*. European Parliamentary Research Service. Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)696161\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI(2021)696161_EN.pdf) (accessed on 10 October 2023).

<sup>3</sup> Institute for Economics and Peace, Global Terrorism Index 2023, March 2023. Available at: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GTI-2023-web-170423.pdf> (accessed on 1 December 2023).

However, due to the increase in terrorist activities, EU efforts have remained primarily focused on a military strategy, which has produced some tangible benefits (such as for instance the training missions detailed in the subsequent chapters launched with the aim of enhancing the operational capacity of the armed forces of the Sahelian countries to combat terrorism), but ultimately fallen short of long-term regional stability. While preserving security cooperation with neighbouring states, the new EU integrated strategy in the Sahel from 2021 seeks to enhance political action by emphasising human rights, governance systems, and cooperation with local authorities as well as civil society.<sup>4</sup> Due to the new approaches and methods used by the EU in the Sahel, the region has frequently been referred to as a “laboratory of experimentation” for the EU’s external action.<sup>5</sup> But as the Sahel continues to face the vicious circle of the above mentioned aggravating factors, including a sharp increase in armed conflict, the EU and the international community have so far not been able to demonstrate any tangible results of their efforts. The states in the region have notably continued to be weak, occasionally contributing to the problem rather than solving it. The recent events in Niger serve as an example of how fragile the situation is. Niger, the largest and most populous country in the Sahel, plays a key role in the stability of the region as a whole and has therefore been of strategic importance for Europe for several reasons (e.g. irregular migration, jihadist groups, energy resources, especially uranium). However, after the coup d’état in July 2023, the focus has slightly shifted to the neighbouring Chad – also under military rule, but one of the remaining stable countries in the region.

This paper aims to provide a brief overview of the EU’s involvement and policies in the Sahel, highlighting some of their inadequacies and challenges, and outlining potential approaches for readjustment. The article begins with a brief overview of the current situation in the Sahel (thereby focusing mainly on Niger and to a certain extent on Chad) and concludes with an analysis of the issues the EU faces in the Sahel, both regarding its

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<sup>4</sup> PICHON, E. – BETANT-RASMUSSEN, M. (2021).

<sup>5</sup> LOPEZ, L. E. (2017): Performing EU agency by experimenting the ‘Comprehensive Approach’: the European Union Sahel Strategy”, *Journal of Contemporary African Studies*, 2017, 35:4, 451-468. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02589001.2017.1338831> (accessed on 28 November 2023).

own strategy and the region’s multifaceted crisis. Finally, the study ends with recommendations for future EU policies targeting the Sahel.

## THE STRATEGIC CULTURE OF THE EU IN THE SAHEL

The EU’s role as a security actor has evolved slowly since the early 2000s. The theoretical framework frequently used to understand a security actor is the concept of strategic culture, which is based on a combination of common behavioural patterns in the military history and political culture of the actor that influence its strategic behaviour, and which may to some extent help to anticipate possible future decision-making.<sup>6</sup> While different scholars define strategic culture differently, most researchers will agree that the notion refers to the use and management of hard power (i.e. the ability to influence actions by using economic or military coercion).<sup>7</sup> The EU’s strategic culture is young and controversial; some argue that it is made up of individual strategic cultures of member states,<sup>8</sup> others that the EU has a separate strategic culture (influenced by member states),<sup>9</sup> but there is a consensus on one thing: the EU’s strategic culture stems from the EU’s overriding security interest, namely the protection of Europe and its citizens.<sup>10</sup> The migration crisis of 2015-2016 confirmed this latter perception, along with the recognition that the EU must act beyond its borders for its own security. Continuing along the same line, this serves as an

<sup>6</sup> NILSSON, R. (2021): *EU som säkerhetsaktör i Sahel*. Linköpings Universitet, 2021. Available at: <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1572090/FULLTEXT01.pdf> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

<sup>7</sup> TOJE, A. (2010): The EU Security Strategy Revised: Europe Hedging Its Bets. *European Foreign Affairs Review* 15: 171–190, 2010. Available at: <https://asletoje.no/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/The-European-Union-security-strategy-revisited.pdf> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

<sup>8</sup> BIAVA, A. et al (2011): Characterizing the European Union’s Strategic Culture: An Analytical Framework. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 2011, pp. 1.22. Available at: [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20111110\\_cscp\\_artikel\\_mdrent.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/20111110_cscp_artikel_mdrent.pdf) (accessed on 15 December 2023).

<sup>9</sup> TOJE, A. (2008): *America, the EU and Strategic Culture: Renegotiating the Transatlantic Bargain*. London: Routledge.

<sup>10</sup> NILSSON, 2021

explanation to why the complex conflicts in the Sahel region is a particular focus of attention for the external policies of the EU.

EU operations in the Sahel are expected to contribute to the defence of Europe in two ways. The geographical proximity and the link between the Sahel and Europe imply that instability, conflict, and terrorism can spill over into Europe; including the triggering of large-scale migration flows towards Europe. Controlling these flows is therefore a key issue. This policy interest in reducing irregular migration to Europe (in other words, combating irregular migration outside the EU's borders) would have been strongly questionable in terms of the EU's strategic culture a few years ago, but is now considered to be in line with the responsive security perception, as it emphasises both humanitarian and policy-oriented elements.<sup>11</sup>

The EU's traditional strategic humanitarian culture shifted in the 2010s to focus more on the implementation of EU policies. In the case of the Sahel, this means that EU strategies for the Sahel have, over time, increasingly represented EU interests in the Sahel.<sup>12</sup> However, humanitarian concerns are still clearly present but seem to have receded in what the EU calls an integrated and holistic approach, meaning that security and humanitarian operations must go hand in hand to stabilise the region. The causes of instability in the region lie largely in economically vulnerable and marginalised communities who lack access to and trust in state authorities, and this is the reason behind good governance as a top priority for the EU in the Sahel.<sup>13</sup>

## THE SAHEL STRATEGIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

Restructuring and fortifying ties with Africa is one of the main objectives of the current European Union leadership. The European Commission released a joint communication in

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<sup>11</sup> NILSSON, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

March 2020 that would act as the foundation for the upcoming EU Africa policy.<sup>14</sup> The Sahel was the first region in Africa for which the EU formulated a dedicated regional strategy in 2011, which originally focused on Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, but was extended three years later to include Burkina Faso and Chad as well. In 2013, a dedicated EU Special Representative (EUSR) was appointed for the Sahel region and in 2015 a regional action plan for the years 2015–2020 was adopted to complement the Sahel strategy.<sup>15</sup>

Hence, within its Africa policy, the Sahel region has been an area of priority for the EU based on the realisation of how different events in the region may be directly linked to Europe and the security of its citizens. Hence, the European Union has made a major effort to raise its profile as a security player in the Sahel in the last ten years. Over time, the EU’s involvement in the Sahel has evolved to include elements of development, security, and migration policy. The “Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel” (hereinafter: the Sahel Strategy 2011), which was approved by the EU Council in 2011, serves as the primary strategic foundation for the EU’s policy toward the region.<sup>16</sup> The strategy placed a particular focus on security as a requirement for the development of the Sahel countries in response to concerns expressed by EU member states about the deteriorating security situation brought on by the rise of jihadist terrorist organisations. Examples of this increased involvement were seen in the response to the political turmoil in Mali in 2013 (and the French intervention to counter the jihadist insurgency), when the European Union, within the framework of the EU Common Security and Defence Policy (hereinafter CDSP), launched the EU Training Mission to Mali in 2013 to train and advise the Malian

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<sup>14</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2020): Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council: Towards a comprehensive Strategy with Africa, JOIN(2020) 4 final, Brussels 9 March 2020. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52020JC0004> (accessed on 28 November 2023).

<sup>15</sup> Sahel Regional Action Plan 2015-2020. Available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/21522/st07823-en15.pdf> (accessed on 17 October 2023).

<sup>16</sup> EEAS (2011): *Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel*, 2011. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategy\\_for\\_security\\_and\\_development\\_in\\_the\\_sahel\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/strategy_for_security_and_development_in_the_sahel_en_0.pdf) (accessed on 13 October 2023)



military forces,<sup>17</sup> and thereafter deployed the EU Capacity Building Mission Sahel Mali in April 2014,<sup>18</sup> a civilian mission aiming to support the Internal Security Forces of Mali. At that time there were some regional experiences to build upon, as the EU had previously started a civilian capacity-building mission in Niger to train the nation’s civilian security forces.<sup>19</sup> The justifications for these missions made a clear connection between the rise of violent extremism and organised crime (including trafficking in drugs, arms and human beings) in these countries and the stability in Europe.<sup>20</sup>

In addition to sending out military and civilian security troops as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) missions, the EU began directly supporting the G5 Sahel and its G5 Sahel Joint Force with financial and operational support in 2017. The G5 Sahel was founded by the heads of state of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger in 2014 to further improve regional security structures and cooperation. Since the G5 Sahel’s founding, the EU and its member states have been a major backer of the region, seeing it as a priority area of EU foreign policy.<sup>21</sup> Today, the group is on the verge of dissolving itself, which begun in 2022 when Mali left the cooperation, followed by Niger and Burkina Faso, leaving in December 2022, referring to the organisation “failing to achieve its objectives”.<sup>22</sup> It remains to be seen which direction the remaining two members, Chad and Mauritania decide over regarding the future of the G5 Sahel. However, considering how the regional

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<sup>17</sup> Part of the mission included to assist the Malian Armed Forces in restoring their military capacity through of the provision of advice, education, and training. EUTM Mali further delivers military assistance to the G5 Sahel countries (Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad), and to their Joint Force. According to its mandate it is made clear that the EUTM Mali is not be involved in combat operations.

<sup>18</sup> The mandate of the EUCAP Sahel Mali was extended by the Council of the European Union until 31 January 2025.

<sup>19</sup> EUCAP Sahel Niger

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance the background of the EUCAP Sahel Niger under the following link: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-niger/eucap-sahel-niger-european-union-capacity-building-civilian-mission\\_und\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eucap-sahel-niger/eucap-sahel-niger-european-union-capacity-building-civilian-mission_und_en) (accessed on 27 November 2023).

<sup>21</sup> DESGRAIS, N. (2019): *Cinq ans après, une radioscopie du G5 Sahel*. Fondation pour la recherche stratégique, 2019.03.12. Available at: <https://www.frstrategie.org/programmes/observatoire-du-monde-arabo-musulman-et-du-sahel/cinq-ans-apres-une-radioscopie-g5-sahel-2019> (accessed on 13 October 2023).

<sup>22</sup> THE EAST AFRICAN (2022): *Burkina Faso, Niger withdraw from G5 anti-militia alliance*. The East African, 2022.12.06. Available at: <https://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/tea/news/rest-of-africa/burkina-faso-niger-withdraw-from-g5-anti-militia-alliance-4455906> (accessed on 10 December 2022).

security cooperation, heavily backed by France, was at times perceived by some of its members (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Mali) as Paris playing an outsized role on their territories,<sup>23</sup> the military rulers of Burkina Faso, Niger, and Mali are more likely to search for other ways to enhance regional security cooperation. Niger has already signed a mutual defence agreement with Burkina Faso and Mali to support one another, even militarily, in the event of armed insurrection or external intervention. This charter is known as the Alliance of Sahel States (ASS).<sup>24</sup>

In addition to channelling support to the G5 Sahel's security and development initiatives, the EU is involved in a significant amount of bilateral development cooperation with each of the G5 Sahel countries. However, the efficiency of the EU's initiatives has been called into question due to the persistent decline in the security situation in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger since 2016.<sup>25</sup> The EU has significantly expanded and intensified its efforts, despite the Sahel's continuously deteriorating security situation, but without a noteworthy impact on the dynamics of stability and security of the region.

## EU AND NIGER

Surrounded by war-torn Mali, Libya and north-eastern Nigeria, Niger was long considered as one of the more stable countries in the Sahel region and thereby an important partner for the European Union in stabilising and improving the deteriorating situation in the region. In this context, Niger has been the focus of European attention for more than a decade and has been the subject of a wide range of EU interventions, from strengthening border control measures to addressing job shortages and food insecurity. Nestled in the

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<sup>23</sup> THE EAST AFRICAN, 2022

<sup>24</sup> AINA, F. (2023): *A New West African Security Pact is Bound to Fail*, Foreign Policy, 2023.10.24. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/24/alliance-sahel-states-security-extremism-mali-burkina-faso-niger/> (accessed on 5 December 2023).

<sup>25</sup> THÉROUX-BÉNONI, L-A. – ADAM, N. (2019): *Hard counter-terrorism lessons from the Sahel for West Africa's coastal states*. Institute for Security Studies (ISS), 2019.06.05. Available at: <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/hard-counter-terrorism-lessons-from-the-sahel-for-west-africas-coastal-states> (accessed on 10 December 2022).

centre of the Sahel, the country has long been a destination for migrants heading towards Europe, as well as a hub for migration movements to North and West Africa. Niger's role as a central transit state on the Central Mediterranean migratory route is best illustrated by the negative peak in 2016, when over 181 000 migrants arrived in Italy along this route,<sup>26</sup> most of them presumably via Agadez – from where for years, several times a day, smugglers' vans loaded with West African migrants departed for Libya and Algeria.

The European Commission has on several occasions recognised the nation's hard work to combat migrant smuggling and guaranteeing irregular migrants a respectable return home. In view of its role as a central transit state, the EU already identified Niger as a priority partner at the 2015 EU-Africa Summit in Valletta and in 2016 Niger was one of the five priority African countries (alongside Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and Ethiopia) in the new EU Partnership Framework for Cooperation with third countries on migration.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Niger has received substantial political and financial support to fight irregular migration. Subsequent EU policies have tended to be characterised by repressive measures, best exemplified in Niger by Law No 36 of 2015 (issued under the aforementioned Partnership Framework), which aimed to increase border control capacity and to eradicate human trafficking.<sup>28</sup> While implementing the law, the Nigerien government faced logistical, legal, and political difficulties in responding to the EU's requests. Firstly, it is exceptionally difficult to maintain control over the northern Niger desert and its border with Libya, an area often characterised as “ungoverned” due to the weakness of state institutions and

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<sup>26</sup> GOÏTA, M. (2021): *The Borders of Shame for the Migrants Community*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2021.01.13. Available at: <https://www.fes.de/en/shaping-a-just-world/international-community-and-civil-society/article-on-international-community-and-civil-society/the-borders-of-shame-for-the-migrants-community> (accessed on 11 October 2023).

<sup>27</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2016): *Migration Partnership Framework – A New Approach to Better Manage Migration*. European Commission, July 2016. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet\\_ec\\_format\\_migration\\_partnership\\_framework\\_update\\_2.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/factsheet_ec_format_migration_partnership_framework_update_2.pdf) (accessed on 11 October 2023).

<sup>28</sup> Loi No. 2015-36 du 26 mai 2015 relative au Trafic Illicite de Migrants, 26 May 2015. Available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/60a505e24.html> (accessed 2 December 2023).

the numerous nomad communities inhabiting the area.<sup>29</sup> Secondly, most migrants passing through Niger are from the 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), a zone that offers its 350,000 million citizens unrestricted travel and trade rights – upon which the new law inadvertently infringed upon.<sup>30</sup> Thirdly, one of the immediate consequences of the strict implementation was a significant loss of income for tens of thousands of locals, as the economic activities linked to the passage of migrants and their presence in the country were a fundamental part of local economies in some regions of Niger.<sup>31</sup> The stated demonstrate the practical difficulties and – at times – unforeseen, unintended and negative consequences of implementing EU policies in the Sahel region.

In July 2022, the European Commission stated that since 2017, “more than 700 criminals have been arrested and more than 400 prosecutions have been launched in Niger thanks to the measures taken so far”.<sup>32</sup> However, due to the mentioned economic losses among large parts of the population, the law 2015-36 became extremely unpopular among Nigeriens and eventually also became the symbol of the undesired external interference due to its interrelatedness to EU policies.

In line with the EU’s overall migration policy, the fight against migrant smuggling has also been named as a shared challenge that calls for strong cooperation and coordination with important partner nations along migration routes, something that is emphasised in the

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<sup>29</sup> PELLERIN, M. (2018): The Niger-Libya Border: Securing It without Stabilising It? *Notes d’Ifri*, Ifri, November 2018. Available at: [https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin\\_niger\\_libya\\_2018.pdf](https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/pellerin_niger_libya_2018.pdf) (accessed on 10 December 2023).

<sup>30</sup> MOLENAAR, F., et al. (2017): *A Line in the Sand: Roadmap for Sustainable Migration Management in Agadez*, CRU Report, The Hague, Clingendael, 10. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/roadmap-sustainable-migration-management-agadez> (accessed on 12 October 2023).

<sup>31</sup> WEIHE, M. et al. (2021): How EU Pressure Hampers Circular Migration between Niger and Libya. German Institute for Global and Area Studies, GIGA Focus Middle East, Number 5, November 2021. Available at: <https://www.giga-hamburg.de/en/publications/giga-focus/how-eu-pressure-hampers-circular-migration-between-niger-and-libya> (accessed on 12 October 2023).

<sup>32</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2022): *Joint press release: Strengthening cooperation in the fight against migrant smuggling: the European Union and Niger launch operational partnership to tackle migrant smuggling*. European Commission, 2022.07.15. Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_22\\_4536](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_4536) (accessed on 11 October 2023).

new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum<sup>33</sup> as well as in renewed EU Action Plan against Migrant Smuggling (2021–2025)<sup>34</sup>. Hence, as part of the series of EU policies on Niger, the Operational Partnership Initiative “Partnership against migrant smuggling”,<sup>35</sup> announced in July 2022), which, continues to aim at curbing irregular migration to Europe mainly from West Africa. This agreement came at a time when Niger’s role in the fight against terrorism increased, among others due to the rise of jihadist armed movements in the region. However, since the military coup in Niger in July 2023, the EU has suspended budget support and security cooperation with Niger,<sup>36</sup> indicating that some of the migration-related activities towards security actors have momentarily been halted. The timeliness of the agreement – and of similar measures – remains today, partly due to the largely unchanged developments in this respect, not only in the context of the continuing consequences of armed conflicts, which are generating waves of migrants (of which Niger itself is one of the victims), but also due to the realistic prospect that the worsening food crisis caused by the blockade of the grain agreement by Russia could again lead to the movement of significant numbers of people in both the short and medium term. Already last year, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) predicted that the food crisis caused by the Russian-Ukrainian war (partly alleviated for a time by the agreement brokered by Turkey) will leave 34 million people in West Africa, and especially in the Sahel,

<sup>33</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2023): *What is the New Pact on Migration and Asylum of the EU?* European Commission Migration and Home Affairs, 2023. Available at: [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/new-pact-migration-and-asylum\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/migration-and-asylum/new-pact-migration-and-asylum_en) (accessed on 11 October 2023).

<sup>34</sup> EUR-Lex (2021): COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS: A renewed EU action plan against migrant smuggling (2021-2025), COM/2021/591 final, 2021. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52021DC0591> (accessed on 11 October 2023).

<sup>35</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2022), op. cit.

<sup>36</sup> EEAS (2023): Niger: *Déclaration du Haut représentant Josep Borrell sur les derniers développements*. European Union External Action, 2023.07.29. Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/niger-d%C3%A9claration-du-haut-repr%C3%A9sentant-josep-borrell-sur-les-derniers-d%C3%A9veloppements\\_fr?channel=eeas\\_press\\_alerts&date=2023-07-29&langid=fr&newsid=0&source=mail](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/niger-d%C3%A9claration-du-haut-repr%C3%A9sentant-josep-borrell-sur-les-derniers-d%C3%A9veloppements_fr?channel=eeas_press_alerts&date=2023-07-29&langid=fr&newsid=0&source=mail) (accessed on 30 November 2023).

unable to meet minimum nutritional requirements in the coming period.<sup>37</sup> This forecast was confirmed by the interim Executive Director of the EU’s border agency, Frontex, in mid-July this year, who warned that the EU must brace for “refugees coming from other areas” because of the food crisis exacerbated by the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>38</sup> In this context, negotiations have been ongoing for some time between Frontex and Niger to reinforce the border protection of the latter.

Hand in hand with security measures, the EU has over the years provided hundreds of millions of euros in support to Niger, including for good governance, education, and green energy. EU action in the region has been criticised on several fronts, most notably for its over-emphasis on security as opposed to humanitarian aspects. However, military operations are also necessary to implement for the safeguard of the latter measures, as humanitarian and development-oriented operations cannot be implemented if they are constantly threatened by violence. From an EU perspective, perhaps the biggest challenge is the effort to strengthen good governance,<sup>39</sup> which is difficult to support artificially from outside to successfully restore the credibility of the state and to include marginalised minority groups in the administration.

Also, it is noteworthy that a decade after the EU initiatives targeting Niger, and a year after the latest initiative to step up the fight against human smuggling, the circumstances and conditions in Niger remain unchanged. The country remains one of the poorest in the world, with low life expectancy (60 years), high infant mortality (25 percent of children do not live to their fifth birthday), a very high fertility rate (6.7) and a correspondingly high

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<sup>37</sup> MARCHAL, R. (2022): The Ukraine war and Sahel. Vienna Institute for Cooperation and Dialogue, VIDC. Available at: <https://www.vidc.org/detail/the-ukraine-war-and-sahel> (accessed on 11 October 2023) and FAO (2022): Impact of the Ukraine-Russia conflict on global food security and related matters under the mandate of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), 8 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.fao.org/3/ni734en/ni734en.pdf> (accessed on 11 October 2023).

<sup>38</sup> EURACTIV (2023): EU braces for migrants spurred by food crisis. Euractiv.com, 2023.07.12. Available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/justice-home-affairs/news/eu-braces-for-migrants-spurred-by-food-crisis/> (accessed on 11 October 2023).

<sup>39</sup> NILSSON, 2021.

youth bulge, with 45 percent of the population under the age of 15.<sup>40</sup> The extremely fragile ecosystem that characterises the Sahel region also be traced in the case of Niger; only 12 percent of its territory receives enough rainfall to sustain agriculture, and the country's government expects little or none of this area to remain by 2100. Niger's soils are nutrient-poor, poorly managed and overgrazed, losing up to 100 tonnes of topsoil per hectare per year to erosion, according to the country's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock.<sup>41</sup> Poverty and extreme poverty rates are high, the latter is expected to reach over 44 percent by the end of 2023.<sup>42</sup>

A recent critical challenge in terms of the EU achievements so far concerning the irregular migration and human smuggling transiting Niger is the withdrawal of the above-mentioned law 2015-36 by the junta end of November.<sup>43</sup> It is too early to assess the potential of resurging irregular migration transiting the country, but considering the significant loss of income due to the authorities strict action against human smuggling, recurring smuggling of irregular migrants towards the north is to be expected.

## EU AND CHAD

Chad's past is tumultuous, marked by coups, civil wars, and the repression of democracy. Following President Déby's passing shortly after his re-election in April 2021, his son Mahamat Idriss Déby was nominated to take over as military council's interim leader, assuming the dual roles of head of state and chief of staff. Elections have been postponed

<sup>40</sup> CIA (2023): *The World Factbook: Niger*. Central Intelligence Agency, 2023. Available at: <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/niger/> (accessed 3 December 2023).

<sup>41</sup> SERKOVIC, M. (2020): *In Niger, a 'crazy idea' to restore degraded land pays off*. World Bank Blogs, 2020.05.22. Available at: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/nasikiliza/niger-crazy-idea-restore-degraded-land-pays> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

<sup>42</sup> WORLD BANK (2023): *The World Bank in Niger – Country Overview*. The World Bank, 2023. Available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/niger/overview> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

<sup>43</sup> LE MONDE (2023): *Niger's junta revokes key law that slowed migration toward Europe*. Le Monde online, 2023.11.28. Available at: [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/28/niger-s-junta-revokes-key-law-that-slowed-migration-for-africans-desperate-to-reach-europe\\_6293873\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/11/28/niger-s-junta-revokes-key-law-that-slowed-migration-for-africans-desperate-to-reach-europe_6293873_4.html) (accessed 3 December 2023).

until October 2024. The economy of the nation, which depends heavily on oil earnings, is nevertheless unstable and susceptible to growing demands on natural resources because of population displacement and climate change. Attacks by the militant Islamist organisation Boko Haram as well as the military response to these attacks have led to internal population displacement. In addition to threats to its internal security, Chad faces conflicts in its border regions, with Lake Chad being the epicentre of internal displacement and refugee flows. Currently there are at least 5 million people experiencing food insecurity in the country (including locals, internally displaced persons as well as and refugees), with nearly 2 million being severely impacted.<sup>44</sup> In all of Africa, Chad has the least amount of access to proper sanitation and the third-lowest amount of access to safe water, as there is a dearth of surface water resources and the water infrastructure is largely underdeveloped.<sup>45</sup> According to figures from UNICEF, access to basic drinking water services is at 43 per cent and to sanitation is at 10 per cent. Further, less than one in two children has access to safe drinking water, while only one in ten has access to improved sanitation.<sup>46</sup>

Despite dire circumstances, Chad is – like neighbouring Niger – of strategic importance for Europe. Its importance lies, among other things, in its role in maintaining regional stability, combating terrorism, managing migration, access to natural resources, and diplomatic as well as economic relations within the African context. In terms of geography, Chad is a key player in the context of ethnic conflicts in the neighbouring countries as well as the spread of violent extremism. This is because it is situated between the Horn of Africa to the east and the Sahel region to the west, and it borders the war-torn Sudanese state of Darfur. As such, it plays a pivotal role in maintaining stability in the region, a stance it endorses by

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<sup>44</sup> LAZAROU, E. – STANICEK, B. (2023): Mapping Threats to Peace and Democracy Worldwide – Normandy Index 2023. European Parliamentary Research Service, August 2023. Available at: <https://normandiepourlapaix.fr/sites/default/files/2023-08/EPRS-Study-751422-Normandy-Index.pdf> (accessed on 1 December 2023).

<sup>45</sup> UNICEF (2020): *Chad: Water, sanitation and hygiene*. United Nations Children’s Fund, 2020. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/chad/water-sanitation-and-hygiene> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



permitting Western nations to conduct operations from its borders in the fight against violent extremism.<sup>47</sup>

Even by African standards, the incredibly diverse Chad suffers from recurring crises, in particular chronic malnutrition, and food insecurity, compounded by the mass influx of refugees caused by the crisis in neighbouring Sudan in early 2023. This influx adds to the large refugee population already in Chad, fleeing from conflicts in neighbouring countries (Central African Republic and Darfur in Sudan). Since April 2023, Chad has experienced a humanitarian crisis<sup>48</sup> and the inability of the government to meet the humanitarian requirements could make Chad even more unstable. Increasing instability in Chad would, in its turn, further impact the already troubled Sahel region. Hence, an important question is how long Chad, as currently almost the only stable partner of the EU in the Sahel, will hold out.

In terms of EU policies in the region, Chad has been one of the long-standing partners in the Sahel in maintaining stability and combating terrorism in the Sahel and Lake Chad regions. The European Union, the European Investment Bank (via bilateral agreements with the EU), France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Spain comprise ‘Team Europe’ in Chad.<sup>49</sup> Compared to the variety of initiatives in Niger summarised above, EU measures in Chad so far have tended to focus on humanitarian assistance (also with respect to the large

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<sup>47</sup> KAALBY VESTERGAARD, M. (2021): *Regional dynamics and consequences related to political instability in Chad*. Human Security Centre, 2021.07.01. Available at: <http://www.hscentre.org/africa/regional-dynamics-consequences-related-political-instability-chad/> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

<sup>48</sup> EUROPEAN COMMISSION (2023b): *European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations: Chad*. European Commission, 2023.07.20. Available at: [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/africa/chad\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/africa/chad_en) (accessed on 20 November 2023).

<sup>49</sup> Team Europe consists of the European Union, EU Member States – including their implementing agencies and public development banks – as well as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Team Europe was initially put in place to ensure a co-ordinated and comprehensive response between the EU and its Member States to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences. The new approach has quickly become the backbone of Global Europe (the main financial tool for EU international cooperation from 2021 to 2027) and its programming. Source: European Commission, International Partnerships. Available at: [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/team-europe-initiatives\\_en#what-is-team-europe](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/team-europe-initiatives_en#what-is-team-europe) (accessed on 30 November 2023).

number of Sudanese refugees in the country), sustainable development and support to key sectors such as nutrition, food security and resilience, sustainable agriculture, democratic governance and promotion of the rule of law.<sup>50</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of globalisation through which transnational issues have an increased impact on the European Union and the security and safety of its citizens, the EU has increased its involvement in numerous regions worldwide. Specifically, close contacts with various African players, including the African Union (AU), have evolved, and the Africa-EU cooperation has grown to be one of the top goals of EU foreign policy.<sup>51</sup> The EU has made the Sahel-Saharan region a primary focus of its recent efforts to advance security and prosperity on the continent.

Although the EU's Sahel strategy has gradually changed from a purely humanitarian approach to a more complex, security-oriented approach, but the original objectives remain the same. The EU has – among others – increasingly focused on good governance, but although governance has been at the heart of all EU strategies, these parts have not been successful – something that is highlighted by the above stated military coups across the Sahel countries. The emphasis on good governance was renewed in the 2021 strategy, however, as the analysis above shows, one of the fundamental difficulties in addressing the question of governance is that the Sahel states are weak and fragile. Not only are they unable to meet the basic needs of their populations, but they do not have a monopoly on the use of force on their territory.<sup>52</sup> In addition, the presence of the state is highly unequal

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<sup>50</sup> RELIEFWEB (2017): *The European Union increases its support for Chad*. Reliefweb, United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 2017.17.10. Available at:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/chad/european-union-increases-its-support-chad> (accessed on 27 November 2023).

<sup>51</sup> CARBONE, M. (2013): *The European Union in Africa: Incoherent Policies, Asymmetrical Partnership, Declining Relevance?* Manchester University Press, manchester, 2013. HAASTRUP, T. (2013): *Charting Transformation Through Security: Contemporary EU-Africa Relations*. Palgrave Macmillan London, 2013.

<sup>52</sup> ISO-MARKKU, T. – TAMMIKKO, T., 2020

across its own territory, and citizens of a state can live in very different circumstances. Further, the series of coups over the past three years have created a 3,500-mile coast-to-coast corridor that has become the longest military-dominated corridor in the world. Hence, addressing issues of good governance for an external actor as the European Union, has proven to be difficult.

Another clear change was the EU's shift of responsibility to the region and to bilateral operations to maintain security. Initially, the EU was heavily criticised for not involving local actors enough, but with each new version of the strategy it has sought to improve this situation. Regional actors, such as the G5 Sahel, have been given much greater responsibility and ownership, but as this latter formation for regional security cooperation is on the verge of dissolving itself, new partners need to be identified as legitimate partners in terms of support to regional stability and security.

Although it is not to blame for the unfavourable trends in the Sahel, the EU eventually will need to readjust its own involvement in the region. There are many opinions as to why the EU's strategy for the Sahel has not been successful. Some argue that the problem was not with the strategy, but with the fact that its implementation was not successful,<sup>53</sup> while others argue that the focus is too much on the military.<sup>54</sup> To add to this, the political aspirations of EU member states to secure Sahelian areas and their readiness to implement such policies through military deployment have been disconnected,<sup>55</sup> resulting in France – as the former colonial power – having influenced counterterrorism strategies in the region significantly.

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<sup>53</sup> THURSTON, A. (2021): *The Hollowness of "Governance Talk" in and about the Sahel*. Italian Institute for International Political Studies, 12 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/hollowness-governance-talk-and-about-sahel-30026> (accessed on 15 December 2023).

<sup>54</sup> SOTO-MAYOR, G. et al. (2020): *STRATEGIC MISSTEPS: LEARNING FROM A FAILED EU SAHEL STRATEGY*. Clingendael, 2020.11.09. Available at: <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/strategic-missteps-learning-failed-eu-sahel-strategy> (accessed 30 November 2023).

<sup>55</sup> COLD-RAVNKILDE, S-M. – LINDSKOV JACOBSEN, K. (2020): Disentangling the security traffic jam in the Sahel: constitutive effects of contemporary interventionism, *International Affairs*, Volume 96, Issue 4, July 2020, pp. 855–874. Available at: <https://academic.oup.com/ia/article/96/4/855/5866446?login=false> (accessed on 30 November 2023).

Part of the problem lies in this regard in the state structures of the Sahel states, where weak governments have sought to accommodate the needs of their highly diverse population, battling the effects of climate change, food insecurity and jihadist insurgency at the same time. Considering the weak character of the states, the focus on improving governance in the EU strategies in the Sahel is of pivotal importance, but in practice very challenging to execute. The Sahel states' structures have not been strengthened by EU and member state assistance, rather it has significantly improved their military capabilities, giving armies a bigger say in regional affairs – but at the same time not possessing the capability of fully pushing back jihadist terrorist groups. The declining support for the ruling class, which has been charged as being unduly reliant on Europe – particularly France – has coincided with this process.

Criticism against the EU measures in the Sahel has to a great extent focused on the (im)balance between security-oriented and development-related measures. However, it must be noted that implementing measures other than military nevertheless require military means to a certain extent, as humanitarian and development-oriented operations cannot be implemented if they are constantly threatened by violence. In addition, a significant proportion of the funds allocated to needs be directed towards investment in public services (in areas such as health, water, education, food, and security), political reform and the promotion of accountability – all at a time when public sentiment in the region is strongly anti-Western.

Regarding future policies the important message highlighted also by the string of military coups across the Sahel, that one of the main characteristics of these countries facing violent extremism and military coups is a disillusioned youth who see little chance of breaking out of the constraints of the education system as well as from the economic and power structures. Looking at the coup leaders in the Sahel so far, it becomes clear that most of them were young officers in their thirties and forties – supported by even younger people (both military and civilian).<sup>56</sup> The fact that Africa's young, exploding population is

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<sup>56</sup> CAMARA, K. – STIGNANT, S. (2023): Countering Coups: How to Reverse Military Rule Across the Sahel. United States Institute of Peace, 2023.08.03. Available at:

expected to make up a quarter of humanity by 2050 makes it clear to all decision-makers how important it is not only for the stability of the continents as such, but also for our own future to work with African countries to stabilise them.

Based on the brief overview and assessment made above, the following recommendations may be considered in terms of future EU-Sahel policies:

1. EU policies would benefit from a shift from state-centred policies toward regional dynamics, especially considering the region's different governance forms and the central governments' limited authority. Gaining an enhanced understanding of local dynamics would also enable the EU to tailor its approach more specifically to the demands of the region's communities.
2. The discussions on the necessity to give socioeconomic growth and human rights more consideration does not answer the question of what should be done when the current allies of the EU, the civilian governments of the Sahel countries are slowly disappearing due to the series of coups and are being replaced by military juntas that are hostile to the West. However, to maintain a channel for communication and leave the door open for future cooperation for the sake of the stability of the region, dialogue with the ruling junta based on *realpolitik* and pragmatism needs to be considered. If the EU steps back, there is a pertinent risk that other actors will step in its place – of which some already have a military presence in some of the countries of the Sahel.
3. Continue to frame initiatives within a civil-military framework, as implementing non-military measures will require military means to a certain extent, considering that humanitarian and development-oriented activities cannot be carried out if they are under the threat of violence. In this context it should be noted that the integrated Sahel Strategy of 2021 states that the EU will “make sure to draw on decentralised authorities and civil society in all its diversity”. Regarding how civil society should

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<https://www.usip.org/publications/2023/08/countering-coups-how-reverse-military-rule-across-sahel> (accessed on 16 December 2023).

be integrated, however, remains somewhat unclear, implying that these measures would presuppose a clear plan to reach civil society and involve NGOs.

4. Concerning the heavy anti-Western sentiments in certain Sahelian countries, the question of intermediaries perceived as more neutral and closer cooperation with regional blocs such as the African Union and ECOWAS should be considered. An example of the former may be countries such as Togo (whom the Nigerien junta invited to play a mediating role with ECOWAS and other international actors), Italy (who is still present in Niger with a relatively small contingent comprising 250 personnel with the support of the military rule in the country, and whereby the moderate line taken by the Italian government has allowed Rome to continue to cooperate with Niger) or Hungary (that is launching its first independent complex engagement in Chad during spring 2024, incorporating elements of military training, humanitarian and stability-building activities, humanitarian aid, medical missions and agricultural development).
5. Continue to address the question of military capacity-building in Niger, a longstanding partner of the EU in security-related issues through readjusted channels, albeit the hardened climate. The junta in Niger recently ended two important security and defence partnerships with the EU (EU Partnership Mission in Niger and the EU Civilian Capacity-Building Mission), while simultaneously hosting the Defence Minister of the Russian Federation to discuss the strengthening of cooperation within the field of defence between the two countries.

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