

# The EU vis-à-vis Turmoil in Burkina Faso: Towards Europeanisation?

by Francesca Lenzi

In late September 2022, Burkina Faso experienced its second coup in eight months. In the name of national security, Captain Ibrahim Traoré took control of the country on 30 September, deposing Paul-Henri Damiba, who had come to power through his own coup in January. Insecurity and the inability of the political class to deal with the jihadist threat are among the determining factors that led to two coups in such a short time. The coups unfolded in a context marked by competition between the European Union (EU) – initially led by France, the traditional European hegemon in the region – and Russia for influence in the Sahel.

## *Burkina Faso in turmoil*

Since independence in 1960, Burkina Faso's governments have experienced numerous periods of democratic instability and have been strongly criticised for their apparent inability

to achieve national stabilisation. Coup after coup, the democratic structure of Burkinabé institutions has increasingly been perceived as fundamentally broken, while the practice of coup d'état has come to be seen as a reasonable response to such political failure.

Especially in the past two years, Burkina Faso has seen a sharp increase of insecurity across the country due to the presence of armed groups. Violence has caused the death of more than 2,000 people and led to the displacement of over 1.8 million people.<sup>1</sup>

Burkina Faso is one of the countries in the Sahel that has suffered the most from the implications of the war against Ukraine. Indeed, the pre-existing economic crisis has been

<sup>1</sup> "Suspected Jihadists Kill Dozens in Eastern Burkina Faso", in *France 24*, 26 May 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220526-suspected-jihadists-kill-dozens-in-eastern-burkina-faso>.

*Francesca Lenzi is an Intern in the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa Programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) and a Master student in International Security Studies at the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies in Pisa and the University of Trento. The author would like to thank Francesca Caruso and Leo Goretti for their assistance and editorial guidance.*

exacerbated by the increase in prices of basic commodities (food inflation was over 30 per cent in July),<sup>2</sup> with evident implications in terms of social tensions, political instability and an increase of internally displaced people. All these tumultuous conditions created fertile ground for the two coups d'état.

In a context of deep malaise among the Burkinabé population, the military army has come to the fore in national politics. Growing frustration at the government's inability to bring about effective change, factionalism within the army itself and widespread anti-colonial resentment towards France – both among the civilians and the military – were enabling factors of the successive coups. Specifically, Traoré's new pan-Africanism and his initially strong pro-Russian inclination allowed him to receive the support of the Burkinabé in overthrowing Damiba's government.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, Traoré's personal history of direct involvement in the anti-jihadist fight and his pledge that a pragmatic and local solution would be implemented may have played a significant role in convincing civilians as well as a fraction of the military to support him.<sup>4</sup> At the age of 34, Ibrahim

Traoré is the youngest-serving head of state in the world.<sup>5</sup>

As a matter of fact, Traoré is trying in every way to gather resources to inaugurate the promised security reform. Due to a lack of armaments and financial resources, however, his government has launched an ongoing campaign to recruit more than 90,000 volunteers for armed service as a measure of last resort.<sup>6</sup>

Against this backdrop, Traoré has claimed that, to be able to properly address the security threats, his government also needs international financial aid and external military assistance, looking to Russia for support.<sup>7</sup>

### *The current role of the EU and Russia*

The Sahel is a region with a sweeping external military presence, including from the European Union. Since 2011, Brussels has considered the area of strategic importance, especially due to concerns about migration flows. Traditionally, the EU's presence in the region has been linked to initiatives led

<sup>2</sup> Trading Economics, *Burkina Faso Food Inflation*, updated November 2022, <https://tradingeconomics.com/burkina-faso/food-inflation>.

<sup>3</sup> Chrispin Mwakideu, "Is the Burkina Faso Coup a Boost for Russian Influence?", in *Deutsche Welle*, 4 October 2022, <https://www.dw.com/en/a-63332163>.

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Roger, "Burkina Faso: Who Is Ibrahim Traoré, the Man Who Brought Down Damiba?", in *The Africa Report*, 4 October 2022, <https://www.theafricareport.com/246310>.

<sup>5</sup> See, Omega Rakotomalala and Farouk Chothia, "Capt Ibrahim Traoré: Burkina Faso's New Military Ruler", in *BBC News*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-63117008>.

<sup>6</sup> "Burkina Faso. L'armée a recruté plus de 90 000 supplétifs civils pour lutter contre les djihadistes", in *Ouest-France*, 25 November 2022, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/burkina-faso/burkina-faso-l-armee-a-recrute-plus-de-90-000-suppletifs-civils-pour-lutter-contre-les-djihadistes-b7ab7765-dfdc-4ee7-9b21-5f116079be80>.

<sup>7</sup> Nosmot Gbadamosi, "Burkina Faso's Junta Looks to Russia for Support", in *Foreign Policy*, 5 October 2022, <https://bit.ly/3C0boUE>.

primarily by France to promote interests labelled as European. However, recent events have highlighted that European states face diplomatic and military problems with some governments in the region: this is, for example, the case for Denmark with Mali and France with Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso. Subsequently, over the past year and a half, there has been a gradual disengagement from the region, both from a military cooperation and development aid perspective, of some EU member states (France, Denmark and more recently Germany).<sup>8</sup>

The Covid pandemic and the Ukrainian conflict have also contributed to a weakened role of France and the EU in the Sahel. This is evident from the shift in the EU's overall priorities, with a considerable decrease in financial funds and aid to tackle contemporary crises in the region.<sup>9</sup> Compared with the war against Ukraine, the different levels of attention paid and resources deployed by the EU to crisis situations in the Sahel region has been noticeable for West African governments. As a result, a feeling of resentment towards the EU is becoming increasingly evident.<sup>10</sup> The Economic Community of Western African States (ECOWAS) has criticised the EU for not investing enough resources in the stabilisation of Africa and, above all, for not meeting

the real needs of African countries. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that a state like Burkina Faso is seeking help elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

While it was once common to see French flags welcoming French troops in countries such as Burkina Faso and Niger, the latest coups d'état have instead turned the flag into the Russian one, including in Mali.<sup>12</sup> Mounting turmoil in these countries opened a window of opportunity for Russia to increase its presence in the region.<sup>13</sup> For its part, Burkina Faso, as other Sahelian countries, seems to be prepared to accept Russian help. Increasing Russian leverage is evidenced by two recent events: the first is the permit granted to the Russian Nordgold group to exploit a gold site in Yimiougou (North Central region) for a period of four years;<sup>14</sup> and the second is the discreet and unofficially scheduled trip of the Burkinabé Prime Minister to Moscow for possible deals on military equipment and meetings with officials of the paramilitary company Wagner.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Germany to Withdraw Troops from UN Mali Mission by May 2024", in *Al Jazeera*, 22 November 2022, <https://aje.io/r2y7zo>.

<sup>9</sup> Bernardo Venturi, "The EU's Diplomatic Engagement in the Sahel", in *IAI Papers*, No. 22|08 (May 2022), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/15254>.

<sup>10</sup> IAI interview with Burkinabé civil society organisations, online, December 2022.

<sup>11</sup> IAI interview with a European official, online, October 2022.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Wilkins, "Why Burkina Faso Protesters Waved Russian Flags in French Embassy Attack" (video), in *VOA News*, 6 October 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/6778372.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Roger E. Kanet and Dina Moulioukova, "Russia's Return to Africa: A Renewed Challenge to the West?", in *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 5 (2022), p. 427-439, DOI 10.1080/1060586X.2022.2034357.

<sup>14</sup> "Au Burkina Faso, le groupe russe Nordgold à l'assaut d'un nouveau gisement d'or", in *Courrier International*, 10 December 2022, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/economie-au-burkina-faso-le-groupe-russe-nordgold-a-l-assaut-d-un-nouveau-gisement-d-or>.

<sup>15</sup> "Burkina Faso : le voyage discret du Premier ministre à Moscou", in *Africanews*, 12 December 2022, <https://fr.africanews.com/2022/12/12/>

Even though the incumbent Traoré's government has not yet officially declared a new alliance with Russia, Burkina Faso is eventually looking for alternatives to France to establish a new collaborative partnership. Russia is viewed more favourably than France because it does not have a past as a colonising power in the region and, moreover, seems to be willing to respond to local needs in a more efficient and timely manner (although this is also linked to human rights violations, brutalities and killings of civilians).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Russia is trying to establish a win-win relationship between the two countries. By offering Burkina Faso military assistance to fight the jihadist threat with services provided through the Wagner Group, Moscow's main interest is to establish its presence and influence in countries surrounding Europe and the Mediterranean basin that are rich in mineral resources.<sup>17</sup>

### *Future trajectories*

In light of Paris's declining influence and Moscow's rising presence in the region, and faced with increasing political instability in countries such as Burkina Faso, the EU must rethink its policy towards the Sahel, possibly through an approach centred on Europeanisation.

burkina-faso-le-voyage-discret-du-premier-ministre-a-moscou.

<sup>16</sup> Catrina Doxsee and Jared Thompson, "Massacres, Executions, and Falsified Graves: The Wagner Group's Mounting Humanitarian Cost in Mali", in *CSIS Commentaries*, 11 May 2022, <https://www.csis.org/node/65197>.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Atwood and Jean-Hervé Jezequel, "Coup in Burkina, Russia in Mali and a New Chapter in the Sahel?" (podcast), in *Hold Your Fire!*, Season 3, Episode 5 (7 October 2022), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/19752>.

First, taking into consideration the 2021 European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel,<sup>18</sup> Brussels needs to stop adopting a policy centred on emergency intervention and sporadic governance that does not adequately take into account local requests and needs. Second, and nonetheless, the EU has an even more unavoidable mission to implement: outlining a new Europeanisation of its strategy in the Sahel. In other words, European action must be based on the contribution of all member states that play an important role at the regional level and not only on the traditional (and highly contested by locals) French leadership. In this scenario, Italy seems to be more welcomed by the Sahelian government thanks also to its protracted humanitarian assistance and diplomatic cooperation that the Italian government aims to strengthen. The year 2022 saw a great commitment by the Italian government to reinforcing diplomatic, political and economic relations with the region. In the months January–July 2022, trade flows between Italy and Sub-Saharan Africa increased by about 39.2 per cent compared to the same period in 2021,<sup>19</sup> while diplomatic relations aimed at bilateral development and joint security agreements were fostered mainly by Italy's then Prime Minister

<sup>18</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Conclusions on the European Union's Integrated Strategy in the Sahel* (7723/21), 16 April 2021, <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7723-2021-INIT/en/pdf>.

<sup>19</sup> InfoMercatiEsteri, "Africa Sub-Sahariana", in *Osservatorio economico*, 25 October 2022, [https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-aree-geografiche/Indicatori%20%20Africa%20Sub-Sahariana\\_25\\_10\\_2022\\_1666682306.pdf](https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-aree-geografiche/Indicatori%20%20Africa%20Sub-Sahariana_25_10_2022_1666682306.pdf).



Mario Draghi, President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella and ministers of relevant sectors. In addition, the Italian military presence in the region, focused on training local military forces, trade of military equipment and bilateral cooperation projects,<sup>20</sup> seems to be welcomed by Sahelian governments.

To conclude, the two coups d'état in Burkina Faso and mounting Russian influence have highlighted that the EU cannot afford to lose the trust of Sahelian countries if it wants to continue strengthening its influence in this region. A diversification of policies and the implementation of a Europeanisation strategy could be more accepted by African states and thus more fruitful for the EU to achieve a rewarding cooperation approach to regional challenges.

21 December 2022

<sup>20</sup> Italian Chamber of Deputies-Research Department, *Italian Participation in International Missions*, 6 December 2022, [https://temi.camera.it/leg19/temi/19\\_autorizzazione-e-proroga-missioni-internazionali-ultimo-trimestre-2019\\_d\\_d\\_d.html](https://temi.camera.it/leg19/temi/19_autorizzazione-e-proroga-missioni-internazionali-ultimo-trimestre-2019_d_d_d.html).

## Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

[www.iai.it](http://www.iai.it)

## Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Leo Goretti ([l.goretti@iai.it](mailto:l.goretti@iai.it))

- 22 | 66 Francesca Lenzi, *The EU vis-à-vis Turmoil in Burkina Faso: Towards Europeanisation?*
- 22 | 65 Francesco Belcastro, *Palestinian Flags and Warm Embraces: Politics and Arabism at the World Cup in Qatar*
- 22 | 64 Pier Paolo Raimondi, *Walking out of the Woods: EU Industrial Policy between the Energy Crisis and Decarbonisation*
- 22 | 63 Maria Giulia Amadio Viceré, *EU Foreign Policy Integration at Times of War: From Short-Term Responses to Long-Term Solutions*
- 22 | 62 Costanza Galetto, *The Ukrainian Conflict and the Energy Crisis: Sustaining the Energy Transition*
- 22 | 61 Silvia Strangis, *Italy's Renewed Interest in the Horn of Africa*
- 22 | 60 Pietro Malesani, *Italian Foreign Policy and the Western Sahara: Balancing Relations with Morocco and Algeria*
- 22 | 59 Anna Magnasco, *The MUOS Ground Station in Niscemi: Legal Aspects and Environmental Sensitivities in US-Italian Relations*
- 22 | 58 Andrea Di Bernardo, *Climate Change and Food Insecurity: Unleashing the Promise and Potential of Agroecology in the Mediterranean*
- 22 | 57 Manuel Herrera, *Are Small Modular Reactors Europe's Energy Salvation?*